

REVENGE OF THE ANTI-PAINE: THE UNCOMMON WISDOM OF  
EDMUND BURKE (AND WHY IT STILL TRIES OUR SOULS)

by

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Americans have long accepted (even internalized) the proposition that Paine and Jefferson won the seminal debate against Burke and Adams, and in the process established the dominant vision of the United States as a product of Enlightenment thought. Consequently, the vanquishing of Old World hierarchies and superstitions by democracy and reason freed human kind (for America was a harbinger of global transformation) from ages of oppression and ignorance. To the extent that varieties of liberalism supplanted traditional orthodoxies, a triumphant "happy ending" to Western history might seem warranted. But just as revolutions often spawn counter-revolutions, the evolution of "progress" has triggered counter-forces that now call for a fresh evaluation of the finality of Paine's apparent victory.

While a critical examination of Paine's own writings is essential, so too is a reappraisal of the chief writings of the archetypal anti-Paine: Edmund Burke, as well as those who claim to speak in Burke's name. This effort is especially relevant today, at a time when the Age of Reason seems to have run its course, and the assumptions behind liberalism and modernization are openly challenged from both the left and right. The Burkean persuasion was often dormant but never extinct in America, and it has returned with a vengeance since World War II. Of late, it contributes to a broader irrationalist sensibility that denies the primacy of reason and the benefits of the Enlightenment legacy. Such phenomena as anti-modernism, religious fundamentalism, the counterculture, and New Age obscurantism, indicate that an eclectic mix of Americans believe that intuition, mystery, faith, transcendence, and reversion to age-old practices, can provide personal "meaning" and public guidance. Put another way: Burke's view that we must "venerate" that which "we cannot presently comprehend," now threatens Paine's assertion that Burke was "labouring in vain to stop the progress of knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

In today's America, the Irish-born British politician Edmund Burke (1729-1797) is known mostly as the "father of conservatism," thanks to the enduring reputation of his anti-revolutionary tract: *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The revival of Burkean thought by "new conservative" intellectuals during the Cold War transformed Burke's 18th-century anti-Jacobinism into 20th-century anti-communism. This convenient

interpretation proved so powerful that the balanced, progressive-traditionalism of Burke's "Whig vision" has been forgotten, and many conservatives have installed Burke as their guru. Yet this ideological stereotype ignores the considerable body of reformist, progressive, proto-liberal thought, that Burke articulated (for the most part) early in his political career. On such matters as slavery, capital punishment, freedom of the press, habeas corpus, religious toleration, government corruption, colonial rule, royal prerogative, and imprisonment for debt, Burke stood against the entrenched establishment, and on occasion even allied himself with radicals. Many of his aphorisms dating from the Wilkes Affair or the American Crisis could easily have come from Paine (around 1770 Burke was thought--incorrectly--to have been the author of the rabble-rousing *Letters of Junius*).<sup>2</sup> That said, Burke was never temperamentally a creature of the left, and his later conservative writings divorced him from the liberal tradition. Moreover, post-war American conservatives in search of a modern father had surprisingly few choices available. Even on the short list of candidates, Burke (strange as it might seem) was least hampered by fatal flaws. Certainly he was the most eloquent and quotable of the lot. In consequence, it is the anti-radical, anti-Enlightenment Burke, the defender of monarchy, chivalry, aristocracy, religion, mystery, and tradition, whose likeness we now recognize.

Post-war liberals, on the other hand, had fathers in abundance. Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson were the most self-evident, but the family tree could be traced back to John Locke or forward to John Dewey without much effort. In the modern age, especially in America, liberal names loomed large and came readily to mind because the liberal spirit was pervasive and persistent. This is not to suggest that liberalism ever held a monopoly in political or intellectual discourse, nor to deny that conservatives achieved their share of victories.<sup>3</sup> But even in today's reactionary political climate, one would be hard-pressed to argue against such post-war writers as Louis Hartz, Clinton Rossiter, Allen Guttman, Lionel Trilling, Morton Auerbach, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and claim that the main current of American history (which carried the Revolution, Jacksonian democracy, the Civil War, woman suffrage, populism, progressivism, the New Deal and Great Society, the civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, and environmental movements, followed by multiculturalism) has represented the steady advance of conservatism. Indeed, today's

right-wing intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, acknowledge that liberalism has been dominant, which is why they are working so hard to reverse the tide. Tellingly, among many conservatives, the practical alternative to the liberal tradition in American history is not an outright conservative tradition (which would require an almost Soviet-style revisionism), but a consensus tradition that eschews a clear left-right divide.<sup>4</sup> In any event, not only is history usually written (and taught) by the "winners," but as the "Whig interpretation of history" suggested, nothing succeeds like success. Once liberalism, in the form of democracy, progress, modernization, heightened expectations about individual rights and communal justice, and a devotion to free intellectual and scientific inquiry, gained momentum, its continued expansion seemed to be inevitable. Conservatives could not turn back the clock. The mere fact that they might try, made them naive; the fact that they wanted to, made them pathetic. Worse yet, it made them unreasonable.

