

Edmund Burke

*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is an exploration of the aesthetic differences between the sublime and beautiful. According to Burke, beauty is experienced through reflection, understanding, and reason. Beauty is associated with love—it is pleasing and intelligible. The sublime is, by contrast, a direct link to primal passions. It is unruly, terrifying, and never fully graspable. Beauty represents an object as it is in its serene entirety; the sublime is the experience of an object's pure and unmediated potential.

Burke contrasts pleasure and pain as sensations associated with the sublime and beautiful, pleasure being connected to beauty and pain with the sublime. Pleasure to Burke has no transformative effect upon the person experiencing the sensation. Pleasure is a function of beauty, and is an easier sensation upon the body and mind. Pain is a deep and transformative sensation, connected with terror, fright, and the seemingly contradictory feeling of delight. To make this point, Burke first clarifies the difference between “delight,” a function of the sublime, and “positive pleasure,” a function of the beautiful.

The effect of positive pleasure is that it “quickly satisfies; and when it is over, we relapse into indifference, or rather we fall into a sort tranquility” (34). There is no significant change or growth as a result of positive pleasure. Pain is a more powerful emotion than pleasure and is directly connected to imagination. The idea of pain or

danger, when there is no actual threat of either, can be a pleasurable form of fear.

“Pleasurable fear”—fear experienced from a safe enough distance—is defined by Burke as delight. As a product of the sublime, delight excites the passions and is therefore more affecting than positive pleasure.

Burke asserts that “the great power of the sublime” is that “it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (57). This statement is significant because it explains that the sublime *precedes* the ability to reason or the use of logic. It also posits that an *irresistible force* is inherent the sublime, something larger than human capacity to comprehend on a cognitive or analytical level, an irrational and violent aesthetic experience.

Burke elucidates many factors that lend themselves to the sublime: obscurity, power, privation (vanity, darkness, solitude, and silence), vastness, infinity, magnitude, difficulty, magnificence, extreme light, and loudness, among others. The common denominator shared by all of these elements is the capacity for each to overwhelm and cloud the aesthetic experience to the point that there is no possibility of clarity or complete comprehension of the experience. Upon experiencing an overpowering extent of obscurity, magnitude, or loudness, for example, the person then experiences the terror of the unknown.

The threat of pain overwhelms the senses, and the individual who experiences this terror has no capacity to reason through, fully understanding, or evaluate potential danger. “When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (58-9). Without knowing the full extent

of that which lies ahead, the imagination ignites with the endless possibilities of impending danger. Once the mind is filled with terror, it is then utterly consumed, “it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (57).

The state of being completely overwhelmed by terror or horror is a reaction Burke defines as Astonishment. Astonishment is, “is a state of the soul, in which all motions are suspended with some degree of horror” (57). Astonishment, rather than being considered a negative by-product of fear and terror, is described by Burke as the sublime in its highest degree with the lesser effects of astonishment labeled equally positive terms such as admiration, reverence, and respect.

Burke then elucidates the passions associated with the sublime, and how those passions actually have positive effects on the mind, body, and soul. The ruling principle of the sublime for Burke is terror. Terror and fear are the building blocks of the sublime, for “it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous” (57). Burke finds through the study of languages that synonyms for terror include astonishment, admiration, wonder, and respect. The duality of fear and wonder, terror and admiration are combined within Burke’s aesthetic definition of the sublime and clarify his assertion of its singular power over man’s passions.

The next factor of the sublime described by Burke is obscurity, the state of darkness or the unknown. Obscurity prevents man from knowing any potential danger completely. To illustrate this point, Burke uses examples such as the terror, fear, and dread associated with night; the way despotic governments employ the passion of fear

and keep their leaders as much as possible from the public eye; and the darkness used in religion in heathen temples, dark ceremonies, and places of worship. Burke further uses examples of literature, poetry, and art in which, “the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. He uses Milton as an example as he describes Satan. In the description it is not clear and concise, but rather, “a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused” (62).

Burke also uses painting to clarify the notion of the power in obscurity. Were a painter to attempt to depict the image of hell with an abundance of clear and horrid images of frightful phantoms, rather than depicting something terrifying, the painting might “be clear enough, but I fear might become ridiculous”. It is this notion that the unknown, the mysterious and obscure that are necessary to allow the mind the space for the imagination. As Burke states, “a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea” (63), and the more obscure, the more potential for the awe and terror that accompanies the sublime. Burke states that, “even in painting a judicious obscurity in some things contributes to the effect of the picture; because the images in painting are exactly similar to those in nature; and in nature dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those which are more clear and determinate” (62).

Another factor of the sublime delineated by Burke is infinity. Infinity “has a tendency to fill the mind with delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime” (73). Without the ability to see the limits of bounds of any thing, the eye and the imagination are called upon to continue the line. Without a limit,

the imagination stretches beyond its capacity for cognition or understanding. This can be seen (and is demonstrated by Burke) in whirling motion, the beating of hammers, roaring waters, or equidistant markings on a pole.

Uniformity and succession, called by Burke “artificial infinity,” is consistent with the sublime, as succession repeats is that the parts are continued so long and in such a direction that the imagination extends them beyond their limits. Uniformity maintains a consistency in the progression to allow the imagination to extend into infinity. Infinity, Burke goes on to describe, “causes much of our pleasure in agreeable, as well as our delight in sublime images...in unfinished sketches of drawing, I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing; and this I believe proceeds from the cause I have just now assigned” (77).

Burke makes a case that pain—a fundamental element of the sublime—can also be a source of delight. He explains that labor is necessary to “pass our lives with tolerable satisfaction” (135). Burke asserts that no matter how enticing and appealing the notion of rest and leisure—simple pleasures—initially appear, inactivity is actually the basis of many disorders, both physical and mental. The body at rest loses its vigor, strength, and becomes loose and nervous, “melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder, is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body. The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour.” (135)

Labor to Burke is overcoming difficulties, physical work which engages the muscles—even to the point of feeling pain. He points out that not only is this important to the physical body, but also to the “finer organs” that engage the imagination and mental

abilities, “to have them in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree” (135). This notion of a “proper degree” is significant, for the pain or labor must remain within tolerable degrees, “if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person...they are capable of producing delight, not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror” (136).

This delightful horror, tranquility tinged with terror, is what Burke points to as the strongest of all the passions. Burke makes his point that the idea of pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure. Burke’s goal in this essay was to lay down the principles that distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful.