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Author(s): Vanessa L. Ryan

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The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason

Vanessa L. Ryan

The eighteenth-century discussion of the sublime is primarily concerned not with works of art but with how a particular experience of being moved impacts the self. The discussion of the sublime most fully explores the question of how we make sense of our experience: "Why and how does this object move me?" Focusing on the perceiving subject, most critics cast the British discussion of the sublime as reflecting a gradual shift towards a Kantian focus not on the object judged, but on the judging mind. Certainly, eighteenth-century thinkers move away from understanding the sublime as a set of qualities that are presumed to be internal to a given object, and shift their attention to the mental effects of those objects. Yet the increasing interest in the perceiving subject in eighteenth-century British thought should not be understood as necessarily anticipating a Kantian perspective. In his classic work on the sublime Samuel H. Monk claims that this aspect of the British debate provides a preliminary discussion of the Kantian "autonomy of the subject" and that it constitutes a movement towards the "subjectivism of Kant."¹ This reading of British aesthetics exclusively in

¹ The claim of Samuel H. Monk (*The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* [Ann Arbor, 1960], 4, 6), is typical: "it may be said that the eighteenth-century aesthetic has as its unconscious goal the *Critique of Judgment*, the book in which it was to be refined and re-interpreted." Cf. Adam Phillips, "Introduction" in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York, 1990), ix; see also, María Isabel Peña Aguado, *Ästhetik des Erhabenen: Burke, Kant, Adorno, Lyotard* (Vienna, 1994), 36. Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York, 1992), 6, admits that the move from "Burkean empiricism" to "Kantian formalist idealism" is a movement towards the "less objective and the more subjective," but qualifies it by saying that this view fails to distinguish between "the empiricist-formalist debates in aesthetics and those over ontology and epistemology." Tom Furniss's *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (New York, 1993) breaks from this critical tradition. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (*The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* [New York, 1996], an excellent introduction and selection of eighteenth-century writings on the sublime, to which this essay is indebted), makes a powerful case for the need to create an independent narrative of British thought on the sublime.

terms of a preparation for the Kantian description of the subject obscures the differences between the British and the German traditions. It thereby fails to accommodate the reluctance of British thinkers to give up the social and ethical when faced with the sublime: instead of explaining the commonality of the aesthetic experience by positing a “disinterested” and “autonomous” subject, thinkers such as Adam Smith, John Dennis, and Edmund Burke subordinate the freedom of the individual subject in an attempt to reconcile the aesthetic affect with moral conduct.

The teleological and Kantian understanding of British eighteenth-century aesthetic theory is largely the result of the central position that has been given to its most famous theorist, Edmund Burke. Although Burke’s conception of the sublime differs in some points markedly from that of his British contemporaries, his treatment of the sublime in the *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) has come to represent eighteenth-century British thought, and as such it is routinely compared to Kant’s analytic of the sublime. Yet at the point where the British tradition seems to come closest to the Kantian, namely, in the writings of Burke, it also most clearly marks its distance from it. Burke is in some ways the least Kantian of eighteenth-century British thinkers. Whereas Kant holds that the sublime allows us to intuit our rational capacity, Burke’s physiological version of the sublime involves a critique of reason. The sublime for Burke is a question not of the subject’s increasing self-awareness but of the subject’s sense of limitation and of the ultimate value of that experience within a social and ethical context.

One of the most intransigent problems in distinguishing the strains of thought on the sublime is that the relationship between the object and its sublime effect—between the object taken to arouse heightened response and the affective quality of such a response—is so variously conceived. The sublime experience is seen as leading, on the one hand, to an overpowering of the self and, on the other hand, to an intense self-presence and exaltation, sometimes even to self-transcendence. The central question is thus not to what extent the sublime is located in the subject, but in what way the experience of the sublime affects the perceiving subject: Does the sublime enlarge us, or diminish us?² Does the sublime annihilate our sense of self, or does it affirm and heighten our sense of identity? These two opposing views of the effect of the sublime on the self can be seen in the contrast between Kant and Longinus, whose theories exerted an enormous influence in Britain, especially on Burke. Whereas Longinus emphasizes that the sublime overpowers and dominates the self, Kant holds that the feeling of the sublime “renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our faculties on

