

An Imaginary Edmund Burke

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CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN's book, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), provides a good occasion for a retrospective assessment of the significance of Burke as a political figure, both in his own era and in the twentieth century, in the light of scholarship on the great Whig statesman since about 1930. It consists of a preface, an introduction on "the Whig tradition," an account of the attacks on Burke by Sir Lewis Namier and his followers, and a statement on methodology, followed by selections from Burke and comments by the author on Ireland, the American Colonies, India, and France, variously combined in chronological segments. The book concludes with an epilogue and appendix reproducing an exchange of letters between O'Brien and Sir Isaiah Berlin.

O'Brien categorizes his book as "a thematic biography and commented anthology of Edmund Burke," and he attempts to correlate the basic facts of Burke's life with his political career of almost thirty years in the House of Commons. The word "thematic" implies a continuity of basic political beliefs in Burke's politics. Yet O'Brien's concern is wholly with Burke's thoughts and actions as a leader in the partisan policies of the Rockingham Whigs, and he fails

utterly to manifest any concern with the cardinal principles of Burke's political philosophy. In order to treat Burke exclusively as an eighteenth-century Irish Whig politician in England, O'Brien omits Burke's providential view of history and his conception of the origins and development of the nations of Europe from the ancient Classical world into what Burke called "the commonwealth of Christian Europe." This leads him also to omit Burke's religious and metaphysical view of reality, his belief in moral natural law, his principle of legal prescription, and his appeals to moral prudence and prejudice. In short, O'Brien leaves out of his study the whole cultural inheritance of past ages which provided Burke with his sense of tradition, normative values, and principles of politics. In addition, he disregards much of the important scholarship on Burke which has dealt with these matters during the past forty years. He calls Burke "a child of the Enlightenment," strictly a product of an aspect of his era, but without any moral, intellectual, or social roots in previous centuries of Europe.

O'Brien's anthological format of commentaries interspersed between lengthy passages from Burke's political writings is remarkably similar to the 536-page anthology by Ross Hoffman and Paul Levack, *Burke's Politics* (1949). In that

annotated collection the scholarly apparatus is unobtrusive and objective; the biographical and historical exposition is factually accurate; the prose style is concise; the active role of Burke in the partisan politics of his era is clearly illuminated without any ideological bias; his basic political principles are identified as needed; and the authors make no pretense that their generous selections from Burke's writings and their own comments constitute a "thematic biography." In almost total contrast, O'Brien's anthology and pseudobiography hardly reflects the kind of scholarly skills and knowledge so pronounced in its predecessor. It is more journalistic than scholarly; its structure is loose; its prose style is personal, subjective, and discursive; O'Brien interjects himself between Burke and his readers to such a degree that everything under consideration is screened through his empirical point of view. Many of his comments on Burke constitute a perpetual soliloquy on his self-conscious involvement in his protracted study of Burke.

O'Brien candidly admits that after several decades of studying Burke, and unsuccessful attempts to write his biography along conventional lines, he hit upon these lines in W.B. Yeats's poem, "The Seven Sages":

*American Colonies, Ireland, France and
India
Harried, and Burke's great melody against
it.*

In a flash of inner light, these lines provided him with the title and theme of his anthology-biography. But his admission raises an embarrassing question: anyone who can spend several decades reading Burke's writings and speeches, and then needs these lines by Yeats to tell him that his four great "themes" (really subjects, not themes) are America, Ireland, India, and the French Revolution, stands badly in need of a good course in

remedial reading. Moreover, "Burke's great melody" is not merely "against" the abuses of political power by rulers in the affairs of these nations. At best his arguments against the arbitrary will of rulers who "harried" their subjects through tyrannical actions reveal only the *negative* side of his party politics, and fall far short of ascertaining the *positive* principles of his social and political philosophy that provide the basis for understanding his partisan activities. But O'Brien never rises to a philosophical level of understanding of Burke; he is content to present him strictly as a Whig politician condemning abuses of power.

But even within the severely restricted area of party politics there is a serious problem with O'Brien's study. Since he is so enthralled by Yeats's insight, and makes it his own springboard to describe Burke as a Whig, why didn't he also quote these later lines from Yeats's poem?

*Whether they knew or not,
Goldsmith and Burke, Swift and the
Bishop of Cloyne
All hated Whiggery; but what is Whiggery?
A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of
mind
That never looked out of the eye of a
saint
Or out of drunkard's eye.*

Inasmuch as these verses flatly contradict O'Brien's main thesis, he prefers not to quote them, for to answer Yeats would require him to take issue with the poet's conception of Whiggery, or abandon his thesis.

O'Brien's "Introduction" includes a statement of his method, which is based upon a distinction drawn by Sir Isaiah Berlin between two types of historians: those who "paint portraits of entire societies or groups within them that are rounded and three-dimensional," and therefore believable, and those "antiquaries, chroniclers, accumulators of facts or statistics . . . who look on the use of

imagination as opening the door to the horrors of guesswork, subjectivism, journalism, or worse."¹ O'Brien makes it very clear that he believes that he belongs to the first type of biographer-historian. As though he anticipates criticism, he hurls defiance against anyone who may condemn the method of his "thematic biography," charging him with "the horrors of guesswork, subjectivism, journalism, or worse." He defends his method by an appeal to "the faculty that Vico called *fantasia*, without which the past cannot . . . be resurrected." By *fantasia* Vico meant "imagination," and O'Brien assumes that he, unlike many other scholars and historians concerned with Burke's epoch, possesses the imagination necessary to bring Burke's life and political career to living reality. He allows that "critical methods of examining evidence are indispensable," and that an historian must obtain "factual evidence . . . by the best critical methods available," but these scholarly tools are clearly subordinated to *fantasia*. He concludes that the biographer of Burke must "possess the depth of imaginative insight that characterizes gifted novelists."

