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BOOK REVIEWS

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF EDMUND BURKE. Vol. I, April 1744-June 1768. Edited by Thomas W. Copeland. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958. Pp. xxvi, 377. \$8.00.

A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY INTO THE ORIGIN OF OUR IDEAS OF THE SUBLIME AND BEAUTIFUL. By Edmund Burke. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by J. T. Boulton. New York, Columbia University Press, 1958. Pp. cxxx, 197. \$5.00.

This first volume of the correspondence of Edmund Burke includes most of the surviving letters of Burke's first 37 years. The next nine volumes will be needed to include the letters of his last 30 years. This is an appropriate division of Burke's life. He achieved no real eminence until after his fortieth year, but all that came first was preparation. Burke was born in 1729. He finished his secondary education at Abraham Shackleton's school in Ballitore and was admitted to Trinity College in Dublin on April 14, 1744. His correspondence opens with letters written by him in that month.

The first letter is two and one half printed pages. It is filled with information of interest to his former schoolmate, Richard Shackleton, it is literate (with a reasonable sprinkling of misspelling), the sheer pleasantness and fullness of the letter is beyond what can be expected today, but, above all, it shows a learning which exceeds that attained by one of Burke's modern counterparts—a first or second year American high school student. He tells in this letter of being examined prior to admission to the college in Vergil, Horace, and Homer. The examiner told young Ned "that I was more fit for the college than three parts of my class." In short, not a genius, but a good student.

These opening letters therefore reveal a vivacious and ambitious student who had a private secondary education that made him at fifteen years an excellent candidate for a provincial college. They point to a level of achievement by a class of young men in Ireland in the early eighteenth century that is not equalled by any class of young men of the same age group in America today. It cannot be argued that this was an education heavily weighted in the classics and that sort of schooling is gone now. We are discussing friendly letters written in English. This young man is already at home in the English language, he can toss it into humorous verse or information prose, his allusion shows a familiarity with English and European literature, and, when called upon, he could read from the classics of the foreign languages he had studied, Latin and Greek. Two years later, on June 1, 1746, he was "examin'd for 2 days in all the Roman and Greek authors of note."¹ He was successful and was elected to a very fine scholarship of which one of the perquisites was that he had a vote for a member of Parliament—and he was now but seventeen.

He had early learned one of the secrets of success in this world. He

¹ CORRESPONDENCE I, 66.

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wrote in October of 1744 on the subject of diligence: "I know that it's the gate by which we must pass to knowledge and fortune, that without it we are both unserviceable to ourselves and our fellow-Creatures and a burthen to the Earth."²

In those early years he feared that he was giddy and superficial. Twenty-two years later, in the first months of his parliamentary career, this diligence had brought him "very near death."³ But this was Burke's mark—energy, mastery of subject matter, eternal diligence. This diligence, almost foreign to his age, allied to his great powers are sufficient to explain his dominating position in the House of Commons.

A literary career could have been prophesied from the interests of Burke's college days. It can be assumed that paternal pressure led to the half-hearted stab at the law. The backsliding into literature was foreseeable. Then, strangely enough, a moderate success in literature was followed by the abandonment of this career and the assumption of another. In 1759 Burke became the secretary of William Gerard Hamilton. The quarrel in 1765 that ended their relationship was apparently based in part upon Burke's dissatisfaction with the time that he was able to devote to his own literary interests. Burke was at a critical moment in his life. His next move diverted him finally from literature and led him into politics for the rest of his life. On July 11, 1765, Burke became the private secretary to Charles Watson Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham—"who has the reputation of a man of honour and integrity; and with whom, they say, it is not difficult to live."⁴ On December 24 of the same year he was elected to Parliament—"yesterday I was elected for Wendover, got very drunk, and this day have an heavy cold."⁵

On January 18, 1766, he made his first speech in Commons. "All I hoped was to plunge in, and get off the first horrors; I had no hopes of making a figure. I find my Voice not strong enough to fill the house; but I shall endeavour to raise it as high as it will bear."⁶ Within one month of his debut, Burke was marked as an orator when he received the public commendation of Mr. Pitt.

