

# The Political Economy of Edmund Burke

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CONVENTIONAL WISDOM has it that Edmund Burke was, as an economic theorist, a devotee of laissez faire. William C. Dunn, Emmet John Hughes, D. Barrington, Frank Petrella, and Isaac Kramnick,<sup>1</sup> among others, have written on Burke's economic principles in this vein, though with varying nuances and varying measures of subtlety. Recognizing the traditional misreading of Adam Smith as a facile laissez-faire economist, some have designated Burke the substitute for Smith's mistaken image. Others have discerned an irreconcilable contradiction between Burke's conservative politics and his classical-liberal economics. And yet others have found an accommodation between the alleged contradictions and sketched Burke as an overall classical liberal—a portrait, in fact, which complements that painted by some of his Victorian admirers.<sup>2</sup> Frank O'Gorman has extended this last interpretation to the length of treating Burke's purported laissez-faire economic principles as the basis of his political and social theory. Thus, O'Gorman informs us that Burke "regarded society as a self-regulating mechanism, a totality in which harmony could be found in the most unequal of relationships. Social harmony was not thus the product of government intervention. It was a function of the market."<sup>3</sup>

Most commentators on Burke's economic principles have relied for their evidence almost entirely on Burke's two essays pertaining more or less exclusively to economic theory—the *Speech on Economical Reform* of 1780 and the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* of 1795. It is the latter in particular, together with one or

two out of context sentences from the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, which has been employed—with seeming incontrovertible reason—to demonstrate the laissez faire nature of Burke's economic ideas. Most readers of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* have concluded that a laissez faire interpretation of Burke's economics is unavoidable; the unmitigated and intemperate advocacy of laissez faire is blatant. "To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of government,"<sup>4</sup> Burke there proclaims. Moreover, Burke does not hesitate to describe labor as "a commodity like every other." It is "an article of trade . . . Labour must be subject to all the laws and principles of trade, and not to regulations foreign to them."<sup>5</sup> Burke writes further of men "pursuing their own selfish interests, to connect the general good with their own individual success" and of the need to resist the temptation to succumb to the view "that it is within the competence of government . . . to supply to the poor, those necessities which it has pleased Divine Providence for a while to withhold from them."<sup>6</sup> For Burke, the state should restrict its concern to "the exterior establishment of its religion; its magistracy; its revenue; its military force . . . to everything that is truly and properly public."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, these excerpts from *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* encourage us to characterize Burke as an image of the traditional representation of Adam Smith—a representation which, as is now generally recognized and as any careful reading of the *Wealth of Nations* (and even a scanty perusal of the *Theory of Moral Senti-*

ments) would confirm, is a mere caricature of the complex reality. It is, indeed, not difficult to read Burke as once Smith was read. For example, Emmet John Hughes, apparently relying on the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* alone for his evidence, jumps to the conclusion that Burke's philosophy is "a simple system of natural liberty."<sup>8</sup>

Most exegetes of Burke's politics have chosen to ignore his economics or, more commonly, to mention them in passing as a separate and unrelated category, as though it were possible to divorce the two. Frank O'Gorman seems to have been the first to have grasped the bull by the horns and recognized the necessity of including Burke's views on economics within any understanding of his politics. In like vein, it was with Frank Petrella's analyses that we first encountered an appraisal of Burke's economics which takes his political principles and practices into account. Both the earlier and most later commentators failed to grapple with the apparent contradiction between Burke's alleged laissez faire economics and his conservative politics.

If we follow the lead of O'Gorman and Petrella in treating Burke's politics and his economics as an interrelated whole, as in all conscience we are bound to do, prima facie three interpretations appear plausible: 1. Burke was a classical-liberal thinker, espousing both classical-liberal economic and political principles. In essence, this appears to be the conclusion of both Frank O'Gorman, who describes Burke as constructing "a non-interventionist philosophy of government"<sup>9</sup> and Frank Petrella, who writes of "a more apparent than real contradiction between [Burke's liberal] pronouncements on the laws of economy and his practice of the art of politics."<sup>10</sup> 2. There is an irreconcilable antagonism between Burke's wholly "bourgeois" (liberal) economics and his predominantly "aristocratic" (conservative) politics. This is the interpretation of Isaac Kramnick, who de-

scribes Burke as "an ambivalent conservative"<sup>11</sup> 3. Burke held a rather more complex and subtle theory than he is usually given credit for (and than one could possibly imagine from a reading of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* alone), and one which is, in fact, compatible with the more customary conservative interpretation of his politics.