Notwithstanding our post-modern skepticism about the efficacy, objectivity, reliability, or even the ontological legitimacy of reason, the ascendancy of human reason (as a recognized prerequisite for social and material betterment) was at least as revolutionary and as consequential as the greatest historical watersheds: say, the ascendancy of monotheism or the advent of agriculture. In retrospect, the Enlightenment may not have been as enlightened as was once believed, yet the spirit of rational inquiry, and hence the new-found confidence in the meliorative effect of conscious human agency, gave the modern age its essential and distinctive character. True to the spirit of the times, Edmund Burke demonstrated that--when it suited his purposes--he could be as reasonable or liberal as any man of his generation. That he chose to assume an apparently anti-modern posture in sections of his counter-revolutionary tracts, and that his emotional, passionate, romantic, traditional, mysterious, and often ambiguous remarks caught the attention of the world and went on to form the basis of his American legacy, is for our purposes the key to his lasting importance.

It may surprise many to learn that the purple prose for which Burke has become famous, and which separated him so vividly from Paine, represented a small, even tiny, portion of his output. And most of his inflated rhetoric was merely grandiose; only a

minute fraction was (for lack of a better term) mystical. Yet without the mystical touch, Burke would not have been Burke, nor would his late-modern reputation be so unique. Above all else Burke's approach to politics was based on moral intuition. His inner certainty about good and evil was not amenable to rational inquiry or logical proof; it was not so much irrational, as it was (like instinct or religious faith) arational or extra-rational.<sup>5</sup> Paine too may have been guided by his own internal sense of right and wrong. But, unlike Burke, he specialized in the art of plain speaking. Thus he sought to dispel mystery, majesty, and hoary tradition--what Burke called "all the pleasing illusions," and replace them with unadorned realities. Not that Paine was lacking in eloquence. Despite writing for the "common man" in what has been called the "vulgar style," his statements routinely transmitted a simple dignity and a quiet profundity.<sup>6</sup> But there is little grandiosity in Paine, and nothing mystical whatsoever. Most important, Burke's polemical poetics sought to awe his readers into submission; Paine's forensic advocacy invited his audience to exercise its own reason. Hence, not only was Paine more democratic than Burke, but his style was more participatory. While Paine may be justifiably faulted for assuming that human nature was simpler and more benign than it actually was, and therefore that social, political, and economic problems were ripe for relatively easy solutions, Burke may be faulted for asserting that "man's nature" and the "state of civil society" were so complex and mysterious, that it was fruitless or counter-productive to attempt all but the most marginal adjustments to existing, inherited practices.<sup>7</sup>

Famously, while Burke granted hypothetically the idea of "natural rights" akin to the "rights of man," he denied that such rights could be understood well enough to serve as political principles:

These metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are, by the laws of nature, refracted from their straight line. Indeed in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections, that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, in more a mystical tone, Burke incanted man's obedience to incomprehensible strictures:

Dark and inscrutable are the ways in which we come into the world. The instincts which give rise to this mysterious process of nature are not of our making. But out of physical causes, unknown to us, perhaps unknowable, arise moral duties.<sup>9</sup>

Burke openly mocked the "blaze of illumination," supposedly emanating from the Philosophes, whom he sarcastically referred to as "modern lights" and "illuminators of the world."<sup>10</sup> Though Burke defended "reason," he held a highly restrictive view of it.<sup>11</sup> Besides, he preferred "wisdom" over reason, because wisdom combined the sum total of ancestral reason with a moral intuition that was not beholden to intellectual machinations. Locke, Rousseau, and Paine, extolled the realization that men could think for themselves; Burke believed that in most cases, especially on the big issues, they should not even try. Burke's reliance on prejudice and prescription represented the polar opposite of Paine's reliance on common sense. In America, where according to Jefferson: "Paine's principles...were the principles of the citizens of the U.S.," and where even John Adams (allegedly the American Burke) spoke of superstition abating in a land where "the people were universally too enlightened to be impressed by artifice" and government ruled "without a pretense of miracle or mystery," the Old World sensibility of Edmund Burke was already an alien anachronism by the 1790s.<sup>12</sup> No wonder that Paine's *Rights of Man* outsold Burke's *Reflections* by a huge margin.