Certainly a great historian must possess imaginative insight in order to understand the significance of factual data. Unfortunately, O'Brien treats "imagination" as an abstract absolute to set against the factual records, a power by which to reconstruct history itself. Nowhere does he say that imagination needs to be disciplined by moral norms, sound judgment, good taste, and the common sense so often inherent in facts themselves. A strong and healthy imagination is not at variance with these qualities. But O'Brien's imagination is wildly romantic, free to roam arbitrarily and speculatively by loose associations over the historical landscape of eighteenth-century Britain: "When I set out to write *The Great Melody*, starting from a clue supplied by a poet, I

was required . . . not to set too tight a rein on such powers of imaginative insight as may have been granted to me."² Unfortunately, he often seems unable to distinguish between imaginative insight and conceptualization of ideology or mere sentiment. His loose rein makes him free to be subjective, doctrinaire, and ideological regarding political events and pronouncements and biographical facts. Thus he feels free to pick and choose those elements in Burke's life and politics which can be manipulated to support his thesis, and to omit anything that contradicts that thesis. The result is anything but an historically solid and balanced portrait of Burke or his era.

Since O'Brien claims to be writing biography and political history, not fiction, he must be judged by the canons of sound scholarship. It will not do for him to dismiss objectivity as mere "affectation."³ Nor are verifiable facts necessarily less important than his own speculations. The long passages from Burke and the factual details that O'Brien weaves into the descriptions of his subject's political concerns serve to disguise his fictional techniques and his frequent errors of omission and commission. His insistence that the final supreme authority lies in his imagination and *fantasia* makes his study more a fictional fantasy than scholarly biography or history. He deconstructs Burke into an image of himself, using historical data as the raw materials for creating an imaginary Edmund Burke.

At age sixteen, in a letter to his Quaker schoolboy friend Richard Shackleton (15 February 1745/46), Burke states one of the most important principles that guided him throughout his adult life: "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." This general principle of moral prudence and social tact, to which he adhered assiduously, makes it difficult for any biogra-

pher to ascertain Burke's subjective mind and psyche, particularly since he burned many of his private papers just before his death in 1797.

But this reticence and silence regarding his personal life does not prevent O'Brien from engaging in wild surmises on Burke's supposed "Irish psyche," so that his book contains scores of phrases such as "I feel sure that," "It seems likely," "I suspect, although there is no record of," "If, as I believe," and so on. One could make a case that it takes *more* imagination to refrain from such idle speculations than it does to indulge in them, but O'Brien's methodology dismisses that claim of self-discipline as dull history, as it would also exclude logically plausible but dubious theorizing where no verifiable evidence exists.

O'Brien notes the lack of knowledge regarding the very early education of Burke before he attended grammar school. He observes that folk legends still survive in the Blackwater country of rural Ireland, where Burke as a child lived with his maternal Catholic relatives, the Nagles. He contends that Burke was educated secretly in a "hedge school," such as was conducted surreptitiously by Catholics in Ireland because the penal laws forbade their having schools of their own. It may be so. Or it may not be so. Folk legends do not provide certainty in such matters. But O'Brien insists that Burke was educated as a "hedge school" Catholic.

This speculative contention becomes the basis for O'Brien's claim that Burke as an adult was a closet or "crypto-Catholic." Burke's many private and public statements of his belief in and affection for the established Church of England and his defense of it against its enemies are taken by O'Brien as the necessary means of disguising a secret Catholicism. The horrendous prejudice and persecution of Irish Catholics by the Protestant Ascendancy, the expedient conversion

of his father to Anglicanism seven years before he was born, and his own political efforts to lift the civil disabilities against Irish Catholics, are all construed by O'Brien as evidence that Burke was a secret Catholic. Disguise was necessary in order to have a career in British politics.

O'Brien's thesis is made to seem plausible because it is well established that Burke was very private about his own religious beliefs; and as a member of Parliament he had frequently to contend with anti-Catholic bigots who made much about his Catholic relatives. In political cartoons he was pictured as a Jesuit. But nowhere does O'Brien admit the possibility that he was a sincere Anglican, with deep sympathies for his persecuted Catholic relatives and countrymen. Instead, O'Brien avers that for over three decades Burke hoodwinked his political colleagues, his friends, like Dr. Johnson, as well as the British public in general, through a calculated policy of "dissimulation" in order to minimize "the importance of his Catholic connections and . . . taking care to be taken for a normal Anglican. This meant keeping the Catholic side of his feelings, and habits of viewing Irish affairs, under careful control Burke made himself sound more Protestant than he actually felt."⁴ But "the submerged Catholic layer" was always there, which placed him "in the habit of wearing a mask," so that Burke ". . . was living a lie."⁵

According to O'Brien, the hypocrisy in Burke's presumed Catholicism carried over into his party politics, so that he had to keep up "particular pretences with Rockingham," and this led to his "incapacity to communicate seriously with Rockingham and the other Whigs on . . . Ireland."⁶ As an Irishman and a commoner, and therefore a social outsider among English aristocratic Whigs, Burke was forced to disguise not only his supposed Catholicism, according to O'Brien, but also his true political liberal

convictions and potential revolutionary beliefs during nearly three decades of service and intellectual leadership with the Rockingham Whigs. O'Brien himself becomes aware that both his reliance on hearsay folk legends and his speculative methodology in defiance of existing empirical evidence may strain credulity: "Some readers may feel I have been too lavish in my use of inference, concerning Burke's relation to Ireland." Indeed. And more than to Ireland.

