**After Reading Burke**

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I

I AM the happy possessor of the complete works of Hazlitt and from time to time I take a volume from my shelves and read an essay here, an essay there, as my inclination prompts. I am seldom disappointed. Like every writer he is not always at his best, which is very good indeed, but even at his worst he is readable. He is amusing, bitter, keen-witted, violent, sympathetic, unjust, generous; he scarcely ever wrote a page in which he docs not give you himself, with his faults and his virtues; and that in the end is all an author has to give. The assiduous reader of Hazlitt cannot fail to notice how often the name of Edmund Burke appears in his pages. It never ceases to give me a little thrill when I find him referred to as ‘the late Mr. Burke’; the hundred and fifty years that have passed since his death seem then to be no great matter and I feel that he was, if not a con­temporary of my own, someone whom if I had been fortunate I might have known in my youth as, for example, I might have known George Meredith or Swinburne. Hazlitt was of opinion that Burke was the first prose writer of his time ana in one of his essays states that at one period of his life his three favourite writers were Burke, Junius and Rousseau. ‘I was never weary,’ he says, ‘of admiring and wondering at the felicities of the style, the turns of expression, the refine­ments of thought and sentiment: I laid the book down to find out the secret of so much strength and beauty, and took it up again in despair, to read on and admire.’ In passage after passage Hazlitt praises Burke’s style and it is evident that his own owes a good deal to his study of it. He describes him as, with the exception of Jeremy Taylor, the most poetical of prose writers. ‘It has always appeared to me,’ he says, ‘that the most perfect prose-style, the most powerful, the most dazzling, the most daring, that which went the nearest to the verge of poetry and yet never fell over, was Burke’s. It has the solidity and the sparkling effect of the diamond . . . Burke’s style is airy, flighty, adven­turous, but it never loses sight of the subject; nay, is always in contact with, and derives its increased and varying impulse from it.’ And again: ‘His style has all the familiarity of conversation, and all the research of the most elaborate conversation. He says what he wants to say, by any means, nearer or more remote within his reach. He makes use of the most common or scientific terms, of the longest or shortest sentences, of the plainest and most downright, or of the most figurative modes of speech. . . . He everywhere gives the image he wishes to give, in its true and appropriate colouring; and it is the very crowd and variety of these images that have given his language its peculiar tone of animation and even of passion. It is his impatience to transfer his conceptions entire, living, in all their rapidity, strength and glancing variety—to the minds of others, that constantly pushes him to the verge of extravagance, and yet supports him there in dignified security.’

This, and other passages too numerous or too long to cite, so much impressed me that I thought I should like to see for myself what justification there was for praise so unqualified. I had not read Burke since I was very young; I read then *On Conciliation with the Colonies* and *On the Affairs with America;* perhaps owing to my youth I did not find the matter very interesting, but I was deeply affected by the manner and I retained the recollection, vivid though vague, of a splendid magnilo­quence. I have now read these speeches once more, and the more important writings of Burke besides, and in the following pages I wish to submit to the reader the reflections that have occurred to me. I hasten, however, to tell him that I do not propose to deal with Burke’s thought; for that it would be necessary to have a much greater knowledge of the eighteenth century than I can claim and an interest in, and a familiarity with, the principles of politics which I must admit (and it may be I should admit with shame) I am far from possessing. I desire to treat only of the manner in which Burke wrote without paying any more atten­tion than can be helped to the matter of which he wrote. It is evident that the two can never be entirely separated, for style must be conditioned by the subject of discourse; a grave, balanced and deliberate manner befits an important theme, but has a grotesque effect when it is applied to a trivial one: contrariwise a gay, sparkling way of writing is ill-suited to those great topics of which Dr. Johnson remarked that you could no longer say anything new about them that was true or anything true about them that was new. But if writers must continue to speak of them they err when they try to excite our interest by jumping through verbal hoops and turning paradoxical somersaults. One of the difficulties that the novelist has to cope with is that his style must change with his matter and if he tries to keep it uniform he will find it hard to avoid an impres­sion of artificiality; for he must be colloquial when he reports dialogue, rapid when he narrates action, and restrained or impassioned (according to his idiosyncrasy) when he describes emotion. But perhaps it is enough if the novelist contents himself with avoiding the grosser errors of grammar, for no one can have considered this matter without being struck by the significant and surprising fact that the four greatest novelists the world has seen, Tolstoi, Balzac, Dostoevsky and Dickens, wrote their respective languages very carelessly; and Dickens, as we know, did not even take the trouble to write tolerable grammar. It is for the historian, the divine and the essayist to acquire and maintain a settled style and it is no accident that in this country the most splendid monuments of the English language have been produced by such essayists as Sir Thomas Browne, Dryden, Addison and Johnson (for *Rasselas,* though purposing to be a work of fiction, is in effect an essay on the vanity of human wishes), by such divines as Jeremy Taylor and William Law, and by such historians as Gibbon. Among these Edmund Burke holds an eminent place.