Yet, as we know, their rivalry did not end with the Age of Revolution.<sup>13</sup> Paine's immortality is unsurprising, given America's glorification of its rebellious origins. Yet it is baffling that Burke has not just avoided extinction, but has experienced a revitalization in the past fifty years. Prior to World War II, Burke appeared to be slowly fading from the scene. Even before the Civil War, important voices had praised Burke's ability and character while distancing themselves from his reactionary philosophy. The democratic historian George Bancroft thought that "no man had a kinder heart," than Burke, "but...his genius, under the impulse of his bewildering passions, wrought much evil to his country and to Europe."<sup>14</sup> And the transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, who (in 1835) called Burke "the Conservative of modern times," sought fit to add that he was "no vulgar

conservative...he was found a steadfast friend of liberty, of humanity, the redresser of wrong....[H]e turned against every cruelty and selfishness."<sup>15</sup> Later in the nineteenth century, Burke was widely portrayed as a utilitarian liberal on both sides of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, Burke did have his conservative champions. The Massachusetts Whigs Edward Everett and Rufus Choate were unabashedly Burkean in their outlook. Everett shared Burke's hatred of the French Revolution, and occasionally echoed his language and mystical inclination: "The mystic tissue of race, woven far back in the chambers of the past...wraps up great nations in its broad mantle."<sup>16</sup> Choate (who in 1845 complained that Americans had become "poor, Tom Painified democrats") rejected the ideas of "Rousseau and Locke, and our own revolutionary age...that the State is nothing but a contract," and he joined Burke and Everett in calling the ancestral spirits from the dusty deep. Choate believed: "Time...tries all things...and works them pure," and he spoke of subjecting American law "to the tests of old experience" and the "awful hoar of innumerable ages."<sup>17</sup>

This in a nation that was scarcely two generations old, and which celebrated itself as a society freed from the corruptions of Europe and from the "elevated obscurity" of apologists for vestigial feudalism like Edmund Burke.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, even in some of Burke's liberal writings, he had revealed a strange predilection for dignifying what was merely legal or constitutional authority by infusing it with mystical powers. In his most renowned American speech (and here there was no confusing him with Paine, Wilkes, or Junius) he sanctified land titles by invoking "the mysterious virtue of wax and parchment."<sup>19</sup> Yet such lapses were rare before the fall of the Bastille, and, not coincidentally, Burke's personal opinion of Paine paralleled his changing political obsessions. During the American Crisis, he enjoyed Paine's company and praised his *Common Sense*. After publishing *Reflections*, Burke attacked Paine's "ignorant flippancy" and the "careless" "art and skill" of his *Rights of Man*.<sup>20</sup> In America, as we have already suggested, the climate favored innovation over prescription. Following in the footsteps of Bancroft and Emerson, the (culturally conservative) genteel writers of the Victorian era praised Burke's rhetorical artistry and his respect for Western Civilization, but they shied away from endorsing his militant anti-radicalism.<sup>21</sup> Early in the 20th-century, Burke was recognized more as an exemplary rhetorician than a relevant political philosopher. When the United

States government honored him with a statue in Washington, D.C. in 1922, it cited only his support of the colonists during the Revolution: no mention of his reaction to the events in France.<sup>22</sup> All this changed dramatically after World War II, when a small yet determined group of conservative intellectuals rediscovered Burke's ideological usefulness.

In what might be called a "Burkean moment," writers Moorhouse Millar, Ross Hoffman, Russell Kirk, Peter Viereck, Peter Stanlis, and others, consciously reshaped the manner of Burke's appearance in light of problems they identified as crucial to the survival of civilization as they chose to see it.<sup>23</sup> Their entrepreneurial efforts yielded a revised and proprietary image of Burke that supplanted all prior interpretations, and this resulted in a paradigm shift in the application of Burkean thought that has set the pattern to this day. As we noted at the onset, the Cold War and communism supplied the golden opportunity for a renewed interest in Burke's anti-Jacobinism. But the Cold War merely popularized a Burkean revival that had already been initiated by a concurrent rediscovery of Natural Law.<sup>24</sup> After the Cold War's demise, the Natural Law interpretation of Burke remained active. Not because it withstood scholarly scrutiny, but because it sought to combat the perceived maladies of the Enlightenment legacy: positivism, relativism, skepticism, pragmatism, utilitarianism, and secularization. Alternatively, it sought the reimposition of a pre-rational world view.<sup>25</sup>

Post-war "new conservatives," especially the Catholic scholars among them, lamented the moral decline supposedly encouraged by modern thought--and by liberal intellectuals.<sup>26</sup> One Natural Law enthusiast (in 1947) described John Dewey's iconoclastic influence as "a movement of ideas which marks the final break with the ancient and medieval outlook upon the world." In modern times: "Organized intelligence is to take the place of myth and dogma in improving the common lot and enriching individual experience." Consequently: "There is no absolute truth....all truths are empirical; they are made by men and are the products of will." Furthermore, amoral "science...has created a Frankenstein monster which threatens to destroy us and which gives us neither assurance, nor hope, nor wisdom."<sup>27</sup> In the 1950s Peter Stanlis, the most prominent Burkean advocate for a Natural Law based counter-Enlightenment, borrowed Burke's reliance on prudence to discredit rationalism. He attacked not only the philosophes of Burke's day,

but the positivist utilitarians and utopians of his own: the "secular contemporary sociologists who deny the existence of all moral norms and standards."<sup>28</sup> Another Natural Law proponent voiced a nostalgically medieval outlook, recalling: "When men had an unquestioned sense of being rooted in an order beyond time and nature, they felt linked to other men in societies by this bond...But with the dissolution of the belief in a transcendent order[,] social bonds were attenuated....This insures the condition of permanent crisis." He added that "Burke did not stem the tide which rose in his day....But...his strong religious and historical sense, his appreciation of continuity in the human venture, may yet rally those who are fed up with patchwork remedies and panaceas."<sup>29</sup>