O'Brien's account of Jules Michelet's massive seven-volume work, *The French Revolution* (1847-1853), reveals the political essence that permeates *The Great Melody*. He notes that "Michelet's polemics. . . pervade his historical writings," that he condemned Burke's *Reflections* as "a furious diatribe against France, for which he was paid cash"; that the French historian greatly admired the Jacobin Jean Baptiste Cloots and Thomas Paine and condemned Christianity; that he had "a very humane and generous mind" and justified the Terror; that "Michelet's cult of the Revolution. . . has probably helped to form the intellectual background of French Communism" and thus paved the way for Marxist historians of the French Revolution, such as Aulard and Mathiez. With these ideologically inspired judgments in mind, O'Brien concludes that "Michelet remains . . . a very great historian" because his "unguarded expression of prejudice and emotion" reveals his honesty.⁷

O'Brien brushes aside as irrelevant Pieter Geyl's objection to Michelet's theory that history is merely an instrumental means to dogmatic ideology. He rejects Geyl's criticism of the French historian as an "absolute thinker," an "illusionist and self-deceiver," and as filled with "repulsive sentimentality" and impotence of . . . judgment. His comment on Geyl reveals the essence of his own bias against mainstream historians:

Most historians, outside France, would probably concur in those opinions; some would deny Michelet the title of historian altogether, call *The French Revolution* an epic pamphlet, a work of art inspired by historical events, anything but history, for accuracy is the essence of history, and accuracy is said to require scientific detachment, not passionate involvement.⁸

Many readers of *The Great Melody* will undoubtedly apply Geyl's criticism of Michelet to O'Brien himself.

It is not surprising then, that among British historians he dismisses Gibbon as "perfidious," holds in high esteem Thomas B. Macaulay and George Trevelyan, and despises the historiography of Sir Lewis Namier and his followers for their work on Burke's politics and the reign of George III. Macaulay appeals to O'Brien because he wrote history as though he were a prosecuting attorney, pleading his case before a court of justice or the throne of God. Trevelyan's erroneous account of eighteenth-century British party politics as a constant war between Whigs and Tories, from rigid positions held as fixed and absolute polarities, is precisely the view still taken by O'Brien.

Although Namier and his school were among the first to reject the radically defective view of party politics and constitutional history portrayed by Victorian and Edwardian historians, it is not necessary to be one of his followers to take issue with O'Brien's view. J. Steven Watson, a severe critic of Namier, wrote: "We can no longer believe in Macaulay's picture of Tories and Whigs (or tyrants and Americans) battling with one another on traditional points of principle." And in 1961, Carl B. Cone, whom O'Brien professes to admire, wrote: "Today, no historian dares accept the view of political history presented by G.M. Trevelyan in his *The Two-Party System in English History* (1926)."⁹ O'Brien's serious lapse in knowledge and judgment helps to ex-

plain the highly melodramatic account of Burke's partisan politics in his discussions of the American colonies, Ireland, India, and France. In light of the large amount of excellent scholarship on Burke and his times since 1950, quite distinct from the work of Namier and his followers, there is no excuse for O'Brien's adoption of such a deeply erroneous course.

In the section of his "Introduction" entitled "The Namier Attack," O'Brien writes, "Modern scholarship, from 1958 to 1991 has rendered untenable the contemptuous view of Burke which dominated the period from 1930 to 1960."¹⁰ This statement is true, but O'Brien fails to note that it was largely the result of scholars in the conservative tradition which brought about the change from the harsh strictures of Namier. In 1957, Sir Herbert Butterfield in *George III and the Historians* stated many important points of criticism of Namier. Between 1961 and 1963 a series of articles criticizing Namier by Carl B. Cone, J. Steven Watson, W.R. Fryer, and Peter T. Underdown appeared in *The Burke Newsletter*. Two articles in 1962, one by W.T. Laprade and another by Thomas W. Copeland, gave evidence of a sharp decline in Namier's influence by not even mentioning him. In "Burke and the Namier Historians: Burke's Chief Critics Since 1929," the present writer summarized all of the main points of criticism against Namier's method in *The Relevance of Edmund Burke* (1964). O'Brien totally ignores this wealth of scholarship, contends that "the first sustained attack on Namier's method" was made by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., in 1964, although at least seven scholars had preceded him. Yet O'Brien writes in 1992 as though his own criticism is original. His work fully exemplifies the truth of Samuel Johnson's dictum that so much that passes for originality is mere ignorance or neglect of our ancestors or predecessors.

O'Brien's image of English politics as

presented by Namier during the reign of George III becomes an ironical parody:

What an eerie place . . . is eighteenth century London, once it has undergone Namierisation: This is a world in which no one ever talks to anyone else. All communication is in writing. The spaces between the bouts of penmanship are filled with silence. Anything that doesn't get written down doesn't happen.¹¹

In view of O'Brien's parody, it becomes doubly grievous for him to categorize indiscriminately as "Namier historians" all those who accept any valid fact established by that scholar, even when they reject his strong prejudices regarding Burke's role in party politics.

