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## PUZZLING THROUGH BURKE

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**H**ERE'S AN UTTERLY INNOCENT QUESTION: What was Edmund Burke up to, anyway? What does all that quirky brilliance, all that majestically tangled prose, amount to? If Burke is a source of profound political wisdom, as generations of conservatives have tirelessly assured us, what does he have to say? If he's an important political theorist—and I don't think we should allow the conventionally received canon, no more sacrosanct than our teachers' reading lists, to determine our judgment on such matters—what is his theory?

Of course, Burke is famous for reviling theory. His works are peppered with insistently repetitive catchphrases and imagery on the subject. Not for him any interest in “a long mazy discussion of the metaphysics of policy” or “the mazes of metaphysic sophistry”; indeed, Burke instructed his Bristol constituents that “I do not pretend to be an antiquary, a lawyer, or qualified for the chair of professor in metaphysics. I never ventured to put your solid interests on speculative grounds.” Burke could easily say, “This is not a mere theory”—but notice how pregnant a phrase that is.<sup>1</sup>

Then again, Burke could also insist, “I do not vilify theory and speculation: no, because that would be to vilify reason itself. . . . No,—whenever I speak against theory, I mean always a weak, erroneous, fallacious, un-

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founded, or imperfect theory.”<sup>2</sup> But this gives up the game. What enthusiast for theory is going to applaud weak, erroneous, fallacious, unfounded, and imperfect theory? Regardless, I want to set aside sterile disputes about what “theory” really is. Instead, I want to raise some questions about Burke’s major lines of argument, theoretical or not.

There are, I suggest, three major lines of argument in Burke. One is a series of dead ends impossible to spell out coherently; another is sometimes incomplete, sometimes pernicious; the last and best offers a striking political sociology but is doomed to arriving too early or too late on the scene.

I will repeatedly press the claim that Burke’s work is contradictory, so I want to be clear on what sort of contradiction is at stake and why it matters. That Burke offers three contradictory major lines of argument, not one, is not a problem: Only readers in the clutches of mischievous categories like “teaching” and “view” will worry about that. (We have better games to play in this business than “will the real Edmund Burke please stand up?” — better strategies of exegesis than showing that one line is the serious or real one and the others mere distractions.) The contradictions I want to exploit are those internal to each line.

Perhaps our intellectual culture is obsessed with coherence; perhaps we should follow the lead of self-styled postmodernists and learn to embrace contradiction, incoherence, flux, and freely floating signifiers as signs of fertility, not confusion. Perhaps. (Does anyone grade undergraduate papers with those strictures in mind?) Still, even the most relentless analytic among us can tell the difference between fruitful contradictions and barren ones. And anyway, the corpus doesn’t just add up to nonsense. It contains incisive critiques of its own conservative arguments, time and again, and in part I want to exhume a Burke all too aware of the failings of the Burke our own conventional wisdom has supplied.

So this essay is a critique, not a celebration; and my larger purpose is to raise some questions about conservatism, not just to probe the corpus of Burke’s writings. One last prefatory point: The principle of charity dictates that we give our opponents the strongest case we can. But that is wholly consistent with — indeed, it demands — our critically assaulting their arguments, seeing what sorts of strain they can and cannot handle. What we might label the principle of reverence, the one that dictates genuflecting before important theorists and endlessly reminding ourselves of our own intellectual inferiority, just gets in the way. It’s a bad way of reminding us to be careful.

Again, I want to raise questions, and I don’t pretend to have earned a summary dismissal of Burke. Others are, of course, free to answer the questions, or (the more ordinary academic tactic) to argue that they are badly

put. Whether or not one sympathizes with Burke, though, we have to be able to do better than point toward such abstract categories as "tradition" and "history"; we have to dig in and see what they mean, what use he puts them to. Theorists are too often fond of giant abstractions, but a lot of this stuff is in the details.

### DEAD ENDS

Burke is celebrated for his contempt for natural rights talk, for "that specious folly of the rights of man." The French revolutionaries, he claimed, "made and recorded a sort of *institute* and *digest* of anarchy, called the Rights of Man, in such a pedantic abuse of elementary principles as would have disgraced boys at schools." Still, Burke had no global contempt for talk of nature. (Or even for natural rights. "The natural rights of mankind," he could write, "are indeed sacred things"; even after the French revolution, he could invoke "the rights of human nature" in bemoaning the plight of Irish Catholics.) Against such talk, I want to reassert a familiar Humean case: that "nature" is a multiple homonym. Absent equivocations and absent the teleological background that once made nature a critical standard, this kind of talk of nature won't get off the ground, however familiar and alluring it seems.<sup>3</sup>

Take Burke's most sweepingly abstract appeals to nature: "Never," he tells us, "no, never, did Nature say one thing and Wisdom say another. . . . Nature is never more truly herself than in her grandest forms." Or again, "We do not give credit enough to our original and genuine affections. Nature is no bad chancellour." Nature here cannot mean whatever happens in the world, since Burke is warning us against flouting the dictates of nature, what he takes to be a live and all too frequently realized possibility.<sup>4</sup> Whatever Burke learned from Hume, passages like this one look unabashedly teleological. The obvious question, then, is how might we decide what counts as natural, what counts as flourishing or perfection?

Perhaps nature here means what is presocial. The implicit project is to strip away what we owe to education or convention and label what is left natural, thus recovering the "original and genuine affections" since distorted or overlaid. (This is, of course, the opposite of Burke's more celebrated affection for "the superadded ideas . . . necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature."<sup>5</sup> But again, we'll get nowhere in Burke exegesis by insisting ahead of time that the whole corpus must be coherent.) There are two skeptical doubts about this project. First, maybe it can't get off the

ground. Maybe what is recognizably human about us is always already an intermixture of nature and nurture, or, if you like, genetics and socialization, that if you insist, say, on examining a newborn human to understand nature, you will find nothing but an indefinitely (not infinitely) plastic bundle of dispositions and potentials. Second is Rousseau's charge against Hobbes: that those going back to nature tend not to go back far enough but to enshrine as nature what must be extensively conventional. Burke himself offers a hilarious case of this problem:

So far is perfection, considered as such, from being the cause of beauty; that this quality, where it is highest, in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness. In all this they are guided by nature.<sup>6</sup>

We can, though, leave both skeptical worries aside here. If we call "nature" what is presocial, there's no reason to believe that nature offers any critical standard we should follow. Toilet training is as laboriously social as anything could be. But I take it that no one is going to urge that we give it up as an interference with pristine nature. (And no one is going to take seriously the thought that our attachment to the practice of toilet training small children is a sign of how perverted civilization has made us.) Burke, of course, cannot think that any and all socialization counts as trampling on nature. When he says, for instance, that "Nature is banished by the formalities of aristocracy, and the abominations of the rights of man,"<sup>7</sup> he must be inviting us to contrast aristocracy and natural rights with other social schemes that do not banish nature. Still, I cannot figure out any non-question-begging way of describing toilet training as respecting or following what is presocial about us, instead of tampering with it.

