

The Sublime and the Beautiful Conservatism and the Idea of Time

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Despite frequent protestations that conservatism is not an ideology or a political philosophy, but rather a way of being (or, even, of being British¹), a substantial canon of texts on the nature of conservatism exists. These range from philosophical treatises to think-tank pamphlets, but most have a series of features in common. Many describe conservatism as a universal human characteristic. Indeed, Lord Cecil suggests that before the Reformation ‘every one was a conservative’.² However, most also trace a lineage of political Conservatism, running back through Baldwin, Salisbury, Disraeli and Peel to Burke.

Beyond this lineage of (proto-)conservative thinkers, most of these texts stress the way that conservatism draws on common sense and everyday experience; it seeks to reflect, rather than to shape human nature and derives its power from its innate connection with the ‘national soul’. Moreover, they emphasise its ‘love of the familiar’, its preference for ‘fact’ over ‘mystery’ and ‘the actual’ to ‘the possible’.³ This is the stuff of the concrete, the quotidian, the small. However, these characterisations sit uneasily alongside conservatism’s grander aspects; they obscure its predilection for reverence, majesty and awe.

This paper is concerned with the tension between these two modes of thinking. In particular, it seeks to understand its impact on conservative ideas about time and progress. Time presents a particular problem for conservatism: it is the dimension of its strongest appeal and its greatest discomfort. On the one hand, conservatives claim to be uniquely in tune with time – focused on the particularity of the present historical moment, rather than the quest towards an imagined future; on the other, they find themselves beset by the fear of being on the ‘wrong side’ of history, even as their scepticism assures them that history has no ‘sides’, no pattern. Likewise, the conservative faith in continuity and tradition is alternately cast as a pragmatic attempt to accept only the tried-and-tested, and as a duty to keep alive the souls of ages past. Again, the prosaic and the poetic collide.

The sublime and the beautiful

Edmund Burke is universally accepted as the father of modern conservatism, though most writers also note that he would neither have recognised the term coined four decades after his death, nor accepted its application to himself, a lifelong Whig.⁴ The significance of Burke to conservatism lies not only in his gifts

¹ The Rt. Hon. Viscount Hailsham, QC, *Toryism and Tomorrow*, 10 October 1957 speech to CPC meeting at Party Conference in Brighton, CPC pamphlet no 181 (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), p. 9

² Lord Hugh Cecil, *Conservatism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), p. 24

³ Michael Oakeshott, ‘On being conservative’, in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 407-37 (408)

⁴ For example, Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (London: Harper Collins, 2013), p. 282

of perception and expression, but also in the events to which he was responding. If the French Revolution has been taken as the starting point of a peculiarly modern way of perceiving the world, it has also been seen to inaugurate the sense of loss and mourning which marks the conservative disposition.⁵ Moreover, as Geoffrey Butler pointed out in a late twentieth-century pamphlet, this loss was soon compounded by that of the Industrial Revolution. Although Burke did not foresee these later changes, Butler argued that his writings prove equally valid as a prescription for resisting their effects.⁶

I am using Burke to frame this paper, not only because of his ubiquity in accounts of both conservatism and Conservatism, but because I would like to suggest that his best known works provide us with a particularly fruitful way of thinking through the tension I have already described, between the awesome and the ordinary aspects of conservatism. While his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is remembered for his eulogy to the smallness of English identity, the ‘little platoons’ that lay at its heart, we tend to forget that he also describes the ‘pious awe and trembling solicitude’, which should characterise our attitude to the state.⁷ Moreover, Burke provides us with a theoretical approach to this problem, with his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, first published in 1757, with a revised edition in 1759.

Burke’s *Enquiry* was part of a large body of eighteenth-century scholarship on the sublime. This tradition originated with a 1739 translation *On Sublimity*, attributed to Dionysius Longinus and dated to the first century BCE. As Philip Shaw explains, this inspired a number of studies into the nature of sublimity, which initially followed Longinus in treating the sublime as a feature of rhetoric, but later began to identify a ‘natural sublime’ inherent in physical objects.⁸ But while Burke’s work was part of a much wider stream of thought, he also made several significant departures from precedent. In his work, the focus of the sublime shifted from the objects themselves, to being an effect in the mind of the observer. He thus prioritised the sensations experienced by the individual. Moreover, he connected the sublime to power (I know of nothing sublime that is not some modification of power⁹), and also differentiated it absolutely from the beautiful. He associated the latter with smallness, smoothness and fragility, a subordinate source of pleasure: ‘we love what submits to us’.¹⁰ Whereas the beautiful is a social emotion which leads to love, the sublime is individual, and turns on self-preservation. Its root is the dread delight ‘which accompanies the removal of pain or danger’, it leaves us ‘in a state of much sobriety, impressed

