

Sublimity, the Supernatural, the Real

In his first preface (see p. 3) and his letter to Mme. Du Deffand (see p. 267), Walpole cheered *The Castle of Otranto* for refusing neo-classical rules of art, rules upheld by writers such as Samuel Johnson and Clara Reeve, who feared that wayward novels would corrupt youthful minds. Walpole's example not only inspired Reeve (who still wanted a more realistic mode of gothic) but also encouraged other writers to attempt a Burkean sublime and to theorize a new supernatural mode for the imagination.

Edmund Burke (1729–1797)

Born in Ireland but spending most of his life in London, Edmund Burke was a prominent Whig in the House of Commons. His influential treatise on aesthetics encouraged Uvedale Price (An Essay on the Picturesque, 1794) and John Milner (Essays on Gothic Architecture, 1800) to judge gothic architecture, in its obscure effects, more sublime than the Greek. The campy tone of Walpole's Otranto makes it difficult to decide whether it is presenting or parodying the aesthetics of the sublime.

from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757)¹

from PART I. SECTION VII. 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. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience. The cause of this I shall endeavour to investigate hereafter.

from PART II. SECTION I. Of the passion caused by the Sublime

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.

from SECTION II. Terror

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear; for fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether the cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous.

from SECTION III. Obscurity

To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accus-
tom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one

¹London, 1759 ed., 58–59, 95–97, 99–100, 101, 105, 107–108, 110.

will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings. [. . .]

from SECTION IV: Of the difference between Clearness and Obscurity with regard to the passions

It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. It is thus with the vulgar; and all men are as the vulgar in what they do not understand. [. . .] Hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds: but to see distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea.

from SECTION V. Power

I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises [. . .] naturally [. . .] from terror, the common stock of every thing that is sublime.

Anna Letitia Aikin [Barbauld] (1743–1825)
and John Aikin (1747–1822)

* Walpole believed this essay was a defense of Otranto against his critics.¹

from “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror; with Sir Bertrand, A Fragment,” *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (1773)²

The old Gothic romance and the Eastern tale with their genii, giants, enchantments, and transformations, however a refined critic may censure them as absurd and extravagant, will ever retain a

¹Letter to Mason, April 8, 1778, *Yale Edition of Walpole's Correspondence*, vol. 28, 382. On attribution to Barbauld alone, see Mandell, <http://www.muohio.edu/womenpoets/barbauld/aboutsirbert.html>.

²From *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose*, 119, 122, 123–27.

most powerful influence on the mind, and interest the reader independently of all peculiarity³ of taste. [. . .]

How are we then to account for the pleasure derived from such objects? I have often been led to imagine that there is a deception in these cases; and that the avidity with which we attend is not a proof of our receiving real pleasure. The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire of satisfying curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer actual pain during the whole course of it. We rather chuse to suffer the smart pang of a violent emotion than the uneasy craving of an unsatisfied desire. That this principle, in many instances, may involuntarily carry us through what we dislike, I am convinced from experience. This is the impulse which renders the poorest and most insipid narrative interesting when once we get fairly into it; and I have frequently felt it with regard to our modern novels, which, if lying on my table, and taken up in an idle hour, have led me through the most tedious and disgusting pages, while, like the Pistol eating his leek,⁴ I have swallowed and execrated to the end. And it will not only force us through dullness, but through actual torture—through the relation of a Damien's execution, or an inquisitor's act of faith.⁵ When children, therefore, listen with pale and mute attention to the frightful stories of apparitions, we are not, perhaps, to imagine that they are in a state of enjoyment, any more than the poor bird which is dropping into the mouth of the rattlesnake—they are chained by the ears, and fascinated by curiosity. This solution, however, does not satisfy me with respect to the well-wrought scenes of artificial terror which are formed by a sublime and vigorous imagination. Here, though we know beforehand what to expect, we enter into them with eagerness, in quest of a pleasure already experienced. This is the pleasure constantly attached to the excitement of surprise from new and wonderful objects. A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of "forms unseen, and mightier far than we,"⁶ our imagination, darting

³Individuality.

⁴Forced to eat a rotten leek, Pistol swears revenge in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth* (5.1.1–79).

⁵Henry Brooke, *The Fool of Quality* (1765).

⁶Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man* (1733–34): Nature "taught the weak to bend, the proud to pray / To Pow'r unseen, and mightier far than they" (3.251–52).

forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. Passion and fancy co-operating elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement.

Hence, the more wild, fanciful, and extraordinary are the circumstances of a scene of horror, the more pleasure we receive from it; and where they are too near common nature, though violently borne by curiosity through the adventure, we cannot repeat it or reflect on it, without an over-balance of pain. In the *Arabian Nights*⁷ are many most striking examples of the terrible joined with the marvellous: the story of Aladdin and the travels of Sinbad are particularly excellent. The *Castle of Otranto* is a very spirited modern attempt upon the same plan of mixed terror, adapted to the model of Gothic romance. The best conceived, and most strongly worked-up scene of mere natural horror that I recollect, is in Smollet's *Ferdinand Count Fathom* [1753]; where the hero, entertained in a lone house in a forest, finds a corpse just slaughtered in the room where he is sent to sleep, and the door of which is locked upon him. It may be amusing for the reader to compare his feelings upon these, and from thence form his opinion of the justness of my theory.

David Hume (1711–1776)

Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume wrote this essay ca. 1737 and published it in 1748. Skeptical of testimonies to miracles (by priests, say, or by the Bible), Hume went so far as to argue that a miracle violates natural law, being logically impossible on an experiential basis. Clara Reeve's criticism of The Castle of Otranto, particularly its supernatural devices, reflects this scruple.

from "Of Miracles" (new ed., 1777)¹

A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against

⁷A group of Persian stories translated into French by Antoine Galland (1704) and then into English (1706–17).

¹From *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 2.10.1.117, 122–23; 2.10.2.127–28.

Comment
by
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