The connective tissue binding these sentiments was an abhorrence of moral relativism, which traditionalists perceived to be the logical outcome of post-Enlightenment thought. In their view, once reason had been unleashed upon the world, heterodoxy quickly followed. This was not a new theme for American conservatives, who had struggled to cap the well of social and intellectual experimentation since at least the 1780s. Unfortunately for them, the intellectual dynamism of the nineteenth century hinged on replacing long-held traditional and religious beliefs with modern scientific and rational analysis. To put it another way: the modernizing mind swapped a belief in old certainties, for the promise of new certainties. It sought to discover the universal laws that governed science, economics, aesthetics, morality, and other fields.<sup>30</sup> Some conservatives tried to hold on to the older "truths," while many moderates tried--with little success--to reconcile the old with the new. By the twentieth century, the intellectual dynamism hinged on replacing the ideal of certainty with the pragmatic inevitability of uncertainty and the new realities of relativism. In other words: certainty was converted from an absolute, permanent, universal concept, into a probabilistic, temporary, or case-specific one, which also depended on the perspective and even on the values of the observer.<sup>31</sup> To liberal intellectuals at the vanguard of Western thought, this represented a maturation of modern society. But to conservatives, the belief in certainty--especially moral certainty--was timeless. Not only were they unwilling to abandon this comfortable notion, they were determined to stop others from abandoning it.

While Thomas Paine's version of optimistic reason served as a precursor to the less idealistic quest for scientific certainties in the nineteenth century, Edmund Burke's pessimistic view of human nature, combined with the mystical sensibility of his later work, provided a dramatic precedent for the twentieth-century reaction against the triumph of liberal thought. Unlike Paine, for whom reason was almost a law of gravity, Burke subordinated reason to virtue, wisdom, prudence, custom, and related agents of stability. Such concepts were intrinsically murky, which only enhanced their contra-rational handiness. Technically, Burke was not an adherent of Natural Law theory, at least not in the way his post-war champions claimed. But he did believe in a natural moral order that was more mysterious than it was comprehensible. Again in contrast to Paine, Burke was not shy about cutting reason down to size. Even in writings that had nothing to do with politics or current affairs, he spoke of the "natural weakness of understanding" and the inadequacy of "naked reason." Not coincidentally, his youthful portrait of an ideal wife included the trait: "She discovers the right from the wrong in things not by reasoning but [by] Sagacity."<sup>32</sup> As for skepticism (religious or political), Burke believed that "in general, it is not right to turn our duties into doubts. They are imposed to govern our conduct, not to exercise our ingenuity."<sup>33</sup> What better maxim was there for late-modern conservatives who asked, as one of our contemporary Burkeans has put it: "[W]hy can't we turn back the clock?...[H]ow may we heal a society that has overdosed on liberalism?"<sup>34</sup>

Surely one way is to repudiate the entire Enlightenment legacy. That is, to question or to pervert virtually all post-traditionalist thought that has unfolded since the Age of Reason--or even before.<sup>35</sup> Today's conservatives have learned not only how to adopt the language of liberalism for their own purposes, but also how to twist it against itself (such oxymorons as Creation Science and compassionate conservatism, form the linguistic tip of an ideological iceberg). Moreover, conservatives have proven adept at changing people's minds about the benefits of liberal thought and modern values. Interestingly, while extrapolations of Paine's world view have generally eclipsed those of Burke's, there is a growing sense that the development of American thought (perhaps Western thought) may be more cyclical and less linear than had been commonly believed. Figuratively speaking, Painites have recently been forced to give some of their winnings

back to the Burkeans. Meanwhile, the prospect of reason ultimately defeating non-rational alternatives no longer seems assured. This conclusion appears to be especially warranted in the "reason versus wisdom" dichotomy.

