

## Modern Language Association

---

Burke's Theory concerning Words, Images, and Emotion

Author(s): Dixon Wecter

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Mar., 1940), pp. 167-181

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/458432>

Accessed: 30/03/2010 04:31

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mla>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## VII

### BURKE'S THEORY CONCERNING WORDS, IMAGES, AND EMOTION

EDMUND BURKE'S youthful essay on *The Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757, sets forth a theory that the impassioned language of poetry and oratory may rouse emotion without the entry of any clear images into the mind. This proposal—audacious if read by the light of the Augustan sunset, but prophetic of romanticism—has received occasional notice from historians of criticism because it anticipates Lessing's brilliant attack upon *Wortmalerei* in *Laokoon* (1766). But the way in which Burke seems to have invented his theory from scraps of Locke and Berkeley, left on the battlefield where the contest over abstract ideas had once been waged, has gone apparently unnoticed.

In this essay we find that Burke frequently unites "the power of poetry and eloquence,"<sup>1</sup> and shrewdly analyzes the orator's appeal to emotion.<sup>2</sup> Words, he declares, "are as capable, nay much more capable of making deep and lively impressions than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases."<sup>3</sup> Hence the fascination which the power of rhetoric holds for young Burke. To the faculty of reason he accords short shrift: just as his æsthetic deals with "bodies acting *mechanically* upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses," so his psychology turns upon "the passions" rather than "the languid and precarious operation of our reason."<sup>4</sup> His frankly introspective method considers even

<sup>1</sup> See II, xiii and v, ii in particular. Unless otherwise noted, references are to the text and section-numbering of the Second Edition (1759), whose amplifications make it more satisfactory for general citation.

<sup>2</sup> Burke's assumption of emotional appeal is shown in III, vii and throughout his essay. Professor F. Mirabent Vilaplana, *La Estética Inglesa del Siglo XVIII* (Barcelona, 1927), p. 98, notes a lax and apparently interchangeable use of 'passion,' 'emotion,' and 'affection' throughout Burke's essay, but adds: "De nuestro estudio hemos desprendido que, a pesar del uso indistinto de estos términos, Burke habla de *afección* cuando quiere significar la simple recepción en el espíritu; *emoción*, cuando se refiere a la reacción fisiológica y mental del individuo; *pasión*, cuando significa lo que en términos actuales llamaríamos sentimientos." In discussing the effect of words upon the auditor, Parts II and V, Burke employs all three terms, but in V, iv specifically describes the result of sound or mental image as *affection*. For the sake of simplicity I think we may here speak solely of emotion.

<sup>3</sup> See V, vii. In Addison's papers on "Pleasures of the Imagination" in *The Spectator* in 1712 (to which Burke refers in I, x and II, ix) we find a significant parallel: "Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves" (*Spectator*, ed. Henry Morley [London, 1889-91], p. 601).

<sup>4</sup> III, vii. In II, xiii Burke observes: "I should imagine, that the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed." At several

the emotional effect of words "put together without any rational view," such as *wise, valiant, generous, good, and great*, when spoken apart from any ulterior context in "a warm and affecting tone of voice" (v, iii).

Dr. Samuel H. Monk in his study of the sublime in the eighteenth century writes: "It is against a background of rhetoric then, that the sublime begins to emerge, and it is no matter for surprise that it should take on a certain coloring from its origins."<sup>5</sup> Professor R. S. Crane in his critique of this monograph observes that whereas certain theorists from Dennis to Reynolds wrote of the sublime as the quality par excellence of great masterpieces, essentially a rhetorical approach," Burke sought the sublime not primarily in literature or art, but in a state of mind induced by natural objects.<sup>6</sup> One should, however, qualify Professor Crane's assertion by noting that after Burke has done with solemn temples and storms and high cliffs, the argument veers back wholly to poetry and rhetoric in Part v—not, to be sure, under the tutelage of *ut pictura poesis* and timeworn rules, but in a fresh empiric attempt to consider words as another range of stimuli, which "affect us in a manner very different from

---

points Burke's speculation comes close to the viewpoint of modern behaviorism, and in iv, iii he anticipates the James-Lange theory of the emotions, "when the body is disposed, by any means whatsoever, to such emotions as it would acquire by the means of a certain passion, it will of itself excite something very like that passion in the mind." Cf. James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York, 1896), II, ch. xxv. Lucretius appears to have had an inkling of the same theory in *De rerum natura*, III, 152-160—a passage from which this entire Section in *The Sublime and Beautiful* seems to be loosely adapted. Lessing drew the same inference from his knowledge of the theatre in *Hamburgische Dramaturgie, Werke*, ed. Goering, I, 113.

<sup>5</sup> *The Sublime: A study of critical theories in XVIII-century England*, MLA General Series (1935), p. 84. It is somewhat confusing that on p. 63 the author still gives 1756 as the publication date of *The Sublime and Beautiful*—a long-persistent error, as has now been shown beyond reasonable doubt and as Dr. Monk himself implies, p. 85, n. 3, in citing recent investigation. In Dr. Monk's discussion of oratory one notes as a trivial slip that the name of John Lawson, lecturer on oratory at Burke's alma mater (cf. *D. N. B.*), appears throughout (pp. 24, 107, 250) as Lanson. One might also challenge Dr. Monk's suggestion, p. 92, that Burke's definition of 'astonishment' is paraphrased from Johnson's *Dictionary*. The verbal correspondence is not close, and in view of Burke's own statement in his Preface to the First Edition (in 1757; dropped from all subsequent editions which I have ever seen) that "It is four years now since this enquiry was finished," it seems unlikely that Johnson's lexicon, published 15 April 1755, furnished Burke with any fresh clues about "that state of the soul, in which all the motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (II, i). This theory of the sublime and its emotional state was essential to Burke's whole system of aesthetics. On the other hand the final part of Burke's essay, dealing with words and images, does bear evidence of some revision shortly before 1757. In v, v he alludes to Spence's Preface to Blacklock's *Poems*, published 13 November 1754, as we learn from Ralph Straus, *Dodsley* (London, 1910), p. 352.

