Edmund Burke, Ireland, and the fashioning of self

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This is the first attempt, since the work of A.P.I. Samuels in 1923, at examining the early career of Edmund Burke without assuming that he was born to become the arch-conservative who condemned the French Revolution. Instead of being in revolt against the Enlightenment, the young Burke was a man intent on illustrating himself and his age by promoting rational knowledge and widening the field of reason. His turn to politics is, therefore, seen as turning away from truth; the compromise changed the direction of his thinking. An escapist solution to some of Burke’s problems could not make him forget Ireland, his native country. The fact that Ireland is the first country to have been colonized by England makes it an interesting laboratory of colonial misrule.

The study of how it fashioned such a man torn between Ireland and England raises and sheds light on problems that go very much beyond the fate of Burke as an individual. It is a demonstration of the different means used by colonial powers to maintain their conquered empire and contain dissidence and rebellion. Making people believe, for instance, that the order of things is as it should be because that is what it is, does not tax the imagination, but it works and is still being used the world over. In this opinion campaign, Protestant England enjoyed the unfailing support of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland and a ‘realistic’ understanding on the part of Catholic Europe.

It is an example of the private and public tragedies caused by the divided loyalties that colonialism generated. The painfully experienced situation of a ‘cultural mulatto’ is the inevitable result of a state of domination. If it seems complex, it is because it is not purely negative: the dominated may in turn dominate the dominator. The effects are still with us of the passionate oscillations and reversals of opinion that Burke called his ‘principles’. Finally it illustrates the fundamental error of those who, even for a moment, lose sight of the truth perceived by Victor Hugo that ‘the first phase of the possible is to be impossible’. As a cultural mulatto, Burke led an impossible life, but who can fail to see that what was then an ‘impossibility’ is, in the present situation of Ireland and of the world, not only possible but eminently desirable? If only because this is just the beginning.

Acknowledgements

List of short titles

1. Ireland in Edmund Burke’s posthumous career
2. The Irish bog
3. Becoming a writer and a thinker in Ireland
4. The discovery of the ‘other world’, or An account of the European settlements in America
5. Of imitation, or A vindication of natural society
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