Burke also uses nature to name an old-fashioned (but still thriving) version of moral objectivism. So he could appeal to "the stable and eternal rules of justice and reason, rules which are above" parliamentary representatives and their constituents; so he could suggest that human laws do not bind if "they are contrary . . . to the immutable laws of nature." So, too, he closed the major chapter of his political life, the impeachment of Warren Hastings, by telling the Lords,

I impeach him in the name and by virtue of those eternal laws of justice which he has violated. I impeach him in the name of human nature itself, which he has cruelly outraged, injured, and oppressed, in both sexes, in every age, rank, situations, and condition of life.<sup>8</sup>

But Burke nowhere tries to develop these fleeting suggestions. At best, then, this appeal is a promissory note. If conservatism is going to be the political view that invokes higher law, then someone really ought to work out the relevant account of higher law. And I know of no satisfactory account.

But there's more to say on this score, even if saying it involves writing some promissory notes of my own for detailed arguments which I cannot develop here. The ordinary skeptical worry about this sort of natural law is that it doesn't exist, that there's nothing there, that the cosmos is wholly mute on questions of mortality.<sup>9</sup> But consider a different worry: It wouldn't make any difference. After all, we cannot step outside our "merely" conventional beliefs about right and wrong to scrutinize the absolute or natural or transcendent or objective moral fact of the matter, any more than we can make progress in science by setting aside all our current theories and beliefs and trying somehow to read the truth off the alleged primitives of "sense data." (Those tempted to enshrine moral intuition as a preconceptual window to moral facts should remember that our moral intuitions come extensively wrapped up in our concepts, our categories, our socialization, and plenty of other conventional packaging.) What we can be justified in believing or doing depends on what we currently believe, what we can learn, and so on. Or, to put the point differently, objectivists and their various opponents have lots to say to each other about metaethics. But in any actual moral or political dispute, the objectivist has no extra resources, no trump card up his sleeve that can be triumphantly brandished at the moment when his opponents are stymied. The objectivist runs out of things to say at precisely the same point (and for precisely the same reasons) that they do.

Burke also deploys the concept of nature in ways familiar from medieval and Elizabethan political thought. Think of order as a grand unifying principle of the entire universe, framing a unified hierarchy incorporating God, the angels, humans, animals, plants, the regular orbits of the planets, and so on. In this view, politics extends far past King, parliament, and the like. Instead, relations of rule and authority pervade all the orderly regularities of the universe, and divine providence is never far away. That is why Burke could move so quickly from political economy to theology, declaring that "We, the people, ought to be made sensible that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of Nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer or which hangs over us." Or again, that is why Burke could promote reform of England's political finances by instructing his parliamentary audience that "it would be wise to attend upon

the order of things, and not to attempt to outrun the slow, but smooth and even course of Nature."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the deep appeal of this line of thought, though, despite its distinguished history, it's incoherent. I can imagine no reputable way to make the orderly regularities of the natural world serve as any sort of model or guide to political choices. It is no accident that when Burke launches this line of appeal, he routinely contents himself with wholly summary rhetoric. I've found only two extended discussions in the corpus, both appearing in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The rhetoric of the *Reflections* hangs on juxtaposing the stolid, happy course of British politics to the gyrating frenzies of France. One of Burke's stabs at making that contrast is an argument that British politics follows nature.

The first appearance of the argument comes in Burke's rejoinder to Richard Price, whose sermon "Of the Love of Our Country," sketching a broadly cosmopolitan conception of natural rights, so enraged Burke. Burke takes pains to emphasize the place of the rights of Englishmen, derived from the ancient constitution, not the natural rights of men. "Our liberties" are "an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers"; the constitution is "without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right." Appeals to the ancient constitution were common enough, but Burke goes on to underwrite them in a rather novel way, crediting English good fortune to "the happy effect of following Nature." Then Burke is airborne, in a rather misty theoretical reverie of his own: "Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world."<sup>11</sup>

The second and more sustained appearance of the argument follows the famous passage where Burke, out to topple the imagery of the social contract, sarcastically concedes that "society is indeed a contract." But, he continues, it is not "a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico, or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties." Instead it demands reverence, since it is for great ends and is a partnership "between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." Now we are at the end of what's frequently quoted, but Burke is barely beginning to warm to his real theme. "Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place." England's "least learned and reflecting" believe this, following "an authority which those whom Provi-

dence dooms to live on trust need not be ashamed to rely on." But authority and subject alike "move in the same direction, though in a different place. They both move with the order of the universe," an order that finally turns out to depend on the divine "institutor and author and protector of civil society." For good measure, Burke tacks on a flourish of teleology: "He who gave our nature to be perfected by our virtue willed also the necessary means of its perfection: He willed, therefore, the state: He willed its connection with the source and original archetype of all perfection."<sup>12</sup>

This argument, surely, collapses under its own weight. It hangs on assimilating moral and political authority to empirical regularities. Burke is committed to believing that all of creation is "held in place" by "fixed compact" and "inviolable oath," that political allegiance is very like gravity. But this is confounding. Subjects have a choice about political allegiance, a choice which a falling rock does not have. And nothing like oath or compact is required to explain the behavior of the rock; the theological backdrop here is excess conceptual baggage, no more. (It's also mysterious: Who are the parties to the compact that keeps lower natures and the visible world in order?) Besides, the thought that disobedient subjects threaten the providential order of the universe is perplexing. Political shenanigans there were indeed in France, some of them bloody and punitive. (People who don't like Burke aren't committed to celebrating the Terror.) But they didn't endanger the order of the cosmos. The sun kept shining, the Rhine kept flowing, and presumably the angels didn't come hurtling out of the sky. Political chaos doesn't seem to trigger cosmic disturbances of any sort. Arguments about theism and teleology may seem daunting, but this stubborn little fact itself undercuts the plausibility of the cosmic conception of order. To put the point differently, it is the astonishing success of modern mechanism, not any forgetfulness of Being or perversely Promethean hubris, which shreds the plausibility of the Elizabethan account of order.

Those interested in finding a Burke we can learn from and relish, I take it, are not interested in trying at this late date to make these sorts of appeal to nature look respectable. The Burke they like is the lofty exponent of tradition. I want now to argue that Burke has two radically different conceptions of tradition. And, relentlessly, I want to argue that neither one works.

### *PRACTICES, REFORM, AND POLITICAL ARGUMENT*

"I put my foot in the tracks of our forefathers, where I can neither wander nor stumble." So Burke proudly announced, contrasting his own approach to



political life with those of the intoxicated Jacobins and innovators he so cordially detested.<sup>13</sup>

The problem with natural rights talk, Burke thought, what made it “metaphysical” or invidiously theoretical, was that it wasn’t rooted in the actual practices of any community. “I give due credit,” he sneered, “to the censorial brow, to the broad phylacteries, and to the imposing gravity of those magisterial rabbins and doctors in the cabala of political science.” (The anti-Semitic imagery is deliberate. Burke distanced himself from “itinerant Jew discounters” and “Jew jobbers,” adding, “We have in London very respectable persons of the Jewish nation, whom we will keep; but we have of the same tribe others of a very different description, — housebreakers, and receivers of stolen goods, and forgers of paper currency, more than we can conveniently hang. These we can spare to France.” Such comments go well beyond the boilerplate contemporary indictment of stock jobbers and corruption.) Burke sometimes thought that such metaphysicians were stupid (“the most foolish of men”), sometimes that they were wicked (“like . . . the Principle of Evil himself, incorporeal, pure, unmixed, dephlegmated, defecated evil”). Regardless, their approach to discussing politics was fundamentally misguided. In escaping the social world, in ignoring history and tradition, they entered what Burke elsewhere branded “the fairy land of philosophy,” a realm where counterintuitive arguments were dazzling. To do cogent political theory in England, Burke thought, was to contemplate the British constitution. His understanding of tradition here is fleshed out by four factors: the distinction between reform and innovation, the limits of individual rationality, a highly contextualist sensibility about political judgment, and the distinction between prudence and principle.<sup>14</sup>