<sup>6</sup> *PQ*, xv (1936), 165-167. Crane names Hume, Akenside, Baillie, Gerard, and Reid as sharing Burke's attitude in this respect.

that in which we are affected by natural objects, or by painting or architecture" (v, i). Between this approach, and the mild titillation of the 'pleasures of imagination' in Akenside, Baillie, or Gerard, or even Burke's own conventional flirtation with beauty in Part III, lie a great difference and a new psychological boldness.

How then does Burke advance into this new field? In Part v he begins his inquiry by classifying words "into three sorts"—aggregate, simple abstract, compound abstract.<sup>7</sup> The probable historic background of these categories is not without interest. For at least a century before Burke, the imperfection of words had been complained of by various writers—the beginning of that interest in semantics and the 'meaning of meaning' which is rife today. While French critics of the fine arts had begun to disparage language because of its inferior clarity to painting,<sup>8</sup> English scientists shortly after the death of Bacon started grumbling about its vagueness and inaccuracy when compared with the idiom of mathematics.<sup>9</sup> John Locke, who shared the scientific viewpoint of his age,<sup>10</sup> set about in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to illuminate the relationship of sense-impressions to words and ideas. In two vital respects Locke is no precursor of Burke; he has no patience with rhetoric and high-flown diction, and furthermore obscure imagery is in his view the unhappy result of "dull organs," faint original impressions, or poor memory in the writer or speaker.<sup>11</sup> Yet he does draw up an elaborate

<sup>7</sup> v, ii. He introduces the third category as "compound abstracts," but thereafter speaks of them as "compound abstracts." Among early attempts to classify words with which Burke was certainly familiar, should be noted the twofold system of Aristotle in *Poetics*, XXI. Although his ἀπλοῦν and διπλοῦν may suggest Burke's 'simple' and 'aggregate,' the resemblance is only superficial; Aristotle's division is merely a linguistic convenience, with no reference to psychology.

<sup>8</sup> Burke himself in II, [iv] cites the opinion of Du Bos, "wherein he gives painting the preference to poetry in the article of moving the passions, principally on account of the greater clearness of the ideas it represents." Cf. Du Bos, *Critical Reflections*, trans. Nugent (London, 1748), I, 321. By his paradoxical theory Burke converts this apparent shortcoming into the chief glory of poetry. For the traditional parallel in this regard between poetry and painting, see W. G. Howard, "Ut Pictura Poesis," *PMLA*, XXIV (1909), 40-123, and Cicely Davies, "Ut Pictura Poesis," *MLR*, XXX (1935), 159-169.

<sup>9</sup> For the history of this grievance, with the various proposals to create a scientific *lingua franca*, see R. F. Jones, "Science and Language in England of the Mid-17th Century," *JEGP*, XXXI (1932), 315-331.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fulton H. Anderson, *The Influence of Contemporary Science upon Locke's Method and Results* (University of Toronto, 1923).

<sup>11</sup> See Locke's *Essay*, ed. Fraser, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1894), Bk. II, xxix, 3. Kenneth MacLean, *Locke and English Literature of the 18th Century* (New Haven, 1936), Bk. III, summarizes Locke's doctrine about words and his rebuke of obscure imagery and muddy thinking—with the response which it drew from Addison, Bolingbroke, Fielding, and others. No attempt is here made to connect Locke with *The Sublime and Beautiful*.

system for classifying ideas from which, I venture to suggest, Burke borrowed in devising his three classes of words. Burke's acquaintance with Locke needs little proof, since his essay makes four direct references to the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* in other connections.<sup>12</sup>

First of all, as Locke sets forth in Book II, 'simple' or indefinable ideas include those of existence, power, unity, space, succession, pleasure and pain; they come through the five senses and cannot be invented by the mind, although it may sort them out by 'reflection.' These sensuous impressions correspond in Burke's aesthetic to the effect of natural objects upon the imagination. As Burke explains in the first four Parts of his essay, objects which impress us with their power, vastness or infinity, succession and uniformity, or their effect of 'painful delight' upon the senses, are sublime—while the opposite or complementary qualities are generally associated with beauty. Locke's second class of ideas, the 'complex,' representing a departure from simple sensuous perception into the realm of memory and reasoning, parallels Burke's classification of words, those symbols which have only an arbitrary connection with real objects and which affect us in a different way. Burke defines his *aggregate words* as "simple ideas *united by nature* to form some one determinate composition." *Simple abstracts* are "they that stand for one simple idea of such compositions, and no more," while *compound abstracts* are "the *arbitrary* union of both the others, and of various relations between them, in greater or less degrees of complexity" (v, ii). This is essentially the way in which Locke sorts out his 'complex ideas' in Book II, Chapters xii ff. His division is as follows:

1. *Modes*, which are abstract or dependent concepts, and have no substance save as they refer to some ulterior thing; Locke gives as examples 'triangle,' 'gratitude,' 'murder,' 'beauty.' This category runs parallel with Burke's simple abstracts, which he illustrates by the words 'red,' 'blue,' 'round,' 'square.' Locke's modes and Burke's simple abstracts therefore depend for their reality upon some specific application. Like the figures of plane geometry (upon which both writers draw for their examples), they do not have all the dimensions of reality.