Burke's apparent espousal of laissez faire economics may be seen on closer investigation to entail a theory of discriminatory interventionism which has constituted the Anglophone conservative view more or less consistently since the Glorious Revolution of 1688. I have argued elsewhere and on more than one occasion<sup>12</sup> that conservatism has been the preservation of the most orderly, disciplined and manly elements of what the past has been becoming, and that in the Anglophone nations, ever since Anglophone conservatism's early development through Halifax and Bolingbroke, among the tenets to be preserved have been those of the rule of law, limited government, individual liberty and a measure of capitalism. Nonetheless, Anglophone conservatism is misunderstood if it is not recognized that the conservative view always involved a critical interpretation of classical liberalism, denying its excesses, its abstractions and its rationalism, and eschewing its failure to recognize the necessity of the past to the present and the future. Further, the conservative variant of classical liberalism insisted that liberty without order, without honor, without virtue, without discipline, without morals, without duty, without religion, without responsibility, was no liberty at all. It was, in Burke's words, "virtuous liberty," "a manly, moral, regulated liberty," "liberty, soberly limited, and defined with proper qualifications," which was the goal.<sup>13</sup>

Quite unlike the continental European conservatism of a Joseph de Maistre, a Louis de Bonald or an Adam Müller, Anglophone conservatism proved no apolo-

gist for despotism, did not extol imaginary virtues of feudalism or mediaevalism (although some romantics such as Wordsworth and the young Disraeli rejected the excesses of infant industrialism in nostalgic terms), was in fact never an advocate at all of the Platonic unitary paternalism espoused by some European conservatives. What needs to be demonstrated, then, is not that Burke's economic principles were somehow a denial of the basic premises of classical-liberal economics (they were not), but that there is in, and related to, Burke's ideas of political economy a critical attitude toward the excesses, abstractions and rationalism of classical liberalism similar to that present in his politics.

It must be conceded immediately that in his *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* Burke comes perilously close to the rationalistic abstractions which he denounces elsewhere as "barbarous metaphysics," as "the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction."<sup>14</sup> When Burke writes of the "mischiefs" men "would do in their country, through their confidence in systems"<sup>15</sup> he could well have been writing of his own shortcomings in the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. If a "certain intemperance of intellect [was] the disease of the time, and the source of all its other diseases"<sup>16</sup> Burke succumbed temporarily to the virus.

An empathetic student of Burke is puzzled when he first reads *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. He wonders whether William Lecky was right after all to imagine that in Burke's later years his "mind was profoundly and radically diseased," whether Henry Buckle possessed some special insight when he remarked that "during the last few years of his life, [Burke] fell into a state of complete hallucination." For these Victorian rationalists Burke went somehow incomprehensibly astray when he denounced the French revolution. By contrast, the conservative scholar will find much of Burke's later work his most inspiring—for example,

the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* itself, the *Debate on the Army Estimates*, the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, and the *Letter to a Noble Lord*. Nonetheless, he will find *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* an enigma, an aberration. It is decidedly out of place in the Burkean scheme of things. There is something essentially un-Burkean about it.

But it is not because of the classical-liberal direction of the thought therein—not because of its approval of capitalism, limited government and individual liberty. It is because of the lack of that critical attitude to the excesses, abstractions and rationalism of simplistic classical liberalism which distinguishes Burke's writings elsewhere and which provides the justification for treating Burke as an original and profound political thinker.

What differentiates the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* from Burke's other major works is the failure to emphasize the primacy of circumstance, the dangers of generalization, the values of prudence, barter, compromise and moderation, and the virtue of relying on instinct and prejudice. Nor does Burke there offer his usual reminders of balance as an appropriate policy principle, of political and economic decisions sometimes being choices between evil and evil, of the necessity of tolerating some evils lest greater evils be encouraged, or of the prevailing naïveté to be avoided that there are necessarily solutions to problems to be found if only we try hard enough. Nonetheless, because these views are expressed elsewhere with such consistency, clarity and emphasis, it would encourage a serious misunderstanding of Burke if *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* were read outside the context of those ideas. Either, we must believe, Burke was somehow not himself when he wrote the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, or the circumstances of the writing impelled a different from normal strategy.