American culture has always contained strains of anti-modernism.<sup>36</sup> Though not all of them were conservative, those that were provided essential outlets for the conservative begrudgement of liberal society. Christian fundamentalism, devout Catholicism, medievalism, agrarianism, Anglo-traditionalism, legal and constitutional formalism, social patriarchy, and class hierarchy, were not entirely consistent with each other, but they formed a united front against skepticism, novel social ideas, and personal liberation. Still, during most of the 19th and 20th-centuries the momentum of modernization and the advance of liberalism were too strong to counter, let alone to reverse. As long as the house of Enlightenment-inspired reason (and its resident "belief-in-progress") remained strong, it was safe from destruction. To put this another way: conservative ideologies were never formidable enough *on their own* to defeat liberal ideologies. Since roughly the 1970s, however, the house of liberal reason began to weaken from within. The political aspect of this phenomenon has received much attention. Researchers have documented the decline of the New Deal order, the rise of the religious right, the white-ethnic and blue-collar "backlash," and so on. Yet as important as these political, social, and economic, trends have been, they were subservient to even more fundamental shifts in the intellectual and cultural arenas. Around the turn of the 20th-century, modernization began eating away at itself, though it took several generations before the damage became obvious. The observable climax of Enlightenment modernism occurred in the early to mid-1960s.<sup>37</sup> This was followed by a fairly precipitous decline, as the post-modern consciousness spread beyond the avant-garde and other small circles of the initiated, to the broader educated public--and as the symptoms of this transition became apparent to the less educated as well. At the same time, the American belief-in-progress lost ground to various permutations of the perennial conservative jeremiad on the decay of civilization.

"Common sense," both in the way Thomas Paine used the term and as it applied to the Scottish branch of Enlightenment thought, might be restated as: "simple reason." One dictionary defined it as: "good judgement free from emotional bias or intellectual subtlety and not dependent on special knowledge."<sup>38</sup> Another option is to think of it as the workable combination of personal reason, experience, and intuition. During Paine's lifetime, and for a generation or so thereafter, science, politics, economics, medicine, and technology, fit (or came close to fitting) a "seeing is understanding" template. But as the 19th-century progressed, and more dramatically once the 20th-century began, the growing "culture of professionalism" and the new complexities of science resulted in a climate in which knowledge was no longer so sensibly comprehensible. A parallel trend of sophisticated exclusivity also developed in the arts and classical music.<sup>39</sup> Aside from creating a world of unfathomable complexity, such modern developments guaranteed a personal experience of incomprehensibility in all but a few fields of selected expertise. Much new knowledge had to be accepted on faith, and this made it as mysterious to the uninitiated as religion, sorcery, or divination had been to our pre-modern ancestors. Yet as a practical matter, so long as modernization continued to "deliver the goods" economically, technologically, medically, even socially, doubts concerning the comprehensibility of its latest discoveries could be shrugged off by the masses. Once the perception of success faded, or once it was recognized that technocratic society was incomplete at best and perhaps psychically damaging or (with the prospect of nuclear war or environmental disaster) even fatal for the species, millions of persons on the cultural left became unintentional allies with others on the cultural right in their challenge to modern thought. Of course, the alternatives to rational culture proposed by conservatives on the one hand and by (what I will call) post-liberals on the other, were often in stark contrast. To note just one false karass: fundamentalist Christianity and New Age religions may be mutually exclusive in their affirmative beliefs, yet they share an approach to human experience that is neither modern nor rational.<sup>40</sup>

As for Paine's rational critique of religious orthodoxy in *Age of Reason*, not only was it ineffective during his own lifetime, but, if he were writing it today, he would have to contend with a range of religious and quasi-religious beliefs that start with the premise

that reason is not the primary key to personal deliverance or social harmony. Concurrent with the recent reaffirmation of religious orthodoxy has been the revival of astronomy and witchcraft, a Western vogue for Eastern religions, the rise of numerous New Age belief systems, a turn toward "alternative medicine," a widespread interest in the paranormal (ghosts, E.S.P., telekinesis), along with "UFOlogy," and countless variations on such non-rational themes.<sup>41</sup> It is doubtful that Edmund Burke would have been susceptible to any of these movements. Contrary to the claims of post-war and contemporary Burkean conservatives, he was not even sympathetic to theological orthodoxy within traditional Christianity.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as we have already observed, Burke reverted to the mysterious and ancient whenever reasoned argument proved to be inadequate--or worse, when it better suited the position of his adversaries. Similarly, Burke's late-modern conservative admirers have adopted the same technique. The most prolific and consistent keeper of the Burkean flame since 1960 has been Francis Canavan, a Jesuit priest who (understandably) adheres to a Catholic Natural Law analysis (though Canavan is more balanced, subtle, and insightful, than more famous writers of the same school such as Russell Kirk and Peter Stanlis). And during the 1990s, Daniel Ritchie and Bruce Frohnen each offered (slightly different) interpretations of "God's Burke."<sup>43</sup>