He was in politics for good. From this time forward his letters are filled with the problems arising out of the business of the House. It is all interesting for a variety of reasons, but what do we learn of Burke? The answer must be that we learn very little. In his early life he almost never tells what books he is reading. There is no hint as to what made Burke write a satire on Bolingbroke. As will be discussed later, the sources of the Enquiry can only be inferred from an internal examination of the work. What can be concluded is that Burke's political life is fully documented. But the omissions are frustrating, particularly with respect to his early career.

Burke's career in journalism has been described elsewhere by Professor Copeland.⁷ Burke began his work on the *Annual Register* in 1758. Virtually no sign of this activity creeps into his correspondence. Even assuming that public knowledge of his part in this sort of work might injure his reputation, as Professor

² *Ibid.* at 32.

³ *Ibid.* at 239.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 211.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 223.

⁶ *Ibid.* at 233.

⁷ COPELAND, OUR EMINENT FRIEND, EDMUND BURKE 92 *et seq.*

Copeland suggests, nevertheless it might be expected that Burke would have mentioned, for instance, the books reviewed by him in the *Register*. Professor Copeland believes that Burke wrote the entire magazine from 1758 to 1766. During that time scores of books were reviewed by him. No reference to any of them appears in his correspondence. Again relying on Professor Copeland, we know that Burke was secretive about his family and financial affairs. It is clear that he was also secretive about the sources of his ideas. This secretiveness however is a challenge to students. It is to be hoped that the revived interest in Burke and the assistance of this new edition of Burke's Correspondence will stimulate the work needed to ferret out the intellectual background of this remarkable man.

The publication of this new and more complete edition of Burke's correspondence is a group project. Eight editors will share the work. Each will contribute one volume at the expected rate of one per year. The ninth volume will be an index. The dust jacket calls for ten volumes in the series. This apparent mistake will clear itself up in time. Physically, it will be a very handsome set of books. As a suggestion, I would like to see in one of the later volumes reproduction of Burke's handwriting taken from various times in his life.

The Correspondence, as noted, is not so revealing as one would desire. And in the second matter of major interest in this review, Burke's essay on aesthetics, the views expressed must be also explained and supported by editorial comment. The *Enquiry* first appeared on April 21, 1757. In August Burke sent a copy of "a little performance of mine" to Richard Shackleton. Of this work he says: "It lay by me for a good while, and I at last ventured it out."⁸ How long it had so lain raises a question for scholars.

In a letter written ten years earlier to Shackleton, Burke had mentioned: "I have myself almost finished a piece—an odd one; but you shall not see it until it comes out, if ever. . . ."⁹ The editor takes this and other similarly obscure remarks as evidence of early work on the *Sublime and Beautiful*. This has been a persistent belief. The editor quotes to similar effect from Prior's early biography of Burke. Carl Cone, Burke's most recent biographer, repeats the assertion that Burke wrote much of the manuscript before he left Trinity College.¹⁰ I do not believe that the available evidence proves this fact beyond doubt.

So let us turn to the work on aesthetics that established Burke as a literary figure.¹¹ The volume here presented is the first critical edition of the *Sublime and Beautiful* in the two hundred years since its publication. The editor is a lecturer in English at the University of Nottingham. His 127-page introduction to the *Enquiry* is a very able performance. I believe that it can be said with assurance that there is nothing available that equals this essay. The editor knows not only the place of aesthetics in eighteenth century thought but also Burke's place in aesthetics. He makes no extravagant claims for Burke and he is satisfied to say no more than that Burke's theory "is no longer acceptable." Here it does not seem advisable to do more than briefly show the problems involved in under-

⁸ CORRESPONDENCE I, 123.

⁹ *Ibid.* at 92. (28 May 1747).

¹⁰ CONE, BURKE AND THE NATURE OF POLITICS 11.

¹¹ The term "aesthetics" was invented by a German, Baumgarten, in 1735. It became the title of a book by him in 1750. HAZARD, EUROPEAN THOUGHT IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FROM MONTESQUIEU TO LESSING 360.

standing what Burke attempted to do in this work. We do not know what attracted him to aesthetics nor, as noted, do we know Burke's preparation for authoritative writing in the field. Mr. Boulton's researches make it clear what that background must have been. After an examination of Burke's aesthetic theory, some general consideration on Burke's thought will be advanced.