2. *Substances*, that is, ideas of collective qualities. "A combination of the ideas of a certain sort of figure, with the powers of motion, thought, and reasoning, joined to a substance, makes the ordinary idea of a man,"

<sup>12</sup> Burke's essay contains four direct references to Locke's treatise. His section "On Taste," first added in the Second Edition, refers to Locke's *Essay*, II, ix; Burke in a note to I, iii disagrees with the pleasure and pain theory of Locke, II, xx; Burke in IV, xiv again mentions Locke only to disagree with the *Essay*, II, vii; his final reference in V, iii, praising Locke's "usual sagacity" as shown in the *Essay*, I, iii, occurs in the midst of Burke's theorizing about ideas—the discussion in which I am here suggesting a larger and unacknowledged debt.

writes Locke in II, xxii, §14. This class corresponds to Burke's aggregate words, of which he offers as specimens 'man,' 'horse,' 'tree,' 'castle.' Locke's substances and Burke's aggregates are thus bundles of simple attributes "united by nature."

3. *Relations*, such as cause and effect, identity and diversity, along with moral concepts like good and evil. Here we have the counterpart of Burke's compound abstracts, which he represents by such words as 'virtue,' 'honour,' 'persuasion,' 'magistrate' (a curious choice, but Burke evidently means a compound of 'man' and 'justice'). Locke's relations, like Burke's compound abstracts, may spring from syntheses of ideas in the previous classes or from inductive reasoning. Burke goes on to observe that these compound abstracts "are not real essences" (v, ii), and a little later remarks that in ordinary conversation "some words expressing real essences, are so mixed with others of a general and nominal import, that it is impracticable to jump from sense to thought, from particulars to generals, from things to words" (v, iv). This discrimination between essences—which stems of course from Aristotelianism—is part of the texture of Locke's argument in the *Essay*.<sup>13</sup> Burke's glance at this doctrine is even more cursory than his treatment of ideas, but that Locke still looms in the background seems to admit of little doubt.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See the *Essay*, III, iii, §15–18 and vi, §6. Real essence is "the being of any thing" apart from all exterior relationships, while nominal essence is "the artificial constitution of genus and species" which changes as the observer increases his knowledge or accuracy. So far as I know, the only critic who hitherto has suggested Locke's influence upon Burke's aesthetic theories is Mirabent, *op. cit.*, p. 93: "Observamos, también, que la palabra *ideas* tiene la significación lockiana que traducida en términos de la psicología equivale aproximadamente a *presentaciones*. Además, el concepto de la imaginación es de evidente estructura lockiana." It should be added that Burke is of course conscious of the traditional bond between *word* and *idea*, and between *idea* and *image*—and in a qualifying clause added to v, vii in the Second Edition explains his novel "ideas not presentable but by language" by saying, "if they may properly be called ideas which present no distinct image to the mind." Burke may have in mind Berkeley's denial of the existence of general abstract ideas; see below.

<sup>14</sup> David Hartley, *Observations on Man* (London, 1749), I, 276–279, discusses the relation of words to ideas, but I find no conclusive bond with Burke's essay. Hartley divides words into four classes: (1) such as have ideas only, (2) such as have both ideas and definitions, (3) such as have definitions only, (4) such as have neither ideas nor definitions. Although his system grows a little muddled in the exposition, one is reminded of Burke in Hartley's remark that the second class "excite aggregates of simple ideas," and in regard to the third that "mental emotions are apt to attend some of these even in passing slightly over the ear; and these emotions may be considered as ideas belonging to the terms respectively. Thus the very words, *gratitude*, *mercy*, *cruelty*, *treachery*, &c. separately taken affect the mind." On pp. 287–288 he suggests that persons born blind come to use words "as algebraists do the letters that represent quantities," in much the same way as that by which Burke had accounted for the blind poet and physicist in v, v. But Hartley's curt dismissal of aesthetics in II, 253–254, precludes any sympathetic analysis of poetry or impassioned rhetoric.

After setting up his threefold classification of words, Burke maintains that compound abstracts do not raise images in the mind—but that through long use, and association with good or evil or “other interesting things or events,” these words are able to stir emotion merely by “the sound, without any annexed notion” (v, ii). Burke concedes that the other two classes of words may evoke the full cycle from sound to image-forming and thence to emotion, although even here an ellipsis is likely:

But I am of opinion, that the most general effect even of these words, does not arise from their forming pictures of the several things they would represent in the imagination; because on a very diligent examination of my own mind, and getting others to consider theirs, I do not find that once in twenty times any such picture is formed, and when it is, there is most commonly a particular effort of the imagination for that purpose.

How Burke tested the visualizing power of his friends we do not know, but if it was by any such experiment as he proposes to the reader—by offering him, not a passage of poetry or rhetoric, as would seem most relevant, but a sentence about the Danube River in the dullest style of school geographies—then the result would appear to be foregone. Long before Burke's essay, of course, the frequently nebulous effect of words upon the mind had been remarked—but always with blame for the inefficiency of language or of the auditor. Locke himself had written:

*Wisdom, glory, grace, &c.* are words frequent enough in every man's mouth; but if a great many of those who use them, should be asked what they mean by them, they would be at a stand, and not know what to answer: a plain proof, that though they have learned those sounds, and have them ready at their tongue's end, yet there are no determined *ideas* laid up in their minds, which are to be expressed to others by them. (III, x, §3.)

