

*Edmund Burke,
The Perennial
Political Philosopher*

IN 1896, in his essay "The Interpreter of English Liberty," Woodrow Wilson praised Edmund Burke's political principles, and noted that they "have emerged from the mass of political writings . . . in their time with their freshness untouched, their significance unobscured, their splendid vigor unabated." Since few things are more dead than the dead politics of past ages, there must be something uniquely vital in Burke's political writings that they should retain their luster and significance a century after his death in 1797, and even down to the present. What is Burke's perennial appeal as a political writer? In response to this and on the occasion of the silver jubilee of *Modern Age* I should like to describe three basic ingredients in his thought and expression which may explain his enduring significance: (1) his conception of society and appeal to history; (2) his basic political principles and methods in practical politics; and (3) his literary genius and supreme mastery of English prose.

Lord Acton wrote that "History . . . hails from Burke, as Education from Helvetius, or Emancipation from the Quakers." Acton correctly perceived that Burke's political writings gave to modern man a true and organic sense of historical continuity between the ancient pagan classical civilization of Rome and the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages which is modern man's inheritance. Within the narrower context of English nationalism Sir Herbert Butterfield noted much the same point as Acton: "It was Edmund Burke who—having recovered contact with the historical achievements of Restoration England—exerted the presiding influence over the historical movement of the nineteenth century." All of Burke's political writings are infused by his profound sense of history, and permeated with a conscious awareness of the enduring power of all the elements which were compounded into the foundations of European civilization.

At age twenty-eight Burke wrote *An Essay towards an Abridgment of the English*

History (1757), in which he defined the chief elements that comprised the basis of European civilization—Roman civil law, embodied in the code of Justinian; Christian morality; and Teutonic customs and manners.

In various combinations in different provinces and nations of Europe, these three basic ingredients provided the organized structure of society in all its legal, political, religious, moral, social, economic, and personal institutions. They gave to Europe its common distinguishing character as a civilization, distinct from the Moslem and Oriental civilizations. Burke referred to this complex of nations as the "Christian commonwealth of Europe," a concept which always commanded his veneration and respect. Burke was acutely aware that such corporate bodies as the family, church, and state, together with all the subordinant institutions of society, provided each European with a deep sense of personal identity, community, provincial loyalty, and nationality. A sense of historical continuity fostered a sense of national identity, and vice versa. The unfolding order of European society, from Classical times to the eighteenth century, was for Burke a complex and delicate historical inheritance which he felt in his bones in the well-ordered civil and religious life of Britain, anchored by legal prescriptions and moral and social norms, and ultimately sanctified by revealed religion. Burke viewed society against the cosmic order of creation, with awe and humility. As the late Ross J.S. Hoffman once remarked, Burke answered the most important questions about the origin, nature, and destiny of man from the Church of England's catechism.

Religion was for Burke the foundation of civil society, because it provided mankind with its ethical norms and values, and it was "the chain that connects the ages of a nation." It made men conscious of "the great mysterious incorporation of the human race." Throughout Europe, Christianity was "the foundation upon which all our laws and institutions stand as upon their base." Apart from religion, in secular life the remnants of Roman civil law were fused with Teutonic manners to provide the structure of the state and government. In 1757 Burke perceived that Roman *municipia*, provinces, and col-

onies in England were "dissimilar," yet "far from being discordant." These Roman corporate bodies "united to make a firm and compact body, the motion of any member of which could only serve to confirm and establish the whole; and when time was given to this structure to coalesce and settle, it was found impossible to break any part of it from the empire." Thus did historical continuity create a conception of civil society which was essentially organic, in which "the several parts blended and softened into one another." Thus also in England there developed from Roman law transformed into English common law, and from feudal Anglo-Saxon customs, a complex political and social constitutional system which at once preserved the character and integrity of free local provinces and established a sovereign order for the nation.

Burke's writings are filled with passages which celebrate the civil diversity and unity of England preserved in her mixed constitution. Two passages will have to suffice as examples: the first was written in 1774, the second in 1790:

Nothing is more beautiful in the theory of parliaments, than that principle of renovation, and union of permanence and change, that are happily mixed in their constitution: — That in all our changes we are never either wholly old or wholly new: — that there are enough of the old to preserve unbroken the traditionary chain of the maxims and policy of our ancestors, and the law and custom of parliament; and enough of the new to invigorate us and bring us to our true character, by being taken fresh from the mass of the people; and the whole, though mostly composed of old members, have, notwithstanding, a new character and may have the advantage of change without the imputation of inconstancy.

Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world... wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middleaged, or young, but, in a condition of unchange-

able constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete.

For Burke civil society is organic, not in any evolutionary sense that it follows laws of mechanical necessity, but as a creation of man's corporate reason and will, or wisdom and power, working analogically through precedents and historical continuity to fulfill the unchangeable principles and spirit of moral natural law. Civil society, patterned upon nature as an ethical norm, upon man as a corporate social animal, and upon historical continuity and change, has a rich and vast diversity of conditions and circumstances to shape its character.