“It cannot at this time be too often repeated, line upon line, precept upon precept, until it comes into the currency of a proverb, — *To innovate is not to reform.*” The innovator, like Paine, surveys what has been made and sees that it is not good. So he wants to dash off in a new direction, to remodel the political world from scratch. The reformer, though, disdains the “blind and furious spirit of innovation.” “He is sensible that his business is not to innovate, but to secure and to establish”; he “will improve his country; but it will be cautiously and progressively, upon its own native groundwork of religion, manners, habitudes, and alliances.” Burke insisted that all states require endless tinkering at the margin, continual reforms: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.” He even charged the powers that be with a complacent refusal to do this important work: “We all know that those who loll at their ease in high dignities, whether of the Church or of the State, are commonly averse to all reformation.”<sup>15</sup>

Tradition here isn't the enemy of change, and it isn't the enemy of rationality. Political institutions require ongoing reform, and it takes arguments to figure out what sort of reform. But those arguments take the form of scrutinizing existing problems and canvassing available solutions, not trying to redesign things from scratch.

What makes innovation so perilous? Burke argues that individuals aren't very bright, and, what matters more, that individuals aren't as wise as existing institutions. "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that the stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages." Or again, "It is a presumption in favor of any settled scheme of government against any untried project, that a nation has long existed and flourished under it." Things work reasonably well right now; we've been ironing out various quirks and problems for centuries; striking off into the political wilderness is a horribly chancy business. There's a Socratic version of political skepticism here: Burke is bright enough to know that he's not bright, and so he can adopt "a perfect distrust of my own abilities" along with "a profound reverence for the wisdom of our ancestors," where, of course, the thought is not that individuals didn't used to be dullards but that the ancestors in question acted collectively over the long run.<sup>16</sup>

What is sensible in England, then, wouldn't necessarily be sensible in France. Different traditions, different practices, different politics: Here's another source of Burke's antipathy to "the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction." Though Burke sometimes urged the French to emulate the British constitution as far as they could, his more considered judgment was that there was no reason they should. So he responded to a proposal to import British legal institutions to France by urging that

one can form no judgment of these things in the abstract. . . . Our juries, for instance, are placed in very different relations and are combined with an order of things so totally unlike your whole project, that no argument from their known effect in England can be safely drawn as to their probable effect in the experimental establishments in France.

So, too, Burke contrasted the statesman with the university professor. The former, he urged, must be attentive to the nuances of context; the latter, he implied, who "has only the general view of society," is "metaphysically mad."<sup>17</sup>

A contextualist political critic, trying to figure out what marginal reforms would improve his polity, must always defer to prudence. Prudence is "the god of this lower world," "the director, the regulator, the standard" of all moral and political virtues. Burke frequently contrasts prudence and princi-

ple. Intriguingly, though, he insists that each has its necessary place in politics. Qualifying yet another attack on "abstraction and universals," Burke conceded that

I do not put abstract ideas wholly out of any question; because I well know that under that name I should dismiss principles, and that without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasonings in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion.

There's a crucial internal dilemma here. Burke sounds as though he doesn't want to be what we might call a conventionalist or historicist all the way down. The enterprise of critically evaluating our practices, he thinks, has to be underwritten by principles. And he explicitly denies that those principles can themselves grow out of the study of history: "History is a preceptor of prudence, not of principles." Where, then, do principles come from? Immediately following the denial that principles come from history is a striking affirmation: "The principles of true politics are those of morality enlarged, and I neither now do or ever will admit of any other." Once again, though, Burke develops no account of the content of morality or of how we come to know about it.<sup>18</sup>

Still, suppose we grant Burke some way, any way, around the problem of specifying the role and status of principle. Surely there is now an attractive and recognizably conservative position on the table, inviting us to beware the seductive but perilous path of radical political innovation and cling to the wisdom of our ancestors. What should we make of it?

### *BOUNDARIES, DISAGREEMENTS, AND HANGOVERS*

Talk about your practices: so Burke instructs us. But what good is that? True, it directs us away from certain kinds of highly abstract theoretical enterprises, away, I suppose, from natural rights, the state of nature, the original position, competing protective associations, manna being divided on new planets, hypothetical auctions, ideal speech situations, and the like. And frankly, I am all in favor of directing our attention away from such enterprises. (If this be conservatism, make the most of it.) But this is, if you will, a metaposition, a placeholder for a political argument, and not yet any political view at all. One has to go on to discuss particular practices, to make one's case on the ground, appealing to the grubby facts of the matter.

I don't mean to suggest that Burke never goes on to discuss particular practices. To the contrary, he takes detailed stands on many of the pressing political questions of his day, stands on Britain's conflict with the American colonies, the rights of Irish Catholics, the French Revolution and its implications for Britain's foreign policy, the conduct of Warren Hastings and the East India Company, reforms of the king's finances, of the franchise, and of the rotten boroughs. I am happy to grant that Burke often had penetrating things to say about the pressing political questions of his day. (Ironically, he was also a colossal loser, his advice on virtually every issue flouted.)

But Burke's own contextualism means we can't go on repeating his particular arguments, treating them as timeless wisdom, any more than the French could simply import the institution of the English jury. We have to think for ourselves, to face our political dilemmas in as prudent and discerning a way as we can. Suppose that we agree that we should do so by scrutinizing our traditions. Consider three problems, what I name for short those of boundaries, disagreement, and hangovers.

The boundary problem: What's inside the relevant sense of tradition or practice, what outside? What may we talk about, and what may we not talk about? Suppose Richard Price responded to Burke's salvo by saying, "look, I didn't make up all this stuff about natural rights out of my own head. There's a long tradition of appeals to natural rights, and I'm just advancing that tradition." In fact, Burke cannot resist taunting Price with the fact that he too has a tradition, he too has his precursors: "Dr. Price, when he talks as if he had made a discovery, only follows a precedent."<sup>19</sup> His precedent was the infamous Hugh Peter, chaplain of the New Model Army, another radical champion of human rights in religious garb. But Burke would be better off if he could cast Price as a turbulent innovator. If Price isn't original, why isn't he a good Burkean conservative?

It is tempting to draw a distinction between ways of talking and ways of acting, to argue that the traditions Burke cherishes are ones of actual political practice, not whimsical rhetoric. However tempting, the distinction won't do. For Burke also can't resist revealing that there's a long tradition of English leveling and radical politics, that explosively insurrectionary talk of the rights of ordinary subjects did not always remain mere talk. So he calls John Ball "that reverend patriarch of sedition, and prototype of our modern preachers"; so he agrees that there were, in fact, insurrections.<sup>20</sup> But then there is a tradition of uprisings in England, isn't there? And so can't one be a Burkean in the sense that one appeals to tradition, but a radical in the sense that tradition leads one to celebrate equality and detest the established order?

