MEMORIAL DISCOURSE

Trinity College Dublin

Trinity Monday 1900

Edmund Burke

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> *And in the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom, to make all that I have commanded.*
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> **Exodus, xxxi. 6**

This statement is made of the handicraftsmen who constructed the ark of Moses. And of their chief we are told that he was given "the Spirit of God to devise cunning work, to work in gold and silver and brass, and in cutting of stones for setting." Thus early was it revealed that what we call the Artistic Faculty comes really from the Lord and Lifegiver. And so every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. Yes, all of it. The intellectual keenness with which Voltaire assailed revelation, and the enormous energies with which Napoleon trampled down liberty, these were God-given, however culpably abused against the Giver.

And this truth teaches us at once the responsibility which is inseparable from all faculty, and the gratitude which we ought to feel for all great powers, nobly and greatly wielded.

It vindicates us amply when in this consecrated place we celebrate the genius of our fellow-countrymen, the children of our Alma Mater. Theirs also was a divine gift: them also the Lamp of God illumined.

Among these, I am to speak of him who, in his lifetime, attained the widest fame, contending upon the most conspicuous platform with immortal orators and statesmen, who has ever since grown more illustrious, as the echoes of mere rhetoric die away, and the make-shifts of temporary politics lose their interest, and only the adequate utterance of enduring principles retains its charm – the sheer brilliance of whose style outshone every contemporary man of letters – who laid the foundation upon which the modern artistic and aesthetic criticism is built – whom Adam Smith declared to have alone attained an independent perception of the doctrine of Free Trade – who drafted, before the time was ripe, a plan for the abolition of slavery – who taught England how to govern Ireland, and stopped the plunder of Hindostan – whose enlightened policy would have saved to us the United States, and has actually bound our existing colonies to us, as the world sees, and wonders.

What a magnificent extent of faculty and attainment! In what other Irishman except Bishop Berkeley is there even an approach to such far-reaching capacity?

Yet this is only a portion of the glory of Edmund Burke.

He was probably born in the beginning of 1729, and graduated in 1748, having read widely and thought much, rather than applied himself with diligence to his appointed studies. But in this place it is right to mention that on him – as, alas on all men – exact scholarship had her revenge in the dread hour when the House of Commons, fastidious then, cried out against a false quantity: nor can I think that his well-known retort was really an expiation – "I welcome any error which entitles me to repeat again the precious aphorism, *Magnum vect-I-gal est parcimonia"*

His monument in this University is the College Historical Society – not exactly such as we know it, but admirably suited for the purposes of a thoughtful man, desirous of comparing his own views and his intellectual prowess with those of other men of learning to express himself clearly and with promptitude, of seeking, in company with kindred spirits, *scire causas rerum*, to understand the true principles of politics and the passions by which politicians are misled.

It is certain that he, at all events, was then proving the armour and the weapons with which he was soon to attack and to defend, when the interests of more than one nation were at stake.

He entered London before he was of age, poor, but not poverty-stricken until five years later, when his father stopped his allowance because he was neglecting law for letters. But ten years after this indignity, at the age of thirty-six, he was the intimate friends of Johnson and Reynolds, a Member of Parliament, and private secretary to the Prime Minister, and Johnson had given utterance both to the expectations of his friends and to their fulfilment. "We who know Mr. Burke know that he will be one of the first men in the country." "He has gained more reputation than perhaps any man at his first appearance ever gained before… He is a great man by nature, and is expected soon to attain civil greatness."

How had he been able in so short a time to reach such eminence, and to attain, almost immediately, a commanding place in the councils of the most brilliant party that ever debated in the British House of Commons, the most brilliant, therefore, that ever discussed politics?

He had published the *Vindication of Natural Society*, so much in the style of Lord Bolingbroke that excellent judges believed it to be his genuine work, although it reduced to absurdity Bolingbroke's recent attack upon religion, by showing that the same arguments would also be fatal to society. And Mr. Morley rightly infers from this essay that Burke had already discerned, in the spirit of negation which was abroad, civic revolution as truly as religious unbelief.

He had also published that *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, which Lessing studied, and which pointed him the way to the speculations of the *Laocoön*. To influence Kant and Lessing was a great achievement; but the real merit of the work is that it criticised and taught the world to criticise, not by comparing one work of art with another, but by the laws of the human mind.