Therefore, nations cannot be governed by any abstract principles projected by speculative philosophy. As Burke said: "I never govern myself, no rational man ever did govern himself, by abstractions and universals." Burke distinguished between abstractions and principles, and noted that "... the statesman has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas... Circumstances are infinite, are infinitely combined; are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous, but stark mad... he is metaphysically mad. A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances... Clearly, to preserve and fulfill the diversity and unity of civil life under constitutional law required statesmanship of a high order.

Burke believed that legislators learned from historical experience because "history is a preceptor of prudence, not of principles." He considered prudence to be "in all things a virtue, in politics the first of virtues." For Burke, political philosophy provided the basic principles of politics, such as natural law, but the practical art of governing man in civil society, which required the statesman, "the philosopher in action," was based upon prudence. Since the common nature of man is infinitely modified by climate, geography, history, religion, nationality, race, institutions, laws,

customs, manners and habits, and by all the circumstances of time, place, and occasions, in contingent matters and details there are no general laws to guide politicians. Here prudence reigned supreme. Prudence was for Burke not an intellectual but a moral virtue. To Burke, "no moral questions are ever abstract questions," and therefore prudence, which taught that "the situation of man is the preceptor of his duty," was the most essential practical principle in politics, and the best means of avoiding abstract rational ideology:

Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral or political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are not made by the process of logic, but by the rules of prudence. Prudence is not only the first in rank of the virtues political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all.

In short, prudence is not merely a matter of empirical observation and rational analysis, but a moral imperative to take all circumstances into strict account, so that the principles of constitutional law and natural law may be fulfilled in practice in civil society.

Because of the complexity of Burke's political philosophy, and the skill in method required in practical politics, both in his own political career and in his thought there has been a great range of interpretations. During much of the nineteenth century Burke was categorized as a liberal. Since 1949, in the scholarship of Ross J.S. Hoffman, Russell Kirk, and many others, Burke has come to be regarded as the fountainhead of modern conservatism. He has been called both a Whig and a Tory; a neo-classic and a romantic; a severe critic of Rousseau and an adherent of Rousseau's political philosophy; a skeptic like David Hume, and a Christian statesman; an expedient utilitarian and pragmatic party politician, and a principled natural law statesman; and in religion both a Catholic and a Protestant. Recently, revisionist Marx-

ian scholars have put in a claim to Burke. Burke's thought is so complex and un-systematic that some critics, such as F.L. Lucas, have dismissed him as "vague," or "inconsistent," or both. But although Burke never provided a golden key to his scriptures, he is neither vague nor inconsistent. As Morley said, "He changed his front but he never changed his ground." Burke's political thought is many-mansioned, and his *ad hoc* statements of principle, buried amidst the rich array of empirical evidence he always provided in speaking and writing, cannot be reduced to any abstract system, like the closet philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, or Bentham. Undoubtedly, this has led some scholars into serious errors of interpretation. But it is also a chief source of Burke's perennial appeal as a political writer.

Burke's method in practical political problems was extremely hard-headed, thoroughly empirical, historical, prescriptive in law and normative in ethics, and in every way and spirit the opposite of ideological, speculative, conjectural, or abstract. In examining the genesis of a problem he showed profound respect for historical facts and past experience. He revered due process in law, and the need to compromise and reconcile conflicting interests without sacrificing essential constitutional principles or moral norms. He combined old common sense with new knowledge to produce equitable and acceptable social results. His aim was to serve the public good, not to establish or apply abstract theoretical "truth." History provided the genesis of political problems and analogies with similar past problems, by which insight and perspective could make prudence prevail in practical solutions. Burke expressed his method very clearly in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795). A legislator, he wrote, should seek "the exactest detail of circumstances, guided by the surest general principles that are necessary to direct experiment and inquiry, in order again from those details to elicit principles, firm and luminous general principles, to direct a practical legislative proceeding." Burke's method was directed by his acute awareness of the delicate complexity of society as an organic whole, which obliged legislators to harmonize its conflicting interests

through practical remedies, adjusting changing circumstances to accommodate present needs, while preserving unimpaired the greatest number of contrary legitimate interests, and the organic structure of society.

To a very great extent Burke's perennial appeal as a political thinker rests upon his literary genius and supreme mastery of English prose. He had perhaps the most powerful rhetoric and style of any prose non-fiction writer in English. Gerald W. Chapman has shown at length in *Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination* (1967), the intense fusion of Burke's unique literary imagination with an ethical awareness which permeated all of his practical political concerns. Burke was master of an enormous erudition in minute facts and details, which enabled him to function well in daily party politics, and on the broad stage of the world, in the affairs of America, Ireland, England, India, and France. When Burke's pen touched paper, no matter how mundane his subject, something magical happened. Whole anthologies have been compiled of his maxims on government and on man as a social animal. Every paragraph carries some evidence of the strong perceptive power of his thought, captured in the brilliance of his expression. In the literature of enduring power, Burke has been called the foremost writer of English prose by such eminent writers as William Hazlitt, Thomas de Quincey, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Matthew Arnold, Sir Leslie Stephen, John Morley, and James Russell Lowell, among others. Morley wrote that Burke "imprints himself upon us with a magnificence and elevation of expression that places him among the highest masters in one of its highest and most commanding senses." Hazlitt was perhaps the first critic to refute the common error that Burke was an ornate writer: "Burke was so far from being a gaudy or flowery writer that he was one of the severest writers we have." This judgment on Burke's complex but concisely disciplined prose style was reaffirmed by W. Somerset Maugham in "After Reading Burke" (1941).