² Adam Phillips (“Introduction,” xviii), asks, though does not answer, this question and notes that Burke “is obsessed by the size and extent of things.”

the rational side of the greatest faculty of sensibility."³ Yet the feeling of exaltation described by Kant results from our initial frustration at the inadequacy of our imagination to comprehend the object: we pass through an initial phase that is similar to the experience of the self being overpowered, as described by Longinus. For Kant the feeling of the sublime is "produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (245).

In histories of literary criticism and of philosophy Burke's conception of the sublime has been cast in remarkably similar terms, as a mental "swelling" and as an experience of self-exaltation.⁴ In this Kantian account of Burke the sense of a boundless force provokes an initial "terror" in the subject, and an "astonishment" in which "all motions are suspended" in an "unnatural tension of the nerves." Although painful, such terror is "tinged with tranquility" and "delight."⁵ As one critic writes, in the sublime moment "we experience a type of mental 'swelling,' expanding as it were, to meet and embrace a part of the object's power."⁶ As this essay will argue, this Kantian account of Burke's view of the sublime is a mischaracterization. The teleological reading of British aesthetics—the perceived inexorable movement towards the subjectivism of Kant—takes for granted that the experience of the sublime implies transcendence.⁷ Reading Burke through such a Kantian perspective fails to recognize that Burke minimizes the role of the mind in the experience of the sublime and that he characterizes the sublime as a natural force that is by its very definition beyond man's ability to control.

The association of the sublime with an overpowering force, which runs throughout the *Enquiry*, is first maintained by Longinus, whose treatise *Peri Hypsous* reintroduced the notion of the sublime into eighteenth-century discussions of aesthetics. Longinus considers the violent deprivation of freedom central to the sublime. The sublime robs us of our freedom: it is a "power and irresistible violence" that does not persuade, but "reign[s] supreme over every hearer" (I).⁸ It is this apparent combination and conflation by Longinus and his

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), 257, §26, page references to the *Akademie* edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften* [9 vols.; Berlin, 1908-13], III).

⁴ See Linda Marie Brooks, *The Menace of the Sublime to the Individual Self: Kant, Schiller, Coleridge and the Disintegration of Romantic Identity* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1995), 14-18; and Peña Aguado (*Ästhetik des Erhabenen*, 31), "One experiences the might of Nature at first as a power, later, thanks to our position as spectator, it becomes a feeling of superiority."

⁵ Burke's phrases in quotation marks are those most commonly used by critics to support the Kantian account.

⁶ Brooks, *The Menace of the Sublime*, 17.

⁷ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, 1976).

⁸ Longinus, "On the Sublime," *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York, 1970), 59-76.

eighteenth-century successors of the “power” and the “irresistible violence” of the sublime that provides the basis for Kant’s strongest attack on the British and the Longinian tradition. In the first sentences of his definition of the dynamic sublime Kant seeks to differentiate between these two effects of the sublime, differentiating positive empowerment from negative, freedom-denying violence. Responding particularly to Longinus’s combination of these two forces, Kant attempts to dissociate the power of the sublime from the violence of the sublime: “*Might [Macht]* is an ability that is superior to great obstacles. It is called *dominance [Gewalt]* if it is superior even to the resistance of something that itself possesses might. When in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is *dynamically sublime*” (260, §27). Kant here differentiates two polar possibilities of the sublime, namely its ability, on the one hand, to exert an overpowering force that dominates the self and, on the other hand, its status as a force that empowers the self. His primary concern is to reclaim the “freedom” and “autonomy” of the subject. In this respect he not only differs from but explicitly rejects eighteenth-century British thought, which emphasizes the overpowering of reason by the passions.⁹ So Kant presents a break with British thought rather than its culmination. Burke’s view of the sublime must therefore be distinguished from the two alternative conceptions of the power of the sublime outlined by Kant: that the sublime is either positive or negative, exalting or diminishing. Distinguishing Burke’s sublime from the Kantian analytic will enable us to reconsider the tendency to see the Burkean sublime, on the one hand, as self-annihilation and, on the other hand, as self-exaltation.