⁵ See, for example, Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010)

⁶ Sir Geoffrey Butler, *The Tory Tradition* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957 [John Murray, 1914]), p. 47

⁷ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 [1790]), p. 24

⁸ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006)

⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge, (2008 [1958]), p. 64

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113

with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed by horror', and, crucially, it holds power over us: 'we submit to what we admire'.¹¹

Many analyses of Burke's *Enquiry* point to the 'troubling' tensions and contradictions in this work.¹² In particular, they highlight the extent to which the beautiful is a source of unease for Burke. Far from the longing for the simple, uncomplicated life of community, which we often associate with conservatism, Burke finds the beautiful indolent and enervating. It 'not only disables the members [of the body] from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the necessary and natural secretions.'¹³ The beautiful leads us to complacency, and so must be countered with the intense 'labour' of the sublime. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, there is something rather phallic about Burke's conception of the sublime (elsewhere described as a 'sort of swelling and triumph'¹⁴).¹⁵ John Milbank has suggested that the beautiful could be seen as 'the *lesser* heterosocial play of quiet charms furthering procreation' in contrast to the 'higher homoerotic thrill of male combat and male confrontation of danger'.¹⁶ Both Eagleton and Tom Furniss also link this to the emergence of bourgeois society, and the striving (masculine) individual at its heart.¹⁷

Power and hegemony

Burke, then, seems an unlikely source of inspiration for a political creed that claims to be rooted in the simple pleasures of sociability, community and the domestic – in which fox-hunting is to be preferred to politics.¹⁸ Take, for instance, Michael Oakeshott's reflections 'On being conservative':

The man of conservative temperament believes that a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better. He is not in love with what is dangerous and difficult; he is unadventurous; he has no impulse to sail uncharted seas; for him there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked. If he is forced to navigate the unknown, he sees virtue in heaving the lead every inch of the way. What others plausibly identify as timidity, he recognizes in himself as rational prudence; what others interpret as inactivity, he recognizes as a disposition to enjoy rather than to exploit.¹⁹

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 36; 34; 113

¹² For example, see Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 61

¹³ Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 133

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke', in *History Workshop Journal* 28: 1 (1989), pp. 53-62 (57)

¹⁶ John Milbank, 'Sublimity: The Modern Transcendant', in Regina Schwartz (ed.), *Transcendence: Philosophy, Literature and Theology Approach the Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 211-234 (223). Original emphasis

¹⁷ Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, gender, and political economy in revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics'

¹⁸ Quintin Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1947), p. 10

¹⁹ Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', p. 412

This timid, unadventurous seeker of certainty could not be further from Burke's admirer of the vast and obscure sublime. Yet Burke remains a regular point of reference for contemporary Conservatives.²⁰ Moreover, the qualities they admire in Burke are those of custom, tradition and stability. These are, of course, the grounds on which he opposed the French Revolution, that it sundered the inheritance of a constitution bound 'with our dearest domestic ties'.²¹ How can we reconcile this with his 'contempt'²² for the familiar and valorisation of the obscure?

Fortunately, Burke himself has done much of this work for us. In a letter to Lord Charlemont he described the events in France as 'a wonderful Spectacle', 'paradoxical and Mysterious'. As Shaw explains, 'For Burke, the Revolution is an event of sublime theatricality', it is both compelling and terrifying in its implications and in it 'Burke realises the political significance of his theory of the sublime.'²³ But rather than identifying the events of the Revolution as sublime, in contrast to the tame and comforting beauty of Britain, as might be expected, Burke takes the opposite line. It is because Britain's constitution is based on the 'sublime principles' of church and monarchical authority that it can 'operate with a wholesome awe upon free citizens', who 'should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude.'²⁴ It is the application of abstract reason to the state that Burke finds so dangerous, not the departure from the small and lovely.

Yet, this is not an argument for naked power. The beautiful is necessary to soften and socialise the sublime. In one of the most famous passages of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke regrets that 'All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off.'²⁵ Eagleton goes as far as to say that in this passage Burke 'speaks up [...] for what Gramsci will later term "hegemony"'.²⁶ This is echoed in less Marxist terms by the arch-conservative, Roger Scruton. He explained not only that authority is 'an enormous artifact' which 'exists only in so far as men exercise, understand and submit to it', but also that the conservative's 'desire is to see power standing not naked in the forum of politics, but clothed in constitution'.²⁷

²⁰ Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (London: Harper Collins, 2013); David Cameron, speech to National Conservative Convention, 5 April 2014: <http://press.conservatives.com/post/81769682097/david-camersons-speech-to-the-national-conservative>. Accessed 10.10.2014

²¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 30

²² Burke, *Enquiry*, pp. 65-7

²³ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 64

²⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 81; 84

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 67

²⁶ Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics', p. 60

²⁷ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001 [1980]), pp. 21-5

We can see this dynamic in operation in Scruton's own description of patriotism in *The Meaning of Conservatism*. He begins with a suitably brutal rehearsal of the Burkean sublime, in which it is the 'recognition of constraint, helplessness, and subjection to external will that heralds the citizen's realization of his membership of society; in this recognition, love of one's country is born.'²⁸ Yet, Scruton then becomes less willing to acknowledge this external will. He denies that patriotism is a matter of 'ideology' or 'self-assertion' and describes it instead as a 'quieter' emotion, which is 'in the first instance a condition of private life'. It 'is, simply, the recognition that we stand or fall together, and that we therefore owe it to each other to maintain the customs or symbols of our common membership.'²⁹ In other words, it is ordinary rather than extraordinary, beautiful rather than sublime. This attempt to reduce patriotic feeling to 'custom' appears to be the inverse of Burke's 'privileging of the sublime' which, in the words of Philip Shaw, 'is prompted by a number of fears: the lapse of the extraordinary into "custom"; the collapse of masculinity in the face of female languor; and the fall of heroic identity into social mediocrity'.³⁰ But it could also be understood as a Burkean attempt to erect 'pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal'.³¹

The ordinariness of sensation

This slippage between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the beautiful and the sublime is a recurrent feature of conservative thought. In his 1913 *Toryism: A Political Dialogue*, Keith Feiling tried to ally conservatism with the most concrete elements of human existence: 'I associate Toryism with every element of permanent value in the life of a nation -- above all, in the life of England. Every man, from the nature of man, loves his home, loves the work of his hands, loves his country.' Yet, as he went on his tone became more elevated and started to hint at the authority beneath the drapery: 'Every man, too needs to help of his fellows, needs some agency to mediate between him and his God, needs law -- on these affections and on these needs I stake the Tory cause.' In the next sentence Feiling drew the conclusion that 'Toryism is permanent; Liberalism, accidental. Toryism is rooted in the facts of nature in Divine revelation; Liberalism is founded on assumption and human pride.'³² In this extract (as so often) conservatism begins as the ordinary, human element but ends as the extraordinary and spiritual.

G.K. Chesterton marries these two elements, claiming that in its very banality human existence becomes transcendent:

Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things; nay, they are more extraordinary. Man is more awful than men; something more strange. [...] The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heartbreaking than any music and more startling than any caricature. Death is more tragic even than death by starvation. Having a nose is more comic

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 26

³⁰ Shaw, *The Sublime*, p. 63

³¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 67

³² Keith Feiling, *Toryism: A Political Dialogue* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), pp. 18-19

even than having a Norman nose.³³

The language is resonant of the Burkean sublime, not only in its hint of terror and transcendence, but also in the way it focuses on the particularity and physicality of humanity. This is perhaps more significant than it seems. Eagleton shows that the development of aesthetics in eighteenth-century Europe was an attempt to counter the politics of universal reason by emphasizing instead the body and its sensations.³⁴ This is the context of Burke's *Enquiry*. Both the sublime and the beautiful are fundamentally affective experiences. They are rooted in emotional and bodily sensation. Both offer us the certainty of experience, over the abstractions of reason.

In modern conservatism, this translates to the oft-stated disdain for ideology or *a priori* philosophical commitments. For instance, in a 1961 Bow Group pamphlet, Russell Lewis claimed that 'the secret of the survival and continuing strength of the Conservative Party is that it has no principles at all.' He expanded on this rather glib comment with the argument that 'It is only by abandoning visionary social aims that the politician is able to be of use. For if he has no heavenly city to offer in the indefinitely distant future, yet by limiting his objective, by taking time seriously, he can achieve real improvements in the here and now.'³⁵

Yet this focus on the here and now, the bodily, the actual runs alongside a predilection for mystery, doubt and what Michael Oakeshott, referencing Keats' notion of 'negative capability', described as 'the power of accepting mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness'³⁶ Shirley Robin Letwin makes a similar point about what she calls 'metaphysical scepticism', noting that the conservative 'takes all human thought to be surrounded by mystery, which he may probe but can never dispel.'³⁷ We are reminded of Burke's declaration that 'To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary', because 'It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions.'³⁸ Yet, the fear of this sublime obscurity is also what drives us back to the safe, and familiar:

Men feel that they live in the midst of mysteries; they dwell in the world like children in a dark room. Dangers from the unseen spiritual world, dangers from the unfathomed passions of other men, dangers from the forces of nature: -- these all haunt the minds of men and make them fear to change from whatever experience has proved to be at least safe and