Among the British historians O'Brien falsely includes as disciples of Namier are Sir Herbert Butterfield, "that distinguished Namierite Lucy Sutherland,"¹² J. Steven Watson, Ian Christie, and Peter Marshall. During visits to Britain between 1963-1965, and in 1974, the present writer knows from personal contact with all of these historians that none of them was ever a disciple of Namier, as O'Brien claims.

Ironically, there are some very important points of identity between O'Brien and Namier. Both men accept only the first half of Carl Cone's statement that "Burke lived both in the world of practical politics and in the world of ideas."¹³ O'Brien quotes John Morley as saying that ". . . the details of practical politics . . . can only be understood and dealt with by the aid of the broad conceptions of political philosophy."¹⁴ and then, like Namier, he totally ignores Burke's political philosophy. He quotes A.J.P. Taylor's largely valid stricture that "Namier took the mind out of history,"¹⁵ and then does the same by following Namier in limiting Burke's mind to party tactics and stratagems, while totally omitting the intellectual and moral virtues in the basic principles in Burke's

politics. In reducing Burke to a party politician, they differ in that Namier utterly denigrated Burke's role and importance, picturing him as a lackey of "the men whose livery he happened to have taken,"¹⁶ whereas at the opposite extreme O'Brien exalts him as paramount in his party, claiming that he so dominated his faction's chief that "whatever power Rockingham possessed was in Burke's hands," so that "Rockingham himself was not really in control of the administration."¹⁷ O'Brien makes much ado about this minor difference, while ignoring how much he shares with Namier in their secular and empirical view of history. Neither man gives the slightest attention to Burke's vital concept of "the commonwealth of Christian Europe," and both regard him as a man of his own time and nothing more.¹⁸

O'Brien objects strongly to Namier's closest colleague, John Brooke, for "drawing . . . large and damaging conclusions from a supposed documentary silence," and to "the Namierite tendency to infer too much from documentary silence."¹⁹ Yet this is precisely what O'Brien's *fantasia* leads him to do in explicating Burke's silences regarding his deep feelings about Ireland. Actually, many of Burke's convictions about Ireland are easily documented. O'Brien complains about Namier's method of omitting rather than refuting interpretations of Burke with which he disagrees: "One might perhaps expect a historian to examine in detail the thesis which he proposes to refute. But Namier proceeds otherwise. He treats the thesis as so absurd as not to require refutation."²⁰ O'Brien must have taken his cue from Namier, because that is exactly what he does in rejecting without any discussion the dominant view of Burke's politics as based upon moral natural law. Namier's description of what he calls Burke's "fertile, disordered and malignant imagination" is a good summary of O'Brien's own loose *fantasia* as it

is applied to scholars who interpret Burke as a moral natural law political philosopher. O'Brien goes so far as to invent a pejorative fictional category for scholars who perceive Burke in a conservative moral natural law tradition. He refers to them as members of "the Cold War, the Vietnam War school of Burke studies."²¹ But no such category exists except in O'Brien's mind.

He wholly omits Burke's many passages which appeal to moral natural law, particularly in the affairs of Ireland and India, and he ignores its connection with politics, such as Burke's statement that "the principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged; and I neither now, nor ever will, admit of any other."²² He objects to "the classification of Burke as 'conservative,'" and claims that Mansfield is firm against the natural law view of Burke's theoretical position, "a view dear to the cold warriors of American Burke studies."²³ How much substance is there to his claim that Mansfield denies the moral natural law in Burke's politics? In Mansfield's review of R.R. Fennessy's *Burke, Paine, and the Rights of Man* (1963), he writes most respectfully of "the relation of natural law and prescription in Burke," and that he accepts that scholar's thesis, identical with that of Hoffman, Stanlis, Strauss, Kirk, Canavan, and many others, that "the *real* rights of men are to be found in a complicated social structure, not in a pre-civil state of nature."²⁴ In Mansfield's edition of *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* (1984), however, he does ignore Burke's belief that moral natural law is of divine origin, and therefore treats it as an arbitrary construct of human discursive reason, that is, as an ideology, rather than as the wholly anti-ideological God-given moral law which is perceived (not created) by man's "Right Reason," and which all rulers and subjects are obliged to obey. Mansfield would have done well to include among his selected letters that which Burke sent to

William Markham (November 9, 1771): "The principles that guide us in public and private, as they are not of our devising, but molded into the nature and essence of things, will endure with the sun and moon."²⁵ To Burke moral natural law is not an ideological intrusion of abstract theory into politics, as Mansfield errs in asserting, but the necessary ethical norm at the core of constitutional law, by which political behavior is judged both morally and legally.

In order to destroy the reputation of scholars who interpret Burke in terms of moral natural law, O'Brien offers what he thinks is a contrasting alternative: "Even in the period of these political distortions, however, some American scholars were working on Burke in an altogether disinterested way The first to appear was Carl B. Cone's two-volume biography" ²⁶ Apparently O'Brien is unaware that Cone accepts the natural law interpretation of Burke as completely as many other scholars. In an article called "The Burke Revival" Cone wrote:

In recent years there has been a concentrated re-examination of Burke's conception of the Natural Law. As a result of the studies of Ross Hoffman, Leo Strauss, and Peter Stanlis, to name only three, the earlier statement of this problem has been drastically revised. At the same time the modern conservative movement has found in this reconstruction of Burke's thought the unifying, pervasive principle which it sought. Through Burke, modern conservatism is now connected with the middle ages and antiquity, finding its support in immutable law, of divine origin, anterior to positive law, and concerned with moral duty and the achievement of justice in the social order.²⁷

From Cone's statement it is clear why O'Brien ignores the sense of history and tradition in Burke's political thought, and also why he cannot admit the moral natural law interpretation: to do so he would have to abandon his main thesis, that

Burke is merely "a child of the Enlightenment" and is limited to being a party politician.