In the opening pages of the *Reflections* we read that circumstances “give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour, and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.”<sup>17</sup> In the *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* we are told that before appropriate policies might be proposed, “I must see all the aids, and all the obstacles. I must see the means of correcting the plan, where correctives would be wanted. I must see the things; I must see the men. Without a concurrence and adaptation of these to the design, the very best speculative projects might become not only useless, but mischievous.”<sup>18</sup> Burke writes further of the “multitude of misfortunes” derived “almost all from this one source, that of considering certain general maxims, without attending to circumstances, to times, to places, to conjunctures, and to actors! If we do not attend scrupulously to all these, the medicine of to-day becomes the poison of to-morrow.”<sup>19</sup> In the light of Burke’s own explicit, manifest and repeated pronouncements, Burke’s economic as well as his political statements must be read in their context. In order to understand Burke’s arguments we must inquire of their circumstance. This does not mean we should ignore the intemperance and rationalism of the generalizations in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. But we should recognize that Burke there offered us generalizations—which he did more often than his reputation as a pragmatist would suggest—without offering us concomitantly his customary cautions about generalization or his usual advice on the significance of the context. We must ourselves provide the warnings and inquire of the circumstances of the writing.

Let us first, however, investigate the message of the *Speech on Economical Reform* to check its consistency with the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* in order to discover whether Burke’s economics

are all of a piece and inconsistent with his conservative politics or whether *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* is different in kind from his other writings, including his other work on economics. The *Speech on Economical Reform* is customarily deemed by interpreters of Burke’s economics as less adamant and extreme than *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* but nonetheless as confirmatory evidence of Burke’s commitment to the classical-liberal doctrine. Isaac Kramnick, for example, claims that “By far the most important statement by Burke of the basic bourgeois principles of a laissez faire state and economic order is found in his essay *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* of 1795.”<sup>20</sup> Having quoted liberally from the essay to demonstrate his point, Kramnick informs us that Burke was “in many ways a man of the new bourgeois age . . . a part of him was firmly at home with the assumptions and mental set of a capitalist society. Parts of Burke’s writings are indistinguishable from parts of Smith’s or Bentham’s. His famous *Speech on Economical Reform* (1780) is a case in point.”<sup>21</sup>

Surely, one may permit Burke an affinity with the new bourgeois and capitalist order without likening his mind to that of the rationalist Jeremy Bentham and without assuming a devotion to the laissez faire doctrine. Try as I might I have been unable to discover one passage, not even one sentence, in the *Speech on Economical Reform* suggestive of laissez faire, of state withdrawal from economic intervention. The argument is, in fact, one of a significant measure of government intervention to ensure economy and efficiency. Yet neither Kramnick, nor other commentators on Burke’s economics, appear to have noted the apparent discrepancy. Indeed, Kramnick uses the two essays to demonstrate what he imagines to be almost the same point—the laissez faire Burke and the bourgeois, capitalist Burke. The two need not be synonymous.

The purpose of his economical reform, Burke tells us, is that "of getting rid of every jurisdiction more subservient to oppression and expense than to any end of justice or honest policy; of abolishing offices more expensive than useful; of combining duties improperly separated; of changing revenues more vexatious than productive into ready money; of suppressing offices which stand in the way of economy; and of cutting off lurking subordinate treasuries."<sup>22</sup> The argument is, indeed, for rationalization, efficiency and impartiality rather than for governmental withdrawal. Rather than leaving to Providence, to the "invisible hand," the task of correcting disabilities, it is the responsibility of government to correct them. Indeed, instances are given in the *Speech on Economical Reform* where government control is to be made more effective. Thus, we are told that reform is necessary because the First Lord of the Treasury has never been "able to take a survey, or to make even a tolerable guess, of the expenses of government for any one year, so as to enable him with the least degree of certainty or even probability, to bring his affairs within compass."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, and more conclusively, Burke states that his policy "weakens no one function necessary to government; but on the contrary, by appropriating supply to service, it gives it greater vigour."<sup>24</sup> Reform was "for the purpose of restoring the independence of Parliament,"<sup>25</sup> not of minimizing government.