Its conclusions are now valueless: so pretending is the Time-Spirit that I can remember the incredulous amusement which they caused me before I had entered college; but the methods, which were original, live; and it is for their sake that German authorities have called it epoch-making.

In the third place, he had devised and conducted for six years, the *Annual Register*, the fore-runner of all such works indispensable to every student of affairs, which range from the *Statesman's Year-book* to *Dalzel's Almanac.*

What elements of distinction are revealed in these early works – what kind of greatness? There is the rare union of the philosophical and practical. For him Bolingbroke's sophisms are best met by observing that they would, if admitted, proceed to upset everything: this practical refutation is final for an intelligence at once so penetrating and so keenly alive to actualities. For him, art must cease to rely upon the precedents of its own past work for its sanction, because it claims to be made for humanity. The steady and fixed attention to affairs which went on for years toiling at the *Register*, revealed the man whose industry in detail, and in research, presently reformed the civil establishment, which was, indeed, the cleansing of an Augean stable of extravagant waste, and in so doing (as he foresaw) cut off at the very fountain the resources by which parliament had for a century been corrupted. But these qualities would have availed him nothing without another – the marvellous eloquence for which I suppose that all of us first turned to him, and for which alone most of us care to know him still.

And this is as convenient a time as any in which to say a little about his style, which is one of the permanent glories of the English language – wonderfully elastic and various; capable, as in the case of Bolingbroke, of deliberate mimicry, and expressing adequately all the range of human emotion, from scorn for the heterogeneous ministry that lay heads and points in his famous truckle-bed, to compassion for the discrowned queen, hiding in her bosom the sharp remedy against dishonour.

It is, to begin with, a real style, made for the expression and not for the concealment of thought; and it swells out into those wonderful sentences which we all know, vast and resonant as an Atlantic billow, and as sparkling simply because his thought or his emotion has expanded so that a smaller utterance would not cover it, nor would an exaggeration of little sentences befit its organic indissoluble unity.

It would be a revelation to many a student of style to read aloud, first any page of any of Mr. Gladstone's publications, and immediately thereupon any page of any of the works of Burke. In his, there is plenty with which one may differ, some which one may even blame, but there is not a page, perhaps there is a not a line, in which your critical faculty accuses him of fingering a truth upon which his hands have not firmly closed, nor one in which he fails to convey a real meaning – *his* real meaning, to the reader. It is for this, despite his cynics, that man received the gift of speech.

And I claim this for him, although he has clearly not stayed to bestow upon the broad *façades* of his architectural masses the minute polish of a lapidary in words. Sometimes he has actually said the precise opposite of what he meant, which also is instructive and consoling to the student. Listen, for example, to an aphorism at once profound and eminently characteristic: - "The opinion of my having some abstract right in my favour would not put me much at my ease in passing sentence" [in my own cause] "unless I could be sure that there were *no* rights which, in their exercise under certain circumstances, were *not* the most odious of all wrongs and the most vexations of all injustice." He means to say that he would not be at ease in exacting his rights, unless he were sure that there were no rights which *did* involve injustice. He asks to be assured that there were none which did not involve it.

I have noted some others of the same sort, and many inaccurate constructions; but I have not come upon one where the meaning was not as plain and strong as the muscles moving under the skin of an athlete in perfect training.

Dare I add, that it would be an equally instructive experiment to read any of the celebrated passages from Burke – the passages you find in every book on literature – along with similar passages from Jeremy Taylor.

Many of the latter – I take my life in my hand saying this – are strictly speaking purple patches; they are sewn on because they are so brightly coloured, but they have no essential homogeneity with the texture of thought and argument; and as for the feeling, if it were hot it would burn them up. "So have I espied a cherub" – "the hyacinthine locks of seraphim" – "the fringes of the north star" – "the down of angel's wings" – all these are very pretty, but for my part I heartily wish they were not there. They come between me and the theologian who is addressing me, and who had something of importance to say. They always remind me of Landor's epigram: "Thine eggs are very prettily speckled, but those which men choose for their sustenance are of a plain white." Even the tawny Numidian lion, best known of all the strange creatures in Jeremy Taylor's strange menagerie, instead of helping me to realise the courage of the Christian, distracts my attention; it is of him, not of the saint, that I think, from the time when first he lashes his sides with his tail, until he either scrapes into the recesses of his lair or dies the bravest of the forest.