It is this element of mysterious authority (in contrast to the clarifying light of human reason) that survives as the most serious challenge to the Painean legacy in America. The other major points in the Burke-Paine controversy have been settled in Paine's favor: Democracy overtook monarchy, egalitarianism (at least in principle) replaced inherited social class, a written constitution with a bill of rights prevailed, a culture of "progress" supplanted one of custom; Americans may have become enamored of their own "pleasing illusions" in the realm of patriotic traditions, but they are not of the ancient and mysterious variety; and progressive reform has--recent elections notwithstanding--been the long-term pattern of American political activity. Even the threat of revolution has not, despite the efforts of conservative writers, vindicated Burke's ideology. Both Paine and Burke disavowed abstract theory as a foundation for political philosophy, and so have modern liberals and conservatives (that is, most participants in mainstream debate believe they are practical rather than theoretical--which explains why

"ideologues" always seem to be working for the opposition). Likewise, Stalinist totalitarianism was considered to be a scourge on civilization by both the right and all but the most extreme segments of the American left during the Cold War (though the two sides emphasized different reasons for their hatred of dictatorial regimes). Hence, by process of historical elimination, the reason-wisdom tug-of-war survives as the last serious point of contention between Painites and Burkeans. And there has always been something mysterious about the acquisition of wisdom.

Traditionalist-conservatism gave ground very grudgingly throughout the modern era, and it was never comfortable with the liberal frame of mind and its reliance on human reason. Yet as long as American life remained predominantly concerned with the ideals of liberty and the attainment of material progress, the spiritual, transcendent, religious, ancestral, and mythical aspects of culture remained subservient to rational, scientific, economic, or technological imperatives. While a broad national consensus developed around the benefits of modernization, the various contra-modern constituencies were relegated to isolated pockets.<sup>44</sup> For much of the nineteenth century, most contra-modern impulses were culturally and socially conservative--though, as with Thoreau's transcendental, anti-industrial anarchism, they were not exclusively so. But as the twentieth century approached, there were already signs that even among free-thinking cultural liberals, reason did not supply a comprehensive enough--or a satisfying enough--world view. Granted, turn-of-the-century flirtations with what we now call New Age spirituality were confined to small bohemian circles. Yet they anticipated the sort of non-rational belief systems that would later become common.<sup>45</sup>

It is tempting to dismiss the lure of the mysterious, regardless of whether it manifests itself in old-time religion or New Age obscurantism, or whether it leads to "liberal" or "conservative" behavior. And perhaps a generation ago such a dismissal would have been justified. Today however, there is no mistaking the loss of passion, even loss of respect, for rational, scientific, secular, and "common sense" approaches to public policy and personal philosophy.<sup>46</sup> This is not only understandable, but, in hindsight, it should have been predictable.<sup>47</sup> At the dawn of the modern age, enlightened thinkers saw

limitless possibilities for improvement of the human condition. The realization that these early hopes were unsupportable was delayed by early victories over the residual ignorance and injustice of earlier eras. But, just as in war, initial euphoria fades once the prospect of easy, painless victory is thwarted. By the final third of the twentieth century, the United States and much of the "developed world" lived in the midst of (what Juergen Habermas has called) a "disenchanted modernity." The disenchantment had multiple roots, but the taproot may have been its own "common sense" belief that reason was virtually the sole method for obtaining knowledge and for solving problems. In other words, the faculty of reason became transformed into the *Weltanschauung* of rationalism.

By the later twentieth century, American culture was ripe for a resurgence of transcendental experience, and the mysterious nature of the Burkean revival played to this theme. One may interpret this to be either an atavistic regression or a necessary corrective to Enlightenment over-reach. Perhaps the sense of comparative balance between reason and transcendence was captured by the British historian Alfred Cobban when he wrote about Burke in 1929. While Cobban contrasted Burke with Locke, the same point could have been made by inserting the name of Thomas Paine: "The great achievement of [John Locke] had been to free political thought from theological authority and bring it into the more reasonable realm of secularity and individual responsibility. The greatness of [Edmund Burke] lay in re-inspiring politics with a cosmic spirit and in teaching men again the deeper realities of social life."<sup>48</sup> Now, three-quarters of a century after Cobban's remarks, we might ask in the American context: Is it still possible to infuse a reasonable society with a sense of awe and a spirit of imagination, and in the process to infuse secular life with a deeper (that is, beyond material) purpose? Or must reason be sacrificed to the transcendent and obscure, simply because it cannot by itself deliver human contentment?

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<sup>1</sup>Edmund Burke, "Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," in Daniel E. Ritchie, ed., *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 199; the "Appeal" was published in August 1791, nearly a year after *Reflections* appeared on November 1, 1790. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, Part One, in Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick, eds., *The Thomas Paine Reader* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 244.

<sup>2</sup>For example: "The House of Commons can never be a control on other parts of Government unless they are controlled themselves by their constituents." ("Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents," 1770); or: "If any ask me what a free government is? I answer, that, for any practical purpose, it is what the people think so; and that they, and not I, are the natural, lawful, and competent judges of this matter." ("Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol," 1777), in Paul Langford, gen. ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* 8 vols. to date (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-2000), 2:300, 3:317. (Apparently, Sir Philip Francis was the real "Junius" in 1769-72.)