Burke is quite explicit that he was not concerned with economy at the expense of all other considerations.<sup>26</sup> He even went so far as to acknowledge the value of the luxury of regal splendor.<sup>27</sup> Prejudice and instinct were to play a part of their normal role. Nor should we read Burke as arguing the classical liberal belief of the harmony of public good being produced out of private discord. To the contrary, "Law, being only made for the benefit of the community, cannot in any one of its parts resist a demand which may compre-

hend the total of the public interest . . . it is better, if possible, to reconcile our economy with our laws than to set them at variance—a quarrel which in the end must be destructive of both."<sup>28</sup> Certainly, economic laws may not be altered, but it is the duty of government to intervene in the economy for the public good insofar as the laws of economics permit that intervention to achieve what it sets out to achieve. Thus, when Burke writes in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* of men "pursuing their own selfish interests, to connect the general good with their own individual success," we must read Burke as recommending that individuals be left unhindered insofar as their pursuit of self-interest is conducive to the public good and to the extent that government intervention would fail to provide for a greater public good. After all, even in the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Burke recognizes that "It is in the power of government to prevent much evil . . ." even though "it can do very little positive good. . . ." Burke is constantly wary of what he calls in the *Reflections* "the presumptuous good intentions of ignorance and incapacity."<sup>29</sup> Intervention is likely to be undertaken by optimistic rationalists when it can be of no value, and is even of considerable harm. We must thus, Burke says, "know how much of an evil ought to be tolerated, lest by attempting a degree of purity impractical" we succeed only in producing "new corruptions." Government intervention is not to be denied in principle. It is, however, to be recommended only when the circumstances are conducive to its success.

While Burke was no apologist for feudalism or mediaevalism—his occasional rhetorical flourishes about "the age of chivalry" are properly understood as nothing more than rhetorical flourishes—while he was no friend to mercantilism and recognized the benefits of free trade, there is nothing in the *Speech on Economical Reform* which should induce us to categorize Burke as a devotee of laissez

faire—if by that is meant that the state should have no role in economic direction. Indeed, the first few pages of the *Speech* are devoted to the doctrine of circumstance, explaining that it is not some general theory but the prevailing conditions of Britain in 1780 which persuade Burke to advocate the course of action he does. In the *Speech* Burke does indeed, offer much more of the critical version of classical liberalism than he does in *Thoughts and Details*. Yet even insofar as abstract economic theory is concerned the differences between the two essays are most significant. It is, then, the circumstances of the *Thoughts and Details* which must be investigated, remembering that, for Burke, it is the “circumstances [which] render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind. Abstractedly speaking, government, as well as liberty, is good.”<sup>30</sup>

We might be tempted to explain the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* as reflective of fifteen years further consideration after the *Speech on Economical Reform*. Yet such an interpretation will not do. In the *Letter to a Noble Lord*, published in the same year as, and after, *Thoughts and Details*, Burke defends explicitly the views propounded in the *Speech on Economical Reform* and indicates his continued belief in a significant measure of government intervention. Thus we are told that “mere parsimony is not economy. It is separable in theory from it; and in fact it may or may not be a part of economy according to circumstances. Expense, and great expense, may be an essential part in true economy. If parsimony were to be considered as one of the kinds of that virtue, there is, however, another and a higher economy. Economy is a distributive virtue, and consists, not in saving, but in selection. Parsimony requires no providence, no sagacity, no powers of combination, no comparison, no judgment. Mere instinct, and that not an instinct of the noblest kind, may produce this false economy in

perfection. The other economy has larger views. It demands a discriminating judgment, and a firm, sagacious mind.”<sup>31</sup> Since this passage and those already quoted from the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* were written within a few weeks of each other, and since the thoughts of the *Letter to a Noble Lord* are, in general, closer to those of Burke’s other works, we are led inexorably to the conclusion that it must be the circumstances of the writing which explain the deviance of the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

The context of the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* was the war against France, the famine and scarcity of goods that ensued, and the bankruptcy of Britain which threatened. Prime Minister Pitt had to be persuaded of present requisite action (or inaction). To alleviate the suffering now would produce only greater suffering in the long run. This was not the time to explain the intricacies and qualifications of the economic arguments. It was the time to be adamant, emphatic and certain. The expression of philosophic subtleties would merely permit the greater influence of one’s political opponents. The man of *phronesis* needed to be advised of the immediate principles of action, not of the philosophical complexities appropriate to the man of *sophia*. Yet Burke could have recognized all this and still not have written with such abandon in the abstract generalities he did. It is, however, consistent with Burke’s correspondence of the time to recognize in Burke’s phrenetic writing the exaggerated feelings of a deeply alarmed man. The excesses and abstractions were consistent with the feelings of an English patriot devoted to the traditions of the British constitution who perceived a most serious threat to the temper of the people and their inimitable way of life.

