



2

Indeterminacy

...I think there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. 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.

Edmund Burke

Particularly the most elevated sensation of music arises from a confused perception of idle or visionary beauty and rapture, which is sufficiently perceivable to fire the imagination, but not clear enough to become an object of knowledge. This shadowy beauty the mind attempts, with a languishing curiosity, to collect into a distinct object of view and comprehension; but it sinks and escapes, like the dissolving ideas of a delightful dream, that are neither within the reach of memory, nor yet totally fled. The noblest charm of music, then, though real and affecting, seems too confused to be collected into a distinct idea.

James Usher

Introduction

Moving from Kant to eighteenth-century Britain, one leaves behind the complex two-way traffic with pure forms, transcendental schemas and categories prefiguring the world of appearances. What one finds here is a world of ideas based on sense-perceptions. In good Lockean fashion, the term 'idea' broadly connotes that which the mind perceives in itself, or is an immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding. As Stephen Priest has put it, in the Lockean tradition, 'idea' basically "includes not only our notions of a mental image and a concept, but also our notion of an experience. An idea for Locke is any mental content whatsoever. It is the medium of thought and what our minds are stored with" (Priest 1990: 62). It should, moreover be borne in mind that in the Lockean scheme of things "only ideas are perceived directly – not physical objects. The mind perceives or has ideas and these ideas represent the physical objects which cause them" (ibid.: 62). As in the Kantian system, therefore, one's interactions with the world are never interactions with things in themselves but with one's ideas or representations of things: to experience the sublime is to experience an idea of it.

However, there is something peculiar about this idea in British eighteenth-century critical theory. As Edmund Burke emphasizes all over in the second and fifth parts of his *Enquiry*, the idea of the sublime is not a clear but obscure one. This means that it allows for no, or at best only an indeterminate mental picturing. Apart from notions of pain, danger, and power, I will suggest in this chapter, it is this indeterminacy – painful and pleasurable at once – that epitomizes eighteenth-century British theories of the sublime as a specifically artificial sublime.

To this end, I will first of all show that conventional interpretations of the Burkean sublime generally bypass a perhaps all-too obvious aspect of Burke's argument. Thus, the 'source' of the Burkean sublime is familiarly represented as terror: the painful feeling of a life-negating threat that is nevertheless surmounted in a delightful awareness of one's own safety. Still, in his analysis of the sublime as terror and terror relieved, Burke's main focus is not on terror alone. Rather, it is on that which in turn makes terror possible: darkness, uncertainty, blindness. It is the Lockean idea transformed into an obscure idea. This will lead me to propose that the 'source' of the Burkean sublime is, in the end, not terror but indeterminacy.

Starting from this thesis, I will subsequently point out how in Burke's text the existential tension of uncertainty relative to terror, is translated into a semantic and visual indeterminacy where the artistic or artificial sublime is concerned. To evoke the sublime in art, one must specify and show as little as possible, so as to increase tension as much as possible. For Burke, not pictures but words can achieve this, as only words would be able to rouse obscure, indeterminate ideas.

This may be familiar enough, but it may not be so familiar that Burke's theory of words as raising obscure ideas harks back to earlier eighteenth-century ideas on contemporary instrumental music. As Kevin Barry (1987) has suggested, and as I will fully explain, what Burke has to say on the peculiar advantage of words with respect to sublime evocation, is what theorists like James Harris had already observed with respect to music: it communicates indirectly, raising no distinct but only at best imperfect or incomplete ideas to the mind. Later theorists like James Beattie, too, will inscribe the said 'imperfections' of music into the fittingly suggestive, indeterminate ways of words where the sublime is at stake.

This, I will argue, marks a first connection between eighteenth-century ideas on contemporary instrumental music and the idea of the artificial sublime: poetry, words, must somehow act in the manner of the 'open' musical sign to bring about the tense indeterminacy of the sublime. Yet, it may be wondered, is this tension of indeterminacy only connoted negatively in eighteenth-century critical theory? Is it a tension, as with Burke's existential sublime, that needs to be relieved in order to bring delight? Beattie, in this instance, already stresses – precisely – the delight of indeterminacy in poetic texts as a delight of imaginative freedom. Likewise, and more radically, the later eighteenth-century theorist Thomas Twining will point to the delights of instrumental music as lacking the stability of an ultimate signified.