Hazlitt says that he had tried half a dozen times to describe Burke’s style without succeeding, and it may seem presumptuous in me to attempt something that Hazlitt failed to do; but, in fact, in various of his essays he has given so good a description of it that there is really nothing left to add. He takes note of its severe extravagance; its literal boldness; its matter-of-fact hyperbole; its running away with a subject, and from it at the same time; and then he adds, ‘but there is no making it out, for there is no example of the same thing anywhere else. We have no common measure to refer to; and his qualities contradict even themselves.’ My object is not to describe Burke’s style, but to examine its texture and to discover, if I can, the methods he employed by means of words to produce his effects. Hazlitt has set forth the rich succulence of the dish; my aim is to ferret out the ingredients that give it savour. I am concerned to find out how he constructed his sentences and how he ordered his paragraphs, what use he made of abstract and concrete words, of image and metaphor, and of what rhetorical devices he availed himself to serve his turn; and if this seems a dull subject, after all no one is under an obligation to read the follow­ing pages. To me, a writer, it is an interesting one. But I am confronted with two difficulties: the first is that I am none too confident of my capacity to deal with this somewhat ambitious task; the second is that I can only hope to achieve a measure of success by giving quotations, and these I believe only the most conscien­tious readers can resist the temptation to skip. Yet it is only by example that I can indicate practice. English is a difficult language to write, and few authors have written it consistently with accuracy and distinction. The best way of learning to do this is to study the great masters of the past. Much of what Burke wrote has no longer, except perhaps to the politician, a pressing interest; indeed, I believe that almost all that he has to say of value to the average reader now could be put into one volume of elegant extracts; and for my part I must confess that I could never have brought myself to read his voluminous works with such care if I had not hoped to gain something from them that would enable me to write more nearly as I wish to. The manner of writing changes with the fleeting generations and it would be absurd to try to write now like one of the great stylists of the eighteenth century, but I see no reason to suppose that they have not something to teach us that may be to«our purpose. The language of literature maintains its vitality by absorbing the current speech of the people; this gives it colour, vividness and actuality; but if it is to avoid shapelessness and incoher­ence it must be founded on, and determined by, the standards of the period when English prose attained the highest degree of perfection of which it seems capable.

I think there arc few writers who write well by nature. Burke was a man of prodigious industry and it is certain that he took pains not only over the matter of his dis­course, but over the manner. ‘With respect to his facility of composition,’ says Hazlitt, ‘there are con­trary accounts. It has been stated by some that he wrote out a plain sketch first, like a sort of dead colouring, and added the ornaments and tropes afterwards. I have been assured by a person who had the best means of knowing, that the *Letter to a Noble Lord* (the most rapid, impetuous, glancing and sportive of all his works) was printed off, and the proof sent to him: and that it was returned to the printing-office with so many alterations and passages inter-lined, that the compositors refused to correct it as it was—took the whole matter in pieces, and re-set the copy. This looks like elaboration and afterthought.’ And we learn from Dodsley that more than a dozen revises of the *Reflections on the French Revolution* were taken off and destroyed before the author could satisfy himself. A glance at the *Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is enough to show that Burke’s style was the result of labour. Though this work, praised by Johnson, turned to account by Lessing and esteemed by Kant, cannot now be read with great profit it may still afford entertainment. In arguing that perfection is not the cause of beauty, he asserts: ‘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. Beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty. Blushing has little less power; and modesty in general, which is a tacit allowance of imperfection, is itself considered as an amiable quality, and certainly heightens every other that is so. I know it is in every­body’s mouth, that we ought to love perfection. This is to me a sufficient proof that it is not the proper object of love.’ Here is another quotation: ‘When we have before us such objects as excite love and complacency, the body is affected so far as I could observe, much in the following manner: The head reclines something on one side, the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object; the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a long sigh; the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides.’ This book is supposed to have been first written when Burke was nineteen and it was published when he was twenty- six. I have given these quotations to show the style in which he wrote before he submitted to the influence which enabled him to become one of the masters of English prose. It is the general manner of the middle of the eighteenth century and I doubt whether anyone who read these passages would know who was the author. It is correct, easy and flowing; it shows that Burke had by nature a good car. English is a language of harsh consonants, and skill is needed to avoid the juxtaposition of sounds that offend the hearing. Some authors are insensible to this and will use a word ending with a consonant, or even a pair of them, and put beside it a word beginning with the same one or the same pair (a fast stream); they will use alliteration (always dangerous in prose) and will write words that rhyme (thus producing an unpleasant jingle) without any feeling of discomfort. Of course the sense is the first thing, but the riches of the English language are such that it is seldom a sufficiently exact synonym cannot be found for the word that comes first to mind. It is seldom that an author is obliged to let something stand that grates upon his ear because only so can he say precisely what he wants to. One of the most valuable things that can be learnt from Burke is that, however unmanageable certain words may appear, it is possible by proper placing, the judicious admixture of long ones with short, by alternation of consonants and vowels and by alternation of accent, to secure euphony. Of course no one could write at all if he bore these considerations in his conscious mind; the ear does the work. In Burke’s case I think it evident that the natural sensibility of the organ was infinitely developed by the exigencies of public speech: even when he wrote only to be read the sound of the spoken phrase was present to him. He was not a melodious writer as Jeremy Taylor was in the seventeenth century or Newman in the nineteenth; his prose has force, vitality and speed rather than beauty; but notwithstanding the intricate complication of many of his sentences they remain easy to say and good to hear. I have no doubt that at times Burke wrote a string of words that was neither and in the tumult of his passion broke the simple rules of euphony which I have indicated. An author has the right to be judged by his best.