But there is an even deeper fallacy in O'Brien's rejection of natural law in Burke's thought as the basis of modern political conservatism. His criticism assumes that conservatism consists of a mindless defense of any established political authority, regardless of the beliefs or actions of those in power. Since Burke was a severe critic of King George III's ministers during the American Revolution, and since he attacked the bigotry and tyranny of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, the extortions and cruelties of Governor Warren Hastings in India, and the Jacobin rule by terror in France, by O'Brien's facile reasoning he was not a conservative, but a liberal opposing established political authority.

This line of reasoning totally ignores the fact that conservatism is based upon normative moral, legal, and constitutional principles, that it is a philosophy by which to judge those who use or abuse political power. Since Burke adhered strictly in his politics to the norms of moral natural law and constitutional law in holding rulers accountable for their use of power, he was never more conservative than when he condemned potentates who violated such norms. O'Brien's error regarding conservatism is exactly the same as that made currently by American and British journalists who refer to hard-line and die-hard Soviet Communists as "conservatives." Philosophically speaking there is no such thing as a conservative Communist; it is a total contradiction in terms. As an ideology, Marxist Communism is based upon atheism, which, like O'Brien, denies the validity of moral natural law as a God-given norm, and is the furthest point removed from the conservatism of Burke. Like all materialistic and totalitarian systems, Marxist Communism violates basic moral and constitutional natural and civil rights to life, lib-

erty, and property, because it conceives of the state under the Communist Party as an arbitrary god. O'Brien also ignores the fact that historically, from the New Deal to the collapse of Soviet Communism, many liberals such as he were among the great apologists for Marxism.

One of the most serious weaknesses of O'Brien as a scholar is his addiction to abstract categories. In 1975, the British historian John Lough warned against the loose use of "Enlightenment" as an abstract all-inclusive category: "It is surely obvious that the greater the diversity of ideas which the term *Enlightenment* is stretched to cover, the less use it has as a scholarly tool. By the time the lowest common denominator can be discovered for ideas produced under such vastly different conditions, *Enlightenment* and *Lumières* become empty words." O'Brien would have done well to heed Lough's warning.

Unless one equates the "Enlightenment" with the entire eighteenth century, it is meaningless abstract jargon to call Burke "a child of the Enlightenment," and to repeat it so often is to make it a tiresome cliché. O'Brien's indiscriminate inclusion of Burke under that term raises grave doubts that he understands either his subject or the complex nature of that elusive category and its vast range of interpretations. After studying a whole library of works by the outstanding scholars of the eighteenth century, Ira Wade, in *The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment* (1971), noted that "there is very little agreement among them as to what happened, or when, and still less as to how it occurred, and practically none at all as to what was its total effect."

In view of O'Brien's misinterpretation of Burke's religion, Norman Hampson's statement in *A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* (1968), takes on great significance: "The great mass of the population of Western Europe continued to accept . . . the existence of a Christian

order . . . It is something of an historical impertinence to consider the century as the age of the Enlightenment since religion exercised a far greater hold over most sections of every society than it does today." This statement is a salutary reaction to the commonly held view of Ernst Cassirer, Alfred Cobban, and Peter Gay, among many other scholars, that in essence the Enlightenment, following definitions by Diderot and Kant, consisted of the claim that every individual, using his private critical and analytical reason, had the right to subject the whole inherited Christian social order of Europe to destructive criticism. According to that interpretation, Burke is clearly not "a child of the Enlightenment," but as the defender of "prejudice" as moral habit he is probably its most powerful and persistent enemy.

Peter Gay recognized this when he totally omitted Burke from his "comprehensive anthology," *The Enlightenment* (1973), and wrote of Burke's politics in *The Yale Review* (Spring 1961): "Consider the absurdly inflated reputation of Burke, whose shrewd guesses and useful insights are placed like a fig leaf before his malicious incomprehension, confused politics, and unashamed ignorance." That is the true voice and temper of modern secular liberalism, the category into which O'Brien is so eager to place Burke. Whether or not one agrees with Gay's interpretation of Burke's politics, he at least understands the Enlightenment; and, unlike O'Brien, he has his categories right.

O'Brien's addiction to abstract categories applies even to the title of his book. "The Great Melody" begins as a gathering metaphor borrowed from Yeats, to be applied to Burke's important subjects. But before long it becomes not merely a means of illuminating Burke's ideas, but acquires the qualities of an imperative norm endowed with actual, independent, historical reality. Finally,

whenever Burke's words or actions seem to O'Brien to fall short of his metaphor-category, Burke is criticized as not being true to his genuine nature or beliefs. Thus does O'Brien's *fantasia* conceptualize historical reality, and create for him an independent fictional world of meaning.