Burke’s treatment of the beautiful and the sublime is modest in its aims: Burke does not want to work out a theory of the essence of the sublime and the beautiful, but he explicitly outlines his program of inquiry as an attempt to examine the origin of the ideas of the beautiful. Referring to Longinus, he observes that “the ideas of the sublime and beautiful were frequently confounded,” and that “both were indiscriminately applied to things greatly differing, and sometimes of natures directly opposite.”¹⁰ He proposes to remedy this confusion “from a diligent examination of our passions in our own breasts; from a careful survey of the properties of things which we find by experience to influence those passions, and from a sober and attentive investigation of the laws of nature, by which those properties are capable of affecting the body and thus of exciting our passions” (1). These three steps correspond to the sections of the *Philosophical Enquiry*. In Part I Burke examines the formal cause of aesthetic experience, namely, the passions that we feel in our experience of the sublime and of beauty.

⁹ Dennis (*The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* in *The Critical Works of John Dennis* [2 vols.; Baltimore, 1967], I, 359) even criticizes Longinus for allowing for the possibility of a non-pathetic sublime.

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (New York, 1990), 1.

Parts II and III explore the material cause, investigating the properties of the things productive of the emotion of sublimity and beauty. In Part IV Burke examines what he calls the "efficient cause," by which he means "certain affections of the mind, that cause certain changes in the body; or certain powers and properties in bodies, that work a change in the mind" (118). In other words, in this section he treats the principles in accordance with which certain properties excite our passions.¹¹ In the movement from "formal causes" to "material causes" to "efficient causes" there is a clear progression of internalization, in which Burke focuses increasingly on the perceiving subject. Although critics are often tempted to see this structure of the work as reflecting the more general movement in the history of ideas towards a focus on the subject, it would be misleading to characterize the program of the *Enquiry* as reflecting a movement from the objectivism of neoclassical theories of art to a psychological and subjective view. Monk, for example, writes that although Burke "cannot, by the very nature of his reasoning, refer beauty and sublimity to the perceiving mind alone, as Kant was to do and as Hume had already done, he does, perforce, concentrate most of his attention on the effect rather than on the qualities of objects."¹² Yet all of the aestheticians from Addison to Kant and onwards, as Hipple acknowledges, "conceive of the sublime as a feeling in the mind caused by certain properties in external objects."¹³ Instead, the culmination of Burke's *Enquiry* in the examination of the relationship between the "affections of the mind" and the "changes in the body" is remarkable for its emphasis on the physiological aspects of experience.

Burke's unique contribution to the debate on the sublime is rooted in his largely ignored and belittled emphasis on a physiological explanation for our passions and his consequent limitation of the role of reason in the experience of the sublime. Burke's practice throughout the *Enquiry* is to derive the mental reaction from the physical rather than the reverse. As David Bromwich notes, the *Enquiry* is composed in an "idiom that recalls that of Hobbes," "it talks of the power of bodies to affect other bodies, and uses the word *body* to refer to objects both animate and inanimate."¹⁴ Burke presents an empirical view of aesthetic taste based on sensations and on our physiological and psychological responses to them. His physiologism, which contrasts strongly with the associationist interests of his contemporaries, has invited criticism and ridicule not only in his

¹¹ On Burke's method see Walter John Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, 1957), 85; James T. Boulton, "Introduction" in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Oxford, 1988), xxviii; Peña Aguado, *Ästhetik des Erhabenen*, 19; Monk, *The Sublime*, 96.

¹² Monk, *The Sublime*, 98.

¹³ Hipple, *The Beautiful*, 84.