With less than the precision required of clarity, the modern conservative is inclined to talk the language of individual responsibility in the most general terms when what he usually means is that the

individual should be required to bear greater responsibility for his actions than the state presently demands—and even then only in certain circumstances. He may well believe, for example, that the state too readily assists those who are unwilling to take the responsibility to assist themselves, that individuals should be required to take responsibility for themselves, to take the burden of life on their shoulders. Indeed, he will usually believe that without that burden and that responsibility the individual necessarily loses his dignity, his manhood. Nonetheless, he may well also believe that the individual should not be allowed the responsibility to decide to divorce at will, should not be entitled to have the Lord's prayer abolished in schools, should not be permitted to dress in an unseemly manner in public. The general and abstract language of individual responsibility, however appropriate up to a point, tends to hide the fact that the conservative may really be thinking in terms of duty, discipline and fortitude as contrasted with self-indulgence, license and ease. The generality and abstractness of the language used suggests something other than is warranted. Despite Burke's customary punctiliousness, the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* has to be read in like vein in the light of too easy abstract generalizations born of impending disaster and personal unhappiness<sup>32</sup> which hide the impact of Burke's message. To come to any significantly different conclusion would require us to recognize more than one Edmund Burke—perhaps at the same time.

If we read beyond the superficial message of the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* into Burke's more representative writings, then, what impression do we get of Burke's political economy? In the *Letter to a Noble Lord* Burke refers to his governmental experience "promoting the commerce, manufactures and agriculture of [the] kingdom."<sup>33</sup> And the promotion of that economy was directed to political

ends. "Economy in my plans was, as it ought to be, secondary, subordinate, instrumental. I acted on state principles."<sup>34</sup> In fact, although Burke wrote in *laissez faire* vein with reference to an artificial elevation of the condition of the poor during a period of famine, he nonetheless advocated government intervention in Indian economic reform, the operation of the Navigation Acts, as well as the reorganization of government benefices and numerous other instances. Nor should we imagine that Burke advocated that the poor are necessarily and in all circumstances to be left to fend for themselves. In the *Reflections* Burke assures us that it is "one of the objects of [government] to secure the weak from being crushed by the strong."<sup>35</sup> We are unable to avoid the conclusion that Burke implicitly adds the rider: insofar as the laws of economics permit and insofar as effective self-responsibility will not be irreparably impaired.

Society will always contain "the conflict caused by the diversity of interests, that must exist, and must contend in all complex society."<sup>36</sup> It is not in the purview of government to eliminate that conflict. But with wise and prudent action it may regulate the society by restraining from intervention when the conflicts lead to the public good—when, for example, "the balance between consumption and production makes price"<sup>37</sup>—and by intervening when the public good is hindered in a significant respect through those conflicts without their being offsetting benefits in other respects. "Nothing," Burke tells us, "turns out to be so oppressive and unjust as a feeble government."<sup>38</sup> For Burke, the essence of economics is summed up in the passage already quoted from the *Letter to a Noble Lord*. "Economy is a distributive virtue, and consists, not in saving, but in selection. Parsimony requires no providence, no sagacity, no powers of combination, no comparison, no judgment." Weak government provides no opportunity to exercise the

sagacity, judgment and discrimination which are the distinguishing characteristics of good government.

Burke was decidedly not a laissez faire theorist, despite the apparently incontrovertible evidence of the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. His was a theory of discriminatory interventionism. To understand Burke's economics we need to apply the same critical criteria to classical-liberal economic theory as we appropriately apply to classical-liberal po-

litical theory in the understanding of his principles of politics. Burke approximated both the classical-liberal economic and the classical-liberal political standpoint but from a critical perspective with a greater emphasis on duty, honor, virtue and tradition than that of the classical-liberal proper. With the exception of the aberration of the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* Burke's writings reflect a more complex economic theory than his interpreters have commonly given him credit for.