I have read somewhere that Burke learnt to write by studying Spenser and it appears that many of his gorgeous sentences and poetical allusions can be traced to the poet. He himself said that: ‘Whoever relishes and reads Spenser as he ought to be read, will have a strong hold of the English language.’ I do not see what he can have acquired from that mellifluous but (to my mind) tedious bard other than that sense of splendid sound of which I have just been speaking. He was certainly never influenced by the excessive use of alliteration which (again to my mind) makes the *Faerie Queene* cloying and sometimes even absurd. It has been said, among others by Charles James Fox, who should have known, that Burke founded his style on Milton’s. I cannot believe it. ft is true that he often quoted him and it would be strange indeed if with his appreciation of fine language Burke had failed to be impressed by the magnificence of vocabulary and grandeur of phrase in *Paradise Lost;* but the *Letters on a Regicide Peace,* on which, such as it is, the evidence for the statement rests, were written in old age: it seems improbable that if Burke had really studied Milton’s prose for the purpose of forming his own its influence should not have been apparent till he had one foot in the grave. Nor can I believe, as the *Dictionary of National Biography* asserts, that he founded it on Dryden’s. I see in Burke’s deliberate, ordered and resonant prose no trace of Dryden’s charming grace and happy-go-lucky facility. There is all the difference that there is between a French garden of trim walks and ordered parterres and a Thames-side park with its coppices and its green meadows. For my part I think it more likely that the special character of Burke’s settled manner must be ascribed to the robust and irresistible example of Dr. Johnson. I think it was from him that Burke learnt the value of a long intricate sentence, the potent force of polysyllabic words, the rhetorical effect of balance and the epigrammatic elegance of antithesis. He avoided Johnson’s faults (small faults to those who like myself have a peculiar fondness for Johnson’s style) by virtue of his affluent and impetuous fancy and his practice of public speaking.

II

We all know Buffon’s dictum that *Le style c’est ! homme même.* If it is true, then by making yourself acquainted with the man it should be possible to come to a better understanding of his style. But is it true? I think Buffon thought men more of a piece than they really are. They are for the most part an amalgam of virtues and vices, of strengths and weaknesses so incompatible that it is only because they are manifest that you can believe it possible for them to co-exist in one and the same person. Burke was much discussed in his day, passionately praised by some, violently decried by others, and from the various reports that have come down to us, from Hazlitt’s essays and the excellent *Life* of Sir Philip Magnus, it is possible, I think, to get a fairly accurate impression of the kind of man he was. But it is not a plausible one. It is with difficulty that you can persuade yourself to believe that merits so rare can go hand-in-hand with defects so deplorable. You are left utterly perplexed.

Edmund Burke was born in Ireland, in 1729, the son of an attorney, a profession then held in small respect: Johnson once remarked of someone who had quitted the company that ‘he did not care to speak ill of any man behind his back, but he believed the gentleman was an *attorney.’* When just over twenty Burke went to London to study law and soon after his arrival formed a close friendship with a certain William Burke who, if a relation at all, was a very distant one. He soon abandoned the law for literature and for some years made his living as best he could by writing for the booksellers. He published a couple of books which appear to have attracted sufficient attention to secure him the acquaintance of Horace Walpole and the warm friendship of Dr. Johnson. He married in 1757 and the same year his younger brother Richard joined him in London. The three Burkes were devoted to one another; William and Richard lived with Edmund and his wife, and they shared a common purse. Richard was a noisy, exuberant, disreputable fellow without, as far as one can tell, any redeeming qualities; but William was able and pushing. He had made useful friends at Oxford and when in 1765 Lord Rockingham was called upon by the King to form a ministry he persuaded him to offer Edmund the post of his private secretary and got Lord Vemey to give him one of the pocket boroughs at his disposal.

Burke immediately made his mark in she House of Commons. Dr. Johnson”wrote to Bennet Langton that he had ‘gained more reputation than perhaps any man at his first appearance ever gained before. He made two speeches in the House for repealing the Stamp Act, which were publicly commended by Mr. Pitt, and have filled the town with wonder.’ The ministry fell in 1766 and two years later Burke bought a house called Gregories with an estate of six hundred acres at Beaconsfield. It is natural enough that he should have wished to do this. His reputation was great and he had a well-justified confidence in his ability. We may suppose that his lofty spirit, his boisterous exuberance, made it irksome to him to live meanly. He was a sociable creature and loved to entertain his friends. It was a pleasure to him to succour deserving (and often undeserving) talent and to relieve the necessities of the needy. His origins were modest and such were the manners of the time it may be that he was often twitted with them. He lived in the company of the great; he was used by his party and knew himself to be invaluable, but he could not be unaware that he was regarded with suspicion; he was with them, but not of them, and there hung about him the taint of the Irish adventurer. And that of course is exactly what he was; he happened to be also a man of high principle, brilliant gifts, social and intellectual, and wide know­ledge. He may well have thought that the acquisition of Gregories, by giving him a stake in the country, would add to his prestige and, by enabling him to meet these lords and gentlemen on a more equal footing, increase the influence on them which till then he had owed only to his talents.