But you do not think of any other animal than the Duke of Bedford only, grudging Burke his pension, and your indignation deepens with every grotesque addition to the picture of the vastness of the grants which he himself enjoys, while assailing a much smaller grant, as you read the equally well-known passage in which Burke retorts: - "The Duke of Bedford is the leviathan among the creatures of the Crown. He tumbles about his unwieldly bulk; he plays and frolics in the ocean of the royal bounty. Huge as he is, and while he "lies floating many a rood" he is still a creature. His ribs, his fins, his whalebone, his blubber, the very spiracles through which he spouts a torrent of brine against his origin, and covers me all over with the spray – everything of him and about him is of the throne. Is it for *him* to question the disposal of the royal bounty?

That is the true style, and most of all for the speaker. The image is not deposit beside the thought; you are not bidden to wonder at the resemblance between them, nor to admire the shrewdness which detected it, nor the poetic taste which stored up such lovely things against the day of need – no, this is the very thought itself which stands up visibly embodied and incarnated in this form, by no means anxious to be ornamental, more solid and more formidable far because it has thus taken upon it flesh and blood. But woe tithe sorcerer who dares to conjure up such potent beings, with powers too vague or uncertain to employ them when they come, and therefore doomed to be rent asunder by their indignation.

Now of this robust and vigorous method (so fit for our humanity, in which body and soul are one) Burke was the greatest of all our masters. His style was much more sinewy and less serpentine than Ruskin's; and it had that correctness which made it grow richer, with practice, to the end. And despising which the progress of Carlyle was from the *Sarter* and the *French Revolution* down to the *Frederick*, that huge Serbonian bog.

If we ask, then, why he was not the greatest of orators, but frequently failed together, there are two answers. One is that he wanted manner; and certainly there is evidence that his gestures were sometimes ungainly and his voice harsh. But then he was sometimes successful in the highest degree. One is ashamed to repeat yet again how one of his election speeches raised his colleague to such enthusiasm that he could only exclaim: "I say 'ditto' to Mr. Burke; 'ditto' to Mr. Burke." More than one of his Indian speeches moved reluctant hearers to tears of pity and indignation. What has to be explained is not a failure, but that he failed only sometimes.

The other answer, which comes very near the truth, is that he could not persuade himself to compress. But it is a fact that his style, among its manifold splendours, was capable of an epigrammatical condensation, and often converts much treasure into a single gem.

"Is a polite act the worse for being a generous one?"

"Justice to others is not always folly to ourselves."

"Freedom and not servitude is the cure of anarchy as religion and not atheism is the true remedy of superstition."

[In the British Empire] "England is the head; but she is not the head and the members too."

"Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found."

"All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, and every prudent act, is founded on promise and barter – we balance our inconveniences; we give and take; we remit some rights some rights that we may enjoy others; and we choose rather to be happy citizens than subtle disputants."

"Is all authority of course lost, when it is not pushed to an extreme? Is it a certain maxim, that the fewer causes of dissatisfaction are left by a government, the more the subject will be inclined to resist?"

"All protestantism, even the most cold and passive, is a sort of dissent. But the religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent and the protestantism of the Protestant religion."

"Despotism itself is obliged to truck and huxter. The Sultan gets such obedience as he can."

"In order to prove that the Americans have no right to their liberties, we are every day endeavouring to subvert the maxims which preserve the whole spirit of our own."

"An Englishman is the unfittest person in the world to argue another Englishman into slavery."

"It is sometimes as hard to persuade slaves to be freemen as it is to persuade freemen to be slaves."

"I do not know the method of drawing up an indictment against a whole people."

"The general character and situation of a people must determine what sort of government is fitted for them."

All these pregnant utterances I have gathered from a single speech, that great speech upon Conciliation with the American Colonies, the wisdom of which, if taken for our beacon, might perhaps have saved us the United States, and made us at this moment the arbitrator of the destinies of the world, the wisdom of which, applied only not too late, actually saved us Canada and endeared us to her, and to-day, consistently and boldly applied, exhibits to the world a family of nations bound together in the most cordial and permanent of all alliances, and growing in population and affluence more rapidly than all the races who wish us ill.

But I have been led away from my point, namely, that the undue diffuseness which so gravely limited Burke's effect as an orator had its best seat elsewhere than in his style, for no style ever exhibited more compactly and lucidly as great a wealth of thought as do the extracts I have just read.