A just evaluation of this one work of Burke's requires that it be considered in its proper place in eighteenth century English philosophical thought. For this purpose, it will be useful to consider the work of David Hume. Hume considered the problems that arise throughout the full range of philosophy. His resolution of these problems presents an integrated philosophy in the main current of eighteenth century thinking. His writings are generally available, and they are better known than most of the other names that might have been selected.

Hume's metaphysics appeared on the English scene in 1738. Their ultimate effect was to unhinge the philosophy of most of his contemporaries. Suppose this man now turned to the field of ethics and aesthetics. The same sceptical eye cast in these directions should cause a similar upheaval. But it did not happen. Hume accepted the existing moral conventions but struck at the ethical theories then current. Naturally he did not accept the will of God as any basis for doing good. He also rejected reason as a basis for determining the good. The rules of morality were not to be derived from reason or understanding. The source of virtue is the passions. Passions, according to Hume, are impressions of the mind arising out of original sensations which produce pleasure or pain in the body.

Thus our passions prompt us to action by their very structure. We have received the impression of pleasure or pain. We want one and wish to avoid the other. It appears quite convenient therefore that Hume finds that

"Virtue is distinguished by the pleasure, and vice by the pain, that any action, sentiment, or character, gives us by the mere view and contemplation."¹²

In 1751, in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume returned to his analysis of moral problems. He examined specific virtues and found that the basis of the pleasure they gave was the fact of their utility. He described how a man becomes "favourable to all those habits or principles, which promote order in Society, and insure to him the quiet possession of so inestimable a blessing."¹³

This clearly requires that there be a community consensus so that the approved good equals the orderly way of conducting affairs. That intra-community divisions on points of morals exist is a fact. There should therefore be some focus at which the approved course of conduct is determined. But Hume never isolates who will do the approving that determines the good; whose esteem makes the right and the just.

However, he does answer this question in a closely related field when he seeks a standard of taste, that is, "a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled."¹⁴ He asserts that "few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty." Few such critics may be but nevertheless they can be found. Hume suggests what their background will be. They will be men of delicate feeling and good sense, who are free of

¹² HUME, A TREATISE OF HUMAN NATURE II, 183 (Everyman's ed).

¹³ HUME, ESSAYS, LITERARY, MORAL, AND POLITICAL 435.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 135-36.

prejudice, and who have practised the arts. These men by their superior discernment will persuade and convince and will establish a standard of taste. And so despite the subjective foundations of his aesthetic theory there is, according to Hume, an empirical regularity, a factual sameness of judgment that provides a common standard of taste for a given time and place. This is an implicit confession that neither beauty nor the good are completely subjective concepts. But eighteenth century *theory* does not explain the qualifications.

Actual experience, of course, demonstrates the existence of this empirical regularity. It is not at all difficult to identify a work by an eighteenth century artist. We are familiar with the neat English garden, Watteau's gay and artificial paintings of the French court, the rhymed couplet. The actuality is recognizable because it was dictated by, and restrained to, well known rules and conventions of artistic production.¹⁵

Hume was not the sole spokesman for English aesthetics in the eighteenth century. There were other names in this field: Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Lord Kames, Sir Joshua Reynolds. But it can be agreed that English thinkers were virtually one in rejecting the classical emphasis upon the work of art itself. As one student describes it, the English school of empirical aesthetics "is interested rather in the subject enjoying art and it endeavors to gain a knowledge of his inner state and to describe it with the instruments of empiricism."¹⁶

It is this approach to aesthetic problems that tends to confuse a modern reader. We examine great works of art. We discuss philosophies of art. There appears to be a body of knowledge that can be learned and reflected upon. Beauty is an attribute of a work of art and I believe that the modern view is that beauty is determined by cultural considerations rather than instincts. But the sense psychologies of the eighteenth century would not support such a view. When we turn to Burke with this background, we can see why the editor states that Burke's views are "no longer acceptable."