The estate cost twenty thousand pounds and twenty- five hundred a year to keep up. It seemed strange that a man who a few years before had been glad to accept from Dodsley, the bookseller, a hundred pounds a year to do hackwork could think of disbursing so large a sum and be prepared to burden himself with an expense so great. The Burkes, with Lord Verney to back them, were engaged in vast gambling transactions in East India Stock and they seem to have bought Gregories on the profits they had made; but then, unfortunately for them, the stock fell heavily, they were unable to meet their differences, and in the end Lord Verney was ruined and William Burke fled the country. Edmund, involved in financial difficulties which harassed him to the end of his life, was obliged to mortgage the property ‘up co the hilt’ and borrow money from his friends. The year he bought Gregories he borrowed a thousand pounds from David Garrick, and at some later date two thousand more from Sir Joshua Reynolds. During the seventeen years of his connection with Rockingham he received from him loans amounting to thirty thousand pounds. Now it is a common experience that when sums of money of any extent have passed from one person to another there arises a constraint between them that often results in coldness. In Burke’s case, such was the esteem in which his friends held him, nothing of the sort happened. They revered his ‘private virtues and transcendent worth’, and it may be supposed that, like Dr. Brocklesby who made him a present of a thousand pounds, they gave him the money he so badly needed as proof of their devotion. When Rockingham died he left instructions that Burke’s bonds should be destroyed. Reynolds did the same thing and left him a couple of thousand pounds besides.

Burke was a proud man, sensitive of his honour, and one asks oneself if he did not feel it a humiliation to apply to his friends for money. It seems never to have occurred to him that he could very well sell Gregories and by paying his debts extricate himself from a situation that was not only mortifying but damaging to his reputation. One can only suppose that he looked upon it as an asset of such consequence that it must be retained at whatever cost to his dignity. And of course it is only a surmise that he looked upon the situation as mortifying. Borrowing, as we know, is a habit easy to contract, hard to break, and the habitual borrower soon finds a way to satisfy his need and retain his self-respect.

Burke had the insouciance which is generally con­sidered a characteristic of the Irish in money matters, and he had also their generous warm-heartedness.

However hard pressed, he continued to give financial aid to those who enlisted his sympathies. There was an Irish painter, James Barry by name, whom he mis­takenly thought a genius and to whom he gave an income so that he might study in Italy. Crabbe, the poet, was destitute; the applications he had made to one distinguished person and another for help went unanswered and as a last resource he applied to Burke. Burke installed him at Gregories and never rested till he saw him comfortably settled for life. These are only two instances of his constant benefactions. Few people came in contact with him without growing conscious of his greatness. It is remarkable how often one comes across references to the veneration with which he was regarded; so frequent are they that I have asked myself whether the word had then a slightly different con­notation from what it has now. I have respect and admiration for the statesmen, generals and admirals who conducted affairs during the last war. I esteem the great gifts of the poets and novelists with whom it has been my good fortune to be acquainted, but it has never occurred to me, nor, I imagine, to anybody else, to look upon them with veneration. Perhaps we no longer possess the faculty of doing so. Burke had charm, and until worry and disappointment soured him a genial temper. He was a great talker and, as we know, Dr. Johnson valued him for the ‘affluence of his conversation’. I have asked myself how this would please us at the present day. It is hard to avoid the impression that we should find it a trifle heavy, for it appears to have been devastatingly informative, and we are inclined to be impatient of being told what we can read for ourselves, if not in a book, in the news- papers. We are no better listeners than was Burke himself (Johnson complained that: ‘So desirous is he to talk that if one is speaking at one end of the table, he’ll speak to somebody at the other end’), and we are restless of a talker who monopolises the conversation. And Burke had neither wit nor humour. It is possible that we should think him something of a bore, and I am afraid that, notwithstanding the commanding air and fine presence that impressed Fanny Burney, we should prefer to his eloquence the playful flippancy of Miss Austen’s Henry Tilney.

After the crash of East India Stock, Richard Burke, who by Edmund’s influence had some years before been appointed Receiver-General of His Majesty’s revenues in the West India island of Granada, returned to his post. He bought for next-door to nothing from the Red Caribbees, descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of the neighbouring island of St. Vincent, a great tract of land which was estimated to be worth a hundred thousand pounds. The transaction was so disreputable that the Council of St. Vincent refused to admit its legality. The Burkes were by this time in desperate straits and Edmund made every effort to have his brother’s claim substantiated. He offered Fox, himself badly in need of money, a share of the swag if he could induce Lord North, then in office, to rule that the purchase was valid. Fox tried, and Lord North was apparently prepared to oblige, but he bungled the matter and Richard, defeated, returned to England. He was then charged with misappropriating ten thousand pounds of His Majesty’s revenues, tried and found guilty. He appealed. Burke used his influence to have the appeal indefinitely postponed. One would think that had he been convinced of his brother’s innocence he would have been glad to see it proved. William Burke, on leaving England to escape being arrested for debt, went to India, and there, again by Edmund’s interest, was appointed Paymaster of the King’s Troops. He engaged in a variety of shady enterprises, from one of which he expected to net a hundred and fifty thousand pounds and which Sir Philip Magnus describes as flagrantly dishonest. When, utterly discredited, he was obliged to return to England he was in danger of being arrested for embezzlement. A pretty pair!