The problem is central to the *Reflections*. There Burke makes much of the contrast between the stately reforms of 1688 and the dastardly innovations of 1789. Well-nigh invisible in the text, though, are the equally dastardly events of 1649 in England, when Charles I was put on trial and executed after seven years of civil war. Why can't Price and his ilk tell Burke that they follow Hugh Peter, John Ball, and the good old cause — so the radicals called it — of establishing an egalitarian republic in England? Burke's response is all too brief. He labels efforts like John Ball's "aberrations," and he tersely comments that "the people of England will not ape the [French] fashions they have never tried, nor go back to those which they have found mischievous on trial."<sup>21</sup> But the label "aberration" begs the question, and not everyone found the events of the interregnum mischievous.

We have many traditions, not one. Choosing one and enshrining it as central or authoritative, discarding the competing traditions as mischievous aberrations (or not bothering to discuss them at all), is a crucial political choice. The initial injunction, talk about your practices, didn't tell us how to identify any particular practice as the right one to talk about. And Burke offers no guidance on that question. Much of the same problem, though, arises within what is presumptively any one tradition. There too we will face disputes about what's inside, what's outside, what's central, and what's marginal or irrelevant.

Take, for instance, Burke's celebrated speeches on American affairs. In vigorously defending the Americans, Burke prided himself on remaining resolutely silent on the very issue that American and English writers and politicians increasingly focused their attention on, namely, the vexed question of sovereignty: "I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries. I do not enter into metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them." Burke went on to caution his fellows in Parliament that "if, intemperately, unwisely, fatally, you sophisticate and poison the very source of government, by urging subtle deductions, and consequences odious to those you govern, from the unlimited and illimitable nature of supreme sovereignty, you will teach them by these means to call that sovereignty itself into question." (Precisely what happened, in fact.) So too he indignantly demanded of a correspondent, "How could you imagine that I had in my thoughts any thing of the theoretical separation of a power of taxation from legislation? I have no opinion about it."<sup>22</sup>

Talk of strategies for regaining amicable concord is sensible prudence; talk of sovereignty is pernicious metaphysics. Or so Burke asserts. But on what grounds? Why is the concept of sovereignty outside the English con-

stitution? After all, the concept wasn't dreamed up by some visiting Martian anthropologists. Even a casual survey of its history reveals that it was frequently on the lips of central actors in English politics. Wouldn't it beg the question to assert that when they talked about sovereignty they somehow stepped outside the practice and started doing theory? One can imagine, maybe, barely, practices that aren't the least bit reflective. But politics surely isn't one of them. At the very least, we want to remember that those parliamentary representatives spent lots of time deliberating and talking. Some of them spent hours at a time listening to one Edmund Burke.

Suppose for the moment that Burke establishes some way of solving the boundary problem, some way of settling what tradition we're interested in and precisely what that tradition contains. People could agree on those points and still disagree on what the tradition dictates in the current context. That is especially likely if political questions are typically hard questions, as Burke holds: "Every political question that I have ever known has had so much of the pro and con in it, that nothing but the success could decide which proposition ought to have been adopted."<sup>23</sup> This appeal to consequences, though, is too facile. After all, we cannot adopt each and every competing policy and run an experiment to see which one work best. We can only muddle through, and we can only go on arguing about what would have happened had we done something else. (Indeed, given a Burkean skepticism about our rationality and a healthy skepticism about social science, we can only go on arguing about the actual effects of the policy we did adopt.)

Consider two kinds of hard cases. Suppose we are trying to come to terms politically with some new development. How it fits into our settled schemes and categories is decidedly unclear. Is there a right answer? Maybe not. Maybe, that is, the tradition really is just open on the issue. Nothing in the record, nothing one could generate from the record by way of plausible rational reconstructions or underlying rationales, covers the new case. Take a literary analogy: You read Henry James's *The American*, and your flighty English teacher asks if Christopher Newman liked nougat. Well, you want to say, the novel doesn't say one way or the other. Undeterred by this clumsy literalism, your teacher demands that you extrapolate, that you figure out what kind of man Newman is and whether his sort of man relishes nougat. But you demur, rightly, that the taste for nougat just doesn't connect up with anything we know about Newman. The text leaves the question open. Here, the hard case is a matter of the tradition having a lacuna or being incomplete.

Another kind of hard case is presented by the anomalous event, one throwing previously settled categories and understandings into doubt. What makes this case hard isn't that the tradition seems silent, but that it seems

suddenly murky. There are undeniably relevant resources in the record, but their import is unclear. For the Whigs, I suggest, the French Revolution was itself an anomalous event. The Whigs, of course, split over the Revolution. To Burke's dismay, Fox embraced the very politics that he, Burke, wanted to throttle. Burke's *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* was a desperate attempt to persuade his fellow Whigs that they'd gone badly wrong, that they shouldn't be saying such nice things about the French and their champions in England; so, Burke bemoaned the "new, republican, frenchified Whiggism . . . gaining ground in this country."<sup>24</sup> We have here, I suggest, something more interesting than a personal squabble or the jockeying of ambitious men for political power. We have a study in the politics of open texture. At this juncture of English history, such concepts as "the liberty of the subject" turned out to be up for grabs. They could be used to applaud or condemn the events of France. (Perhaps I should emphasize that I do not at all believe that concepts are always up for grabs.)

So the French Revolution was in part a conceptual challenge for the Whigs, a political fork in the road. Coming to terms with it involved sharpening and recasting Whigs' understandings of previous political events, of their own tradition, indeed of their own identity. In his *Appeal*, Burke tried to show that the right reading of the events of 1688 would sharply distinguish English liberty from French. But that too proved unpersuasive to his opponents, who argued that Burke misunderstood the historic thrust of their own practices. Each side had its own interpretation of Whiggery, of the British constitution, of the events of 1688, and more. Each one had a reasonably unified account of the tradition it stood for. But that tradition was now pointing in opposite directions at once.

The mere fact of disagreement here settles nothing. (I might be certain that Dan Quayle is a poorly programmed AI robot, but I'd still be wrong.) But how might we decide who's right? Ronald Dworkin's injunction, that we seek the rendition of Whig tradition that shows it as the best it can be,<sup>25</sup> is hopeless here. It's not just that it is vacuous, though it is. It's that the category of "best" has no priority relationship, no independent standing, over and against the rest of the view being renegotiated in this struggle.

What counts as best, after all, depends on what one sees as the definitive virtues of the tradition. But that, surely, is part of what's being renegotiated in the Whigs' dispute about the French Revolution. As usual, we can find suitably abstract—that is, vapid—principles to which all parties are committed. They all cherish the liberty of the subject, the rule of law, and the like. But those categories have no critical bite. They are pliable enough to be enlisted in perfectly good faith by both sides.

So certain kinds of disagreement pose a dilemma for this view of tradition. First, the tradition simply may not cover a new case, even if we search for underlying principles and rational reconstructions to help flesh out what the tradition consists in. Second, and more important, any tradition, however detailed and well unified, may come to face anomalous events that disrupt its settled categories, making them seem fluid, unhelpful, in need of creative extension. At that point, tradition can no longer serve as a guide, a source of wisdom. Notice that creatively extending a tradition is not the same as innovating from scratch. What comes next has to be recognizable as a continuation. The mistake is thinking that we can be confident that one continuation will emerge as the best. It's a mistake made by Burke; it's also made by Dworkin and Michael Walzer. Put the point this way: Appeals to tradition are not always strategies for attaining agreement. Sometimes the appeal to tradition is a method of disagreement, of focusing and even intensifying what will divide us.