Locke makes this observation with no little contempt, looking upon the symptom as one to be cured; using the classic phrase of Descartes he advises that men “talk of nothing but what they have clear and distinct ideas of” (III, xi, §2). That any one should speak of “judicious obscurity” argue that “a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions,” comment airily that “a clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea,” or cite a passage from Milton with the admiring comment that “in this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree”—would have outraged Locke and the age in which he lived.<sup>15</sup>

Had not Longinus himself—obviously one of Burke's sources<sup>16</sup>—de-

<sup>15</sup> For these quotations see Burke, II, iii and II, [iv]; II, iv; II, [iv]; II, iii.

<sup>16</sup> W. Rhys Roberts in his edition of Longinus (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1907), p. 260, carelessly avers that “Burke's *Sublime and Beautiful* has no manner of connexion with the

clared that the chief purpose of rhetorical imagery is vividness (*ἐνάργεια*), and described the technique of poets and orators as one of image-forming (*εἰδωλοποιεῖν*)?<sup>17</sup> And certainly Dryden had spoken for the Augustans in declaring that "imaging is, in itself, the very height and life of Poetry."<sup>18</sup> Up to the time of *The Sublime and Beautiful*—despite a new taste in poetry which was being set by "the tender, wistful, twilight pensiveness of Gray" and "the self-conscious, deliberate gloom of the Wartons"<sup>19</sup>—no one seems to have dared justify the poets' faith, or to explain it in terms of psychology and aesthetics. Like the innovations in every age of transition, the new fashion needed an apologist to discover that it had been implicit in many great masterpieces since time immemorial. This is what Burke did, in citing Homer, Virgil, and Milton, with their passages of cloudy grandeur. Of Burke's essay Professor W. G. Howard wrote: "Indeed, his view of the function of words [is] a view which I have not found before him in the eighteenth century."<sup>20</sup> Certainly, two reviewers of *The Sublime and Beautiful*, Oliver Goldsmith and Arthur Murphy, were struck by the novelty of this heresy, and

*De Sublimitate*, if indeed it contains a single reference to it." But Burke refers to Longinus by name in his Preface to the First Edition and also in I, xvii. His treatise was on the required reading-list for Trinity College Sophisters in Burke's time, and with obvious interest Burke mentions Longinus twice in undergraduate letters to Shackleton; cf. A. P. I. Samuels, *Early Life, Correspondence, and Writings of Burke* (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 178, 109-110, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Longinus, xv, 1-2. Admitting that the aim of such language is to communicate the speaker's emotion, Longinus stresses the need for clarity in the images which achieve this purpose: *ὅταν ἂ λῆγεις, ὅπ' ἐθουσιασμοῦ καὶ πάθους βλέπειν δοκῆς, καὶ ὅπ' ἕψιν τῶν τοῖς ἀκούουσιν*. It may be worth noting that Dugald Stewart, in challenging Burke's theory of non-visual language in poetry, cites this particular dictum from Longinus; see *Collected Works*, ed. Sir W. Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1850), II, 447. Furthermore, Longinus—showing that simple heliotropism which one associates with the outdoor life and lucid thought of ancient Greece—tends always to symbolize his sublime in terms of radiance, whether he is citing the *fiat lux* of Genesis as the supreme verbal instance, or comparing the "pervading splendor of sublimity" to the blazing sun (xvii, 2). Burke's praise of obscurity in natural objects and in the imagistic quality of poetry, and his contention that "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light" (II, xiv), indeed would have puzzled his Greek mentor.

<sup>18</sup> *Essays*, ed. Ker (Oxford, 1926), I, 186.

<sup>19</sup> R. D. Havens, "Changing Taste in the 18th Century," *PMLA*, XLIV (1929), 528.

<sup>20</sup> "Burke among the Forerunners of Lessing," *PMLA*, XXII (1907), 609. In J. G. Cooper's *Letters concerning Taste* (London, 1755), pp. 46-47, there is at least a possible anticipation of Burke's theory. After quoting with rapture

"How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon that bank,"

Cooper repeats the comment of a friend that "this adventitious beauty of Shakespear's seizes the Imagination at once, before we can reduce the Image to a sensible Object, which every meer Picture in Poetry ought for a Test of its Truth to be reduc'd to."



joined issue; to them its author replied by buttressing his arguments in the Second Edition.<sup>21</sup>

So far it appears that no one has proposed a source where Burke might have discovered his clue for this theory of non-imagistic language which rouses emotion—namely in the Introduction to Bishop Berkeley's *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, first published in 1710. Here Berkeley is denying the existence of general abstract ideas, a question which grew out of the epistemology of Locke mentioned above. In the course of his argument Berkeley makes this observation:

I entreat the reader to reflect with himself, and see if it doth not often happen, either in hearing or reading a discourse, that the passions of fear, love, hatred, admiration, disdain, and the like, arise immediately in his mind upon the perception of certain words, without any ideas coming between. At first, indeed, the words might have occasioned ideas that were fitting to produce those emotions; but, if I mistake not, it will be found that, when language is once grown familiar, the hearing of the sounds or sight of the characters is oft immediately attended with those passions which at first were wont to be produced by the intervention of ideas that are now quite omitted.<sup>22</sup>

It is plain from other passages that Berkeley uses *idea* to signify "images of things," "a congeries of sensible impressions."<sup>23</sup> In the midst of the philosopher's more audacious paradoxes one might easily overlook this casual suggestion—that the images once attached to words may fade out, but leave a residue of the original emotion.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is the exact