Much of this dirty business was not known till Sir Philip examined the papers at Wentworth Woodhouse, but enough leaked out gravely to discredit Edmund. Dr. Johnson was a shrewd judge of character and he retained his affection for him till his death. He valued Burke’s intelligence, his knowledge, his amiability and his benevolence, but there are passages in Boswell which suggest that even he doubted his honesty. It is true that during the eighteenth century it was an understood thing that they who served the State had the right to live on it. But Burke was a moralist and a reformer. He prided himself on his high principles, and yet could use his power to get men appointed to lucrative offices for which they were notoriously unfitted. He prided himself on his veracity, and yet could untruthfully make a public declaration that he had never had dealings in East India Stock. He con­sistently fought injustice and corruption, and yet strained every nerve to further the corrupt and unjust chicaneries of William and Richard. Burke was a great orator; it was difficult to reconcile his admirable pre­cepts with his reprehensible practice and it is no wonder that people said he was a humbug and a hypocrite. I don’t think he was. He had to an extreme degree the failing, common to most men, and one to which politicians are not immune, of believing what it was to his interest to believe. He would not look at what he did not want to see. I don’t know what name to give to this failing, but neither hypocrisy nor humbug is the right one. When Burke’s affections were engaged his judgment was vitiated. It was the misfortune of his life that his most engaging trait, his power of affection, should have had such unhappy consequences. William and Richard were a pair of crooks, and not even clever crooks, for not one of their nefarious schemes succeeded; yet Edmund could write: ‘Looking back to the course of my life I remember no one considerable merit in the whole course of it which I did not, mediately or immediately, derive from William Burke.’ And of Richard he wrote that his integrity was such that no temptation could corrupt it. He loved them both to the end and, incredible as it may seem, respected them. In his eyes they could do no wrong and so, no matter how damning was the evidence against them, he dis­believed it.

‘If a man were to go by chance at the same time with Burke under a shed, to shun a shower,’ said Dr. Johnson, ‘he would say—“this is an extraordinary man”.’ Burke was extraordinary in more ways than Johnson knew. It is not often that you come across a man the features of whose personality are so incom­patible as was the case with Burke. He was upright and abject, straightforward and shifty, disinterested and corrupt. How is one to reconcile characteristics so discordant? I don’t know. But let us not be censorious. Did not Becky Sharp say that it was easy to be good on five thousand a year? If Burke had been bom a gentle­man with a fine estate and an ample income his conduct would doubtless have been as irreproachable as he was invariably convinced it was. About that, the propriety of his conduct, he never had a doubt and he looked upon the obloquy (his own word) with which he was pursued as a shameful injustice. Machiavelli has told us that when he retired to his study to write he discarded his country clothes and donned the damask robe in which as Secretary of the Republic he was wont to appear before the Signoria. So, in spirit, did Burke. In his study he was no longer the reckless punter, the shameless sponge, the unscrupulous place-hunter (not for himself, but for others), the dishonest advocate who attacked measures introduced to correct scandalous abuses because his pocket would be affected by their passage. In his study he was the high-minded man whom his friends loved and honoured for his nobility of spirit, his greatness and his magnanimity. In his study he was the honest man he was assured he was. Then, but only then, you can say of Burke: *Le style c’est l’homme même.*

III

His style, it must be obvious, is solidly based on balance. Hazlitt stated that it was Dryden who first used balance in the formation of his sentences. That seems an odd thing to say since one would have thought that balance came naturally to anyone who added two sentences together by a copulative: there is balance of a sort when you say: ‘He went out for a walk and came home wet through’. Dr. Johnson on the other hand, speaking of Dryden’s prose, said: ‘The clauses are never balanced, nor the, periods modelled: every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls in its proper place.’ Thus do authorities disagree. Burke was much addicted to what for want of a better word I will call the triad; by this I mean the juxtaposition of three nouns, three adjectives, three clauses to reinforce a point. Here are some examples: ‘Never was cause supported with more constancy, more activity, more spirit.’—‘Shall there be no reserve power in the Empire, to supply a deficiency which may weaken, divide or dissipate the whole?’—‘Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention.’—T really think that for wise men this is not judicious; for sober men, not decent; for minds tinctured with humanity, not mild or merciful.’ Burke had recourse to this pattern so often that in the end it falls somewhat monotonously on the ear. It has another disadvantage, more noticeable perhaps when read than when heard, that one member of the triad may be so nearly synony­mous with another that you cannot but realise that it has been introduced for its sound rather than for its sense.

Burke made frequent use of the antithesis, which of course is merely a variety of balance. Hazlitt says it is first found in *The Taller. I* have discovered no marked proof of this in an examination which I admit was cursory; there are traces of it, maybe, but adumbra­tions rather than definite instances. You can find more striking examples in the *Book of Proverbs.* I hazard the guess that it was from this and from his reading of the Latin writers that Johnson developed a device which he made his own. He perfected the form and by his authority gave it a long-continued vogue. The grammars tell us that the antithesis is a mode of structure in which two clauses of a compound sentence are made similar in form, but if this is correct then we must allow two forms of antithesis, the open and the disguised. The open emphasises a contrast, the dis­guised a balance. Here is an example of an open antithesis: ‘The doctor recollected that he had a place to preserve, though he forgot that he had a reputation to lose’; and here is what might be described as a disguised one: ‘But if fortune should be as powerful over fame, as she has been prevalent over virtue, at least our conscience is beyond her jurisdiction.’

The antithetical style is vastly effective, and if it has gone out of common use it is doubtless for a reason that Johnson himself suggested. Its purpose is by the balance of words to accentuate the balance of thought, and when it serves merely to tickle the ear it is tire­some. Oddly enough it is just on this account that Coleridge, comparing Johnson’s use of it with that of Junius, condemned Johnson: ‘the antithesis of Junius,’ he said, ‘is a real antithesis of images or thought; but the antithesis of Johnson is rarely more than verbal? It became a trick of phraseology, and with Macaulay, who was the last writer of eminence to practise it, an exasperating trick. It is perhaps a pity that it has gone so completely out of fashion, for it had vigour and cogency. It hit the nail on the head with precision.

