
Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Burke*

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The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke, by Conor Cruise O'Brien. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992. £22.50. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 692 pp. \$34.95.

The aesthetic side of politics is easily overlooked. Today, as always, it is important to ask how and why the machinations of power are being clad in certain forms, in a rhetoric, for example, that seeks to connect what rulers do with our perceived values, or to ask how official functions may be given dignity and elevation by some kind of ceremonial or ritual.

One who truly understood why power needs beauty and variety of form was Edmund Burke. It is no mere coincidence that, early in his life, Burke published a treatise on the sublime and the beautiful. Although not explicitly addressing the issue of politics, this work provides a philosophical underpinning for much of what Burke later said on related issues in his political books and speeches. He was acutely aware of the ways in which form and substance interact both in his public work and theoretic-

cal writing.

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke develops his defense of the inherited order of Europe in a way that pays close attention to the harmony which even the human eye can see. The malefaction of revolution is repulsive even in its tastelessness and clash of styles. When, in a much-quoted passage, Queen Marie Antoinette is compared with the morning star in its sphere, this image becomes an emblem of the celestial source of power. "Raw" power, that is, power devoid of beauty and harmony, Burke finds detestable.

Burke's present-day compatriot, the writer and former United Nations official Conor Cruise O'Brien, is the author of a "thematic biography" entitled *The Great Melody*. The melody, he argues, is the orchestration, through language, imagery, and rhetoric, of that fight against abuse of power on

all levels and latitudes that O'Brien sees as the paramount goal of Burke's career.

It is good to see that Burke is being systematically studied. O'Brien gives his reader a broad overview of how Burke pursued his causes in Parliament and in his writing. The author draws a rather detailed picture of the dramatic circumstances. When defending the American colonies and criticizing British rule in India and the abuses of the French Revolution of 1789, Burke's melody sounded strong and pure. On the delicate Irish question, however, he was often forced to speak *sotto voce* or to be silent, but he made certain unnoticed contributions nevertheless. According to O'Brien, Burke's activities in regard to America, India and the French Revolution actually took their intensity from the agony which he felt over the English treatment of his native Ireland.

To see Burke in a multifaceted way is crucial. He possessed a subtlety and a personal as well as philosophical complexity which are easily misunderstood. The secondary literature on Burke has been rich and productive of diverse opinion also in the twentieth century. Burke has always been heralded in the Anglo-Saxon world as a great politician, thinker, and literary renovator, but O'Brien reminds us in *The Great Melody* that Sir Lewis Namier and his circle undertook a fatally flawed reassessment of Burke in the 1930s. At least among European scholars, that reassessment greatly hurt Burke's reputation for some forty years. In a series of studies on King

George III and his cabinet, Namier sought to play down, entirely unjustly, as O'Brien shows, Burke's political career and its major achievements. Namier's contention was that Burke was a political intruder and opportunist who never won much influence. In the highly iconoclastic years after 1945 such ideas were well received. But, as O'Brien shows, Burke had a strong impact on practical affairs in Britain, not least on how the problems of the American colonies were solved.

O'Brien laments that Burke has often been interpreted for specific political purposes and that the goodwill enjoyed by his work has been abused. That may be so. But O'Brien directs this charge against American Burkeans like Russell Kirk and Peter Stanlis, who are dismissed as "the cold warriors of American Burke studies." These individuals, O'Brien asserts, used Burke as a weapon against communism and even to defend America's war in Vietnam. "[T]he Burke of this revival was seriously distorted by its polemical and propagandistic purposes." This is a wholly misleading and unjust assessment, all the more so since no supportive evidence is offered.

Burke's influence in modern America had other reasons. That Burke enjoyed a renaissance in the United States after 1945 is due primarily to the deep unease felt not only by Kirk and Stanlis but also by Peter Viereck, Francis Canavan and others over the enormous power wielded by the liberal and humanitarian ideas that had seized the initiative during the New Deal era. Those ideas were

seen as ideological and ahistorical in character and as not really ameliorating the mounting social and cultural problems of the time.