<sup>3</sup>It has become trendy to challenge the myth of American liberalism (along with exceptionalism). But even valid and valuable contributions of this sort, for example: Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review* 87 (September 1993), 549-566, do not convince me that such broad terms as "liberal," "democratic," or "modern," are inaccurate descriptions of overarching themes or particular climates. Granted, one must guard against simplistic interpretations; but useful generalizations are another matter.

<sup>4</sup>Most writers who asserted that conservatism has been too successful came from the left: out of the progressive, new left, or radical schools; yet even they believed that America was supposed to stand for liberal ideals, but was not living up to them.

<sup>5</sup>Burke called such moral intuition "untaught feelings," or a "natural sense of right and wrong," Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 70, 74; this edition offers the most useful thematic index, though I cannot endorse Frank M. Turner's introduction.

<sup>6</sup>An excellent examination of Paine's rhetoric is "Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*: The Vulgar Style," in James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 134-150.

<sup>7</sup>Burke anticipated many polemical tactics of later day conservatives, such as the "slippery slope" argument; all three of the techniques outlined in Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1991) can be found in *Reflections*.

<sup>8</sup>*Reflections*, 52.

<sup>9</sup>"Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," *Further Reflections*, 161.

<sup>10</sup>"Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," *Further Reflections*, 149.

<sup>11</sup>For instance: "Men have no right to do what is not reasonable." *Reflections*, 53. Burke called on the "powerful instincts" of "nature" "to fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason" (30). See also his preference for prejudice over reason (74).

<sup>12</sup>Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 250; Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With A Life of the Author* 10 vols. (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 4:292-293.

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<sup>13</sup>See Francis Canavan, "The Burke-Paine Controversy," *Political Science Review* 6 (Fall 1976). While I am not in sympathy with Canavan's Natural Law interpretation of Burke, this old article is still a useful introduction to the topic. In particular, Canavan's opening point: that the Burke-Paine debate was not so much between the two principles, as it was among their numerous followers, has particular relevance to our discussion here.

<sup>14</sup>M.A. DeWolfe Howe, ed., *Life and Letters of George Bancroft* 2 vols. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 2:222; George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent* 10 vols. (volume quoted originally published 1852; Boston: Little, Brown, 1866-1875), 5:302.

<sup>15</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Edmund Burke," (1835) in Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller, eds., *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 1:190, 194.

<sup>16</sup>Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions* 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-1868), 3:226-228.

<sup>17</sup>Samuel Gilman Brown, ed., *The Works of Rufus Choate with a Memoir of His Life* 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1862), 1:215, 423.

<sup>18</sup>The term "elevated obscurity" is from Boulton, 140.

<sup>19</sup>"Speech on Conciliation with America" (1775), *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, 3:129.

<sup>20</sup>Burke to Sir Gilbert Elliot (1788), Burke to William Cusac Smith (1791), in Thomas Copeland, ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* 9 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958-1978), 5:415, 6:303; "A Letter to a Noble Lord" (1796), *Further Reflections*, 324.

<sup>21</sup>Namely, Edwin Lawrence Godkin, Charles Elliot Norton, James Russell Lowell, and Joseph O'Connor; all admired Burke, but only Godkin (later in his career) became reactionary.

<sup>22</sup>It is curious that in 1922, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and the post-WWI Red Scare, Burke was remembered as a Whig reformer rather than as an anti-Jacobin conservative.

<sup>23</sup>"Burkean moment" is of course a play on J.G.A. Pocock's famous phrase *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975); see Pocock's preliminaries (vii-viii) for his articulation of the general concept, which my description paraphrases.

<sup>24</sup>The uses and interpretations of Natural Law have been many. See for example, Benjamin Fletcher Wright, Jr., *American Interpretations of Natural Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931), 327. A more recent work that "pushes the envelope" on the subject is David Braybrooke, *Natural Law Modernized* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Especially relevant to the post-war revival is Roscoe Pound, "The Revival of Natural Law," *Notre Dame Lawyer* 17 no. 4 (June 1942), 287-372. While much of the initial post-war advocacy centered on jurisprudence, there was little attempt to restrain the broader social, political, moral, and religious implications.

<sup>25</sup>In this vein the post-war New Conservatives reprised the inter-war movement called New Humanism, in which Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Ralph Adams Cram were key.

<sup>26</sup>I mention the Roman Catholic influence not only because of its centrality to Natural Law scholarship, but also because of the church's institutional role in dragging "miracle, mystery, and authority," into the

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modern world and liberal America. See Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>27</sup>Ben Palmer, "Natural Law and Pragmatism," *Notre Dame Natural Law Institute Proceedings* 1 (1949), 33, 36-37, 63, (Palmer's first statement was a quotation from Sidney Hook; his paper was first delivered in December 1947).