³³ G.K. Chesterton *Orthodoxy* [1908], in Roger Scruton (ed.) *Conservative Texts: An Anthology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 59-60

³⁴ Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics'

³⁵ Russell Lewis, 'Continuing Conservatism: Reconciling power, prejudice and progress', in David Howell and Timothy Raison (eds), *Principles in Practice: A series of Bow Group Essays for the 1960s* (London: Conservative Political Centre on behalf of the Bow Group, 1961), pp. 125-139 (125; 129)

³⁶ Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, revised edn (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991 [1962]), p. 6

³⁷ Shirley Robin Letwin, 'On Conservative Individualism', in Maurice Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), pp. 52-68 (60)

³⁸ Burke, *Enquiry*, pp. 59; 61-2

endurable.³⁹

The great law of change

It is no accident that the dominant fear expressed in the previous passage is of change. This is the area where the tensions within conservative thought are most apparent. Although, as we will see, conservatives have expressed the sense of being overtaken by history, they have also tended to portray themselves as uniquely in step with it. Again, this is a question of being attuned to the sensibility of ordinary men and women and refusing to subject them to grand historical narratives – and particularly to what John Gray has called the ‘sentimental religion of humanity, with its ruling superstition of progress’. As he put it in a 1991 lecture, conservatives ‘are rightly suspicious [...] not only of politics as the pursuit of perfection, but of the idea of history as a narrative of progress, with ourselves as its telos.’⁴⁰ Similarly Shirley Robin Letwin has explained that Conservatives ‘are not allowed to pride ourselves on being doomed to great crises and struggles, or to hope that we are progressing ever closer to perfection. [...] We must reconcile ourselves to the banality of being neither God nor bits of clockwork, and we have to get through life without a cosmic obligation to be either rebels or saints.’⁴¹

The conservative understanding of time rejects the overarching sweep in favour of particular historical moments, each of which must be understood on its own terms. This is a historicist position, which emphasizes the specificity, unrepeatability and messiness of the past. It is this which informs the conservative aversion to anachronism, which makes the idea that ‘one generation can meaningfully apologise for something that a previous generation did’ nonsensical, in a way it is not for socialists.⁴² Change is therefore seen in pragmatic terms, as an unavoidable fact of history. As Disraeli famously put after the 1867 Reform Act,

In a progressive country, change is constant; and the great question is not whether you should resist change, which is inevitable, but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws and traditions of a people, or whether it should be carried out in deference to abstract principles, and arbitrary and general doctrines.⁴³

Here, Disraeli was echoing the sentiment behind Burke’s *Reflections*, in which he cautioned that ‘a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’.⁴⁴ Elsewhere, Burke noted that if change is implemented ‘by insensible degrees’, it can be a beneficial force and a means of conservation,

³⁹ Cecil, *Conservatism*, p. 10

⁴⁰ John Gray, *A Conservative Disposition: Individualism, the free market and the common life* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1991), p. 9

⁴¹ Robin Letwin, ‘On Conservative Individualism’, pp. 52–68 (68)

⁴² David Cameron, quoted in Hugh Muir, ‘Livingstone weeps as he apologises for slavery’, *Guardian*, 24 August 2007. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/aug/24/london.humanrights>. Accessed 02.11.2009

⁴³ Benjamin Disraeli, speech in Edinburgh, 1867. Quoted in Ian St. John, *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics*. (London: Anthem Press, 2010), p. 110

⁴⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 19

‘without any of the inconveniencies of mutation’.⁴⁵ Such optimism about the effects of change is usually cautious and conditional, as with Hogg’s warning that although a ‘virtuous circle of progress has been working in our favour over six hundred years’, this should not be seen ‘as something certain and inevitable, guaranteed by any law, natural or divine’. He explains that it is precisely because conservatives know that this is a fragile and reversible situation, ‘they see in progress something of the miraculous, by which man, over countless millennia, clammers painfully from the primeval slime to something a little lower than the angels.’⁴⁶ Burke’s own view appears rather more determinist. Even as he wrote of controlling change, he described it as ‘the great law [...] the most powerful law of nature’.⁴⁷