¹⁴ David Bromwich, "The Sublime Before Aesthetics and Politics," *Raritan*, 16 (1997), 30-51.

own time but also in our own. In his 1805 offensive against Burke, Richard Payne Knight, for example, pointed out that one's pen a foot away makes a greater impression on the retina than Salisbury steeple at a mile, and that the sheet of paper on which one writes would be more sublime than the Peak of Teneriffe.¹⁵ More recently Thomas Weiskel has written that Burke's "explanation of how terror produces delight is cumbersome, not to say silly, and depends on an antiquated physiology."¹⁶ Burke's physiologism is, however, at the heart of his aesthetic theory: it provides the basis for his most fundamental assumption that the manner in which man is affected is uniform. It also leads him to minimize mental activity: his insistence on looking to the physical to explain the internal, psychological effects of the sublime breaks with a well-established assumption that the sublime is allied with an elevation of the mind. Reducing the role of conscious and reflective mental activity, Burke's turn to the physical sharply contrasts with Kant's later analytic of the sublime.

Reading Burke from a Kantian perspective has led critics to deemphasize this physiological basis of Burke's theory and has given rise to the view that he associates the sublime with an act of mastery and a sense of self-exaltation. Two passages in particular have been cited to support this view. Critics frequently cite the statement that "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other" (53), often in conjunction with Addison's view that the sublime effects a sort of stretching of the mind, in order to show that in the Burkean sublime we identify with, are enlarged, and are exhilarated by the sublime object.¹⁷ As the full passage reveals, however, Burke's aim is to show that the fundamental effect of the sublime is to exclude the power of reason. This paralysis is not general, as some critics have assumed, but is limited to our rational capacity.¹⁸

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (53)

¹⁵ Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, I. 5.4, 5. (London, 1906), 59-60.

¹⁶ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 88, and see Hipple, *The Beautiful*, 98.

¹⁷ See Brooks, *The Menace of the Sublime*, 15; Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 45.

¹⁸ Burke's concept of reason should be understood broadly, including what Hume would consider the understanding and the imagination, and what Kant considers reason (*Vernunft*) and the understanding (*Verstand*).

Here Burke describes the paralysis of our rational capacity by fear as the exemplary reaction to the sublime.¹⁹ The pleasure of the sublime is actually inimical to thought, since fear “robs the mind” of its power to reason. The mind is so filled with the object of contemplation that “it cannot reason on that object.” Burke thus takes issue with the association of the sublime with reason, which had been maintained by Dennis and Addison, among others. The sublime experience in Burke is not only dissociated from the realm of judgment, but is seen as setting reason aside.

The experience of the sublime is thus limited to sensation and to emotion arising from “a tension in the nerves.” Burke outlines and justifies this approach most forcefully in his preliminary discussion of “Taste,” added to the second edition of the *Enquiry* in 1759, in which he investigates whether there is a standard of taste that is the same in all human creatures. He argues that since the physical organs have the same “conformation” (13), the same sensations must be common to all men. Since ideas have their sources in sensations, all men must have common conceptions: “for as the senses are the great originals of all our ideas, and consequently of all our pleasures, if they are not uncertain and arbitrary, the whole ground-work of Taste is common to all” (22). A wrong taste is due not to different sensations but to a “defect in judgment” (23). Burke’s physiological emphasis thus provides the most basic cornerstone of his empirical investigation into our aesthetic responses, that the working of our response is comparable from individual to individual.

Burke’s extreme physiologism naturally has consequences for his conception of the imagination: he claims that in the experience of the beautiful and the sublime, the imagination contributes only by supplying the equivalent of sensation. The imagination thus depends radically on experience: imagination is merely a substitute, at times a poor one, for sensation. In arousing the passions the imagination is thus “only the representative of the senses,... [and] can only be pleased or displeased with the images from the same principle on which the sense is pleased or displeased with realities” (17). Burke does acknowledge that the imagination can be creative insofar as it combines, but it remains largely passive with no power beyond collecting and combining impressions of the external world. He thus describes the power of the imagination only as “a sort of creative power” insofar as it is capable of “either representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the sense, or in combining those images in a new manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order” (16). Since, as he argues, the imagination cannot go beyond the senses there must be as close an agreement in the imaginations as in the senses of men.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 45.