In Burke's account of the artificial infinite – for him a prime 'source' of the sublime – the tension of indeterminacy similarly takes on a more ambivalent aspect. No longer exclusively tied to a crushing terror of uncertainty, this tension here also holds a peculiar delight relative to a suspension of determination. In Burke's sublime experience of the infinite a resolution remains wanting, thus obstructing a satisfying sense of

closure. Nevertheless, the absence of such closure here not precludes but *conditions* a delight paradoxically holding pain (tension) and pleasure (tensionlessness) *in one*: the latter is interlocked with the former.

A similar conflict of simultaneity, I will show, surges in James Usher's proto-Romantic (re)reading of the (Burkean) sublime. Significantly, the delight of indecision associated with instrumental music in eighteenth-century theories here converges with the idea of an 'alternative' sublime feeling: linking the sublime to the musical experience, Usher posits a sublime feeling that vacillates rather than sublimates, taking on itself the inconclusiveness that marks the idea of the infinite.

Sublime Relief

In its conventional or traditional reading, the Burkean sublime feeling differs but little in terms of structure from the Kantian sublime experience as a narrative experience. Briefly and simply put, Burke defines sublime experience as, firstly, the threat that something vital may be taken away from me, and secondly, a subsequent relief on finding that it has not been taken away from me after all. The threat gives rise to terror (for instance: a terror of death, of life being taken away from me), while the ensuing relief gives rise to delight (the delight on finding that my life has been preserved). Terror, in turn, is defined as “an apprehension of pain or death”; a dreadful premonition that something awful, not yet seen or known, might happen to me, while delight refers to a negative pleasure arising from the initially felt – but subsequently removed – dread of pain or death (Burke 1990: IV, sect. III, 119). Or, as Lyotard has suggested, Burkean sublime experience consists of a series of subsequent privations. First, and this is what makes up the pain of the sublime, there is the threat of a privation of certainty: a dreaded interruption of the continuation of life, of light, of company, of language, of objects (Lyotard 1998: 99). As Burke himself also indicates, these privations correspond to terrors of death, darkness, solitude, silence, and emptiness respectively (ibid.: 99; Burke 1990: II, sect. VI, 65). However, for this terror to become in any way pleasurable, the “terror-causing threat” must be “suspended”: if the threat is not imminent, if any real danger is kept at bay, tension gives way to an intense and joyful relief (Lyotard 1998: 99). This relief “is still a privation, but it is a privation at one remove: the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life” (ibid.: 99). Burke calls this secondary privation the delight of the sublime.

Like the Kantian sublime, Burkean sublime experience can thus be defined as a pleasure that is mediated through, and intensified by, a displeasure. As I have already shown in the preceding chapter, such a mediated pleasure can be brought about in a fictional, or distanced, context: I am faced with (a fictional scene of) impending death, but when I realize that the danger is not or no longer ‘actual’, tension is released and I am given free reign to delight in the awareness of my own safety. Differently said, only when pains of privation are suspended in feelings of relief and reassurance, the delight can be felt which makes the terrible sublime. This is, in the end, what those famous lines from the *Enquiry* entail:

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 pain or danger 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... (Burke 1990: I, sect. VII, 36-37).

Thus, for Kant the pain of the sublime serves a self-fulfilling principle, and can be delightful to the extent that the exalting joy of self-affirmation is earned through the suffering of self-humiliation. Burke, conversely, represents pain and terror as serving the purpose of a delightful, *life-affirming* passion: a rejuvenation of vitality. Very roughly said, the former revolves around the delight of having a rational mind, while the latter revolves around the delight of having a physical life.