The wreckage of history

Conservatives have generally found it rather more difficult to reject the grand narrative of progress than we might imagine. Running underneath their arguments we find the recurrent suggestion that the role of conservatism is to trail behind an historical process which is both inevitable and desirable. One particularly clear expression of this attitude can be seen in an article entitled ‘A Plea Against Progression’, published in the Conservative *National Review* in 1892, under the pseudonym ‘An Old-School Tory’. This was a seemingly straightforward reply to a ‘A Plea for Progression’. However, its author was not opposed to progress *per se*. Instead s/he argued that ‘progressive’ measures of state intervention, would in fact lead to ‘retrogression’ -- ‘a blind irrational destruction of the very forces to which our country owes all the progress which she has already achieved.’⁴⁸ But although ‘An Old-School Tory’ wished to conserve past progress, s/he also argued that ‘To promote progress is not the proper function of the Tory Party’;⁴⁹ instead

the natural function of the Tory Party, the party of negative force, is to prevent the Radical Party, the party of initiative force, from using power wrongly. We are not meant to be constantly, or even usually, in Power ourselves. An endeavour to do so by means of any Progressive Policy would be only in appearance an endeavour to vanquish Radicalism. It would be really an endeavour to vanquish Nature.⁵⁰

A century later, another British Conservative, John O’Sullivan, also depicted conservatism as an essentially negative creed. Drawing on Samuel Huntington’s 1957 article ‘Conservatism as an ideology’, O’Sullivan explained that conservatism exists in order to ‘defend established institutions when they came under fundamental attack [...]’. And once a social system has been decisively

⁴⁵ Edmund Burke, letter to Sir H. Langrishe, MP. Accessed via Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004795912.0001.002/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. Accessed 14.10.2014

⁴⁶ Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism*, pp. 84-5

⁴⁷ Burke, letter to Langrishe

⁴⁸ An Old-School Tory, ‘The Future of the Tory Party: I. – A Plea Against “Progression”’, *The National Review* 116, October 1892, pp. 151-159 (156)

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 152-3

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 159

overthrown, conservatism counsels acceptance of the new *status quo* and may even defend it against future attack.⁵¹ The implication of this is, as O'Sullivan goes on, that 'when a country is at ease with itself, conservatism is largely unnecessary.'⁵²

The striking thing about this argument is the acceptance not only that radical change is inevitable, but that conservatives are required to be on the wrong side of it. The examples O'Sullivan takes from Huntington are the Reformation, the French Revolution, franchise reforms and the abolition of slavery. In a 1969 article in the *Swinton Journal*, Alasdair Morrison made a similar argument. This time seventeenth-century royalists and medieval barons joined the Church and opponents of the 1832 Reform Bill as illustrations of the way in which 'History is littered with dead issues, and also with the wreckage of conservative stands on those issues.'⁵³ This is the direct inverse of Walter Benjamin's description of the 'Angel of History', with his 'face is turned toward the past [...], he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it as his feet.' The angel is propelled 'irresistibly' into the future by a storm, which goes by the name of 'progress.'⁵⁴ In Morrison's account, progress is similarly irresistible, but it is also benign. The 'wreckage' of conservative positions is its welcome side effect: 'Many things that we value would have been stifled unborn if earlier conservatives had won.'⁵⁵ The idea that conservative ideas not only will inevitably be overthrown, but also that they *should* be, goes against the driving logic of modern parliamentary politics. Its implication is that conservatives are necessarily out of step with the public mood. This is not their misfortune, it is their *purpose*.

Absorbing the past

Throughout the twentieth century British conservatives have worried that the left were winning the battle of ideas, that even the friends of conservatism had 'written it off as a curious survivor from the distant past, an anthropological exhibit of great interest no doubt to historians and political scientists, but one whose importance lay entirely in the past'.⁵⁶ Sometimes they have attempted to fight back, as with the institution of Ashridge College and the Right Book Club in the 1930s.⁵⁷ At others they have been more sanguine. John Gray has noted with approval that no Conservative government has ever tried to reverse the 'permissive' reforms of the 1960s, suggesting that 'In this it has, surely, been right. For, if there is a consensus on morality among us, it is a liberal one [...] the liberal reforms of the '60s ought to be accepted by conservatives, partly because they

⁵¹ John O'Sullivan, *Conservatism, Democracy and National Identity*, the Third Keith Joseph Memorial Lecture, 16 Feb 1999 (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1999), p. 6

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 7

⁵³ Alasdair Morrison, 'The historic basis of conservatism', *Swinton Journal* 15: 1 (Spring 1969), pp. 22-29 (23-24)

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* tr. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1968]), p. 249

⁵⁵ Morrison, 'The historic basis of conservatism', pp. 23-24

⁵⁶ John Ramsden, *Britain is a Conservative Country that Occasionally Votes Labour: Conservative Success in Post-War Britain*, 1997 Swinton Lecture, 4 July 1997, Churchill College, Cambridge. CPC Pamphlet no. 916 (London, Conservative Political Centre, 1997), p. 5

⁵⁷ E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter 5

express an actually existing consensus on values.⁵⁸ Such reasoning was, of course, condemned by the New Right who argued that conservatives must be more than ‘political “corks on the water”’, following the social democratic tide.⁵⁹