Another characteristic of Burke's prose was that he always adapted his style to his subject and the circumstances of his writing. Connor Cruise O'Brien, in the introduction to his edi-

tion of Burke's *Reflections* (1968), distinguished five different prose styles in his writings. Burke's prose styles appeal to the total nature of man, and comprehend the whole reality of his subject. This is the main point in Edward Dowden's summary of what distinguishes Burke's prose style from that of most other good writers:

In a well-known canon of style Burke lays it down that the master sentence of every paragraph should involve, first, a thought, second an image, and thirdly, a sentiment. A thought, an image, a sentiment, and all bearing upon action—it gives us an intimation that the writer who set forth such a canon was a complete nature, no fragment of a man... and that when he came to write or speak, he put his total manhood into his utterance. This is... Burke's first and highest distinction.

Burke did indeed appeal to his reader's reason, senses, and emotions, but the mere presence of these ingredients in his speeches and writings did not, in themselves, make his style powerful. His imaginative fusion of all these elements, his skill in converting an image into a state of mind and feeling, combined with his moral imagination, intuition, and erudition, enabled his readers to leap from sight to insight, from the physical sense to the metaphysical essence of his subject and theme, so that at once they saw, understood, and felt profoundly the whole point of Burke's argument. Burke was a great phrase maker, and even his most mundane writings are marked with sudden illuminating flashes of insight.

But above all, Burke was a poet in prose: he thought in metaphor. Goldsmith once remarked that Burke "wound into his subject like a serpent," and Samuel Johnson characterized his oral and written style as showing "copiousness and fertility of allusion, a power of diversifying his matter by placing it in various relations." Johnson admired Burke's enormous erudition in many subjects, his readiness and ability to talk well on almost every subject, and "the ebullition of his mind." Johnson once noted that "his stream of mind is perpetual. He talks not from a desire to excel, but because his mind is full."

The power to think in metaphor was intuitive and spontaneous in Burke. After hearing Burke speak in the House of Commons, James Boswell wrote: "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." Gibbon, Reynolds, Malone, Mackintosh, and many others of Burke's contemporaries have attested to his remarkable eloquence and metaphorical habits of speech. His ability to reason in metaphor was the hallmark of his political thought. He used language as a civilizing force, as though he were engaged in a political dramatic monologue between himself and the listening world. In that sense his political writings may be regarded as a vast epical metaphor in defense of civilization. If Jonathan Swift is the greatest master in English of the simple concise style, Burke can be considered the most polished writer in the complex concise style.

Burke's continued relevance from generation to generation is in part the result of his having said so many wise things about the perennial problems of war, empire, and revolution, of constitutional parliamentary government, of justice, order, and freedom, of rights and duties in society—subjects which never leave the center stage of public events. His wisdom in these subjects is such that even writers who disagree with his political positions often find much to admire in him.

But Burke's greatest relevance in the twentieth century—a period criminally insane with socialistic and anarchical ideologies—lies in his criticism of the respective crimes and follies of totalitarian tyranny in all its modern forms, and of the anarchy of selfish egoists who think they can live in society as though they existed as isolated, atomized individuals in a pre-civil state of nature. Burke expounds perhaps the strongest case possible against the theory, put forth by Tom Paine, that society is merely a voluntary association of isolated individuals.

Those who think that their relationship to society is privately voluntaristic sooner or later believe they can live without institutions, without community, without norms not of their private will, without any historical inheritance of laws, religion, and civility. Contemporary so-called "libertarians" who attribute to themselves as individuals rights and achievements which are made possible only by their having been born and brought up in corporate society have much to learn from Burke. His criticism of voluntaristic, revocable social contract theories applies perfectly to them. Burke knew that legally organized society, due process, and constitutional government, cannot exist on the theory that each individual can on his arbitrary will separate himself from his country for any reason he sees fit, or even, as Tom Paine argued, for no reason at all. Such theories sound like defenses of freedom when directed against gross abuses of power in government, but in fact they are destructive of the very existence of organized society, including societies essentially free and just. Such anarchical ideologues, with the best of intentions, walk in darkness and know not whither they go. Burke's writings on the French Revolution contain the best correctives to their follies; he knew that anarchy prepared the way for the very leviathan state or Napoleonic military collectivism they most despised. More than any other political writer of the past, Burke addresses himself to the great problems which plague the twentieth century, with a wisdom that is more appreciated the more he is read. In the nineteenth century William Lecky wrote of Burke's writings: "The time will never come when men would not grow wiser by reading them." Lecky was merely extending Morley's remark in 1879 that Burke was the "largest master of civil wisdom in our language." By any realistic judgment, Burke deserves to be considered one of the world's outstanding thinkers in politics.

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