Once it is clear to the reader of O'Brien's book that his main purpose is to identify and assimilate Burke's conservative Whig principles into the revolutionary and radical beliefs of the statesman's worst political enemies, it becomes obvious why O'Brien dared not complete the quotation from Yeats's poem, and why he abstracts the vast range of specific differences between various groups of Whigs into "*The Whig Tradition*." Yeats was perfectly right that Burke, like Swift, "hated Whiggery," because it included "a levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind" no saint or drunkard ever possessed. The aspect of Whiggery that Burke detested was the revolutionary and radical strain linked with religious dissent, which had its roots in the English Commonwealth during the 1640s, and which O'Brien construes as the norm for all Whiggery. Since Burke expressly denied that even the most moderate "New Whigs" of 1790 were the authentic historical Whigs, he probably did not consider Richard Price, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and the other eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen as Whigs at all, but as revolutionaries and radicals. In making the eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen the norm for Whiggery, O'Brien's "*The Whig Tradition*" and his account of Burke as a Whig become a comedy of errors.

When Burke entered Parliament in 1765, the very conception of a political party did not exist; he himself formulated it during the 1770s. Organized parties did not evolve in Britain until the nineteenth century. The Whigs in Burke's time were split into fluid factions: the Pelham Whigs who became the

Rockingham Whigs; the Bedford Whigs; the Grenville and Pitt Whigs, and other small groups, each pursuing its own self-interest and policies. The Tories, independent country gentlemen, and even the Court faction, were similarly split over political issues that touched their own concerns. By ignoring all these differences, and by accepting the now obsolete, rigid, unified, and absolute conception of Whigs and Tories utilized by Macaulay and Trevelyan, with all Whigs crowned by a halo and all Tories allied with Satan, O'Brien's understanding of political parties during the last half of the seventeenth century and the entire eighteenth century is rendered completely untenable.

Party was important to Burke, and under ordinary circumstances he was convinced that party government, following publicly declared policies, was the best instrumental means of achieving the great ends of society—good order, justice, and freedom under constitutional law for all citizens and subjects. When a vital issue involving basic constitutional and dynastic changes in government was at stake, as in England in 1688 and in France in 1789, and when Burke was convinced that party leaders were betraying their sacred trust and traditional principles, then his ultimate commitment was to his religious, moral, and political principles, and the party label "Whig" was not a badge of honor. Although it was most painful for Burke in 1790 to break with Charles James Fox and the "New Whigs" over the French Revolution, he did so and did not hesitate to join with William Pitt's Tories against that movement. All of these palpable facts regarding Burke and his party in his own time are set aside by O'Brien as of no importance, since he pictures him as an absolute "Whig," and one such as Burke would never have recognized.

In presenting Burke as a rigid Whig, O'Brien quotes his ironical objection to

the eagerness of the British Jacobins to accept the dubious peace overtures by the French Directory in 1795, which led the vacillating Pitt to forget Burke's warning against a regicide peace: "Scarcely had the Gallic harbinger of peace and light begun to utter his lively notes, than all the cackling of us poor Tory geese to alarm the garrison of the Capitol was forgot." O'Brien comments on Burke's sentence: "This is the only reference by Burke to himself as a Tory, but it is facetious. He no more thought of himself as a Tory than as a goose."²⁸ There are two errors in O'Brien's remark, one of fact, the other of judgment. Burke did refer to himself as a Tory on another occasion, and he was not facetious because his appeal was to principle above party. Carl Cone disposes of O'Brien's errors in one statement:

In April, 1792, during the first stages of the negotiations that led to the coalition [of Burke's Portland Whigs with Pitt's Tories] that was completed two years later, Burke said it made no difference whether he and his friends were abandoning the old Whig name. Only principles mattered. He was remaining constant to his old ones. If formerly he had called them Whig, and if now "they are Tory principles, I shall always wish to be thought a Tory."²⁹

Twenty-one years earlier, as if to refute O'Brien's contention that he was a rigid Whig, Burke defined the subordinate role of party to principle: "The principles that guide us in public and in private, which as they are not of our devising but molded into the nature and essence of things, will endure with the Sun and Moon, long very long after Whig and Tory, Stuart and Brunswick, and all such miserable Bubbles and playthings of the Hour are vanished from existence, and from memory."³⁰ O'Brien's error, as usual, is in treating Burke's party politics not as an instrumental means to good government, but as an absolute end in itself.

Burke agreed with Jonathan Swift and Johnson, who believed that a reasonable Whig and a reasonable Tory would agree on fundamental principles and would oppose revolutionary and radical subversive ideology no matter which party label seemed to justify it. Like Swift, who changed from Whig to Tory in 1710, Burke abandoned the "New Whigs"; and in neither case was there anything facetious or expedient about the change.