Minimizing all conscious and reflective mental activity, Burke goes so far as to question the power of association, which was a familiar component in the speculation of Dennis, Hutcheson, Hume, and Hartley, writing: “when we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth” (117). Burke limits association to its role in aiding the imagination in expanding the sensory impression. It helps expand an object to sublime size. Whereas from a Kantian perspective we might expect pleasure or delight to come from that *process* of expansion, from our own operation on the mere sensory impression, Burke accommodates the role of association while still insisting on the primacy of sensation; he focuses on the impact of the now expanded object on our nerves. Burke does not question association in itself but rather refuses to accept it as an explanatory cause. The representation in the imagination gives pleasure through its impact on the nervous system, rather than through any operation of the mind. In a striking reduction of experience to its physiological basis, Burke suggests that the sensation, the impression of the sensation, and the impression compounded with association all cause the *same* nervous tension.

Burke’s claim that his subject has led him “out of the common course of discourse” (34) is thus well borne out with respect to his rejection of a long tradition in which the sublime had been allied with mental elevation. That the sublime involves an expansion and elevation of the soul, which is partly present in Longinus, becomes central for eighteenth-century thinkers such as Dennis and Addison. The British, particularly the associationists, are interested in the moment of cognition when a new experience awakens the interpretive faculty and the experience is then treated as the *beginning* of a possible series, generally characterized by augmentation. Dennis, for example, values the sublime for its role in stimulating reason to more penetrating insights. What counts for Dennis is the expansive process of meditation, the way in which the idea of an object is expanded by thought. Addison similarly connects the power of the sublime with the power of the mind. Addison’s major claim is that our encounter with vast natural phenomena involves a sense of being liberated from perceptual confinement: the sublime constitutes a sort of stretching of the mind. In his *Spectator* essays on the “Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712) he locates the source of pleasure in the activity into which it throws the Fancy: the “Pleasure of the Imagination proceeds from that Action of the Mind.”²⁰ Pleasure is therefore not derived solely from a particular sight, but from the action of the Fancy that it induces, which “awakens numberless Ideas that before slept in the Imagination” (no. 417). Addison describes an expansive kind of mental exercise enjoyable for its own sake. While this kind of mind-stretching may have the potential to bring the trains of association to bear on the problems of good and evil, Addison does

²⁰ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. D. F. Bond (5 vols.; Oxford, 1965), III, no. 416.

not elevate the role of the imagination into a precise or complete sort of knowing: the pleasures of the imagination, while “not so gross as those of the Sense,” are not “so refined as those of the Understanding” (no. 411). Even while reason, which is the faculty needed to demonstrate truth, is strictly speaking left out, both Dennis and Addison are interested in the way the contemplation of the sublime rouses an activity of the mind, specifically in the way an image can set off a train of related ideas. In stark contrast to his British counterparts Burke credits the isolated, startling, and particular physiological sensation in the sublime. He maintains that the sublime is a sensory response to the phenomenal world combined with emotion untrammelled by thought.

Working within the Longinian tradition, which stresses the dominating power of the sublime, Burke writes, “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power” (59). Burke states specifically that the power of the sublime is tied to the power of destruction, yet his sublime has nonetheless been read as delegating power to the perceiving subject. It is in the section on “Power” that we find the second passage most frequently used to support the argument that Burke’s sublime involves an empowerment, or a “swelling” of the perceiving self:

Whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under his [the Deity’s] arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him.... If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling; and even whilst we are receiving benefits, we cannot but shudder at a power which can confer benefits of such mighty importance. When the prophet David contemplated the wonder of wisdom and power, which are displayed in the oeconomy of man, he seems to be struck with a sort of divine horror, and cries out, *fearfully and wonderfully am I made!* (63)

Focusing on the last sentence, Frances Ferguson considers David’s exclamation as arising from an identification with the power of God.²¹ Steven Cresap in his analysis of this passage speaks of “the power exchange from the object to the self.”²² Both of these interpretations are at odds not only with Burke’s larger project, but with the sense of the passage quoted from the old testament, which comes from the sudden recognition that one is, after all, the creature of an omnipotent God, and a creature capable of feeling awe in the face of that omnipotence. If David’s exclamation arises from a sense of self-exaltation, then why

²¹ Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 50.