Burke's impatience with his failure to persuade his fellow Whigs, his sense that here he'd run into the limits of tradition, led to a revealing expostulation worth quoting at length:

Whether [my principles] are allowed to be Whig principles, or not, is a very small part of my concern. I think them exactly such as the sober, honorable, and intelligent in that party have always professed. I think I have shown beyond a possibility of debate that they are exactly the same. But if any person or any number of persons choose to think otherwise, and conceive that they are contrary to the doctrines of their Whig party — be it so. I am certain, that they are principles of which no reasonable man or good citizen need be ashamed of. If they are Tory principles, I shall always wish to be thought a Tory. If the contrary of these principles be Whig principles, I beg that you, my dear friend, will never consider me as belonging to that description: For I look upon them to be wicked and absurd in the highest degree. . . . So far for the Whigs who do not consider me as a Whig.<sup>26</sup>

Superficially, it's an attractive response. Whether one is a Whig, it might seem, is a petty verbal question, no more. What matters is the merit of the position, not its label. But in this context far more is at stake than the meaning of words. At stake is Burke's membership in the community of Whigs, his allegiance to the tradition, in fact the very shape of that tradition. When Burke says that he doesn't care if he's a Whig or a Tory, that that much overworked jack-of-all-trades, the "reasonable man," would agree with his views, he has scrapped the strategy of finding wisdom in particular traditions. Indeed, it sounds as though he has given up on treading the footsteps of his fathers, as though he has doomed himself to wandering and stumbling. If we can't get



Whigs to agree on how Whigs should think of the French Revolution, is there any hope for commanding agreement among reasonable men?

I turn finally to the problem of hangovers. A tradition might come to face a new context in which the old wisdom was obsolete, pernicious, a lousy guide. After all, the context of our political lives is always shifting in ways we don't fully control. Just as the English jury may not belong in France, yesterday's English jury may have become inappropriate in today's England. And then those who cling to the wisdom of their inherited traditions will seem not like prudent citizens but like drunkards unable to pull themselves together the morning after.

Ironically, Burke spent his political career vehemently asserting this very point in one political crisis after another. Tradition would provide no guide to relations with America:

Whoever goes about to reason on any part of the policy of this country with regard to America, upon the mere abstract principles of government, or even upon those of our own ancient constitution, will be often misled. . . . The object is wholly new in the world. It is singular; it is grown up to this magnitude and importance within the memory of man; nothing in history is parallel to it. All the reasons about it, that are likely to be at all solid, must be drawn from its actual circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

Tradition would provide no guide to reforming the finances of the royal household, based as they were on obsolete feudal principles:

But when the reason of old establishments is gone, it is absurd to preserve nothing but the burden of them. This is superstitiously to embalm a carcass not worth an ounce of the gums that are used to preserve it. It is to burn precious oils in the tomb; it is to offer meat and drink to the dead: not so much an honor to the deceased as a disgrace to the survivors.<sup>28</sup>

Tradition would provide no guide to foreign policy relations with that regicide republic of France:

I cannot persuade myself that this war bears any the least resemblance (other than that it is a war) to any that has ever existed in the world — I cannot persuade myself that any examples or any reasonings drawn from other wars and other politics are at all applicable to it — and I truly and sincerely think that all other wars and all other politics have been the games of children in comparison to it.<sup>29</sup>

I could go on quoting from Burke in this vein for quite some time.

"New things in a new world! I see no hopes in the common tracks."<sup>30</sup> A valiant cry, perhaps a forlorn cry, but anyway a cry that vitiates and even

obliterates the appeal of ancestral wisdom. Now those treading the footsteps of their ancestors are mindless robots refusing to open their eyes and notice novelty; those departing aren't turbulent innovators, aren't stumbling and wandering but are appropriately prudent, trying to come to terms with new situations. Tradition here is not the home of enduring political wisdom; it's the home of obsolete political categories. And our real worry, pace Gary Hart and Ronald Reagan, isn't the failed policies of the past: those we've probably junked by now. It's the successful policies of the past that may have outlived their usefulness.

This view of tradition, like any other political view, has its quiet empirical presuppositions. One of them is that social change is slow and shallow, that the process of marginal tinkering is enough to keep us on track. But here's another irony for Burkeans: The French Revolution is exemplary of the (in)famously rapid pace of change in modern society. That's an irreversible fact, something that has happened to us, not any kind of mistaken choice we could repent and take back. For crassly empirical reasons, "new things in a new world!" must increasingly be our slogan, and these paeans to tradition must often be sadly misguided.

### *ILLUSION, SLEEPWALKING, AND HAIRDRESSERS*

Happily, though, Burke offers a wholly different account of tradition. Let me begin with some puzzling comments in the corpus. Take, for instance, Burke's treatment of the Reformation in England. It is a delicate subject for Burke, in part for biographical reasons (he is the Irish and arguably quasi-Catholic champion of Irish Catholics trying to make his way in Protestant London) but more important, for theoretical reasons. For the Reformation, one might think, was once as sudden an innovation as one could like; but in the two-hundred-some years since, it has become cherished English tradition. At the very least, that suggests another problem for Burke: If the Paines and Prices of the world succeed in their outlandish projects, Burke's own descendants will rightly prize Jacobin politics. What, then, does Burke have to say about the Reformation?

Several things, and putting it mildly, they don't cohere. In the *Reflections*, Burke needs to insist that English reform is always gradual, and, distressed by French anticlericalism, he also wants to describe the English as faithful to a prescriptive religion. "So tenacious are we of the old ecclesiastical modes and fashions of institution, that very little alteration has been made in them since the fourteenth or fifteenth century." But a dozen pages later, he corrects

this remarkable mistake by branding Henry VIII a “tyrant,” indeed “one of the most decided tyrants in the rolls of history,” for the dissolution of the monasteries. (The word choice is significant; Burke has already announced that the name tyrant is “expressive of everything which can vitiate and degrade human nature.”) In fact, Burke tells us, Henry was a French revolutionary *avant la lettre*, missing only a vocabulary made available later, namely, “one short form of incantation: — ‘*Philosophy, Light, Liberality, the Rights of Men*’.” In his *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Burke again argues that the Reformation was like the French Revolution: Both established an international and vividly ideological politics. Church education—the narrow referent of “institution”—shifted dramatically, too.<sup>31</sup>

Burke is not content with this glaring contradiction. Elsewhere, making an argument for the autonomy of the English church, Burke declares blithely that

she claims, and has always exercised, a right of reforming whatever appeared amiss in her doctrine, her discipline, or her rites. She did so, when she shook off the Papal supremacy in the reign of Henry the Eighth, which was an act of the body of the English Church, as well as of the State (I don’t inquire how obtained).