<sup>21</sup> For Goldsmith's disagreement see *The Monthly Review*, May 1757, p. 477: "Distinction of imagery has ever been held productive of the sublime. The more strongly the poet or orator impresses the picture he would describe upon his own mind, the more apt will he be to paint it on the imagination of his reader." Murphy in *The Literary Magazine*, II (1757), 188, denied the truth of Burke's psychology: "It is a disposition to feel the force of words, and to combine the ideas annexed to them with quickness, that shows one man's imagination to be better than another's." Burke's rebuttal in the Second Edition consists of the distinction between "a clear expression, and a strong expression," and in the argument stressing the sympathetic rather than the visual potency of words (v, vii). For a summary of Burke's debate with his critics see H. A. Wichelns, "Burke's Essay and its Reviewers," *JEGP*, XXI (1921), 645–661. Gibbon, an interested reader of *The Sublime and Beautiful* in November 1762, summarizes Burke's theory about words and images, but with scant comment, in his *Journal* (ed. Lowe), pp. 179–181. This theory was pointed out as one of the prime absurdities of Burke's essay in F. Plumer's anonymous *Letter from a Gentleman to his Nephew at Oxford* (1772), p. 9 *et seq.*

<sup>22</sup> Berkeley's *Works*, ed. Fraser (Oxford, 1901), I, 252.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274 and 276. See also Fraser's note on 'ideas' in the passage cited above, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> Ignoring the residue of emotion assumed by Berkeley—which of course is essential to Burke's æsthetic theory—David Hume writes in terms which are hardly an advance upon Locke: "I believe every one, who examines the situation of his mind in reasoning, will agree with me, that we do not annex distinct and compleat ideas to every term we

contention of Burke's essay, v, ii; of the more generic terms in our daily speech he writes—

Such words are in reality but mere sounds; but they are sounds, which, being used on particular occasions, wherein we receive some good, or suffer some evil, or see others affected with good or evil; or which we hear applied to other interesting things and events; and being applied in such a variety of cases that we know readily by habit to what things they belong, they produce in the mind, whenever they are afterwards mentioned, effects similar to those of their occasions. The sounds being often used without reference to any particular occasion, and carrying still their first impressions, they at last utterly lose their connection with the particular occasions that gave rise to them; yet the sound, without any annexed notion, continues to operate as before.

Burke admits that in response to most words a certain degree of visualization can be achieved: "I know very well that the mind possesses a faculty of raising such images at pleasure; but then an act of the will is necessary to this; and in ordinary conversation or reading it is very rarely that any image at all is excited in the mind" (v, v). One may compare Berkeley, in the *Third Dialogue of Hylas and Philonous*: "The ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct; they have, besides, an entire dependence on the will."<sup>25</sup>

Berkeley's writings were certainly accessible to young Burke in the days when *The Sublime and Beautiful* was being written.<sup>26</sup> Berkeley was Bishop of Cloyne during Burke's undergraduate career at Trinity College, Dublin, but his memory was still green at the alma mater where he had been Fellow and Senior Proctor, and was still her intellectual pride.<sup>27</sup> One of Burke's college letters refers to the tar-water craze which seized upon Dublin in 1744 after the publication of *Siris*,<sup>28</sup> and although Berkeley is not mentioned in *The Sublime and Beautiful* his influence is per-

---

make use of, and that in talking of *government, church, negotiation, conquest*, we seldom spread out in our minds all the simple ideas, of which the complex ones are compos'd" (*Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge [Oxford, 1896], p. 23).

<sup>25</sup> *Works*, I, 452; the observation however verges upon the commonplace. An able discussion of seventeenth-century theories of the imagination, as the faculty and source of image-making, will be found in Donald F. Bond, "The Neo-Classical Psychology of the Imagination," *ELH*, iv (1937), 245-264.

<sup>26</sup> Burke's statements in later years to French Laurence and Edmond Malone indicate that the essay was begun during the author's undergraduate days; see Prior's *Life of Burke* (London, 1854), I, 47 and the same biographer's *Malone* (London, 1860), p. 154.

<sup>27</sup> Berkeley died in Oxford in 1753 and was buried beneath an inscription written by Dr. William Markham, Burke's early London friend and a critic of *The Sublime and Beautiful*; cf. Sir C. Markham, *Memoir of Archbishop Markham* (Oxford, 1906), p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of 5 July, 1744, in Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 49. Late in life, in the Fourth of his *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, *Works* (London, 1815), ix, 24, Burke refers to "the excellent queries of the excellent Berkeley."

haps suggested in several scraps of scientific fact or speculation.<sup>29</sup> And finally Boswell tells us that Burke in his youth, before "politicks 'turned him from calm philosophy aside'," with a view to refutation had made a thorough study of Berkeley's system—that extreme idealism which so deeply disturbed the eighteenth century, and to which Johnson could retort only by a *coup de pied*.<sup>30</sup>

Berkeley did not apply his theory about imageless words and emotions to the practice of poetry or oratory. Here Burke seems to have a real claim to originality, though in pursuing his inquiry he may have been inspired by those Continental experiments in sense-perception, words, and imagery which the fame of Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749) and *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751) had spread abroad. The celebrated case of blind Professor Saunderson who lectured on light and colors of which he had intellectual but not visual knowledge (a marvel which fascinated both Diderot and Burke), and the similar instance of the blind poet Blacklock whose description of visible objects (by hearsay, as it were) Burke had read as an undergraduate,<sup>31</sup> served to arouse curiosity about the processes of perception. Some of this new evidence cast doubt upon the old easy-going assumption that the senses were sharply distinct from one another and also that words had much the same values for all men.<sup>32</sup> This fresh scepticism was keener upon the Continent than in

<sup>29</sup> Burke's ideas about optics in IV, ix, with his assumption of "a vast number of distinct points" of radiation acting upon the retina, recall Berkeley's "visible points or *minima visibilia*" in the *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (Berkeley's Works, I, 169), although the idea later becomes trite. Burke's discussion of the smoothness of oils as the vehicles of salts, and even his application of the rare word "vellicate" (IV, xx-xxi), may be compared with *Siris*, in *Works*, III, 164.

