Burke, Paine, and the Nature of Language

JOHN TURNER

University College of Swansea

I   Introduction: the Lockean Tradition

Political analysis of the Burke-Paine controversy sets out most typically 'to show how and why these two famous eighteenth-century writers could have totally different opinions on such typical eighteenth-century topics as "nature", "reason", and "rights"'.[1] My purpose here is to explore the part played in their controversy by their different conceptions of the nature of language. How, in particular, did each of them understand the representational function of language? It is an interesting question since it touches upon a problem central to the whole of the eighteenth century; for the difficulty of finding a language in which to discuss language was part of the much larger difficulty of finding a language in which to discuss representation of all kinds, not only linguistic but literary, theatrical, political, and theological representation too.

The terms in which the representational function of language was commonly understood in the eighteenth century were established by Locke in the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*;[2] and we need to understand both the purpose and the polemic of the *Essay* if we are to appreciate its characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Locke's main purpose was to facilitate what he called 'the workmanship of the understanding' (3.3.12) in the act of knowing and classifying the natural world. He sought to make language serve the turn of the new scientific and philosophical inquiry upon which the commercial prosperity of the settlement between bourgeoisie and aristocracy of 1689–90 was to depend. Mental knowledge of the physical world: Locke's system is fundamentally dualistic, with man inhabiting two distinct worlds, the public world of things and the private world of ideas. Since ideas, according to Locke, may exist in the mind before, or independent of, the words that name them, the chief use of language is to enable one man to convey to another the private ideas of his own inner world. Meaning is achieved when the speaker perfectly matches word to idea — this is Locke's psychological theory of signification — and communication is achieved when the hearer perfectly matches his own idea to that of the speaker. It would be right, I think, to infer from this that the model for Locke's thinking about language (although it is not the area of language to

---

[1] R. R. Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion* (The Hague, 1963), p. vii. This book provides an excellent, fully documented account of the history of the controversy.

[2] References here are to the collated edition of Alexander Campbell Fraser, Oxford, 1894.

which he gives the most attention) is to be found in the simple ideas that are formed by sense-impressions. He has an atomistic conception of language, in which words rather than sentences are the basic units of meaning; and his aim is to reduce all language as far as possible to the clarity that attends upon a word such as 'cat', which is perfectly able to communicate to another person who has also seen a cat the idea that we have received from our senses of the thing as it exists in the natural world.

It is the metaphor in which Locke valorized clarity of language that concerns me here, because of the profound influence that it was to have upon eighteenth-century thought. Words occupy the space between ideas and things, he thought, and never more noticeably so than when imperfectly used: 'they interpose themselves so much between our understandings, and the truth which it would contemplate and apprehend, that, like the medium through which visible objects pass, the obscurity and disorder do not seldom cast a mist before our eyes, and impose upon our understandings' (3.9.21). The true use of language is thus to be *transparent*; the word must disclose the idea which it represents by a perfect self-effacement. In arguing this, Locke turns away from any sense that language might be (in Raymond Williams's word) *constitutive*,[3] that it might be considered as something existing in its own right, in power, by virtue of which we are enabled to exist in *relationship* with the world.

Locke argued this way, of course, for sound historical reasons. He was engaged in part in a polemic against an Adamic tradition of language study which believed, in the words of Theodor Bibliander, that 'that language is the most perfect whose words explain the natures of things. Such as that language is believed to have been, in which Adam imposed names on individual things'.[4] Adam's name for cat, that is, would have captured the essence of felinity. This original Adamic language having been lost at Babel, however, the philosopher's task is to recover its traces amongst the surviving languages of the world — a task necessitating the study of words in their own right. Leibniz too had believed in the existence of an original universal language, grounded in onomatopoeia and primitive affect, which similarly revealed the nature of things,[5] whilst English members of the Royal Society, most notably Bishop Wilkins, went one better and tried to invent a new universal language of their own, but still 'basing each word upon the nature of the thing for which the word was a symbol'.[6] Locke would have none of it. As vigorously as he asserted an extreme nominalism against the forces and essences of the schoolmen, so too he asserted the arbitrariness of all language

---

[3] Constitutive *and* constituting: see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), chapter 2, especially pp. 43–44.

[4] Quoted in Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London, 1982), p. 47.

[5] See Aarsleff, pp. 42–83, for a full discussion of the relationship between Leibniz and Locke on the language question.

[6] R. F. Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1932), p. 52.

against those who sought to naturalize it. Words were not to be treated as things, to be pored over by the etymologist as the botanist pores over his plants; they were transparencies, invented to enable commerce with the otherness of the material world. The gain was great in terms of efficiency and power, but there was loss too — the loss that Foucault noted when he wrote that, with the dawning of classical representationalism, 'the profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved'.[7] The instrumentalization of language that accompanied the rupture of nature into subject and object effectively did away with any possibility that language might be seen as relationship. In the new alienated world of the capitalist pacification, language was man's tool of communication, and the proof of his having been designed 'for a sociable creature' (3.1.1); but, arbitrary in its namings and private in its significations, it could no longer be that bond between men that joined them in kinship to their world.