Casually tacking on the state begins to suggest that the church wasn’t acting all that voluntarily; the parenthetical announcement that he won’t pursue the matter shows how fragile the picture is. Burke was capable of writing better history: “I admit, however, that the established religion of this country has been three or four times altered by act of Parliament.” The obvious candidates are the Reformation, Mary’s reversion to Catholicism, and Elizabeth’s return to Protestantism.<sup>32</sup>

Why does Burke make such jarringly contradictory claims? To be coy for a moment, consider another exegetical puzzle. As we’ve seen, Burke routinely rejects talk of natural rights and the rest as “specious folly”; he casts Jacobinism as metaphysical madness. Sometimes, though, Burke says unequivocally that what the Jacobins say is true. Consider his comment on the *gabelle*:

The sophisters and declaimers, as soon as the Assembly met, began with decrying the ancient constitution of the revenue in many of its most essential branches, such as the public monopoly of salt. They charged it, as truly as unwisely, with being ill-contrived, oppressive, and partial.<sup>33</sup>

As truly as unwisely—but how could it be unwise to speak the truth? Why does Burke applaud the Parliament of 1689 for throwing “a politic, well-

wrought veil" over proceedings that might support Price's view that monarchy is elective? Why does he grumble that

all the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason?<sup>34</sup>

Burke thought illusions and veils were crucial in safeguarding social order. The Enlightenment project of dissolving those pleasing illusions in the name of reason was a dreadful mistake, one plunging the world into chaos. Contemplating the inevitable suppressions of the slave rebellions likely to follow promulgation of the rights of man, Burke is plunged into caustic indignation: "Troops again, — massacre, torture, hanging! These are your rights of men! These are the fruits of metaphysic declarations wantonly made and shamefully retracted!" More generally, "the triumph of philosophy is the universal conflagration of Europe." The point here is emphatically not that the Jacobins are relying on their insufficient individual rationality, that what they say is really nonsense. Again, their claim against the salt tax is true; again, Burke endorses what he calls "illusion," and no attention to eighteenth-century usage, however exquisite, is going to rid the concept of the aura of falsehood. In this mood, Burke thought utility, not truth, was the real issue. That is why he was so bewildered by Fox's echoing revolutionary talk:

It is not easy to state for what good end, at a time like this, when the foundations of all ancient and prescriptive governments, such as ours, (to which people submit, not because they have chosen them, but because they are born to them,) are undermined by perilous theories, that Mr. Fox should be so fond of referring to those theories, upon all occasions, even though speculatively they might be true, — which God forbid they should!<sup>35</sup>

Burke derisively attributes to the revolutionaries the view that "a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman, a woman is but an animal, — and an animal not of the highest order." My suggestion is that Burke himself thought this was true, but that it was horribly indiscreet to say so aloud. For public consumption, Burke eulogized Marie Antoinette as "the late glorious queen, who on all accounts was formed to produce general love and admiration, and whose life was as mild and beneficent as her death was beyond example great and heroic"; privately, when exasperated by her failure to take the lofty and unyielding position he recommended in the name of safeguarding monarchy itself, he could write to his son that "it is not to be expected that she should elevate her mind" and could indict the queen's "foolish dread of the influence of Calonne." Similarly, for public consumption "the unhappy Louis the

Sixteenth was a man of the best intentions that probably ever reigned"; privately, he could write to his son that Louis was "a figure as ridiculous as pitiable."<sup>36</sup>

The truth, even the historical truth, sometimes hurts. The facts of the matter can be used not to buttress the reigning order but to impeach it, to mock it, to leave in tatters whatever cloak of legitimacy it once had. Twice in his career, Burke excelled at using facts, even historical facts, to mount a stinging attack against his enemies. The lover of pleasing illusion, the celebrant of the well-wrought veil, became a caustic unmasker himself.

Burke took pains to argue that Hastings's crimes were deliberate and calculated, not casual blunders or even opportunistic peccadilloes. To show that Hastings was the repulsive incarnation of shameless greed and calculated wrongdoing, Burke tried to show that he'd kept phony accounts and the like. In a typically florid moment, Burke then invited his audience to ponder the elaborate administrative machinery of evil he had laid before them:

Now, my Lords, was there ever such a discovery made of the arcana of any public theatre? You see here, behind the ostensible scenery, all the crooked working of the machinery developed and laid open to the world. You now see by what secret movement the master of the mechanism has conducted the great Indian opera, — an opera of fraud, deceptions, and harlequin tricks. You have it all laid open before you. The ostensible scene is drawn aside; it has vanished from your sight. All the strutting signors, and all the soft signoras are gone; and instead of a brilliant spectacle of descending chariots, gods, goddesses, sun, moon, and stars, you have nothing to gaze on but sticks, wire, ropes, and machinery. You find the appearance all false and fraudulent; and you see the whole trick at once.

Shorn of illusion, Burke hoped, Hastings's administration of evil would strike the Lords as matchless tyranny. In this context, Burke was willing to generalize the point, instructing his noble audience that "whenever in any matter of policy there is a mystery, you must presume a fraud."<sup>37</sup>

Or consider the *Letter to a Noble Lord*, an expertly orchestrated and debunking use of history in political argument. Attacked by the Duke of Bedford for receiving money from the crown, Burke sounded the tones of bourgeois radicalism on his own behalf: "Poor rich man! he can hardly know anything of public industry in its exertions, or can estimate its compensations when its work is done." The *Letter* is a fiercely proud exercise in self-justification, contrasting Burke the hard-working patriot, the self-made man, and Bedford, born to a colossal fortune; it is a celebration of "the mediocrity of humble and laborious individuals." "My merits, whatever they are, are original and personal: his are derivative." With studied hostility, Burke tells us that he would have been happy to leave the Duke to the "gentle historians" of the Herald's College, their pens dipped "in nothing but the milk of human

kindness"; he would have been happy, that is, had not Bedford seen fit to attack him.<sup>38</sup>

So, Burke says menacingly, "let us turn our eyes to history, in which great men have always a pleasure in contemplating the heroic origin of their house." The first Bedford, we learn, was "raised by being a minion of Henry the Eighth," and his bounty came from expropriated nobles and "the plunder of the Church." The fabulous wealth raised from these ugly ventures is what makes the current Duke of Bedford "the leviathan among all the creatures of the crown," bloated in obscene wealth. His holdings are indeed "a downright insult upon the rights of man." Stupidly, though, the Duke is a champion of those very rights, a sympathizer with the Jacobins. Burke can only chortle with disdain at the incongruity. The "*sans-culotte* carcass-butchers" are preparing to slice the Duke up "into rumps, and sirloins, and briskets, and into all sorts of pieces for roasting, boiling, and stewing," while the Duke, "poor innocent!", is assaulting pathetic Edmund Burke, a powerless old man.<sup>39</sup>

The rhetorical brilliance of the *Letter* may overshadow its theoretical significance. Not only does it demonstrate conclusively that Burke had his own bourgeois sympathies, if you like that sort of thing. But it also shows that history, the storehouse of political wisdom, may be brutally corrosive of the present. To learn the history of the Duke of Bedford's house is to learn to loathe the Duke of Bedford and all his order stands for. True, Burke could fawn with the best (or worst) of them, and he could describe aristocrats as "the great oaks that shade a country." But his real views, I surmise, are best caught when he asserts that "many of the nobility are as perfectly willing to act the part of flatterers, tale-bearers, parasites, pimps, and buffoons, as any of the lowest and vilest of mankind can possibly be," when he denies having any "vulgar admiration" for the peers. Instead, he says, "I hold their order in cold and decent respect. I hold them to be of an absolute necessity in the Constitution."<sup>40</sup> Given their necessity, Burke is willing ordinarily to restrain from criticism, to let the pageantry go on, to let the Heralds do their appointed labors and surround the aristocrats with pleasing illusions.