The master of the antithesis is the author of the *Leiters of Junius.* He wrote admirably. Coleridge, it is true, claimed that when he wrote a sentence of five or six lines long nothing could exceed the slovenliness of his style, a fact which I must confess I have not noticed, but Hazlitt not only admired it, he learnt from it. I will quote the last passage of the letter he addressed to the Duke of Bedford. It is a very good sample of his manner.

‘It is in vain therefore to shift the scene. You can no more fly from your enemies than from yourself. Perse­cuted abroad, you look into your own heart for con­solation, and find nothing but reproaches and despair. But, my Lord, you may quit the field of business, though not the field of danger; and though you cannot be safe, you may cease to be ridiculous. I fear you have listened too long to the advice of those pernicious friends, with whose interests you have sordidly united your own, and for whom you have sacrificed everything that ought to be dear to a man of honour. They are still base enough to encourage the follies of your age, as they once did the vices of your youth. As little acquainted with the rules of decorum, as with the laws of morality, they will not suffer you to profit by experi­ence, nor even to consult the propriety of a bad character. Even now they tell you that life is no more than a dramatic scene, in which the hero should preserve his constancy to the last, and that as you lived without virtue you should die without repentance.’

Now, the vogue of the antithesis had a marked effect on sentence structure, as anyone can see for himself by comparing the prose of Dryden, for example, with that of Burke. It brought into prominence the value of the period. I may remind the reader that a period is a sentence in which the sense is held up until the end: when a clause is added after a natural close the sentence is described as loose. The English language does not allow of the inversions which make it possible to suspend the meaning, and so the loose sentence is common. To this is largely due the diffusiveness of our prose. When once the unity of a sentence is abandoned there is little to prevent the writer from adding clause to clause. The antithetical structure was advantageous to the cultivation of the classical period, for it is obvious that its verbal merit depends on its compact and rounded form. I will quote a sentence of Burke’s.

‘Indeed, when I consider the face of the kingdom of France; the multitude and opulence of her cities; the useful magnificence of her spacious high roads and bridges; the opportunity of her artificial canals and navigations opening the conveniences of maritime communication through a solid continent of so immense an extent; when I turn my eyes to the stupendous works of her ports and harbours, and to her whole naval apparatus, whether for war or trade; when I bring before my view the number of her fortifications, con­structed with so bold and masterly a skill, and made and maintained at so prodigious a charge, presenting an armed front and impenetrable barrier to her enemies upon every side; when I recollect how very small a part of that extensive region is without cultiva­tion, and to what complete perfection the culture of many of the best productions of the earth have been brought in France; when I reflect on the excellence of her manufactures and fabrics, second to none but ours, and in some particulars not second; when I contem­plate the grand foundations of charity public and private; when I survey the state of all the arts that beautify and polish life; when I reckon the men she has bred for extending her fame in war, her able states­men, the multitude of her profound lawyers and theologians, her philosophers, her critics, her historians and antiquaries, her poets and her orators, sacred and profane; I behold in all this something which awes and commands the imagination, which checks the mind on the brink of precipitate and indiscriminate censure, and which demands that we should very seriously examine, what and how great are the latent vices that could authorise us at once to level so spacious a fabric with the ground.’

The paragraph ends with three short sentences.

I should like to point out with what skill Burke has given a ‘loose’ structure to his string of subordinate clauses, thus further suspending the meaning till he brings his period to a close. Johnson, as we know, was apt to make periods of his subordinate clauses, writing what, I think, the grammarians call an extended complex, and so lost the flowing urgency which is characteristic of Burke. I should like to point out also what a happy effect Burke has secured in this com­pound sentence by forming his different clauses on the same plan and yet by varying cadence and arrange­ment avoiding monotony. He used the method of starting successive clauses with the same word, in this case with the word *when,* frequently and with effective­ness. It is of course a rhetorical device, which when delivered in a speech must have had a cumulative force, and shows once more how much his style was influenced by the practice of public speaking. I do not know that there is anyone in England who is capable now of writing such a sentence; perhaps there is no one who wants to; for, perhaps from an instinctive desire to avoid the ‘loose’ sentences which the idiosyncrasy of the language renders so inviting, it is the fashion these days to write short sentences. Indeed not long ago I read that the editor of an important newspaper had insisted that none of his contributors should write a sentence of more than fourteen words. Yet the long sentence has advantages. It gives you room to develop your meaning, opportunity to constitute your cadence and material to achieve your climax. Its disadvantages arc that it may be diffuse, flaccid, crabbed or inappre­hensible. The stylists of the seventeenth century wrote sentences of great length and did not always escape these defects. Burke seldom failed, however long his sentence, however elaborate its clauses and opulent his ‘tropes’, to make its fundamental structure so solid that you seem to be led to the safety of the full stop by a guide who knows his business and will permit you neither to take a side-turning nor to loiter by the way. Burke was careful to vary the length of his sentences. He does not tire you with a succession of long ones, nor, unless with a definitely rhetorical intention, does he exasperate you with a long string of short ones.

He has a lively sense of rhythm. His prose has the eighteenth-century tune, like any symphony of Haydn’s, though with a truly English accent, and you hear the drums and fifes in it, but an individual note rings through it. It is a virile prose and I can think of no one who wrote with so much force combined with so much elegance. If it seems now a trifle formal, I think that is due to the fact that, like most of the eighteenth­century writers, he used general and abstract terms when we are now more inclined to use special and concrete ones. This gives a greater vividness to modern writing, though at the cost perhaps of concision. It is an amusing exercise to try to translate one of Burke’s sentences into such English as the average writer would now write. I have taken one almost at random: ‘The tenderest minds, confounded with the dreadfill exigence in which morality submits to the suspension of its own rules in favour of its own principles, might turn aside whilst fraud and violence were accomplishing the destruction of a pretended nobility, which disgraced whilst it persecuted, human nature.’ It is a fine, rounded period, its meaning is clear and there is not a single word, except perhaps *exigence,* which is not in common use today; yet it is one that smacks of its time, no one would express the thought in such a way now, and in passing I may remark that it is a thought which not a few at the present moment may have had. Perhaps a modem writer would put it somewhat as follows: ‘There are times when people even of the most sensitive conscience must put the spirit of the law before the letter, and can do no more than stand aside when an effete plutocracy which has disgraced human nature by its persecutions is destroyed, even though by violence and double dealing.’ I do not claim that this is good, it is the best I can do after several attempts and I would not deny that it has neither the balance, the nobility nor the compactness of the original.

Burke was an Irishman, and the Irish, as we know, are inclined to verbosity. With them enough is not as good as a feast. They load their table with sumptuous viands, so that sometimes the mere sight surfeits you, and on occasion even, when you come to attack these game pasties, these boars’ heads, these lordly peacocks, you discover to your dismay that like the victuals at a banquet in Italian opera they are of papier mâché. English is a rich language. Very generally you have a choice between a plain word and a literary one, a concrete and an abstract word; you can say a thing directly or you can use a periphrase. The greatness, the stateliness of Burke’s nature led him to express himself with grandiloquence. His subjects were impor­tant and I suppose he would have thought it un­becoming to them and to himself to deliver himself with simplicity. ‘It is very’ well for Burke to express himself in that figurative way,’ said Fox. ‘It is natural to him; he talks so to his wife, to his servants, to his children.’ It must be admitted that it is sometimes fatiguing. It was not the least of the reasons for his failure in the House of Commons. The greatest speech he ever made there was that on conciliation with the Thirteen States. Lord Morley describes it as ‘the wisest in temper, the most closely logical in its reasoning, the amplest in appropriate topics, the most generous and conciliatory in the substance of its appeals.’ It drove everybody away.

Dr. Johnson has told us that in his day nobody talked much of style, since everybody wrote pretty well. ‘There is an elegance of style universally diffused,’ he said. Burke was outstanding. His contemporaries were impressed, as well they might be, by his command of words, his brilliant similes, his hyperboles and fertile imagination, but did not invariably approve. Hazlitt relates a conversation between Fox and Lord Holland on the subject of his style. It appears that this ‘Noble Person objected to it as too gaudy and meretricious, and said that it was more profuse of flowers than fruit. On which Mr. Fox observed, that though this was a common objection, it appeared to him altogether an unfounded one; that on the contrary the flowers often concealed the fruit beneath them; and the ornaments of style were rather an hindrance than an advantage to the sentiments they were meant to set off. In con­firmation of this remark, he offered to take down the book and translate a page anywhere into his own plain, natural style; and by his doing so, Lord Holland was convinced that he had often missed the thought from having his attention drawn off to the dazzling imagery.’ It is instructive to learn that Noble Persons and Eminent Politicians were interested in such questions in those bygone days and with such amiable exercises beguiled their leisure. But of course if his lordship’s attention was really drawn off the matter of Burke’s discourse by the brillancy of the manner, it is a reflection on his style. For the purpose of imagery is not to divert the reader, but to make the meaning clearer to him; the purpose of simile and metaphor is to impress it on his mind and by engaging his fancy make it more acceptable. An illustration is otiose unless it illustrates. Burke had a romantic and a poetic mind such as no other of the eighteenth-century masters of prose possessed, and it is this that gives his prose its varie­gated colour; but his aim was to convince rather than to please, to overpower rather than to persuade, and by all the resources of his imagination not only to make his point more obvious, but by an appeal to sentiment or passion to compel acquiescence. I don’t know when Mr. Fox held his conversation with the Noble Lord, but if the *Reflections on the French Revolution* had then appeared he might well have pointed to it to refute his lordship’s contention. For in that work the decora­tion so interpenetrates the texture of the writing that it becomes part and parcel of the argument. Here imagery, metaphor and simile fulfil their function. The one passage that leaves me doubtful is the most celebrated of all, that in which Burke tells how he saw Marie Antoinette at Versailles: ‘and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision.’ It is to be found in antholo­gies, so I will not quote it, but it is somewhat high flown to my taste. But if it is not perfect prose it is magnificent rhetoric; magnificent even when it is slightly absurd: ‘I thought ten thousand swords must have leapt from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult’; and the cadence with which the paragraph ends is lovely: ‘The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.’

Sir Philip Francis, who was perhaps the author of the *Letters of Junius,* condemned this passage as ‘downright foppery’ and somewhat surprisingly went on to write: ‘Once for all I wish you would let me teach you to write English. To me, who aim to read everything you write, it would be a great comfort, and to you, no sort of disparagement. Why will you not allow yourself to be persuaded that polish is material to preservation?’

As the quotations I have given plainly show, Burke made abundant use of metaphor. It is interwoven in the substance of his prose as the weavers of Lyons thread one colour with another to give a fabric the shimmer of shot silk. Of course like every other writer he uses what Fowler calls the natural metaphor, for common speech is largely composed of them, but he uses freely what Fowler calls the artificial metaphor. It gave concrete substance to his generalisations. He used it to enforce a statement by means of a physical image; but unlike some modem writers, who will pursue the implications of a metaphor like a spider scurrying along every filament of its web, he took care never to run it to death. Here is a good example of his practice: ‘Your constitution, it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation, but you possessed in some parts the walls, and, in all, the foundations, of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those foundations.’