<sup>30</sup> For Burke's study of Berkeley see *Life of Johnson*, Hill-Powell ed., I, 471-472. From such biographers as Bisset, *Life of Burke*, 2nd ed. (1800), I, 33, and Prior, *Burke*, I, 72-73, we hear that Burke had made his careful study of Berkeley in hope of being appointed *circa* 1752 to the chair of logic at Glasgow, vacated by Adam Smith. In "The Missing Years in Burke's Biography," *PMLA*, LIII (1938), 1109, I have discussed the evidence for this highly doubtful rumor.

<sup>31</sup> Letter of 5 March, 1747, in Samuels, *op. cit.*, p. 126. An account of this new speculation on sense-perception will be found in E. von Erhardt-Siebold, "Harmony of the Senses in English, German, and French Romanticism," *PMLA*, XLVII (1932), 577-592. In the same speculative vein Burke had written in III, xxiv: "But there is such a similitude in the pleasures of these senses, that I am apt to fancy, if it were possible that one might discern colour by feeling (as it is said some blind men have done), that the same colours, and the same disposition of colouring, which are found beautiful to the sight, will be found most grateful to the touch." Burke probably had in mind Spence's Preface to Blacklock's *Poems* (1754), p. xlv (a work to which he refers by name in V, v), and in Locke he must have come upon the celebrated story of the blind man who thought scarlet "was like the sound of a trumpet."

<sup>32</sup> Upon Locke's anticipation of this point see MacLean, *op. cit.*, Bk. III.

England. We have, however, the evidence of Burke's French reading in *The Sublime and Beautiful*,<sup>33</sup> and it is possible that into his borrowings from Locke and Berkeley went also a dash of that frankly experimental attitude toward sense-perception and imagination which the Encyclopedists and their friends were popularizing.

A final chapter in the history of Burke's theory about images and emotion may be written in terms of German æsthetic thought. *The Sublime and Beautiful* appealed strongly to the eager speculative bent of the *Aufklärung*, in a land which had few neoclassical bonds to break. Apparently Lessing discovered the book a few months after the First Edition had appeared in London.<sup>34</sup> Soon his friend Moses Mendelssohn was reading it with keen interest, but disagreeing with the theory of Part v which is our present concern.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile Lessing began a German translation,

<sup>33</sup> In II [iv], he refers to Du Bos, *Réflexions critiques* (1719), which however had been translated in 1748 by Thomas Nugent. In IV, iv he tells a story about Campanella which he had read in Spon, *Recherches curieuses d'antiquité* (Lyon, 1683). Under Burke's editorship the *Annual Register for 1758* contained a translation of part of Montesquieu's article 'Goût' in the seventh volume of the *Encyclopédie*; in later life Burke is found reading French fluently; cf. Madame D'Arblay, *Memoirs of Dr. Burney* (London, 1832), III, 171.—In respect to *The Sublime and Beautiful*, Diderot anticipates in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* some of Burke's conclusions—e.g., "que le beau moment du poète n'est pas toujours le beau moment du peintre," "que la poésie nous fait admirer des images dont la peinture serait insoutenable." See *Œuvres complètes: Philosophie II* (Paris, 1821), p. 95; cf. Burke, v, v-vii. It seems to me very likely that Diderot in turn read *The Sublime and Beautiful* and incorporated Part II into his *Salon de 1767*; a long rhapsody on the sublime appears to be little more than a précis of this portion of Burke's essay—in three pages I note at least twenty-seven parallels of imagery and phrase (*Œuvres* [Paris, 1876], xi, 146-148). According to Morley's *Burke* (London, 1879), p. 66, Diderot and Burke first met in Paris in 1773.

<sup>34</sup> Letter of 25 November, 1757 to Nicolai, *Sämtliche Schriften* (Leipzig, 1900), xiv, 220. Burke's essay had been published in the preceding April.

<sup>35</sup> M. Mendelssohn, *Schriften zur Philosophie und Aesthetik* (Berlin, 1929), vol. III, "Anmerkungen über das englische Buch: On the Sublime and the [*sic*] Beautiful." That Mendelssohn was still using the First Edition is patent from his references to Burke's treatment of music in III, xxv and xxvi; in the Second Edition these sections were joined together, and xxvi was devoted to 'Taste and Smell.' Hence, in his criticism of Burke's non-imagistic psychology, Mendelssohn lacks the benefit of Burke's rebuttal in 1759. He writes, p. 251: "Der fünfte Theil gefällt mir am wenigsten. Weil wir mit gewissen abstracten Worten nicht allezeit deutliche Begriffe verbinden; so glaubt der Verfasser, wir bedienen uns derselben bloss als Töne, ohne irgend einen Begriff damit zu verknüpfen." And after a brief summary he asks somewhat testily, "Hat man jemals gezweifelt, dass die Worte gemeinlich nur eine symbolische Erkenntnis gewähren?" Professor W. G. Howard, *PMLA*, xxii, 616, n. 1, has a query on this point: "If by 'symbolische Erkenntnis' he means recognition through images formed in the imagination, the answer must be that the greatest number of contemporary writers on poetry escaped doubt by taking the thing for granted. If he does not mean this, then the question is out of order. Mendelssohn had before him a copy of the first edition, without Burke's *Introduction on Taste*."