In general, though, conservative thinkers have reconciled themselves to being at odds with the prevailing consensus by insisting that this is their particular historical role: ‘It is in the nature of conservative thought and practice that it preserves its identity by absorbing other traditions’.⁶⁰ As John Vincent has explained, ‘as a historical Party we know that history cannot be undone, and for two centuries the English inheritance was not expressed through a Tory governing Party. We do not argue with the history of England: instead we absorb our national past.’⁶¹ Moreover, they have depicted progress as surface detail, overlaid on an enduring conservative identity. As Hogg put it in 1957:

These radical Parties are necessary to effect some changes, to graft on our traditional system some new economic and social growths, but we Conservatives are for the root of the tree itself; and that is why, when *they* have served their purpose, they die and give place to others, whereas *we* survive from one century to another of parliamentary life.⁶²

For Hogg, conservatism’s survival was about more than pragmatism; it was a spiritual duty: ‘The end of the Conservative Party is the conservation of that deposit of faith, that living experience which came here with Columba and Augustine fourteen centuries ago’.⁶³ Once again we have left the realm of the specific, the quotidian, the human and found ourselves in the realm of the mysterious, the eternal, the divine. Here it is progress that appears small and historically specific; conservatism is the awesome, ungraspable force.

In twentieth century British politics, these ideas have perhaps been expressed most vividly by Enoch Powell, who once described his feeling that England and Wales were ‘always somehow in a fourth dimension, the dimension of time, as if they were the stage and scenery of the long epic of the English kings.’⁶⁴ His sense of spiritual and historical inheritance transcended the practicalities of politics. Although his political position on the monarchy and Parliament changed in adulthood, for instance, he claimed never to have lost ‘the old sense of the symbolic, numinous kingship’.⁶⁵ Powell imagined British history ‘not so much [as] the steady onward movement of a single stream as the ebb and flow of a strong deep tide.’ This was a profoundly religious vision, in which ‘Like body and soul in

⁵⁸ Gray, *A Conservative Disposition*, p. 21

⁵⁹ Michael Harrington, ‘A conservative ideology?’, *Swinton Journal*, 19:2 (Summer 1973), pp. 27-33 (31)

⁶⁰ Gray, *A Conservative Disposition*, p. 21

⁶¹ John Vincent, *The Seven Voices of Conservatism*, CPC No. 0510/821 (London: Conservative Political Centre, Feb 1991), p. 14

⁶² The Rt. Hon. Viscount Hailsham, QC, *Toryism and Tomorrow*, 10 October 1957 speech to CPC meeting at Party Conference in Brighton, CPC pamphlet no 181 (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), p. 10

⁶³ *Ibid*, pp. 9-10

⁶⁴ Enoch Powell, ‘Patriotism’, in Enoch Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), pp. 1-8 (2-3)

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

a human individual, the temporal and the spiritual, the secular and the ecclesiastical, are so twined together in religion that first one, then the other, seems to predominate in turn, because neither can exist without the other.⁶⁶

The primaeval contract

Powell's description of the power of time resonates very strongly with Burkean ideas of the sublime. It is clearly in the realm of that which we admire and submit to, rather than that which we love because it submits to us:

The mode in which modern man conceives immortality must come to terms with what he knows, and cannot un-know, about the dimension of time. [...] Time is a manner of apprehending reality from which he has no means of escape and with which he has no means of dispensing; but he knows also that it is part of the description of himself. [...]

[...] This mortal life is also the life immortal. It is not like some grotesquely diminutive antechamber to an infinitely vast hall, but is endowed - by what the man thinks, says and does, with proportions and importance which we unsatisfactorily attempt to state in terms of time.⁶⁷

Most significantly, Powell elevated the particularity of the present historical moment to a sacred inheritance. He also linked this to the denial of teleological narratives of progress:

The question therefore "where do we go from here?" is exactly and precisely the wrong question. We do not go from here, we *are* here; and the unique and solemn irrevocability of what we here are and do is asserted by mankind, as it has been since his emergence, by the conviction of immortality.⁶⁸

But, although 'we are here', the conservative must also reckon with those who have been here before. It is possible to approach Burke's partnership 'between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born'⁶⁹ through the lens of the ordinary. G.K. Chesterton, for instance, described tradition as 'an extension of the franchise [...] to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors.' He justified this position with the commonsense observation that 'Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man's opinion, even if he is our father'.⁷⁰ Similarly, Roger Scruton attempted to ground the inter-generational contract in the concrete, by relating it to the conservative's inability 'to appeal to a utopian future, or to any future that is not, as it were, already contained in the present and the past', and which ties him to 'conceptions which are both directly applicable to things as they are and at the same time indicative of a great motivating force in men.'⁷¹