On the other hand Burke used the simile somewhat sparingly. Modem writers might well follow his example. For of late a dreadful epidemic has broken out. Similes arc clustered on the pages of our young authors as thickly as pimples on a young man’s face, and they are as unsightly. A simile has use. By remind­ing you of a familiar thing it enables you to see the subject of the comparison more clearly or by mention­ing an unfamiliar one it focuses your attention on it. It is dangerous to use it merely as an ornament; it is detestable to use it to display your cleverness; it is preposterous to use it when it neither decorates nor impresses. (Example: ‘The moon like a huge blanc­mange wobbled over the tree-tops.’) When Burke used a simile it was generally, as might be expected, with elaboration. Here is the most celebrated one: ‘But as to *our* country and *our* race, as long as the well- compacted structure of our church and state, the sanctuary, the holy of holies of that ancient law, defended by reverence, defended by power—a fortress at once and a temple—shall stand inviolate on the brow of the British Sion, as long as the British Monarchy —not more limited than fenced by the orders of the state—shall, like the proud Keep of Windsor, rising in the majesty of proportion, and girt with the double belt of its kindred coeval towers; as long as this awful structure shall oversee and guard the subjected land, so long the mounds and dykes of the low, fat, Bedford level will have nothing to fear from all the pick­axes of all the levellers of France.’

Few of us writers pay much attention to the para­graph; we are apt, regardless of the sense, to make a break when we feel the reader deserves the slight rest it gives him. But the extent of a paragraph should be determined not by its length, but by its burden. A paragraph is a collection of sentences with unity of purpose. It should be concerned with a single topic and contain nothing irrelevant to this. Just as in a ‘loose’ sentence qualifying statements should not over­weight the statement qualified, so in the paragraph statements which arc of less import should be sub­ordinate to the statement which is essential. Such are the counsels of perfection given by the grammarian. Burke followed them with considerable fidelity. In his best paragraphs he begins with a statement of his subject in short sentences that arrest attention; goes on with a series of sentences of medium length or with a great, majestic period; the phrases grow ampler and more emphatic till he reaches his climax about the middle of the paragraph, or a little later; then he slows down, the sentences grow shorter, sometimes even abrupt, and he concludes.

I have harped upon the fact that Burke’s style owed many of its merits to his practice of speaking in public; to this it owed also such defects as a carping critic might find in it. There is more than one passage in the famous speech on the Nabob of Arcot’s Debts when he asks a long series of rhetorical questions. It may have been effective in the House of Gommons, but on the printed page it is restless and fatiguing. To this may be ascribed his too frequent recourse to the exclamatory sentence. ‘Happy if they had all con­tinued to know their indissoluble union, and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue the instructor, and not aspired to be the master.’ Something of an old-fashioned air he has by his frequent use of an inverted construction, a mode now seldom met with; he employs it to vary the monotony of the simple order —subject, verb, object—and also to emphasise the significant member of the sentence by placing it first; but such a phrase as ‘Personal offence I have given them none’ needs the emphasis of the living voice to appear natural. On the other hand it is to his public speaking, I think, that Burke owed his skill in giving to a series of quite short sentences as musical a cadence and as noble a ring as when he set himself to compose an elaborate period with its pompous train of sub­ordinate clauses; and this is shown nowhere to greater advantage than in the *Letter to a Noble Lord.* Here a true instinct made him see that when he was appealing for compassion on account of his age and infirmities and by reminding his readers of the death of his beloved and only son, he must aim at simplicity. The passage is deeply moving:

‘The storm has gone over me; and I lie like one of those old oaks which the late hurricane has scattered about me, I am stripped of all my honours, I am torn up by the roots, and lie prostrate on the earth . . . I am alone. I have none to meet my enemies in the gate. Indeed, my lord, I greatly deceive myself, if in this hard season I would give a peck of refuse wheat for all that is called fame and honour in the world. This is the appetite but of a few. It is a luxury, it is a privilege, it is an indulgence for those who are at their ease. But we are all of us made to shun disgrace, as we are made to shrink from pain, and poverty, and disease. It is an instinct; and under the direction of reason, instinct is always in the right. I live in an inverted order. They who ought to have succeeded me have gone before me. They who should have been to me as posterity are in the place of ancestors. I owe to the dearest relation (which ever must subsist in memory) that act of piety, which he would have per­formed to me; *I owe* it to him to show that he was not descended, as the Duke of Bedford would have it, from an unworthy parent.’

Here the best words arc indeed put in the best places. This piece owes little to picturesque imagery, nothing to romantic metaphor, and proves with what justifica­tion Hazlitt described him as, with the exception of Jeremy Taylor, the most poetical of prose-writers. I hope it will not be considered a literary conceit (a trifling, tedious business) when 1 suggest that in the tender melody of these cadences, in this exquisite choice of simple words, there is a foretaste of Words­worth at his admirable best. If these pages should persuade anyone to see for himself how great a writer Burke was I cannot do better than advise him to read this *Letter to a Noble Lord.* It is the finest piece of invective in the English language and so short that it can be read in an hour. It offers in its brief compass a survey of all Burke’s dazzling gifts, his formal as#well as his conversational style, his gift for epigram and for irony, his wisdom, his sense, his pathos, his indignation and his nobility.