found many years later among his posthumous papers; and he was still fresh from its influence when he made his own attack upon *Schilderungssucht in der Poesie* in *Laokoon*. The noted Spanish historian of aesthetics, Menéndez y Pelayo, has noted that Lessing's fundamental conception of poetry—as an emotional substitution for reality rather than an imitation of it—is identical with Burke's, though the latter has seldom received due credit.<sup>36</sup> They agree that the words of poetry are not suited to the exact description of visible bodies; for both, the highest aim of poetic rhetoric is not *das Bild* but *die Empfindung*.<sup>37</sup> As a prime example of poetry which forsakes mere visualization to stir something of the original feeling which reality had evoked, Lessing quotes Homer's description of Helen's appearance before the Trojan elders—by an interesting coincidence the same example which Burke had added to clinch the same argument in his Second Edition, which Lessing probably never saw.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, Burke declares that one of the glories of poetic language lies in its indistinct visualization, by which it is able beautifully to represent things which our senses would reject as "wild and absurd," as well as other things of which we have no sensory experience at all, such "as God, angels, devils, heaven and hell" (v, vii). Similarly Lessing remarks that imaginary creations which in poetry are great and noble because they are *unsichtbar*, become ridiculous or monstrous when attempted by the strict lineaments of painting, like the Homeric gods.<sup>39</sup>

Although Burke and Lessing meet in these conclusions, there is a significant difference of approach. Burke maintains in II, iv that in "verbal descriptions . . . a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever." Lessing however has in mind a purer æsthetic emotion than mere 'en-

Since this first edition is inaccessible to me, I cannot say to what extent the second, the basis for all subsequent ones, may have been less open to criticism than the first." A collation of the two texts by the present writer shows that the relevant addition is not the essay "On Taste," but Burke's fuller exposition of v, v and his new distinction between "a clear expression and a strong expression" in v, vii; these perhaps would have placated his German critic.

<sup>36</sup> *Historia de las Ideas Estéticas*, IV, 330.

<sup>37</sup> *Laokoön*, XVI–XVII.

<sup>38</sup> Lessing, as has been noted, came upon the book within seven months after the appearance of the First Edition, reading and beginning his translation of it at that time; it seems improbable that he followed it through successive editions. It did not appear in German until Christian Garve's translation (Riga and Leipzig, 1773). Cf. J. W. Draper, *18th Century English Aesthetics: a Bibliography* (Heidelberg, 1931), p. 15; Draper, by the way, omits a French translation of it published in London in 1765, listed in the Auction Catalogue of Burke's own library, dispersed in 1833 under the hammer of R. H. Evans; if one may judge by the title, this was also the French translation Herder read in November 1767; cf. Kant, *Werke*, ed. Cassirer, IX, 65.

<sup>39</sup> *Laokoön*, XII.

thusiasms,' and grounds his objection to descriptive poetry upon the fact that to the artistically mature imagination it is uninteresting, and also upon the fact that such poetry is powerless to convey any sense of co-existent totality. The true subjects for poetry are therefore not bodies but actions (*Handlungen*), which are presented in some kind of sequence. A great poet like Homer does not try therefore to paint static *scenes*, leaving this task to the other arts; but he wisely chooses the salient, dramatic aspect of his subject, and presents it in a continuum of time and motion.<sup>40</sup> Professor Eunice R. Goddard suggested some years ago that Lessing's disparagement of *Wortmalerei* and his praise of dynamic poetry might be explained by his belonging to what Josiah Royce called "the verbal motor type."<sup>41</sup> Similarly one may be allowed to hazard the guess that Burke belonged to the "audile type." In his system of æsthetics Burke refers constantly to the sounds of poetry, accompanied by a "warm and affecting tone of voice" and the other instruments of rhetorical suasion.<sup>42</sup> Although he seems to have had little or no education in music,<sup>43</sup> he does show himself extremely sensitive to what he styles the sublime in sounds—to thunder, roaring cataracts, the cries of wild beasts, artillery, shouting multitudes, drums, tolling bells, and even "low, confused, uncertain sounds."<sup>44</sup> To be sure, he devotes a good deal of space to his naïve theory of retinal fatigue in producing the visual sublime—a reflection of his boyhood curiosity about optics<sup>45</sup>—but even here in his discussion of light and darkness we find him falling back upon majestic passages from Homer, Virgil, and Milton. They are in fact Burke's in-

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi. Varchi in 1546 strikingly anticipated Burke and Lessing in his assertion that actions are fit subjects for poetry, bodies for painting; cf. Howard, *PMLA*, xxiv, 40 ff. For much the same conclusion, though timidly expressed, see Daniel Webb, *The Beauties of Poetry* (London, 1762), pp. 82–83, 95.

<sup>41</sup> "Psychological Reasons for Lessing's Attitude toward Descriptive Poetry," *PMLA*, xxvi (1911), 593–603.

<sup>42</sup> See Burke's essay, v, iii; he declares in v, vii, "Now, as there is a moving tone of voice, an impassioned countenance, an agitated gesture, which affect independently of the things about which they are exerted, so there are words, and certain dispositions of words, which . . . touch and move us more than those which far more clearly and distinctly express the subject matter."