Locke's insistence upon the transparency of language created, as is well known, particular problems for those concerned with literary representation, especially since it was coupled with a profound distrust for all the forms of rhetoric and eloquence: 'if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheats' (3.10.34). Locke is aware of the danger of dalliance with figurative language even as he indulges it: 'Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived' (3.10.34). The sex discrimination here recalls Dr Johnson's assertion in the Preface to his *Dictionary*, that *'words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven'*.[8] Natural authority must prevail, Johnson's subtext runs, and words be subordinated to things. Eloquence is the Eve in the garden of Adam's naming . . . . It is out of such metaphor and myth that the world has been constituted, and Locke's marginalization of figurative speech and literary form alike is a serious impoverishment of his work. It helped to commit the following century to an inadequate view of figurative speech as passion or persuasion and an inadequate defence of literature as a somehow transparent imitation.

Burke and Paine were both caught up by these questions of the status that should be given to language, to figurative language and to literature as modes of representation. Indeed, in a sense they formed the subject of their controversy. What's in a name? Both men were capable of demanding a Lockean answer to this question; and hence the curious mirror-imaging in the accusations and counter-accusations exchanged between them. Each

---

[7] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, 1970), p. 43.
[8] Samuel Johnson, Preface to the *English Dictionary*, in *Works*, 9 vols (Oxford, 1825), v, 27.

accused the other of diction undisciplined by things and unconnected to ideas; of excessively figurative and paradoxical language; of inappropriate theatricality and literariness of style — in short, of disrespect for denotative clarity. But my concern here is not with this similarity between the two men, although it might be easily shown. Instead, I am interested in the curiously paradoxical nature of the differences between them. I shall show first how Burke, alongside his adherence to Locke, developed both a view and a practice of language that ran counter to those of Locke — a contradiction which Burke, with characteristic pragmatism, allowed to remain unarticulated, but which had its roots in the contradictions of his own position as (to quote Chris Reid) 'the bourgeois spokesman for a Whig aristocracy', their 'servant-philosopher'[9] at a time when the 1689–90 settlement between bourgeoisie and aristocracy which he supported was beginning the long process of its decline and needed a new defence. I shall then briefly indicate the paradoxical nature of the position taken up by Paine, fighting (as he saw it) to perfect the incomplete political revolutions of the seventeenth century by invoking the old linguistic tradition descended from Locke, and associated with the 1689–90 compromise, in order to combat all that was genuinely new in Burke; and finally, I shall hint at those places in the early writings of Coleridge and Wordsworth where we find the sketches of a new theory of language which, if completed, would have developed Burke's suggestions in the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections* — to which I now turn.

II Burke's 'Enquiry' (1757) and the Nature of Language

Rosalie Colie has written of what she called the epistemological paradox: 'Operating at the limits of discourse, redirecting thoughtful attention to the faulty or limited structures of thought, paradoxes play back and forth across terminal and categorical boundaries — that is, they play with human understanding, that most serious of all human activities.'[10] It is wholly characteristic of Locke in his epistemology that, as Bertrand Russell put it, he 'will have nothing to do with paradoxes';[11] and it is equally characteristic of Burke that, in taking issue with the central idea of Locke's *Essay*, he should do so in a paradox: 'It seems to be an odd subject of dispute with any man, whether he had ideas in his mind or not' (*Enquiry*, p. 323).[12] Stephen Land has doubted the extent of Burke's disagreement with Locke:

Burke does not question openly the premises of Locke's theory of language, nor does he venture any systematic alternative. His work on language is best regarded as a series of modifications of the Lockean position having as its object the establishment of a relatively small area within which certain concepts of rhetoric and poetics might operate free from the restrictions of the picture theory. Burke probably regarded

[9] Chris Reid, 'Language and Practice in Burke's Political Writing', *Literature and History*, no. 6 (Autumn 1977), p. 204.
[10] Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: the Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966), p. 7.
[11] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1961), p. 591.
[12] References here are to the Scolar Press Facsimile of the second edition, London, 1970.

himself as generally within the tradition of Lockean linguistics rather than as a leader of potential opposition.[13]

My own judgement would be different. Burke's attention to what Dr Johnson called the *un-idea'd* life of the mind takes us to the heart of the major philosophical, political and religious disagreements that he must surely have always had with Locke — disagreements in particular about the status of reason and passion in our mental life. The disagreements are covert in the *Enquiry* but they are clear. Unquestionably we cannot confine them to the 'relatively small area' of literature, firstly because the categories of the sublime and the beautiful extend beyond art to nature, and secondly because Burke's understanding of art itself extends far beyond the making of pictures, poetry and prose. It will be my argument here that the fifth part of Burke's *Enquiry*, dealing with words, brings into play some general objections to Locke which have an immediate relevance to literary discussion but whose true potentiality was only finally realized in the political discussions of the *Reflections*.

There are four arguments in the *Enquiry* against Locke's belief that words on the tongue should always be accompanied (or once have been accompanied) by ideas in the mind; and each of them is an appeal to experience against theory. First, there is simple assertion of the facts of the case: 'we are often at a loss to know what ideas we have of things, or whether we have any ideas at all upon some subjects' (p. 323). Burke offers as an example the sentence: 'I shall go to Italy next summer' (p. 327). What precise ideas, what mental images do we need to give meaning to these words? They may indeed recall to us particular private ideas of Italy or summer or travel or the passage of time; but our understanding of the sentence does not depend upon it. Simply, our minds do not work that way.

