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With Respect to What

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TRAVEL WESTWARD along Massachusetts Avenue, down from Capitol Hill, and you will run into Edmund Burke. He seems to be hailing a cab, hand raised high, fingers parted, his whole form tense with the attempt to seize your attention; but in fact he is in mid-expostulation. This is the torsion of argument. The bronze statue, a copy of a late nineteenth-century one that stands in Bristol, which Burke immortally represented in Parliament, is eight feet tall, and was presented to Washington in 1922 by a British organization devoted to Anglo-American comity.

Inscribed on its pedestal is a sterling sentence—"magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom," in the capital usually honored in the breach—from the conclusion to Burke's speech in 1775 on "conciliation with the colonies," which is the greatest speech I have ever read. The statue's location is a fine emblem of the local polyphony: a block away is the memorial to Samuel Gompers, glumly in bronze, who sits beneath a turgid company of allegorical figures, which contrasts unfavorably with the animated lucidity of Burke's image. The progressive monument shows a fasces, the conservative monument shows a tricorn hat. And a few steps up the street is the libertarian glasswork of the Cato Institute—in a certain light Burke seems almost to be castigating it. In 1967, in a worshipful book about Burke, Russell Kirk ominously declared that "if, in the near future, this Burke statue still stands in deathless bronze on Massachusetts Avenue; and if its original ... still stands at Bristol ... -why, they will remain as symbols of a human order that has not been pulled down altogether." Well, it still stands, on a grassy island amid the traffic of an unapocalyptic city in which nothing can pull down human order, or disorder.

WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE of yet another Burke revival. Jon Meacham, who relies on the identification of trends for his professional survival, ruled so last spring. The evidence is everywhere. Sam Tanenhaus smartly explains the fate of American conservatism as a contest between Burkeans and "revanchists." David Brooks calls President Obama a Burkean, though Thomas Sowell disagrees. In merry complicity with his own manipulation, Brooks tells of David Axelrod greeting him in the White House with a copy of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in his hand. (No doubt liberal columnists are met with *On Liberty*.) A few years ago Arnold Schwarzenegger invoked a school of political thought that he unforgettably described as "Schwarzenegger, Edmund Burke, [and John] Kennedy." In a CNN discussion of health care hysteria last summer, Mary Matalin spoke obscurely of "Edmund Burke-type linguistics." Even Patrick Leahy cited the right's idol in a speech on government reform. And so on. (I do not include George Will in the fashion, because he really is a Burkean and has the study to prove it.) Many decades ago Kirk noted with some astonishment that "nowadays Burke is praised in such journals as *THE NEW REPUBLIC*." I am happy, in the spirit of the subject, to conserve the tradition of the house.

THE QUESTION OF BURKE is the question of change. It is no wonder that he is back now. Whether or not it is Burkeanism that moves Obama, the scale of his plans are an incitement to its reconsideration. But if Burkeanism means a hostility to change, then Burke was himself not a Burkean. "At once to preserve and to reform": here is the other great dialectical thinker about modern politics. "We compensate, we reconcile, we balance." On America and on India, Burke espoused drastic historical action. Conor Cruise O'Brien, of genuinely blessed memory, may have liberalized Burke a little too much in *The Great Melody*, but he was correct, I think, that Burke's "one constant target" was the abuse of power. And for all his celebrated traditionalism, Burke unflaggingly championed rational deliberation: "In a free country every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters; that he has a right to form and a right to deliver an opinion upon them. They sift, examine, and discuss them ... Your whole importance, therefore, depends upon a constant, discreet use of your own reason; otherwise you and your country sink to nothing." Or, more poetically, "mind must conspire with mind." Tradition, in Burke's category-shattering complexity, was in its way the history of public reason, and therefore not to be trifled with. Liberals

should welcome a notion of truth as additive and accumulative. It may be objected that reason cannot operate adequately without abstraction, which was what Burke most loathed; but still his fidelity to received understandings must not be mistaken for a vindication of prejudice and unexamined conviction.

WHAT BURKE DEMANDED, rather, was circumspection about the motive for, and the pace of, change. Caution is not a sign of "reaction"; and the long annals of left-wing incaution, of the degradation of reform by revolution, should humble some of Burke's despisers. The Burkean retort to the call for change is, with respect to what? The idea of changing everything and the idea of changing nothing are both merciless, and unempirical, and futile for politics. We are all Burkeans and all not Burkeans, all preservers and all reformers, all liberals and all conservatives; we all have our preferred acceptances and our preferred remedies; we all do not wish to create or to destroy the world. We must all climb down from our glittering generalities and justify what we propose in the particular. Concrete change is the only change we can believe in. (Obama has a peculiar relation to concreteness: he floats above it, in the empyrean of his diction, until he collapses into expediency.) The question, are you for change?, is like the question, are you happy?: an emotional set-up, an invitation to mistake a mood for an analysis. The only right answer to such a question is yes and no. To fulfill our desire we must disaggregate it. In the matter of health care, the Democrats are learning this lesson, reluctantly; but the Republicans are now in a frenzy (or as Burke has it, a phrenzy) of aggregation, in wanton opposition to everything. It is not Burkean to declare, as William Kristol did again the other day, that "there is no health care crisis." Such a view is an affront to Burke's teaching about the significance of "circumstance," and to his undoctinal and uncomplacent tone. It preserves, but it does not reform. Anyway, the preservation of our ills is not what we mean by tradition.

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