If the truth hurts, if history can be used in the debunking ways that Burke managed to use it, then political order may depend on constructing an illusory tradition, not recapturing an actual one. Is the Reformation an untoward blemish on the record? Downplay or deny it. Are the trial and execution of Charles I highly unfortunate precedents that might go on inspiring Jacobin violence? Brush them aside. If "to make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely," then defer to that "graceful ornament," the nobility.<sup>41</sup> Tradition here is not the site of rational argument; it is the opposite of rational argument. When tradition reigns, people unthinkingly comply with the rules.

They don't have any considered judgments, any mature grasp of the British constitution that leads them to assent to their role within it. Instead, they just do what they do because that's what they've always done. Or, more intriguingly, because they've been led to believe it's always been that way, even if it hasn't. The past is not to be combed carefully by discerning historians but to be constructed artfully by mythic poets. Or, to put the point as any self-respecting Jacobin would, by liars.

In part, Burke is depending here on a bleak but (for his times) conventional political psychology. "What would become of the world, if the practice of all moral duties, and the foundations of society, rested upon having their reasons made clear to every individual?" asks the "editor" of the *Vindication of Natural Society*. If there are real reasons, good reasons, nonmetaphysical reasons for accepting a certain political order, say, England's, still it is imprudent to count on the abilities of ordinary people to follow those reasons. "The poor, giddy, thoughtless people of our country" need direction, not argument; "all direction of public humor and opinion must originate in a few." Apologists for Burke have tiptoed gingerly around his famous invocation of "a swinish multitude," but it was still a commonplace of English political thought that the mob or multitude or many-headed monster wasn't up to any conception of deliberative rationality, couldn't qualify as part of the political nation, and must be held firmly in place. For the record, Burke also refers to "an unthinking and unprincipled multitude," "a licentious, ferocious, and savage multitude," "an hired, frantic, drunken multitude," "a mere unconnected multitude," "a multitude of the profligate and ferocious," "the blind fury of the multitude," and more.<sup>42</sup>

So arises a crucial political cleavage: The tiny political nation can follow real arguments, contextual debates on the constitution, and the like, while subjects must be presented with loveliness, illusion, and well-wrought veils. Those poor, giddy, thoughtless people are not intelligent or well-educated enough to engage in democratic discussions with their fellows or representatives. Unlike the members of House of Lords, when ordinary subjects see mystery, they shouldn't presume fraud: Instead, they should be mystified. They need not just loveliness, illusion, and veils, but also prejudice. And this is why Jacobinism looms as such a political threat. If Jacobinism is "an attempt (hitherto but too successful) to eradicate prejudice out of the minds of men," and "if anything is, one more than another, out of the power of man, it is to *create* a prejudice," and if "a firm dependence is to be had upon ignorance and prejudice," then the Jacobins are doing irreversible damage to the fabric of civil society.<sup>43</sup>

Consider, in this light, Burke's views on workers. He had no cheery illusions about their plight, making biting reference to "the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed." Nor does Burke have any interest in applauding the dignity of labor, a classic liberal theme from Locke on: "The occupation of a hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honor to any person, — to say nothing of a number of other more servile employments." But one ought never tell the workers that they are wretches. No, "let there be no lamentation of their condition. It is no relief to their miserable circumstances; it is only an insult to their miserable understandings."<sup>44</sup>

What ought one tell the workers? Burke had a number of other suggestions. He wanted to recommend "patience, labor, sobriety, frugality, and religion" (though he also held that "stopping . . . the distillery" would be "too precious a sacrifice to prejudice," since alcohol is "a medicine for the mind"). Burke held that work was a biblical curse, that poverty was caused by population excess, that the wealthy were "trustees for those who labor," that "the order of Providence has destined" workers' lots, that levelers "only change and pervert the natural order of things," that inequality is "as much for the benefit of those whom it must leave in a humble state as those whom it is able to exalt to a condition more splendid, but not more happy." It's neither here nor there whether Burke believed any of these suggestions or even whether they can be spelled out coherently. The point is that any and all of them are far more palatable politically than lamenting the plight of workers. Embracing Jacobin principles, departing from ancestral wisdom, following the dictates of reason: Such political moves leave the minds of the people "sore and ulcerated," "destroying all docility" and threatening to make the people no longer "satisfied, laborious, and obedient." Worse yet, perhaps, "if you once teach poor laborers and mechanics to defy their prejudices," they may decide "that this war is, and that the other wars have been, the wars of kings," and they might decline to fight against France: "All the props of society would be drawn from us by these doctrines, and the very foundations of the public defence would give way in an instant."<sup>45</sup> Nothing like illusion if it's cannon fodder you're after.

If this seems contemptuous, remember that these are subjects, not citizens. A state, maintained Burke peevishly, ought not be run by "church-wardens and constables and other such officers," ought not be "guided by the prudence of litigious attorneys and Jew brokers," ought not be "set in action by shameless women of the lowest condition, by keepers of hotels, taverns, and brothels, by pert apprentices, by clerks, shop-boys, hair-dressers, fid-



dlers, and dancers on the stage." The lurid and leering detail is there to remind the reader that such undignified characters have no claim to any voice in politics. One cannot find this line in Burke powerful and attractive but add that it needs to be revised in more suitably democratic ways. Without the undignified many who need illusion and the direction of the few, there is nothing left of the position. Anyway, these ordinary subjects are "persons of that immature and imperfect state of knowledge which serves to render them susceptible of doubts, but incapable of their solution." They are no part of the political nation. It is patently irresponsible to inflame in them any desire for citizenship or equality, to feed them Jacobin rubbish about the rights of man—or even to feed them unpleasant truths. For the many-headed monster, tradition means illusion and loveliness, not rational arguments about the British constitution; tradition means prereflective deference from habit and prejudice, not critical analysis of political practices. Ideally, the multitude will groggily sleepwalk their way through life or take cues from their betters: "God and nature never made them to think or to act without guidance and direction."<sup>46</sup> Democracy and equality here are just code words for social chaos. Here again, a recognizably conservative position is on the table, cautioning us against relying on the intelligence of the masses or even telling them the truth, urging us to safeguard the discreet control of political elites. What should we make of it?

### *PANDORA'S BOX, EAVESDROPPING, AND FUTILITY*

Burke's sense that things were coming unglued inspires his conservative critique of enlightenment, but it also provides the resources for explaining why that critique must be in vain. Burke was obsessed with the contagion of revolutionary principles, which he thought was spreading across Europe like wildfire. Some of the purplest prose in the corpus, often droll despite itself, is devoted to explaining just how contagious the threat is. The "obscene harpies" of the French Revolution, he warned, "flutter over our heads, and souse down upon our tables, and leave nothing unrent, unrifled, unravaged, or unpolluted with the slime of their filthy offal." "I feel, as an Englishman, great dread and apprehension from the contagious nature of these abominable principles, and vile manners, which threaten the worst and most degrading barbarism to every adjacent country." "There is no rank or class into which the evil of Jacobinism has not penetrated."<sup>47</sup> Pandora's box is open. Jacobin rhetoric and principles stalk the world, dissolving prejudice, opening the eyes of the multitude, inspiring the clamorous and disorderly politics Burke

so despised. Those base hairdressers are now aware of some dangerous conceptual possibilities: Witnessing the French Revolution, they can now talk about equality and natural rights; they can now suspect that the social and political order of Britain is contingent, not natural or necessary or providential, so it can be remade. They can see Burke's paeans to tradition as a clever subterfuge designed to keep them in their places; indeed, they can see through them.