<sup>28</sup>Peter J. Stanlis *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 15.

<sup>29</sup>Edmund A. Opitz, (review of) Charles Parkin, *The Moral Basis of Burke's Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1956) *Modern Age* 1 no. 2 (Fall 1957), 203.

<sup>30</sup>In the British context (though it applies to America as well) this point is made in Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 145: "[T]he Victorian mind in general was committed to the concept of absolute law. Politics, morals, history, economics, art, education, all were governed, it was thought, by universal laws or principles true for all times and places."

<sup>31</sup>For details on relativism's challenge to Victorian certainty, see Stanley Coben, "The Assault on Victorianism in the Twentieth Century," in Daniel Walker Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976); for a newer, more cultural treatment, see Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995); a prominent study of the transitions in 19th-century thought in America is Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); another excellent treatment of the "eclipse of certainty" is Paul Jerome Croce, *Science and Religion in the Era of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup>*Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757); "The Character of [Jane Burke]," elsewhere titled as "The Character of a Good Wife" (post-1757), Burke, *Writings and Speeches* 1:207, 60.

<sup>33</sup>"Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," *Further Reflections*, 163.

<sup>34</sup>Mark C. Henrie, "Edmund Burke and Contemporary American Conservatism," in Ian Crowe, ed., *The Enduring Edmund Burke: Bicentennial Essays* (Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1997), 203.

<sup>35</sup>For example, a prominent post-war conservative located the beginning of the decline of Western Civilization in the 1300s, when William of Ockham denied the existence of universals. Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

<sup>36</sup>See T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) for a selective analysis.

<sup>37</sup>Faith in science, technology, and social science, was manifest in the prospect of atomic energy "too cheap to meter," the new frontier of the space race, the certainty (attested to by Walter Heller in 1965) that the economy could be "fine tuned" to eliminate the business cycle, urban renewal programs and the war on poverty, the expected elimination of diseases (starting with polio and smallpox), and so on. For a slice of this mentality, see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>38</sup>*Webster's Third* (1966).

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<sup>39</sup>Obvious examples include the germ theory and genetics in biology, the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics in physics, theories of the unconscious mind in psychology, and theories of cultural relativism in anthropology; cubism and abstract expressionism defied common experience in art, as did atonal compositions in music.

<sup>40</sup>I will not expand this topic here, though I am in the process of doing so elsewhere. But see the following for a glimpse of the "post-liberal" frames of mind of which I speak: Theodore Roszak *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Juergen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historian's Debate* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), chp. 2, "The New Obscurity," 48-70; James R. Lewis and Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Richard Kyle, *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (Latham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995). I apologize to all grownups for employing Kurt Vonnegut's term "false karass" (from *Cat's Cradle*), but it perfectly fits the mood of this passage.

<sup>41</sup>See Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus 1986); the trends that Kurtz sought to counter in this book have, if anything, intensified since its publication.

<sup>42</sup>Burke was concerned with the stabilizing effect (political and social) of religion, which is why he was conservative on matters such as maintaining an established church with firm rules; but as his "Speech on Clerical Subscription" (1772) revealed, he was well aware of the widely different interpretations of scripture that were reasonably possible; furthermore, his writings display no interest in discovering ultimate religious truths. See Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:361-362.

<sup>43</sup>A representative sampling: Francis Canavan, *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press and the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1987); Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue and the Promise of Conservatism: The Legacy of Burke and Tocqueville* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Daniel E. Ritchie, *Reconstructing Literature in an Ideological Age: A Biblical Poetics and Literary Studies from Milton to Burke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>44</sup>I grant that the majority of Americans within the "broad consensus" were often ambivalent about many aspects of modernization. But within most individual minds, as within the country at large, accommodations were made, and "progress" usually came out ahead.

<sup>45</sup>See for instance, Catherine Tumber, *American Feminism and the Birth of New Age Spirituality: Searching for the Higher Self, 1875-1915* (Latham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); as well as Douglas, *Terrible Honesty* (cited above).

<sup>46</sup>Examples are numerous: Today (August 31, 2005) the New York Times cites a new poll by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that finds that 42% of Americans hold "strict creationist views," and that 64% "are open to the idea of teaching creationism in addition to evolution" in the classroom. Another "favorite" example of mine, is that many persons refuse to abandon their belief that the so-called "Shroud of Turin" is the burial garment of Christ, even though the cloth of which it was made has been carbon-dated to the 14th century. Finally, would it be so easy for the present Bush administration to reject scientific evidence of environmental deterioration if science itself enjoyed a greater public confidence?

<sup>47</sup>An early "prediction" of our 21st-century state of affairs can be found in Charles Frankel, *The Case for Modern Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., briefly anticipated my anti-rationalism argument in "The New Mood in Politics," *Esquire* (January 1960) reprinted in Gerald Howard, ed., *The Sixties* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), 45.

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<sup>48</sup> Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), 96.