<sup>43</sup> Burke's treatment of music, iii, xxv, is hasty and perfunctory. His early mentor W. G. Hamilton once remarked, "Burke understands everything but gaming and music" (Prior, *Burke*, I, 484).

<sup>44</sup> See ii, xvii–xx, with his closing observation, "The modifications of sound, which may be productive of the sublime, are almost infinite."

<sup>45</sup> See ii, vii–x and iv, ix–xviii. He had Newton's *Opticks*, as indicated in iv, xix, and Cheselden's *Anatomy*, cited in iv, xv; his earlier interest in optics is shown in letters to Shackleton, 31 January and 25 February, 1746, in *Leadbeater Papers* (1862), II, 62 and 37, the latter being placed in incorrect sequence because of the editor's failure to note that 1745 is O. S.

fallible touchstones of sublimity; nor must one forget the innate preference for 'the sublime' over 'the beautiful' which Burke's essay reveals.<sup>46</sup> Carried away by his ingenuity in proving that sublimity and beauty are in most respects "opposite and contradictory" (III, xxvii), Burke invidiously contrasts the mild, weak, sensuous pleasure of beauty with the fierce, noble, and almost supra-sensuous appeal of the sublime. Indeed his contention that in the physical world "darkness is terrible" and hence more sublime than light, returns in triumphant restatement in Part v when obscurity of language—with its address to imagination through the ear rather than the inner eye—is shown to be more sublime than clarity.

In his Second Edition Burke draws a significant contrast between "a clear expression" and "a strong expression," finds that the French language is weak because of its proverbial lucidity, and notes that "uncultivated people" are often masters of impassioned language precisely because they are not hampered by clear visualization.<sup>47</sup> In the same Part of his essay Burke confesses that after "a diligent examination" he finds in the course of ordinary speech or reading the intrusion of no clear images in his mind, or scarcely "once in twenty times." "Neither when I spoke of red, blue, or green, as well as refrangibility; had I these several colours, or the rays of light passing into a different medium, and there diverted from their course, painted before me in the way of images" (v, v). And he reports that upon hearing the phrase "the angel of the Lord," that "I have here no clear idea," such as "a beautiful youngman winged." Certainly a keen visualizer—let us say, for example, Burke's younger contemporary William Blake—would have reported no such result. I suggest therefore that Burke's stress upon the sublime arising from the sonority of poetry and rhetoric, as well as his theory which disparages clear visualization as an aid to æsthetic emotion, sprang in part from the peculiarities of his own sensory equipment.

To go through the many volumes of Burke's speeches and pamphlets in his collected works, along with the many other orations reported in fragmentary form by *The Parliamentary History*, and the scores of still

<sup>46</sup> The abstract, philosophic mind seems often to reveal the same preference, as illustrated in Kant's *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, with its elaborate speculation upon the mathematical and dynamic sublime, and the short shrift which it accords the subject of beauty. Hegel was also keenly attracted to the sublime; in the *Aesthetik* his long discussion of the sublime as the half-articulate which despises the amenities of the senses, offers interesting comparison with the irritant qualities—angularity, harshness, disorder, obscurity, and tension of the perceptive eye—which Burke ascribes to it.

<sup>47</sup> Collation of the texts of 1757 and 1759 shows that in v, vii Burke drops, perhaps intuitively, his earlier attempt to include "words which are used to express the objects of love and tenderness," and turns his attention exclusively to the rhetorical sublime in these revised passages.

unpublished speeches in Burke's handwriting which I have read cursorily among the private Burke papers now at Wentworth—all in the light of this self-admitted idiosyncrasy—would be a task far beyond the limits of this essay. It is my conviction, however, that the evidence of an 'audile' imagination will there be found: of tumultuous and sometimes vague rhetoric and of rather frequently mixed metaphors and similes—the ear being quicker than the inward eye. Such utterances often succeeded in the very torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of Burke's passion; at other times they merely added to the reputation for self-conscious oratory of 'the Dinner-bell of the House of Commons,' or heightened that effect of theatricality which caused Fanny Burney to put up her opera-glass,<sup>48</sup> or Tom Paine drily to observe, "Mr. Burke has two or three times, in his parliamentary speeches, and in his publications, made use of a jingle of words that convey no ideas."<sup>49</sup> Burke's weakness for turgid, extravagant language—the practice of an imaginative Celt who believed from his youth that the purpose of rhetoric was the address to feelings rather than to clarity—drew a good deal of unfavorable notice in the course of his long career. His occasional painful failures in Parliament arose from ill-success in achieving what he had named in his youthful essay as the chief business of oratory and of poetry at its most sublime: fully to communicate the emotional mood to one's auditors, to "catch a fire already kindled in another."<sup>50</sup>

DIXON WECTER

*Henry E. Huntington Library*

<sup>48</sup> *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, ed. Barrett, II, 528.

<sup>49</sup> "The Rights of Man," *Works*, ed. Conway, II, 425. A discussion of the rhetorical *beau idéal* of the latter eighteenth century will be found in H. F. Harding, *English Rhetorical Theory, 1750-1800*, summarized in "Cornell University Abstracts of Theses, 1937."

<sup>50</sup> *The Sublime and Beautiful*, v, vii. Unsympathetic comment on the florid and confused oratory of Burke in his less happy moments, could easily be multiplied from Horace Walpole, John Wilkes, Sir Francis Baring, and others. Burke's rhetorical progression from a restrained style to one "ungracefully gorgeous"—perhaps the result of his attempting to sway an apathetic Parliamentary audience for more than a quarter century—was remarked by Macaulay, *Essays* (London, 1889), p. 436.