Second, Burke appeals to our experience of the conversation of the blind: is it not true that the conversation and writings of blind men may be meaningful despite the fact that certain of the words that they use cannot possibly correspond to ideas that they have had?

Third, he appeals to our experience of literature, arguing that poetry 'would lose a very considerable part of its energy' (p. 328) if its words were to depend upon their power of raising images. The literature of the sublime and the beautiful is successful precisely because 'the picturesque connection is not demanded' (p. 330). It works not by the careful depiction of an image but by enabling us to share either the author's or his character's emotional reaction towards that image: 'we yield to sympathy, what we refuse to description' (p. 339).

Fourth, he argues from the nature of what he calls '*compounded abstract words*' (p. 314): words such as virtue, honour, persuasion and — interestingly, if we think ahead to the *Reflections* — magistrate. The course of Burke's argument

[13] Stephen K. Land, *From Signs to Propositions: The Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory* (Longman Linguistic Library, 1974), p. 46.

diverges sharply from that of Locke here, in his discussion of the similar category known in the *Essay* as names of mixed modes; for whilst Locke says at first that these names, invented by men and therefore without a standard in nature, 'must needs be of doubtful signification' (3.9.7), he goes on to say later that, since they are indeed man-made, they may therefore be 'perfectly and exactly defined' (3.11.15). If communication is difficult, definition is nevertheless easy and morality in this sense 'capable of demonstration' (3.11.16). But it is the indefiniteness of this powerful and important class of words that impresses Burke: not only are they incapable of definition with reference to external reality, but such meaning as they do have tends to evaporate beneath the light of analysis.

The passage in which Burke makes this claim is worth quoting in full, since it indicates a major methodological difference from Locke. For Locke, an idea of mixed mode is mechanically assembled out of the building-blocks of more simple ideas and, to understand it, however difficult the process, a man must have in his mind 'a distinct comprehension of the component parts that complex idea consists of' (3.11.9). Burke accepts that this may be done but insists that something crucial is lost in the process:

> For put yourself upon analysing one of these words, and you must reduce it from one set of general words to another, and then into the simple abstracts and aggregates, in a much longer series than may be at first imagined, before any real idea emerges to light, before you come to discover any thing like the first principles of such compositions; and when you have made such a discovery of the original ideas, the effect of the composition is utterly lost. (p. 315)

What is lost is the effect of the word, its power; and this, for Burke, constitutes a part of its meaning, not just in literature but also in conversation. In other words, the habit of analytic definition cannot yield everything that is to be known about a word; and Burke says as much in the Preface to the *Enquiry*, when he declares his aim to be to 'reduce every thing to the utmost simplicity' but then to return the parts to the whole and 're-examine the principles by the effect of the composition, as well as the composition by that of the principles' (p. v). Analysis must be balanced by synthesis, if we are truly to respect the way things are.

For Burke's *Enquiry*, we should remember, is not a recommendation of scientific method but a philosophical study of the imagination. It seeks out 'the genuine face of nature' (p. iv) in the full knowledge that her features are 'not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them' (p. v); and this characteristic sense of the mystery of human nature and the difficulty of human enquiry produces a scientific book structured upon the quite unscientific paradox that words may be used without ideas, a book devoted to a more holistic vision than was common in that age of tabulation and 'analytic industry'.[14] Burke's own prose possesses all those virtues of order

[14] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ii.398, a passage similarly exploring synthetic modes of knowing the world.

and clarity that Locke had demanded, but in pursuit of a quite different (though equally legitimate) aspect of linguistic usage: namely, that un-idea'd words may yet have meaning, yet have power. Words, therefore, for Burke, cannot be considered merely as transparencies. They are products of human art in their own right, and both in their figurative and non-figurative uses they act upon us according to their own properties.

It is true, as Stephen Land says, that Burke does not turn from the word to the formal properties of the sentence in order to refute either the atomism or the psychological theory of meaning propounded by Locke. Neither does he allow his appreciation of the play of figurative language in his last chapter to develop into a pre-Wittgensteinian account of the way that words take their meanings from the language-games to which they are called. Yet the fact that Burke did not take these steps, logical as they may seem in retrospect to the linguistic historian, does not make the two major grounds of his disagreement with Locke seem any the less considered or profound. In the first place, Burke believed that we experience the world as much by passion as by reason, and that therefore any account of language must deal with its affective power as well as with its capacity to name ideas; and in the second place, he believed that the meaning of un-idea'd words is secured to us only by the associations of their conventional usage. Locke, of course, had seen this, but with regret, and had sought to improve the imperfections of conventional usage for the sake of the philosophical and scientific élite of his day. Burke, on the other hand, saw nothing to regret, nothing to change; there is none of Locke's criticism of conventional linguistic usage in the *Enquiry*. He is content that language should work not only by the representation of ideas but also by the process of what he calls — in an important word — *substitution*, that is to say, by the use of words 'which by custom have the effect of realities' (p. 333).

This use of a substitutive language, Burke insists, is most frequent in those areas that are most important to us as moral and social beings:

No body, I believe, immediately on hearing the sounds, virtue, liberty, or honour, conceives any precise notion of the particular modes of action and thinking, together with the mixt and simple ideas, and the several relations of them for which the words are substituted; neither has he any general idea, compounded of them; for if he had, then some of those particular ones, though indistinct perhaps, and confused, might come soon to be perceived. But this, I take it, is hardly ever the case. (pp. 314–15)

Language as substitution: the word is an interesting choice in a discussion of representation — always a problematical topic in the eighteenth century — since it has powerful political and theological associations that surely form part of Burke's meaning. In politics a substitute is one who exercises deputed authority, whilst in religion the word points to Christ's sacrificial atonement for human sin; and the connexion between the two is that, in each case, the substitute has power in his own right by virtue of his position as a mediator. Substitutive language too has a similar symbolic power to mediate — and so

too, we might add, does the literature that, like descriptive poetry, operates not by imitation but 'chiefly by *substitution*' (p. 333).

Paine's objection to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement in *The Age of Reason* suggests itself here to make the necessary contrast: Christianity, he says, 'introduces between man and his Maker an opaque body which it calls a redeemer; as the moon introduces her opaque self between the earth and the sun, and it produces by this means a religious or an irreligious eclipse of light. It has put the whole orbit of reason into shade' (p. 28).[15] For Paine, religion, politics and language must each be transparent. In each, there must be what Burke derisively called 'personal representation',[16] with no Word, State or empty names and titles to interpose themselves between the individual reason and nature. Burke was derisive, of course, because it was precisely the opacities of what mediated between man and his world — religion, the state, literature, language — that claimed his respect. To the imperfect human reason, these were the substitutes, the symbols, the social traditions that stood in for the mysteries of nature, existing as powers in their own right and giving shape to both the reason and the passions of man.

We have arrived, through a study of Burke's ideas about language, at the heart of his most characteristic concern: the ways that the limited life of the individual reason is sustained by the customs and opinions of society. For, he wrote in the *Enquiry*, it is certain 'that the influence of most things on our passions is not so much from the things themselves, as from our opinions concerning them; and these again depend very much on the opinions of other men, conveyable for the most part by words only' (p. 335). Locke's interest lay primarily in the individual struggle to understand fact; Burke's lay in the shared social experience of meaning, not only radical but passionate meaning, of which the literary tradition studied in the *Enquiry* and common to the whole of his adopted class was one perfect example. Hence perhaps his interest in the hearer of language rather than its speaker, in language as communication rather than as personal signification; and hence too his avoidance of all those questions about the origins of language that so preoccupied the rest of his century. Burke's concern was with the way things were; and although he initiated no new age of linguistics, his awareness that language, figurative language and literature alike all testified to man's deep dependence upon his social traditions was to bear fruit some thirty years later with the publication of his *Reflections*.

III   *Burke's 'Reflections' (1790) and the Nature of Language*

At one point early in the *Reflections*, Burke turns to the nature of literary representation to image forth the symbolic function of the French monarchy

---

[15] References here are to the Thinker's Library Edition, Watts & Co., London, 1938.
[16] In his 'Speech on a Motion made in the House of Commons, 7 May 1782, for a Committee to inquire into the State of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament', in *Burke's Writing and Speeches*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1906), III, 353.

as mediator between its citizens' affections and their commonwealth — a function deplored by radical philosophy, as Burke begins by reminding us:

On the principles of this mechanic philosophy, our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression, in persons; so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of filling their place. These public affections, combined with manners, are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law. The precept given by a wise man, as well as a great critic, for the construction of poems, is equally true as to states: — '*Non satis est pulchra esse poemata, dulcia sunto.*'[17] (p. 75)

For poems to be beautiful is not enough, they must also be agreeable to us: it came readily to Burke to transfer Horace's dictum from poetry to politics since both were equally the fields of human art, mediating between man and his world. My aim in this section is to trace under three headings the implications for the *Reflections* of Burke's sense of the affinity between poetry and politics. First, I shall discuss its predominantly literary character; second, its epistolary form; and third, its extensive reliance upon figurative language. I shall assume that Burke's purpose in the *Reflections* is indeed to keep alive 'the traditionary language, along with the traditionary policy of the nation' (p. 17) in the face of what Steven Blakemore has called the 'linguistic terror'[18] coming out of France; and I shall discuss instead the paradox, so baffling to Burke's first readers, conservative and radical alike, that the *Reflections* defends tradition by startlingly new means, involving what we might call the *literarization* of political discourse, in furtherance of Burke's insight into the substitutive, mediatory function of language.

First, the literary character of the *Reflections* — something so pronounced that Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* could write of the whole book as a piece of theatre, a sentimental romance, appropriate to an age where 'sensibility is the *manie* of the day' (p. 5).[19] She saw at once the connexion between the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections* and, in the words of James Boulton, indicted Burke as 'an aesthetician who has strayed into the field of political science'.[20] 'All your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility', she told him (p. 6); they are the heartless fancies of privileged vanity in pursuit of wealth.

What Mary Wollstonecraft saw in the *Reflections* was Burke's determination to install the literary sensibility of his class at the heart of political discourse — a move that would marginalize all those nonconformist radicals who by and large lacked the classical literary education of the late eighteenth-century ruling class. She was witnessing the moment of embattlement of that liberal tradition that had been so powerful in Britain since

---

[17] References here are to the Everyman edition, 1910.
[18] Steven Blakemore, 'Burke and the Fall of Language: the French Revolution as Linguistic Event', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17 (1984), 284–307 (p. 291).
[19] References here are to the second edition of 1790.
[20] James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963), p. 170.

1750, trying to humanize 'the remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist',[21] together with those of the Philosopher, by bringing them familiarly into the drawing-room where men (and occasionally women) of different religious and political persuasions might discuss them. It was this tradition that Burke feared he had failed in the *Enquiry*, when he wrote: 'we must often submit the style to the matter, and frequently give up the praise of elegance, satisfied with being clear' (p. iv). But the failure was in something far more fundamental than elegance when in the *Reflections* he described the radical nonconformists as 'the book-keepers of politics' (p. 78) and the common people as 'a swinish multitude' (p. 76). This last phrase, indeed, as E. P. Thompson says, 'vitiates the composure of eighteenth-century polite culture'[22] and reveals the coarseness of its will to power beneath the boasted refinement of its sensibility. The walls of the drawing-room are drawing in; and the literariness of Burke's style bars the door against the challenge of those outside who have no political rights in their country.

The extravagance of the book clearly surprised many of Burke's contemporaries. Even sympathetic readers thought it went too far,[23] whilst radical readers like Francis Stone ridiculed it as 'a mere romance, a poem in prose, or an undefinable whip-syllabub declamation.'[24] Hazlitt, however, saw more deeply into this charge of rhetoric: 'Burke was not a verbose writer. If he sometimes multiplies words, it is not for want of ideas, but because there are no words that fully express his ideas, and he tries to do it as well as he can by different ones'.[25] What was undefinable and therefore nonsensical to Stone in the *Reflections* belonged, in Hazlitt's eyes, to Burke's adventure upon the ineffable. Where contemporary radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft saw only the servant-philosopher's florid defence of his own adopted class, the Romantic radical thirty years later recognized the imaginative power of a style that needed to re-create the world as literature, arming the mind against the abstraction of theory and the poverty of reason. Such a defence was forced upon Burke by fear, the fear that his world would be usurped unless turned powerfully into words; and such was his success that, amongst all the replies he provoked, it is to literature that we must turn — to Blake's *The French Revolution* — to find a work that can match the *Reflections* in the poetry of its reading of man's political history.

Second, the form of the *Reflections* — 'the freedom of epistolary intercourse' which Burke chose to enable him 'to throw out my thoughts, and express my feelings, just as they arise in my mind, with very little attention to formal

---

[21] I quote Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* here as a reminder of the way that Wordsworth was trying to radicalize a longstanding liberal tradition. See *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), I, 141.
[22] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin, 1968), p. 98.
[23] See Fennessy, p. 181.
[24] Quoted in Boulton, p. 199.
[25] William Hazlitt, *Works*, edited by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930–34), VII, 310.

method' (p. 8). This characteristic informality of the letter-form constitutes
a deliberate part of Burke's polemic against the radicals, who duly respon-
ded by finding the *Reflections* (to quote Mary Wollstonecraft again) one of
'those desultory productions where method is disregarded' (p. 3). 'I glow
with indignation' she wrote, 'when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your
slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed first principle to refute' (p. 9).
But this was precisely Burke's point: there was no fixed first principle in what
was misleadingly coming to be called political science. There was only a web
of interconnected threads, each implicated in the other and the whole greater
than the sum of its parts; and hence the weave of Burke's words, sentence by
sentence, paragraph by paragraph, in the literary genre of the letter, whose
informal form and prescribed liberties mediated precisely the nature of the
constitution it described.

It was not only the informality of the letter that attracted Burke, however,
but also its voice; and here, as Olivia Smith has shown, he differed from
conservative contemporaries who increasingly towards the end of the
eighteenth century restricted correct usage 'more to literary texts than to
speech'.[26] Burke's intention was deliberate: to mingle, within the usage of his
own class, the idioms of written and spoken language. Indeed, he recoiled
from the falsity — the *falsetto*, he called it, in cautioning his friend Arthur
Murphy against it — of a written language divorced from everyday speech:

> There is a style, which daily gains ground amongst us, which I should be sorry to see
> farther advanced by the authority of a writer of your just reputation. The tendency of
> the mode to which I allude is, to establish two very different idioms amongst us, and
> to introduce a marked distinction between the English that is written and the
> English that is spoken. This practice, if grown a little more general, would confirm
> this distemper (such I must think it) in our language, and perhaps render it
> incurable.[27]

This belief that a man should write 'the language of good conversation' had
long been at the heart of Burke's liberal creed. As early as 1758, in the
Preface to *The Annual Register*, he had honoured journalism for its 'aptitude to
enter into common conversation';[28] and the remainder of his work, consist-
ing so largely of letters and speeches, was similarly devoted to closing the gap
between the written and spoken English of his class.

This attempted synthesis was Burke's response to an antithesis that
divided his century, and that has been recently explored in Derrida's *Of
Grammatology* as a symptom of contradictions endemic to Western thought:
on the one hand, eighteenth-century conservative thinkers privileged the
written over the spoken word for its authority, whilst on the other hand, the
primitivists (who particularly preoccupied Derrida) privileged the spoken
over the written word for its authenticity. This to Burke was a dangerous

---

[26] Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford, 1984), p. 16. See the whole of Chapter 1 here.
[27] *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. vii, edited by P. J. Marshall and John A. Woods (Cambridge,
1968), p. 502.
[28] *The Annual Register*, vol. i (2nd edition, London, 1761), p. iii.

antithesis. His fundamental concern was with something that concerned neither Locke with his scientific search for linguistic transparency nor, more recently, Derrida with his solipsistic commitment to a linguistic universe. It was with the social and political *relationships* with the real world and its inhabitants that language facilitates — and he saw how much the flexible interaction of spoken and written languages might keep those relationships alive and able to change. His very title, *Reflections ... in a Letter ...*, set at once a conversational tone upon the Lockean ideal of individual rational thought; and the paradoxical union of written and spoken word, as they met in the silent voice of the letter, made the perfect form in which to mediate that further paradox, the unwritten constitution of his country.