As Paul Crowther has already emphasized, this Burkean life-affirming passion is considerably more than the diverting, "monotony-relieving affective [jolt]" it has been familiarly made out to be during the twentieth century (Crowther 1996: 127). Indeed, and as I have remarked in the first chapter, far from just describing a more or less cosy shivering, Burke specifically interprets the shock of the sublime as a shock facing me with my own mortality (ibid.: 126). Not just any shock is sublime: the term specifically applies to those experiences relating to my eventual fate or destiny as a transient, human being – which is to say, nothing fancy or supersensible, but death. Interestingly, however, death for Burke not merely connotes the total cessation of life. It also refers to, as one says, a doing life to death: a boring one's life away in the tedious monotony of everyday existence. Described as a "stifling" or "suffocating" state, Crowther says, the boredom caused by such monotony easily becomes as dangerous as an aggressive, bodily affliction – "it negates life" (ibid.: 126). Or as Burke puts it, continuous rest and relaxation, without any inspiring stimuli, tend to dull the mind, to incapacitate the body, and thus tend towards the emptiness and waste of death itself:

Providence has so ordered it, that a state of rest and inaction, however it may flatter our indolence, should be productive of many inconveniencies; that it should generate such disorders, as may force us to have recourse to some labour, as a thing absolutely requisite to make us pass our lives with tolerable satisfaction; for the nature of rest is to suffer all the parts of our bodies to fall into a relaxation, that not only disables the members from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions. (Burke 1990: IV, sect. VI, 122)

Satisfaction does not come from doing nothing, but from labour, from straining or exerting oneself: only when work is over, rest is sweet. Continuous inactivity for Burke easily gives way to paralysis: to that life-negating state of languid inactivity called melancholy which, as the suffering from a felt emptiness, a tiredness, of life, may well lead to "dejection, despair, and often self-murder" (ibid.: IV, sect. VI: 122). Differently said, inactivity may well lead to suffering – a suffering that can

be countered by a violent disruption of the state of inactivity from which it arose.¹

According to Burke, the disruption comes in two different, yet related ways: pain and terror. The first would act immediately on the body, the second on the mind, though both ultimately affect both body and mind. For as Burke says, pain operates on the mind *by the intervention of the body*, while terror operates on the body *by the operation of the mind*. Pain suggests an idea of death or danger to the mind, ideas of terror suggest (potential) pain to the body. Both, however, would produce a similar “tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves” (ibid.: IV, sect. III, 120). Of these two, pain need not strictly refer to torment, illness, or injury. Rather it also comprises distressing, exerting sensations, such as labour or other ‘stimulating’ activities. In Burke’s words: “labour is a surmounting of *difficulties*, an exertion of the contracting powers of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in every thing but in degree” (ibid.: IV, sect. VI, 122). This pain of exertion is nevertheless a positive pain. After all, it would remove, if only momentarily, the tiresome, nagging dullness of boredom: a difficulty has been surmounted, a pleasure has been earned, listlessness has been killed, and it feels good. It is the satisfaction one may experience after having worked hard, after a strenuous hike or climb, after running or skating a marathon, after, indeed, any demanding physical or mental effort.

¹Interestingly enough, though hardly noticed till now, in the *Anthropology* Kant largely borrows Burke's argument. Basically, Kant's view comes down to this: pleasure must be earned; it comes through pain and suffering. Or at least, pleasure is felt all the more intensely if it is preceded by pain, whereby pain (in imitation of Burke) can be understood in terms of either physical exertion or psychic tension (fear, uncertainty, jealousy), and pleasure in terms of relaxation or relief. Thus, Kant observes: “Pleasure [*Vergnügen*] is the life-enhancing feeling, pain [*Schmerz*] the life-obstructing feeling. However, as doctors have already observed, (animal) life is a continuous play of antagonism between the two. *Therefore, pain must precede every pleasure; pain is always first...Neither can any pleasure directly follow another; instead, pain must occur in-between the one and the other...Pain is the stimulus of activity [*Stachel der Tätigkeit*], and only in this pain do we have a sense of being alive; without it listlessness [*Lebsoligkeit*] would set in” (Kant 19.?: §60, 418). The assumption that pleasure must be preceded by pain to be felt in the first place, and followed by pain to occur again, is of course nonsensical. For instance, if thirst or hunger is a pain, and the satisfaction of that thirst or hunger a pleasure, I can still enjoy a good drink or a good meal without necessarily having been thirsty or hungry before. Pleasure, in other words, need not have a high difficulty-degree, although such a difficulty-degree may indeed yield a more intense pleasure: verily quenching one’s thirst after a long and arduous hike is a different matter than drinking for pleasure or diversion, just as relaxation is at least more deeply felt after mental or physical exertion. Relief, moreover, can hardly be experienced at all without some kind of tension having preceded it. Indeed, I agree with Kant that one’s ‘sense of being alive’ may be awakened in precisely such tense, dangerous, arduous, or painful situations that tend to break the everyday monotony of life. Exertion or sudden shocks may even effectively interrupt that painful and possibly terminal suffering from a felt emptiness of life known as “*die lange Weile*”; an oversensitivity to the slow, dull, and meaningless passing of time (ibid.: 420).*