Contrary to O'Brien's view, there were at least three distinct Whig traditions confronting one another in 1790 in intense animosity; that of Richard Price, the eighteenth-century commonwealthman whose radical sermon provoked Burke into writing his *Reflections*; the "New Whig" liberalism of Charles James Fox, whose leadership Burke abandoned; and the conservative Rockingham Whig tradition of Burke. It is significant that these three opposed branches of Whig politics were also present and opposed to each other in the main political groups in 1688, and that Burke's position in 1790, in opposing both the Commonwealth and "New Whig" strains of Whiggery, finds its equivalent in his political principles held in common with the Tories who favored the Revolution of 1688. Louis I. Bredvold has made it clear that in 1688 fundamental issues regarding defense of the Established Anglican Church, constitutional law and the royal prerogative, and the legitimate right of succession to the Crown, were of paramount importance, and that party designations were not significant. Few scholars are more knowledgeable than Bredvold on the Restoration and the early eighteenth century. On the revolutionary politics involved in the attempt of John Locke and other radical Whigs to prevent the future James II from becoming king in 1685, Bredvold wrote: "The Whiggism of 1680 is as different from the Whiggism of Sir Robert Walpole and the later eighteenth century as the Toryism of 1680 is from the principles of

Swift and Bolingbroke." He notes another point which O'Brien totally ignores: "The close connection between Whiggism and Dissent did not escape anyone; Tory pamphleteers were never weary of proclaiming that the New Saints of '79 were intent upon repeating the history of '42." In effect, early in his *Reflections*, Burke charges Price and the eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen with the same revolutionary design: "These gentlemen . . . in all their reasonings on the Revolution of 1688, have a revolution [in mind] which happened in England about forty years before."³¹ Clearly, Burke was far more opposed to the eighteenth-century commonwealthmen Whigs than he was to the "New Whigs."

Bredvold describes how John Dryden, a Tory, set forth principles of constitutional limited monarchy regarding the Revolution of 1688, which opposed both the arbitrary absolute power of one, in a Stuart monarchy, and also the arbitrary absolute power of the many, as in a Cromwellian Commonwealth. He observes that, in this view of 1688, Dryden anticipated the very arguments that Burke was to advance in 1790 in his defense of 1688: "If some modern admirer of Burke was to search in the political literature of the late seventeenth century for some faint anticipations of the temper and principles of Burke, he would not find much to his taste in the Whig pamphleteers, but a great deal in John Dryden."³² All of this, of course, is beyond O'Brien's understanding, since he is addicted to ironclad party labels and an abstract conception of Whiggery which forbids any deviation from strict party orthodoxy even though no orthodoxy exists where principles higher than partisan loyalty prevail.

Nowhere does O'Brien reveal the slightest awareness of the complex history of Whiggery, of the enormous political differences between various groups at different times who considered them-

selves "Whigs," from before the Revolution of 1688 to the French Revolution. Unlike Burke, he does not perceive the Whig ancestors of Richard Price in the revolutionary and radical politics of the Commonwealth Levellers, which were carried over into the Revolution of 1688. O'Brien could hardly identify Burke's politics with the radical Whig who provoked his *Reflections*, but he does the next best thing by quoting two other Commonwealth radicals, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine, who wrote savage indictments of his *Reflections*, and he infers that their claims on Burke as a fellow revolutionary are valid.

Few things in O'Brien's book are more instructive than his method of using quotations from Wollstonecraft and Paine as compared with his sharp criticism of L.G. Mitchell, the editor of the eighth volumes of Burke's writings and speeches. Mitchell despised Burke, and in his introduction injected some isolated quotations by critics disparaging him. O'Brien rightly objects to this technique: "It is enough for Mitchell's purpose to cite a political adversary of Burke. . . without committing himself or evaluating the validity of the comments he quotes."³³ Yet O'Brien employs exactly the same crude tabloid journalistic method in quoting isolated statements by Wollstonecraft and Paine. Wollstonecraft wrote: "Reading your *Reflections* warily over, it has continually struck me, that had you been a Frenchman, you would have been, in spite of your respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolutionist."³⁴ The wholly hypothetical basis of her statement, so contrary to facts, does not deter O'Brien from agreeing with her, as it is in accordance with his *fantasia* and the thesis of his book. Paine is quoted on Burke's supposed "change of principles" over the French Revolution: he pictures the statesman as a liberal who is "praising the aristocratic hand that hath purloined him from himself."³⁵ Both of these iso-

lated statements are patently false, yet they are treated by O'Brien as being so self-evident as not to require any comment. They are items in O'Brien's attempt to put Burke into the very revolutionary tradition of the eighteenth-century Commonwealthman which he opposed so strongly during his entire political career. Just about everything that O'Brien claims regarding Burke's politics applies to Paine.

O'Brien's abstract conception of "the Whig tradition" leads him to confound Burke's politics with the political views of John Locke. As Peter Laslett has shown in his superb edition of *Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (1960), this work was published in 1689 in order to give the appearance that Locke was justifying the Revolution of 1688, but in reality the treatises were written before that event, between 1678 and 1681, in support of the first Earl of Shaftesbury's revolutionary activities, especially those designed to exclude the Duke of York from becoming James II. Laslett also showed that Locke's own political views were not like the constitutional Whig and Tory politics of the English aristocracy that forced James II to abdicate, but were rooted in "the Good Old Cause" of the Commonwealth Levellers.³⁶ Laslett notes that Locke "went much further towards revolution and treason than his earlier biographers knew," and he refers to Maurice Cranston's biography of Locke to chide the "political innocence" of those who, like O'Brien, still regard Locke as a respectable middle-class Whig reformer, rather than as an advocate of violent revolution.³⁷

What Arthur O. Lovejoy describes as Locke's "pose of intellectual modesty," but which was actually his masterful art and willful deception, is shown by Laslett to have resulted in a myth, a widely held conviction among Whigs during the entire eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that Locke wrote his two treatises

to justify the Revolution of 1688, and that he was therefore a model of Whiggery. As Laslett notes, the myth is still believed: "This belief is far too deeply ingrained, far, far too useful, to be easily abandoned. Nevertheless, it is quite untrue."³⁸ For O'Brien the myth is still true.