Third, the extensive reliance of the *Reflections* upon figurative language — upon what Mary Wollstonecraft called 'the flowers of rhetoric' (p. 6) as opposed to the solid ground of reason. Metaphor was central to Burke's attempt to show the interconnectedness of all the parts of man's social and political life; and the essentially literary nature of his attempt to re-create those interconnexions in prose was particularly obvious to that admiring foreigner who found himself nevertheless perplexed by 'L'energie et Les richesses d'un Stile, qui est plein d'expressions metaphoriques, de mots qui ont un Sens profond, et appartenant a plusieurs pensées, d'allusions multi-pliées par L'abondance des connoissances litteraires de L'auteur et de tournures de phrases qui Sont propres à son genie'.[29] To the radicals, however, metaphor was illustrative, not constitutive, and the points of Burke's highly literary style were to Paine quite pointless.

I know a place in America called Point-no-Point; because as you proceed along the shore, gay and flowery as Mr Burke's language, it continually recedes and presents itself at a distance before you; but when you have got as far as you can go, there is no point at all. Just thus it is with Mr Burke's three hundred and fifty-six pages. It is therefore difficult to reply to him. But as the points he wishes to establish, may be inferred from what he abuses, it is in his paradoxes that we must look for his arguments.[30]

Here Paine spoke more truly than he knew: for Burke used paradox to break open old habits of mind and metaphor to extend them into new relationship.

Burke, however, does not comment upon his own use of metaphor within the text of the *Reflections* — maybe because, in the Longinian tradition of his time, he thought of metaphor as nothing more than a figure that belonged to passionate expression. But he does speak, with precision, of 'the spirit of philosophic analogy' (p. 32). Even as a young man, drawing up *A Plan for Arguing*, he had discussed analogy as one of the two ways to convince another man of some 'natural truth': 'Arguments concerning the Nature of any being can only be taken from the Investigation of its Properties and the Analogy

[29] *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. VI, edited by Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith (Cambridge, 1967), p. 222.
[30] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (Penguin, 1969), p. 71. All references here are to this edition.

they bear to each other.'[31] Analogy here means that resemblance between properties that may serve as ground for presumptive reasoning about them; and such analogical reasoning differs from metaphor in that, whilst metaphor affirms those relationships which exist subjectively in the mind of the individual observer, analogy affirms the relationships which exist objectively in the real world. Foucault has written with vivid poetry of the power of analogy in medieval thought to 'extend, from a single given point, to an endless number of relationships' (p. 21), leaving man at home in a world rich with his kindred and affinity; and such analogical thinking survived long into the methodology of eighteenth-century science, where we find what Mark Loveridge has described as an obsessive habit 'of taking all-pervasive universal patterns and trying to re-create them in the smaller world of man'.[32] Still, though more coolly than before, the world might feel friendly to man. It was not until the time of the Romantics, when poetry was elevated into the antithesis of science, that metaphor was left to do the work of analogy and man to make his own home in the world. The psychoanalyst Harold Searles has written that metaphor 'kindles in us, momentarily a dim memory of the time when we lost the outer world'.[33] Tantalizingly, metaphor now intimates both relationship and separation, both the power and the vulnerability of our subjectivity; it is the ambiguous agent of that newly important category, literature, itself ambiguous, which in Foucault's words again has become 'that which compensates for (and not that which confirms) the signifying function of language' (p. 44).

Burke comes at the turning-point; and when he invokes 'the spirit of philosophic analogy' to manifest the English constitution as 'an *entailed inheritance*' (p. 31), demonstrating how 'we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood' (p. 32), he still feels confident that his figures of speech have a religious authority. 'Art is man's nature', he wrote;[34] the state was a work of art that co-operated with the divine workmanship of nature, and so too should his *Reflections*. In its literariness and its use of analogy, it should mediate the truth of things, establishing the bond between mind and nature that would draw out the harmony of the universe. However, Burke's new defence of the old constitution relied heavily upon an idealization of its very real faults. He transformed the world into words, and the wordiness of his endeavour provoked dissent; and yet there is no room in the *Reflections* for disagreement. Language as transparency? or as mediation? The new sense of language as mediation entertained by Burke offered more scope for subjectivity and relativism than he was prepared to allow, in his role as servant–philosopher to a class whose imperfections he could clearly

---

[31] Edmund Burke, 'A Plan for Arguing', in *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*, edited by H. V. F. Somerset (Cambridge, 1957), p. 45.
[32] Mark Loveridge, *Laurence Sterne and the Argument about Design* (London, 1982), p. 94.
[33] Harold Searles, 'The Differentiation between Concrete and Metaphorical Thinking in the Recovering Schizophrenic Patient', in *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects* (New York, 1965), p. 583.
[34] Quoted in Fennessy, p. 70.

see but whom he idealized rather than denounced; and hence the usefulness to him of the Lockean vocabulary of meaninglessness, emptiness, obscurity, superstition and so on, in order to denounce the radicals as mistakers and distorters of truth. The traces of Locke's rationalist language-theory lie contradictorily alongside the more literary intimations of Burke in the *Reflections*, but they work to the same end as his religion and philosophy: to anathematize dissent and to preserve a *status quo* which, despite the contradictions in which it involved him, he could never bring himself to disown.