⁶⁶ Enoch Powell, 'God Save the Queen' in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel*, pp. 74-82 (75-76)

⁶⁷ Enoch Powell, 'Where do we go from here?' in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel*, pp. 65-70 (69-70)

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 70

⁶⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 85

⁷⁰ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, p. 61

⁷¹ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, in Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, p. 266

Tradition, then, is a means of learning from past experience – we adopt only those aspects which ‘have the weight of a *successful* history’.⁷² As David Melding also explains ‘History contains good and bad models. [...] British history is littered with obsolete practices that once held great sway. [...] Man has to use his rational judgment to discern what is good and bad in history.’⁷³

However, such instrumental reasoning is explicitly rejected by conservatives like John Casey, who argued that ‘the utilitarian criterion, posing as it does as a criterion of rationality’ drives conservatives ‘into illogicalities or insincerities.’ According to Casey, conservatives who justify their attachment to institutions on the basis of rational judgements, such as the House of Lords’ ability to scrutinise legislation, are guilty of an ill-conceived ‘attempt to depoliticise conservative attitudes [which] has made the conservative attitude intellectually unavailable.’ In place of ‘a merely aesthetic, or nostalgic or whimsical attachment’, he insisted instead on an attitude of ‘*pietas*’. The conservative must regard the institutions of state ‘as having a claim upon him, as deserving allegiance, as having authority.’⁷⁴ In short, Casey was refusing to allow the constitution to be reduced to the realm of the beautiful, to that which we love because we can bend it to our will. Instead, he maintained, its very nature was to be unfathomable, obscure, *sublime*. To return to Burke:

Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primæval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.⁷⁵

The historical sublime

Chesteron’s ‘democracy of the dead’, Powell’s ‘fourth dimension’ and Burke’s ‘primeval contract’ all involve a sense that past and present co-exist; that the latter must live in and through the former. T.S. Eliot evoked a similar idea with his description of the ‘historical sense’, which ‘involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’. It is ‘a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.’ Although Eliot was addressing himself to writers, whom he entreated to write with ‘a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer [...] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order’,⁷⁶ his words also articulate an important element of the conservative disposition. On these grounds, they were included in Scruton’s collection of *Conservative Texts*, with the note that they

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 281. Original emphasis

⁷³ David Melding, *Edmund Burke and the Foundation of Modern Conservatism* (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1991), p. 8

⁷⁴ John Casey, ‘Tradition and Authority’ in Maurice Cowling (ed) *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), pp. 82-100 (85-6)

⁷⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 85

⁷⁶ T.S. Eliot ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, p. 87

represent ‘one of the most sustained and serious defences in the literature, of the view that individual freedom and traditional order are conjoined.’⁷⁷

We are back at the Burkean sublime, with its combination of individual striving for transcendence mediated by the authority of the community (both living and dead). The connection to Burke becomes even stronger when we note Eliot’s claim that tradition ‘cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour’ and that the poet labouring under the ‘historical sense’ must undertake ‘a constant surrender of himself as he is at that moment to something which is more valuable’.⁷⁸ Indeed, Eliot explicitly associates this process with the sublime, distinguishing between a ‘semi-ethical criterion of “sublimity”’ based on ‘the “greatness,” the intensity, of the emotions’ and his own emphasis on ‘the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place.’⁷⁹

For Burke, ‘the ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have’, indeed, ‘hardly anything can strike the mind with greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity’.⁸⁰ When contemplating time we are necessarily faced with the prospect of our own death but at one remove - ‘out of any immediate hazard’ - which is, for Burke, the very essence of the sublime.⁸¹ The other route to this feeling is sympathy with the pain of others and, as Adam Smith explains in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, there is no greater cause of this sympathy than death:

The tribute of our fellow-feeling seems doubly due to them now, when they are in danger of being forgot by every body; and, by the vain honours which we pay to their memory, we endeavour, for our own misery, artificially to keep alive our melancholy remembrance of their misfortune.⁸²

Smith argued that our sympathy with the dead is the source of ‘one of the most important principles in human nature, the dread of death’.⁸³ Smith’s sympathy for the dead arises from ‘our consciousness of that change’ they have undergone, and ‘our joining to that change’ through lodging ‘our own living souls in their inanimated bodies, and thence conceiving what would be our emotions in this case.’⁸⁴

It is the profound distance between the dead and the living with which we sympathise; this is also what gives the ‘historical sense’ its intensity. The idea of broaching the distance between past and present has been a recurring trope in

⁷⁷ Roger Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, p. 85

⁷⁸ T.S. Eliot ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, pp. 86; 89

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 90

⁸⁰ Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 62; 63

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 48

⁸² Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. ed Raphael, D. D. and Macfie, A. L. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991 [1976]), p. 13