Laslett's thesis was confirmed in depth by Richard Ashcraft's important study, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (1986). He proves that Locke's ties with the Levellers of the Commonwealth make his politics far more radical than historians have supposed. It is therefore wholly unfeasible historically for O'Brien to connect Burke's political philosophy or party politics with Locke's Commonwealth Levellers and their beliefs. Ashcraft's thesis is further confirmed by an earlier work, Caroline Robbins' *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (1959). She describes the genealogy of the egalitarian principles of the Commonwealth Levellers from the 1660s to Burke's time, and shows how their radical social and political ideology was transmitted through Locke and others to the radical Whig enemies of Burke, including such eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen as Richard Price, Thomas Paine, and many of the more than 400 writers who "replied" to Burke's *Reflections*. Locke's political ideas run like a central theme through many of those who attacked Burke's book. But to O'Brien every Whig is in the same general camp, and therefore Burke is made indistinguishable from the revolutionary Commonwealth tradition he always opposed, and indeed O'Brien contends that Burke reflects their revolutionary Whig ideas. Richard Price, not Edmund Burke, is the true disciple of Locke.³⁹

But given O'Brien's methodology, in which historical facts count for little while reality and truth are created by his *fantasia*, it would probably avail nothing for his improvement to have a full historical account of Burke as a Whig, his interpre-

tation of 1688, and his political philosophy. O'Brien refuses to take Burke at his word whenever he says or writes something that contradicts the thesis that he is a radical liberal or potential revolutionary like himself. Often O'Brien reassures his readers that Burke doesn't really mean what he says, or that he isn't being true to his real nature, or that his words "ring false," or that party discipline prevents him from speaking his own mind, or that he is forced to dissemble his true feelings, or that he is suffering from a guilt complex acquired years ago from having displeased his father. This method enables O'Brien to run with the hare or the hounds as his whimsy chooses, and to shape Burke to whatever image he desires, to play fast and loose with facts and disregard historical evidence that refutes his *a priori* thesis. His *fantasia* is the final arbiter of what is true or false. In the final analysis, no meaningful communication is possible when the solipsisms of O'Brien's subjective logic, feelings, or imagination determine what is true or false about his subject.

1. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," xxxi. All references will be to this work unless indicated otherwise. 2. *Ibid.*, lxxxiv. 3. See O'Brien, "Queer World," in *Writers and Politics* (New York, 1967), 126. 4. *The Great Melody*, 190. 5. *Ibid.*, 191, 193, and 201. 6. *Ibid.*, 190-91. 7. See O'Brien, "Michelet Today," in *Writers and Politics*, 46, 51, 58, and 48. 8. *Ibid.*, 46. 9. *The Burke Newsletter*, III, 2 and 3 (Winter-Spring 1961-62), 74. 10. *The Great Melody*, lvi. 11. *Ibid.*, 333. 12. *Ibid.*, 331. 13. *The Burke Newsletter*, III, 2 and 3 (Winter-Spring 1961-62), 76.

14. *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," xxxviii. 15. *Ibid.*, lix. 16. *Ibid.*, xli. 17. *Ibid.*, 234. 18. In complete contrast to Namier and O'Brien, the American novelist Walker Percy wrote: "It is not a small thing . . . to turn your back on two thousand years of rational thinking and hard work and science and art and the Judeo-Christian tradition." *Love Among the Ruins* (1971), 249. 19. *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," L and Li. 20. *Ibid.*, xl. 21. *Ibid.*, lxi and the Index. O'Brien pretends that politics, not scholarship, was behind the Burke revival during the 1950s and 1960s: "Some American scholars, notably Peter J. Stanlis and Russell Kirk, drew upon Burke for arguments in the context of the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the idea of America's imperial responsibilities." (*The Great Melody*, "Introduction," lxi.) 22. Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, II, 282. 23. *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," lxxv. 24. *The Burke Newsletter*, VI, no. 3 (Spring 1965), 444. 25. Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, II, 282. 26. *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," lxxii. 27. Carl B. Cone, *The Burke Newsletter*, III, no. 2 and 3 (Winter-Spring 1961-62), 82. 28. *The Great Melody*, 552. 29. *The Burke Newsletter*, III, no. 2 and 3 (Winter-Spring 1961-62), 79. 30. Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, II, 282. 31. Burke, *Reflections*, in Peter J. Stanlis, ed., *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* (1963), 431. 32. Louis I. Bredvold, *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (1934), 138-39 and 149. 33. *The Great Melody*, "Introduction," lxxi. 34. *Ibid.*, p. 89. 35. *Ibid.*, 413. In O'Brien's article "A New York Critic," Paine's quotation is somewhat different. There he calls Burke "a gifted liberal" who "kisses the aristocratic hand that hath purloined him from himself." (*Writers and Politics*, 12). But both O'Brien's quotations are inaccurate. In the standard edition of Paine, edited by Moncure D. Conway, the sentence reads: "Accustomed to kiss the aristocratic hand that hath purloined him from himself, he degenerates into a composition of art, and the genuine soul of nature forsakes him." *The Rights of Man*, (Part One), Norwalk, CT., 1961, 24. 36. Peter Laslett, ed., *Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, "Introduction," 21-22. 37. *Ibid.*, 31. 38. *Ibid.*, 46. See also, 47-48. 39. For a detailed account of Burke, Locke, and the Revolution of 1688, see Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution* (1991).