For Burke, "beauty [is] . . . that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it."¹⁷ Or again, "beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses."¹⁸ These definitions suggest Burke's contribution to English aesthetics. As his editor states, Burke elected "to take up the uncompromising sensationist viewpoint."¹⁹ This attitude forces Burke to examine and to reject the then current theories of the origin of beauty. Beauty does not consist in a certain proportion of the parts of an object. Nor is fitness the test for beauty. Beauty is not related to perfection nor to virtue. All of these criteria, it will be noted, are conceptual. But Burke insists that beauty is independent of the reasoning process of the mind. He then enumerates the sensible qualities

¹⁵ In examining these subjective aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century, one authoritative work makes the following point: "Why did the radical beginning not make a radical ending? In part it was because the practical authority of the French taste which came out of Boileau's age dominated the Great Britain of at least the first half of the eighteenth century." GILBERT AND KUHN, *A HISTORY OF ESTHETICS*, (Rev. ed.) 234.

¹⁶ CASSIRER, *THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT* 315.

¹⁷ ENQUIRY, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at xxxvi.

that, when in conjunction, impinge upon the mind and forthwith produce the impression of beauty. Beautiful objects are small and smooth. Their variations are gradual, delicacy is essential. The coloring of beauty is bright and clear, and gracefully blended.

These attributes should be contrasted with those that affect the mind with sublimity. This feeling arises when the mind has been moved by some degree of terror. Such an effect upon the mind is favored by obscurity, great size, darkness, a sense of privations, and the suggestion of infinity and power.

That these assorted qualities can produce beauty or sublimity is remarkable. Burke is satisfied that these results can be completely explained by an association of the feeling and the event; "whatever is qualified to cause terror, is a foundation capable of the sublime." and "whatever produces pleasure . . . is fit to have beauty engrafted on it."²⁰ It is all very cleverly set forth,²¹ but the reader ought not to inquire too closely into the precise manner by which these effects are produced on the mind. Burke is frank to say that he does "not pretend that I shall ever be able to explain, why certain affections of the body produce such a distinct emotion of mind, and no other; or why the body is at all affected by the mind, or the mind by the body."²²

The obsolete psychology upon which Burke's discussion is based makes it impossible for a modern reader to regard Burke's conclusions seriously. Mr. Boulton gently speaks of Burke's "absurdities." And it is best to leave it at that. A sympathetic critique of Burke's aesthetic theory is given by the editor who also shows how Burke's work and that of his contemporaries led to the development of the body of learning now generally called aesthetics.

Modern enthusiasts of the political philosophy developed by Burke in his later years are aware of the apparent contradiction between the sense psychology of the *Enquiry* and the natural law doctrine used by Burke in the *Reflections*. The contradiction can be avoided²³ or denied.²⁴ I am not satisfied with either method. In 1757 Burke was in accord with the general thinking of his contemporaries; thirty years later he was denying the consequences of that thinking.

The modern fame of Burke is not founded upon the *Enquiry*, but for that reason it should not be ignored. This book does offer a valuable insight into the methods and principles of thinking and speaking that were followed by Burke in his later years of greater fame. The following discussion is offered as a possible key to a problem that must be faced by every student of the works of Edmund Burke. It cannot be denied that there are many passages throughout

²⁰ *Ibid.* at 131.

²¹ In the *Sublime and Beautiful* "there is a good deal of the superficial cleverness which is so common in the eighteenth century." W. P. Ker, *ON MODERN LITERATURE: LECTURES AND ADDRESSES* 31.

²² *ENQUIRY* 129. This statement comes in a section that is specifically intended to discuss "the efficient cause" of the sublime and the beautiful.

²³ Father Canavan recognizes the "sensistic epistemology" of the *Sublime and Beautiful*, but he argues that Burke did not apply "his rather crudely materialistic aesthetic theory to the principles of morality." Canavan, *Edmund Burke's Conception of the Role of Reason in Politics*, 21 *J. OF POL.* 60, 71 (1959).

²⁴ "Burke was too Christian to make individual empiricism, logical reason, or pleasure the criterion for good taste and value judgments in aesthetics any more than in ethics." STANLIS, *EDMUND BURKE AND THE NATURAL LAW* 170.

Burke's works that have no readily ascertainable meaning.²⁵ It is my suggestion that many of these obscurities were deliberate. The evidence for this suggestion and the reasoning upon which it is founded are what follows.