²² Steven Cresap (“Sublime Politics: On the Uses of an Aesthetics of Terror,” *Clio*, 19 [1990], 111-25, 123), does ultimately acknowledge that the “sublime may diminish rather than enlarge us as persons,” 125.

does Burke write that in the contemplation of the Godhead “we shrink to the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him” (63)? Ferguson’s and Cresap’s interpretations rest upon the assumption that what is fearful and wonderful is the product man. A closer reading, however, suggests that David’s exclamation, “*fearfully and wonderfully am I made!*,” refers not to the *product*, but to the *act* of making. We are not so much empowered by the sublime contemplation of the divine; we are overwhelmed by a power superior to ours.

Throughout the *Enquiry* Burke consistently stresses that the sublime is larger than us. He characterizes the sublime as a natural force that is by its very definition beyond man’s ability to control.

Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, and what is your idea before reflection? Is it that this strength will be subservient to you, to your ease, to your pleasure, to your interest in any sense? No; the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction. (60)

He directly opposes the sublime to what is subservient, safe, and useful, writing that whatever is in conformity to our will is “never sublime” (61). Burke uses the example of a horse to reinforce that it is specifically the threat of domination and destruction that engenders the sublime: in ordinary employment as “an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft,” the horse has “nothing of the sublime”; the horse described in the book of Job, by contrast, which “*swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage*” is “terrible” and “sublime” (60). The sublime experience is thus necessarily one of domination; the sublime object remains impervious to human efforts at conquering, domesticating, and exploiting the natural environment.

If the sublime is thus so decisively an experience of domination, in what way does it cause *delight*? Central to resolving this potential conflict is Burke’s definition of pain and pleasure as independent principles. Differentiating himself from Locke, who defines pain simply as the absence of pleasure, Burke argues that pain and pleasure are not complementary: “in their most simple manner of affecting, [they] are each of a positive nature, and by no means necessarily dependent on each other for their existence.” Burke defines delight as the relative pleasure that arises from the remission of pain and thereby distinguishes it from absolute pleasure. He makes an original distinction between pain and pleasure, based largely on their power over us. Whereas pleasure cannot be forced upon us, pain can: pleasure must be “stolen” but pain can be “imposed.” Burke thus concludes that “pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly” (60). Pain, just like delight, which arises from the remission of pain, is inseparable from the contradiction of our

will. The experience of the sublime, characterized by the feeling of delight, is thus grounded in its dominating power.

Like a number of his contemporaries, Burke also connects the sublime to an experience of terror. Dennis includes terror among the "enthusiastic passions" and Addison speaks of "agreeable Horrour" or "a pleasing kind of Horrour." Whereas Addison makes pleasure depend on one's reflective distance from the object, Burke makes terror central to the definition of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (36)

For Burke, terror always has a part of the sublime experience, it is "in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime" (57). The consideration of terror as a major cause of the sublime reflects a move away from "literal" causes of heightened responses, such as qualities inhering in natural objects, towards the possibility that sublime affect may be generated through figuration. In Burke's view anything operating analogously to terror may also give rise to the sublime. Burke holds not that the sublime *is* terror but that it is either terrible, associated with something terrible, or acts upon us like the terrible.²³ While this could be interpreted as moving away from the object and its impression, it reflects not so much an interiorization, as Burke's deliberate reduction of the role of the imagination and understanding: there is a difference in degree and not in kind between the effect of imagination and that of sensation.