IV   *Paine and the Radical Concept of Language*

If Burke attempted to move the literary imagination of his class to the centre of political life, Paine attempted to marginalize it again. There were many reasons for this: a radical distrust of imagination; an uncompromising valorization of reason over passion; and a perception that the literary sensibility so prized by Burke could only reinforce the political dominance of the eighteenth-century élite over the rest of the people. But each of these reasons is in its turn dependent upon Paine's prior commitment to the traditional Lockean belief that language ought to be transparent. 'Learning does not consist, as the schools now make it consist, in the knowledge of languages', he wrote, satirizing the classical literary education of the rich, 'but in the knowledge of things to which language gives names';[35] and all language that draws attention to itself and away from things is for Paine a usurpation upon the common rights of reason. This is Locke politicized; and so what we shall find in Paine is the paradox of a new political language resting upon old linguistic theory — a further instance of that irony noted by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that revolutionaries have conservative imaginations, that (as he put it) 'the beginner who has learned a new language always retranslates it into his mother tongue'.[36]

It came naturally to Paine to describe the mind in political terms; and his model is the surprisingly traditional one of checks and balances. Human rationality, he argues in 'An Essay on Dream', prefixed to Part the Third of *The Age of Reason* (pp. 175–78), depends upon a proper constitutional balance between the three great faculties of 'IMAGINATION, JUDGMENT, and MEMORY'; whilst dream, in contrast, is the activity of imagination unchecked by either judgement or memory. Itself seemingly unsleeping, the imagination is for Paine the source of all mental energy — and as such, as so often in Western thought, dangerous. Blake was perhaps the truer revolutionary when, paradoxically, he satirized the typical docility of religious goodness and praised evil as 'the active springing from energy'.[37] To the rationalist Paine, however, the energy of unchecked imagination was a

---

[35] *The Age of Reason*, p. 33.
[36] Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Surveys from Exile* (Pelican Marx Library, 1973), p. 147.
[37] William Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', Plate 3.

mob-activity of mind. 'If the judgment sleeps while the imagination keeps awake,' he wrote, 'the dream will be a riotous assemblage of misshapen images and ranting ideas . . . The master of the school is gone out, and the boys are in an uproar'. What particularly fascinated Paine about dream is its seeming dramatic potential, the fact that the dreaming mind seems to possess the power 'to become the agent of every person, character, and thing of which it dreams'; and yet, of course, 'it acts all these parts itself'. As Charles Rycroft puts it, 'dreaming is private, reflexive self-to-self communing';[38] and so it exists in Paine's prose as a parody of the true business of a commonwealth, a kind of solipsistic Pandaemonium where 'it may rationally be said that every person is mad once in every twenty-four hours'.

At the start of *The Age of Reason*, Paine recapitulates how as a schoolboy he had consciously renounced a talent for poetry 'as leading too much into the field of imagination' (p. 39); and his two major works, *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, confirm this initial act of renunciation. In their joint attack upon state and church, they set out to demystify the establishment politics and theology of the time, to disperse the dreams upon which they rest and to reintegrate imagination into the harmony of a republican rationalism. *Rights of Man* follows Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* in its criticism of Burke's literariness in the *Reflections*. 'He degenerates into a composition of art, and the genuine soul of nature forsakes him' says Paine (p. 73) — an art of necessity formless since 'when a man in a long cause attempts to steer his course by anything else than some polar truth or principle, he is sure to be lost' (p. 138). Therefore, Paine concludes, Burke's genius, like that of the country he seeks to defend, is 'without a constitution' (p. 97). He is 'a dreamer of dreams' (p. 159), infatuated with a chimera of his own creation; for 'monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, are but creatures of imagination' (p. 164) beside the substantial reality of a republic. They are empty words which, like 'the unmeaning name of king',[39] signify nothing to be found in nature. *The Age of Reason* in similar fashion attacks the empty scriptural and ecclesiastical words out of which Christianity has been built. It is for Paine a religion founded in dream and vision, and filled with fables, legends, stories, romances, theatrical farces, absurdities, quibbles, contradictions and lies, all of them perpetuated by the unholy trinity of Mystery, Miracle and Prophecy on behalf of Power and Privilege. Paine translates the Hebrew word for *prophet* as *poet* — that is, a professional romancer — and finds in *The Book of Isaiah* an epitome of all those literary flourishes, structural deficiencies and figurative caprices that were his aversion in the Bible. 'It is the wildness of his style, the confusion of his ideas, and the ranting metaphors he employs, that have afforded so many opportunities to priestcraft in some cases, and to superstition in others, to impose these defects upon the world as prophecies of Jesus Christ' (p. 194).

[38] Charles Rycroft, *The Innocence of Dreams* (London, 1979), p. 46.
[39] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Penguin, 1976), p. 67.