It has been noted that at the beginning of his literary career Burke is regarded as taking the extreme anti-rational position available to him.²⁶ His basic premises preclude the intervention of the mind in the determination of the sublime and the beautiful. Mr. Boulton notes that "there is that constant interest in the irrational response to art and life, the kind of response which is 'natural' (a word later used freely in his attack on Richard Price in the *Reflections*) and not at all under the control of the analytic reason."²⁷

This same attitude was present thirty years later when he maintained that the irrational forces of history are the best guides for men and societies, "the happy effect of following Nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it." Always he counselled prudence by which he meant that men should not press their ideas to logical extremes. The right course was not necessarily that to which reflection pointed. It must have hurt him to hear that his early speeches in Parliament were regarded as "abstracted and subtle" but he rallied—"perhaps it is true; I myself don't know it; but think, if I had not been known to be the Author of a Book somewhat metaphysical, the objections against my mode of Argument would be of another nature, and possibly more just."²⁸

These reflections on Burke's habits of thought appear to present a paradox. For Burke is the great debater, the man who took such pains to prepare his speeches and pamphlets, the man who worked so hard to persuade, to reach, and to turn the minds of men. Yet he is the same one who would have denied to the French people the right to change their lot in life by following the results of their philosophizing. And we have just seen that reason was allowed no part in determining beauty.

This apparent contradiction poses a question of fathoming the mind of a man who used words in torrents. And they were effective torrents. It is true that not infrequently a passage flowed out that had no apparent meaning. Such a result bothers conscientious critics and should bother biographers of Burke. That words and sentences either do or do not have meaning seems a truism. But Burke himself did not completely subscribe to this view insofar as meaning is confined to conventional dictionary precision. Section V of the *Enquiry* is devoted to words and how they affect the mind.

He begins by questioning the notion that the power of poetry and eloquence lies in the raising of ideas in the mind. An analysis of types of words shows that it is unlikely that many words are capable of raising specific images in the mind. This applies particularly to abstract words such as liberty, virtue, and honor. Such words act on the passions through the associations they raise of good and evil. As in a conditioned reflex, the sound of the word will finally produce the emotion

²⁵ Some of these passages were discussed by the present writer in *Edmund Burke: An Introduction*, 7 CATH. U. L. REV. 61 (1958).

²⁶ "Edmund Burke . . . was more radically anti-rational than most of his group in reducing the whole esthetic process to passion. . . ." GILBERT AND KUHN, A HISTORY OF ESTHETICS (Rev. ed.) 253.

²⁷ ENQUIRY, xi.

²⁸ CORRESPONDENCE I, 241.

without reference to any particular occasion. Words can be used to represent occasions and thus will stimulate anew old emotions. It is a matter of skill, for as Burke says, "If the affection be well conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it."²⁹

Elsewhere in the *Enquiry*, Burke had arrived at similar conclusions for a slightly different purpose. In describing the sublime, Burke notes that obscurity is a helpful attribute. An obscure and imperfect idea can affect the emotions by raising up vague terrors. But, as Burke says, "a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever."³⁰

Referring to Milton, Burke quotes a lengthy description of Satan. The effect of this passage is that: "The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the clearness."³¹ And again, he repeats this idea by saying that "a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." I do believe that this idea is too graven into Burke's mind for us to ignore it. Here is a real explanation for some of those incredibly ornate passages in Burke's writings. Burke was striving for an emotional response that could shake his own listeners but which, because of the passage of time and circumstance, is now utterly without effect upon us.

Mr. Boulton has noted this implication. He concludes that Burke's contention is argued in "an audacious and revolutionary manner." Burke, he says: "represents a reaction against the distrust of language among post-Baconian writers in the previous century, against their desire to evolve a language in which words would simply be marks of things and in which emotional and historical associations would be non-existent."³²

I conclude from this volume on the sublime and the beautiful that a modern reader can learn more of value about Edmund Burke than about aesthetics. But due to the splendid editing of this work, much of value can be learned about both subjects.

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²⁹ ENQUIRY, 176.

³⁰ ENQUIRY, 60.

³¹ *Ibid.* cit, 62.

³² ENQUIRY, xxvii.