Can, and for that matter, did. Burke often wrote as though he was talking about the workers, not to them.<sup>48</sup> But the workers were eavesdropping, and for many of them, Burke became the very emblem of the hated inequalities of the *ancien régime*. He was burned in effigy in 1793, and the toast went up: "The swinish multitude: may they hold in contempt the man who first gave that appellation to free Britons." That infamous aside about "a swinish multitude" became infamous in part because ordinary subjects noticed it and hurled it back with contempt: A stream of pamphlets mocking Burke had titles ironically adopting the label: *Hog's Wash, Pig's Meat, Politics for the People: A Salmagundy for Swine, Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Swinish Multitude*, and so on.<sup>49</sup> They became increasingly vocal, increasingly active politically, and after Burke's death, their voices led to a dramatic shift in the British constitution, what must qualify as a Burkean innovation, namely, the Reform Bill of 1832.

What, after all, could Burke do against Jacobin rhetoric? He could mock the masses' fledgling efforts in political theory, "their crude undigested and vulgar conceptions," and say with magisterial contempt that "they look on those things as discoveries because no one had hitherto been so absurd as to spit out such nonsense." But such cursory dismissals couldn't halt the spread of the disease. Or he could try to develop arguments against Jacobinism, and indeed he did so in one publication after another. But that enterprise is internally doomed. To engage in argument is already to contribute to the death of illusion and tradition. That's why Burke suggested that "they indeed who seriously write upon a principle of levelling ought to be answered by the magistrate, and not by the speculatist."<sup>50</sup> That too is why he campaigned so strenuously in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* to foment holy war against the French, to urge that conventional balance-of-power politics could have no place when one of the actors was bent on the ideological destruction of the others. Bald repression, not facile dismissal or earnest argument, beckoned as the solution. True, popular insurrections can be smashed and political innovation can be delayed, but the characteristic longings inspired by Jacobinism cannot be extinguished. That, anyway, seems to be the lesson of the centuries since Burke.

So it's never the right time to be a conservative, in this sense of conservatism. When illusion is in place, when the masses defer unthinkingly, when they take inequality to be providential, there is no need for conservative rhetoric. Indeed, it could only be pernicious: It could only invite people to start thinking about just those possibilities they're not supposed to think about. When "the most atrocious monsters that have ever disgraced and plagued mankind,"<sup>51</sup> the Jacobins, have started their assault on illusion, when they've led people to ask critical questions, then it is too late to be a conservative. Decrying such developments, applauding the good old days, is nothing but a futile attempt to cram revolutionary (dis)contents back into Pandora's box and slam the lid shut. Once this Pandora's box is open, nothing can be done. That is why conservative rhetoric has a shrill and strident edge. The nostalgia is for good old days that cannot be regained, regardless of whether they ever did exist.

### POSTSCRIPT

Quite obviously, this is an almost purely textualist rendition of Burke's works. And it may be that a more contextual treatment would reveal hidden strengths (or, more mischievously, hidden weaknesses). But that's a project for another occasion.

### NOTES

1. *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, edited by Thomas W. Copeland, 10 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958-1978), 5:52; *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, 9th ed., 12 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1889), 3:258, 2:222, 4:254. I have modernized the often eccentric spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of the correspondence.

2. *Works* 7:97.

3. *Correspondence* 6:303; *Works* 3:221, 2:437, 4:228. Note, too, *Works* 11:232 ("The rights of the people are everything, as they ought to be, in the true and natural order of things").

4. *Works* 5:407; *Correspondence* 3:457.

5. *Works* 3:333.

6. *Works* 1:188. Note, too, *Correspondence* 7:208-9, where French feminism has "defaced and destroyed the frame and constitution of human nature itself."

7. *Correspondence* 8:206.

8. *Works* 2:271; *Correspondence* 10:40; *Works* 10:145.

9. A lucid statement is J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), chap. 1.

10. *Works* 5:157, 2:329. The classic works on this account of order are Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), and E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943); for an attempt to understand its fate in the light of far-reaching social change, see my *Happy Slaves: A Critique of Consent Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. chap. 2.

11. *Works* 3:274-75.

12. *Works* 3:359-61.

13. *Works* 2:156.

14. *Works* 5:114, 4:15, 4:270, 5:216, 1:5.

15. *Works* 5:187, 5:123, 5:422-23, 3:259, 7:5.

16. *Works* 3:346, 7:94, 2:145.

17. *Works* 3:240; *Correspondence* 6:107; *Works* 7:41.

18. *Works* 2:226, 4:81, 7:41; *Correspondence* 2:282.

19. *Works* 3:318.

20. *Works* 4:177-78.

21. *Works* 4:183, 3:264.

22. *Works* 2:72-73; *Correspondence* 3:181.

23. *Correspondence* 2:372-73.

24. *Correspondence* 7:52.

25. Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1986).

26. *Correspondence* 9:446.

27. *Works* 1:395.

28. *Works* 2:305.

29. *Correspondence* 7:521-22.

30. *Works* 5:128.

31. *Works* 3:363, 3:384, 3:385, 3:371, 3:385, 4:318-20. For evidence on just how sweeping a change the Reformation was in England and just how hard to accomplish, see G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), and Christopher Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

32. *Works* 7:7, 2:225.

33. *Works* 3:537.

34. *Works* 3:255, 3:332-33.

35. *Works* 3:527, 5:89, 5:46.

36. *Works* 3:333, 5:370; *Correspondence* 6:340, 6:348; *Works* 5:378; *Correspondence* 6:30.

37. *Works* 11:413, 12:79.

38. *Works* 5:178, 5:200.

39. *Works* 5:201-2, 5:199, 5:217, 5:221.

40. *Works* 2:337; *Correspondence* 2:377; *Works* 7:133. Note, too, Burke's description of his stance on monarchy: "*Je suis royaliste, mais royaliste raisonné. Je ne suis pas fanatique pour les rois*" (*Correspondence* 7:263).

41. *Works* 3:334, 3:416.

42. *Works* 1:6-7; *Correspondence* 3:193; 3:190; *Works* 3:335, 4:23, 4:78, 4:415, 5:46, 7:134; *Correspondence* 4:85.

43. *Works* 6:367, 6:368; *Correspondence* 4:115.

44. *Works* 3:445, 3:296, 5:135. Hanna Pitkin pointed out to me that the rhetoric of the *Reflections* is unstable: The implicit audience sometimes includes those needing illusion (as in

the studied underplaying of the Reformation and the execution of Charles I) but sometimes does not (as in these blunt rejections of the dignity of labor).

45. *Works* 5:135, 5:164, 5:466, 5:134; *Correspondence* 10:20; *Works* 3:295, 3:280, 4:201, 4:202, 3:279, 5:40, 5:41.

46. *Works* 4:4, 4:202; *Correspondence* 3:218.

47. *Works* 5:187; *Correspondence* 6:211, 8:343.

48. I owe this pithy formulation to Gary Shiffman.

49. *Correspondence* 7:340; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 90.

50. *Correspondence* 7:359, 6:304.

51. *Works* 5:450.

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