Burke's consistent minimizing of the mind's reflective activity leads him to take issue with the Addisonian variety of the Lucretian return, which holds that misfortune is more enjoyable if we realize its fictitiousness. Burke explains that Addison's assumption that in "either real or fictitious distresses" it is our "immunity from them which produces our delight" is a "sort of sophism" (44). Like Addison, Burke emphasizes the need for distance from the object causing the affect of terror: "Terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (42). Delight is defined as the removal of pain or danger, which is important in differentiating the sublime experience from unmitigated terror. Although this may sound like an echo of Addison, for Addison the pleasure of terror involves a negation of terror by rational reflection on the absence of danger. For Addison terror is thus assimilated through an operation of the mind and becomes a form of elevation and exaltation, namely a positive pleasure. For Burke immunity from danger is not a cause but a condition of enjoy-

²³ See Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 87.

ment. Burke's stipulation that danger must not "press too close," however, does not imply a difference in kind between actual and artistic danger, but one of degree. Burke in fact arrives at a reverse claim that "the nearer [tragedy] approaches reality, and the further it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power" (43). Burke demonstrates this with his famous illustration of the audience deserting "the most sublime and affecting tragedy" to witness the execution of "a state criminal of high rank" (44) in the square adjoining the theater.

This famous and much-discussed example of the public execution raises questions for many readers about the morality of the sublime. Kant, for example, criticizes Burke (and all equally empirically grounded views of the sublime) on the grounds that to consider the sublime as a reaction to external impressions is to exclude it from the moral sphere. Yet closer consideration reveals that Burke has preempted Kant's implicit criticism of his conception of the sublime. Burke does not affirm the abstract dominating power and violence of the sublime, but his physiological approach allows him to incorporate it into a theory of psychological hygiene. Burke considers the effects of the sublime to be of particular social utility, and thus consciously and explicitly reclaims the moral power of the sublime. Turning characteristically to the analogy of physical exercise, he argues that the sublime sets our more sensitive organs into just as much activity as physical labor does our body: "Labour is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs in a state fit for their functions, but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs" (122). The sublime counteracts the baleful effects of indolence—"melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder" (122)—by prompting us to "exercise or *labour*."²⁴ The sublime thus operates as an antidote to melancholy, whereas the beautiful furthers the decadence of our energies:

beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system. There are all the appearances of such a relaxation; and a relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems to me to be the cause of all positive pleasure. Who is stranger to that manner of expression so common in all time and in all countries, of being softened, relaxed, enervated, dissolved, melted away by pleasure? (136)

In order that mind keep its parts "in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree" (123). Whereas beauty leads to dissipation, the sublime causes an increased "tension" of the nerves and ultimately leads to activity, rather than indolence. This is in a way paradoxical: the beautiful, which Burke reduces to the sweet and gentle, can lay asleep our active powers; the sublime,

²⁴ Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, 41-67, discusses the relationship between this labor and Burke's ethic of labor.

by contrast, keeps us alive by lifting us out of an always potential inertia that is a kind of death.

Burke further distinguishes between the sublime and the beautiful on the basis of their different final causes: the delight and terror of the sublime turns on the principle of self-preservation, whereas the pleasure of beauty turns on that of society. Pleasure is associated with society because the passions "which belong to *generation* have their origin in gratification and *pleasures*" (37). The sublime, however, involves "passions belonging to the preservation of the individual" (37); thus solitude is the strongest notion of the sublime and "death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror" (40). Yet, in a seeming contradiction, Burke also connects the experience of the sublime with fellow-feeling. One of his most original contributions to the discussion of the sublime lies in his resolution of this apparent contradiction: he claims that the sublime experience despite its origins in solitude provides a stimulus towards action and society.

By linking delight to pity and pity to an interest in other people, Burke gives the sublime a benevolent impulse that counteracts its misanthropic or self-isolating essence. Sublime delight strengthens the bond of sympathy. During the sublime experience we imagine the experience of the victims and our powers of fellow-feeling are strengthened. The delight we feel "hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel prompts us to seek relief by relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works to its own purpose, without our concurrence" (43). The sublime effect overleaps our reasoning capacity, even our will, and draws us by impulse to sympathize with others. Kant criticizes Burke's theory, arguing that if the sublime involves real pain, would we not avoid all recurrences of such experiences, rather than delight in them? Burke emphasizes that sympathy with scenes of misery that is engendered by the sublime is an "instinct" that works "antecedent to any reasoning" and "without our concurrence"; that is, we might avoid scenes of misery if we could, but we are not free to do so. Burke thus transforms the possibility of social fragmentation into the very social reconciliation needed to prevent it.