<sup>1</sup>William C. Dunn, "Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Complementary Contemporaries," *The Southern Economic Journal* (1940-41); Emmet John Hughes, *The Church and the Liberal Society* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1961), Ch. VI; D. Barrington, "Edmund Burke as Economist," *Economica* (NS XXI, 1954); Frank Petrella, "Edmund Burke a Liberal Practitioner of Political Economy," *Modern Age* (Winter, 1963-64) and "The Empirical Basis of Edmund Burke's Classical Economic Liberalism," *Duquesne Review* (10, 1, 1965); Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 157-165. <sup>2</sup>See in particular the biography by Viscount Morley, *Burke* (London: Macmillan, 1888). <sup>3</sup>*Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), pp. 45-48. Quotation at p. 46. <sup>4</sup>*The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906-7, 6 vols.) 6., p. 3. <sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, pp. 6, 10. <sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, pp. 9, 22. <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, pp. 30-31. <sup>8</sup>*The Church and the Liberal Society*, p. 91. <sup>9</sup>*Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy*, p. 47. <sup>10</sup>"Edmund Burke: A Liberal Practitioner of Political Economy," p. 52. <sup>11</sup>"Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative" is the subtitle of *The Rage of Edmund Burke*. <sup>12</sup>See, for example, "The Myth of the Red Tory," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1, 2, 1977, pp. 3-28; and

"The Anglo-Saxon Conservative Tradition," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, XIV, 1, 1980, pp. 3-31. <sup>13</sup>*Works*, 4, pp. 7, 273. <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 255. <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 310. <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 317. <sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, pp. 7-8. <sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 312. <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 314. <sup>20</sup>*The Rage of Edmund Burke*, p. 158. <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 161. <sup>22</sup>*Works*, 2, p. 331. <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, p. 335. <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, p. 379. <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, p. 381. <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, pp. 361f. <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, pp. 359f. <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 2, p. 357. <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 258. <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, pp. 7-8. <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, pp. 53-54. <sup>32</sup>From 1794 on Burke's letters would refer, for example, to "this calamitous time" (letter to his son Richard, Jan. 10, 1794) and would be signed, for example, "Ever your faithful and unhappy friend" (to the Rev. Dr. Hussey, Sept. 26, 1795). Burke was especially despondent after the death of his only son but as the letter to Richard mentioned above indicates, this was not the sole cause of his misery. It should, however, be acknowledged that this is not the sole plausible reading of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. For example, F.W. Raffety, in the Introduction to Volume 6 of the edition of Burke's *Works* cited here, claims that the *Thoughts and Details* "prove his still remarkable grasp of affairs and disprove what his enemies were saying as to his madness . . ." (p. X). <sup>33</sup>*Works*, 6, p. 60. <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, p. 45. <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 197. <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 204. <sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, p. 18. <sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 4, p. 255.

# The Moral Meaning of Flannery O'Connor

HENRY MCDONALD

ONE OF THE COMMON complaints made about religious writers of fiction is that they are innocent of the demands of their craft. Either they sacrifice their artistic integrity to the exigencies of religious dogma, draining their work of interest to anyone outside their own sectarian group. Or they sacrifice their religious integrity to the exigencies of secularism, so weakening the spiritual dimensions of their work that its religious character—aside from a nod to peace and brotherhood—is lost. In either case, the final artistic product is compromised.

Whatever the validity of such criticism regarding most religious writers of fiction, probably few people would apply it to Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic writer who died in 1964 at the age of 39 and whose volume of correspondence, *The Habit of Being*, was recently published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. In neither of the above senses could O'Connor be judged "innocent" of the demands of her craft. Fifteen years after her death, she is generally regarded as one of America's greatest short story writers—the sort of writer whose technical skills are often described as "unsurpassed" and "approaching perfection." Nor is her appeal

sectarian; though her religious base is Catholic, she embraces concerns that are ecumenical.

But while O'Connor effectively transcended sectarianism, she at the same time made few if any concessions to the secularist mentality of those whom she mainly wrote for. O'Connor always worked, as her friend and mentor, Caroline Gordon, put it, "within the terrain of the bull"<sup>1</sup>—that is, on the attack. Queried by a Northerner as to why Southern writers like herself so often write about "freaks," she replied: "Because we are still able to recognize one."<sup>2</sup> Asked what she thought was "stifling the Catholic writer of today," she said, simply, "I think it's the lack of a large intelligent reading audience which believes Christ is God."<sup>3</sup> Such a viewpoint is reflected in her fiction, where techniques ranging from extreme violence to the creation of "grotesques" are used to shock the modern reader into an awareness of a spiritual dimension. Her corpus of fiction, consisting of two novels and about thirty short stories, is in fact a consistent and well-sustained attack on a modern secular world view which, according to O'Connor, relegates spirituality to a