It was here, in the concept of superstition, that Paine, the Quaker's son, found the language he needed to stigmatize those words and rhetorical figures that interposed themselves between reason and nature, between man and his God — words not transparent but opaque, reflecting back an image in which power could congratulate itself and poverty learn its subjection. Here indeed is the rapt self-to-self communion of the dreaming imagination, lost in the nightmare of history. Denouncing the imagined right of the crown to make both war and peace, Paine wrote in *Rights of Man*:

In England, this right is said to reside in a *metaphor*, shown at the Tower for sixpence or a shilling apiece: So are the lions; and it would be a step nearer to reason to say it resided in them, for any inanimate metaphor is no more than a hat or a cap. We can all see the absurdity of worshipping Aaron's molten calf, or Nebuchadnezzar's golden image; but why do men continue to practise themselves the absurdities they despise in others? (p. 99)

The imagery by which Burke sought to mediate between man and his world was to Paine idolatry, the source of political servitude.

Against such idolatry, Paine set the analytic transparency of good prose and the structured argument of scientific or mathematical demonstration. This connexion between grammar and government ran deep in the eighteenth century, as might be expected of a society whose ruling élite both identified and perpetuated itself by its cultural privilege. It is made throughout the Preface to Johnson's *Dictionary*, and also in the proud radical boast of Thomas Spence at his trial in 1800, describing the improvements he had brought to both — 'the one by a New Alphabet, and the other by a New Constitution.'[40] Paine makes it too in an extraordinary analogy in *Rights of Man*, describing the irresistible spread of revolution: 'The American constitutions were to liberty, what a grammar is to language: they define its parts of speech, and practically construct them into syntax' (p. 117). Good grammar begets good government: there is but one reality and all the rest is misrepresentation. However, despite Paine's platonic faith in the one true reality, to be communicated by transparency of language, his agonized question still remains: 'why do men continue to practise themselves the absurdities they despise in others?' Clearly, truth and transparency of language are not enough; and in fact, as the foregoing quotations show, Paine too needed to rely upon paradox, metaphor and analogy to re-create in words a world where, for example, the name of king might have no meaning — and for such political idealization, such imaginative re-creation, he had no room in his old-fashioned linguistic theory.

Paradoxically, the attempt to complete at the end of the eighteenth century the revolutions begun in the middle of the seventeenth century relied upon the linguistic theory that had evolved in part to halt the course of those earlier revolutions. A language for political transformation was sought in a theory evolved to aid political consolidation by the cultivation of scientific

[40] Quoted in Olivia Smith, p. 99.

observation; and yet there is an appropriateness here too, since Paine's radicalism is the political face of a *laissez-faire* capitalism that confirmed the Cartesian split between man as subject and the objects in the outer world that were there for his study and use. Thus the controversy between Burke and Paine is not simply to be considered, as Steven Blakemore considers it, in terms of a conservative versus a new language; for it is Burke who, defending the old, evolves new linguistic understanding where Paine, promoting the new, adheres to the old. R. R. Fennessy's estimate of the two men is as true of their linguistic as of their political philosophy: 'Politically speaking, Paine passes for a rebel, and Burke for a conservative; but on the intellectual level, the roles are reversed: it is Burke who revolts against the commonly held political ideas of his day, while Paine appears as their sturdily orthodox defender'.[41] It is an instructive paradox: the radical conservative and the conservative radical — a paradox that the Romantic poets were to attempt to resolve in their piecemeal search for a new linguistic theory that could serve the poetry of a republican politic.

v   *Conclusion: towards a Romantic Theory of Language*

An attempt to trace the development of eighteenth-century linguistics into the Romantic period might well begin with this letter of Coleridge to Godwin in 1800:

I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them . . . Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? & — how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their Growth? — In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of *Words* & *Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too.[42]

In the same year, when both men were evidently meditating and discussing the nature of language, Wordsworth listed a number of reasons in defence of what he called the 'apparent tautology' of *The Thorn*: 'Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion'.[43] Words are now no longer transparencies: they are things in their own right, symbols participating in the world which they articulate. If no longer objective evidence of man's kinship with the world, as Foucault claims they were in medieval times, they are nevertheless powers in and through which our subjectivity may extend its affinity in that world. The names by which we know people, places and things — be it Michael, Grasmere or THE EVENING STAR — constitute part of our imaginative, intellectual and emotional relationship with them. They are

[41] Fennessy, p. 253.
[42] *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Earl Leslie Griggs, 4 vols (Oxford, 1956–71), I, 625–26.
[43] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt, 5 vols (second edition, Oxford, 1952), II, 513.

powers that a poet might wield, in that real area *between* subject and object where so much of our living is done, and which in the paucity of our language Wordsworth was driven to describe in metaphor — the metaphor of the marriage-bed in which the relationship between mind and nature might be consummated,[44] and the alienation of the Cartesian split healed over.

Burke, I have argued, was struggling towards such an understanding of words as things, powerful in mediation because of the associations conferred upon them by social use. Paine and his fellow-radicals grasped this and attacked him for his superstitious veneration of social conventions which, they believed, usurped the rights of individual reason. What is interesting about Wordsworth and Coleridge here is that, caught up in the strange political cross-currents of that time, they were nevertheless able fully to understand and articulate what Burke could not and, for one brief and valuable moment, to turn it to radical ends.

[44] In *Home at Grasmere*, edited by Beth Darlington (New York, 1977), MS.B. ll. 996–1014.