Burke's innovative physiological analysis of the sublime undergirds his theory that the sublime is an overpowering force that limits the exercise of our mental and reflective capability: the sublime leads not to an exaltation of our soul or of our mind but to the strengthening of our body, to a strong nervous system, which ultimately compels us to action. In his distinctive refiguring of the sublime, Burke identifies its significance with the way it confronts us with our finitude. From the confrontation with finitude and limitedness there arises a strong sense of humility and sympathy that in turn animates our actions. Rather than leading us to an experience of self-presence or self-exaltation, Burke's sublime overpowers the self and our instinct to self-preservation motivates us to relieve our pain by relieving that of others. Far from suggesting the autonomy of the self, Burke's

version of the sublime thus subordinates the individual within a social and ethical context.

Whereas Burke consistently limits the role of mind in the sublime experience, Kant's sublime is an entirely spiritual consciousness, which arises at the point where pure reason transcends the sensuous. The sublime in Kant is the resistance against that which had been previously considered sublime: rather than considering the sublime the experience of being overpowered, the sublime is "our ability to resist" (261, §28) the overpowering of the self. According to Kant the sublime, like the beautiful, is a feeling of pleasure, and a judgment about the sublime is an aesthetic judgment that is reflective and disinterested. Our judgments of taste are "apart" from any definite concept, and are indifferent to the "real existence" of the object. He admits that in the experience of the sublime the imagination is deprived of its freedom (269),²⁵ but this deprivation of freedom is in itself no longer considered sublime. Instead it becomes sublime insofar as it calls forth a higher counter-force within us. For Kant loss of freedom is only sublime when it gives us the feeling of an even greater experience of freedom that is not bound to the senses. Kant argues that the unintelligibility of the sublime provides the best way to remind us of the noumenal aspect of our selves, of our "reason" (*Vernunft*). "The object," Kant writes, "is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind" (245, §23): nature is "called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature" (262, §28). In Kant, we feel ourselves to be, as it were, both imprisoned and liberated by the very same force. Kant may rescue or reclaim the freedom of the self, but in so doing he has excluded most of what remains central to theories of the sublime from Longinus to Burke: the overwhelming of our reflective ability through the power of the passions.

The contrast between Burke's and Kant's view of the sublime is much more than the contrast typically made between an empirical theory based on our experience—on sensations and our physiological and psychological responses to them—and a transcendental theory based on an a priori system. Neither Burke nor Kant can be simply seen as representing the culmination of an eighteenth-century British tradition of thought on the sublime. Both break from previous thought in crucial yet opposed ways. Kant rejects the line of thought that considers the sublime as essentially an experience of being overpowered. Burke insists on that power of the sublime, yet his physiologism and consequent minimizing of mental activity sets him clearly apart from the emphasis of his contemporaries on the role of association. Both, however, seek to integrate their views of the sublime with moral conduct. For Kant the recognition in the sublime of our

²⁵ See the "General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgements," in *Critique of Judgment*.

“superiority over nature” is the basis of our “moral feeling” (267). But since this feeling is not connected with action it is not strictly moral activity: moral feeling is the moral will as it triumphantly intuits itself not as it manifests itself in action. Burke offers an alternative model: without becoming part of the Kantian dynamics of self-consciousness and instead embracing physiologism, he avoids the potential misanthropic and destructive tendencies of the sublime by showing that the experience leads directly to moral action. The fundamental difference between Burke and Kant is that while Kant’s transcendent sublime allows us to recognize our limitlessness, Burke’s physiological sublime presents us with our limitedness.

Yale University.