In the perceived vacuum of values, a renewed study of Burke seemed a natural way to realign the academic debate of the early 1950s with older Western ethical, political, and cultural sources. Until then, Americans had often seen Burke as mainly a skilled and respected defender of American freedom. Now, his analysis of the dangers of centralized power, his view of society as a living moral and cultural organism built on habit, symbol, and faith, and his emphasis on the "moral imagination" were put in focus. Of course, his attacks on ideological extremism also had significance for the debate on the nature of a communist threat that these scholars recognized, but that side of the Burke revival was definitely secondary.

That Burke's influence in the United States, as reflected in the mentioned scholarship, is much richer than often assumed and that, above all, it is no mere vehicle for anti-communism, O'Brien does not seem to realize. Either he has not really studied this writing, or he has misinterpreted it grossly.

Strange to say, there is no serious discussion in this spacious volume of Burke and the tradition of natural law. O'Brien aligns himself with Harvey Mansfield, Jr., who is "firm against the 'natural law' view of Burke's theoretical position." In the opinion of this reviewer, Burke's moral and philosophical beliefs are a good deal more than expressions of natural law thinking.

Burke's strong historical sense and reliance on imagination moved him beyond existing tradition. But without understanding that, according to Burke, morality and law are founded in timeless reality, our view of his criticism of the abuse of power in India and elsewhere becomes rather confused, and so does our view of his ideas about why the French Enlightenment and the events of 1789 were so destructive of European civilization. Overlooking the role of the natural law tradition, as absorbed in the English common law, for instance, was a serious flaw in the Burke scholarship of the past century which Peter J. Stanlis rightly sought to correct. That this previously neglected evidence should be simply ignored by O'Brien today suggests his strong commitment to a very different view of Burke. O'Brien's attempt to present Burke instead as "a child of the Enlightenment" in the mold of early liberals like John Locke is forced and unconvincing. O'Brien goes as far as to write that, if Burke had been born in France, "he might well have been a French revolutionary." One may argue in general that in developing his themes (Burke's handling of the questions of Ireland, the American colonies, India, and the French Revolution) O'Brien misses the uniqueness of Burke's thinking in a way that limits his ability to act as Burke's biographer. Burke rejected abstract ideas as a guide for politics, but his own writing represents ideas of a *different* kind. His powerful and historically oriented mind and imagination creatively rearticulated and applied old insights.

If Burke had actually argued, for instance, that reforms should be inspired by general indignation, that view would be hard to reconcile with his idea that civilized order and community, not to mention their supportive beliefs and values, are the fruits of historical growth. What united Burke's achievements on India, America, France, and Ireland was in fact a philosophical outlook, indistinguishable, to be sure, from deep moral convictions and formed in close touch with his personal experience. The unifying element was not just an artful "melody" of power criticism derived from psychological traumas and injustices encountered in his early life.

That Burke was not simply a political actor using ideas and rhetoric to oppose the abuse of power becomes clear as soon as his writings are studied with more philosophical discernment. He had a restless, inquiring mind, but he also had a coherent intellectual and moral position that in-

formed his actions. That position was classical, Christian, and essentially conservative, although certainly not just repetitive of old views or insensitive to the need for change.

For all the sympathy he gives his compatriot Burke, O'Brien does not give this philosophical background its due. One must ask whether this does not say more about the biographer than about his subject. Is O'Brien's one-sided stress on Burke's concern with injustice perhaps in part an attempt to validate his own work as a United Nations official, as if Burke had been a sort of United Nations commissioner and world policeman before that type was invented? If we consider how human rights agitation has developed in modern times, the attempt to connect Burke with such activism seems far-fetched. So do recent efforts to connect Burke with new versions of the Jacobin pursuit of "virtuous politics" that he was the first to condemn.