⁸³ *Ibid*

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

Western thought.⁸⁵ We might think, for instance, of Gustave Flaubert's 'frisson historique' – a kind of ghostly *deja vu* – or of Johann Huizinga's 'historical sensation', when an historian feels themselves to be momentarily in direct contact with the dead.⁸⁶ The philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit, has recently drawn on the latter to explain what he calls the 'sublime historical experience', described as 'the experience of a past breaking away from the present' with the associated 'awareness of irreparably having lost a previous world forever.' Ankersmit suggests that therefore 'the best (and most revolutionary) historian will naturally be the *conservative* historian'.⁸⁷

This awareness of the inevitable and continual loss of the past is what underpins the melancholic aspect of the conservative disposition. It has been immortalized in the character of Don Fabrizio Corbera in Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 novel *The Leopard (Il Gattopardo)*. It is no accident that Don Fabrizio finds comfort in astronomy. In the contemplation of infinity he finds a continuity that transcends the social and political 'progress' that threatens his way of life.⁸⁸ Burke associates melancholia with beauty (it is the removal of pleasure, not the cessation of pain) and tells us that this state of languorous 'gloomy' relaxation can best be surmounted by sublime labour. This is how we should understand Don Fabrizio's pursuits; as Burke reminds us, 'Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.'⁸⁹

Conclusion

In his *Enquiry* Burke made clear that the beautiful and the sublime 'stand on foundations so different' that they cannot be reconciled 'without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions'.⁹⁰ Yet, as we have seen, recent scholarship on Burke has emphasised the extent to which his later political writings did see a role for the combination of these two qualities. In a civilised society, the (sublime) power of the state must be clothed in the (beautiful) draperies of the constitution. The corollary of this is that the (beautiful) amiable virtues of society should be underpinned by (sublime) reverence and respect for the state. Only this can prevent their degeneration into dangerous relaxation.

These concerns can be traced in the writings of modern British Conservatives. For instance, in a 1999 pamphlet Robert Cranbourne explained, "We clothe our organisations with a dignity that is designed to provoke a deep emotional response", noting that 'the Remembrance Day ceremonial still has the power to move us nearly sixty years after the end of the Second World War.' However, he went on, ceremony must be based on real power, otherwise it becomes absurd,

⁸⁵ Jürgen Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: Explorations in Literature and History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005)

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 89; 59-60

⁸⁷ F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 265; 141-2. Original emphasis

⁸⁸ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (London: Collins and Harvill Press 1961)

⁸⁹ Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 73

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 113

‘So if, for instance, parliament surrenders all its sovereignty to the European Union there would be little point in a State Opening any more elaborate than [sic] a municipal mayor making.’⁹¹ He warned that ‘even for those with a sense of history, an institution that no longer serves them gradually seems less worth defending and their sympathy becomes romantic nostalgia.’⁹² This echoes John Casey’s caution against viewing tradition through the viewpoint of the ‘beachcomber’ and the ‘antiquarian’.⁹³

When it comes to ideas about time and progress, the conservative insists that the (sublime) power of time cannot be understood as anything more than a series of (beautiful) particular historical moments; yet the encounter with each of these moments simultaneously reminds us of its place within the vast and awesome sweep of history. T.S. Eliot noted that the intense labour of achieving a ‘fusion’ between past and present, between individual and community is the special feature of the ‘historical spirit’.⁹⁴ We might add that this spirit underpins conservatism. But we should also remember that this fusion can never be fully achieved; its impossibility is its appeal.

Rather than straightforwardly preferring ‘fact’ over ‘mystery’ and ‘the actual’ to ‘the possible’,⁹⁵ then, true conservatism holds these contradictions in constant tension. The very ordinariness of human existence is regarded with awe and reverence; the precariousness of our historical position as a divine mystery. However, as Frances Ferguson reminds us, the ‘dilemma of the sublime’ is that its status as danger *at a distance* means that it is always at risk of collapsing into the familiar; as Burke said, ‘custom reconciles us to every thing’.⁹⁶ The problem of conservatism is that its advocates are often tempted to effect this reconciliation, rather than to resist it.

⁹¹ Robert Cranbourne, *Allegiance: The Nation State, Parliament and Prosperity*, Politeia Address Series No. 7 (London: Politeia, 1999), p. 3

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 4

⁹³ John Casey, ‘Tradition and Authority’, p. 85

⁹⁴ Eliot ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in Scruton, *Conservative Texts*, p. 90

⁹⁵ Oakeshott, ‘On being conservative’, p. 408

⁹⁶ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 46-7; Burke, *Enquiry*, p. 146