Likewise, if effort (momentarily) relieves a debilitating monotony, terror may also break through the rejection and wasting of life that Burke associates with melancholy: doing nothing, being indolent and indifferent, feeling lonely and oppressed, deprived of any interest in one's own life or that of others. That is to say, Burke thinks that a good scare can pull one out of apathy or dejection and bring one, as it were, back to life. If melancholy thus involves a rejection of life, this rejection can be countered by a shock that Burke somewhat naively presumes to automatically revive the urge to *preserve* life, the desire to be alive. This means that a life-negating state (melancholy) can be removed by a life-negating threat (death) – provided the threat never comes so close as to be positively lethal:

...common labour, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a mode of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system... In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance [i.e. dejection, melancholy], they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. (ibid.: IV, sect. VII, 123)

The terror, and delight, of the sublime is a cure for the dullness and indifference of boredom: monotony is positively countered by precisely “that upon which our aversion to monotony is ultimately founded” – namely “the negation of life”; death, decay, paralysis, waste, putrefaction, destruction (Crowther 1996: 127).

Obscurity

Thus, the relieving and liberating shock of the sublime has its direct source in terror. However, in my view Burke's sublime feeling ultimately builds not just on terror but on what, in turn, *conditions the possibility* of terror: *uncertainty*. If according to Burke the sublime is experienced by way of terror, then terror can only be felt in the uncertainty or indeterminacy of darkness and obscurity. Only when one cannot see, oversee, or understand, when one is ignorant or insecure, one is highly susceptible to Burke's dreadful apprehension of death, danger, or pain: “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 accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Everyone 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“ (ibid.: II, sect. III, 54). And again:

in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such a case strength is no sure protection; wisdom can only act by guess; the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else towards his defence, is forced to pray for light. (ibid.: IV, sect. XIV, 130)

According to Burke, the reason for this agony of darkness is not just a lack of foresight or control, a threat of being unmanned. Rather, he believes, "it is in our nature, that, when we do not know what may happen to us, to fear the worst that can happen to us; and hence it is, that uncertainty is so terrible, that we often seek to be rid of it" (ibid.: II, sect. XIX, 76). Uncertainty creates an unbearable tension caused by an induced passiveness: one must wait, or at best guess, to counter a possible danger one does not yet know, has not yet seen, and accordingly cannot yet contain. As a breeding-ground for terror, the pain of uncertainty in a potentially threatening, or at least disorienting, situation is the pain of something dreadful being at once "withheld and announced" (Lyotard 1998: 92). There is a vague premonition of impending danger, a tentative hint (a noise in the dark, a sudden movement in the distance) but it literally remains to be seen if, and if so what, that danger will be. Uncertainty reigns, in other words, when "something remains to be determined"; when one is hostage to an as yet immaterialized threat (ibid.: 91). Terror, therefore, presupposes a suspension of revelation, whether it be in the form of sensuous blindness or intellectual ignorance. It can only be aroused, sustained, and exploited in a sphere of radical indeterminacy that, for Burke and others, translates into a *visual and semantic indeterminacy* in poetry and rhetoric.

Not-Showing

What, Burke wonders, would this mean for artistic or artificial evocations of the sublime? The answer to him is obvious: avoid detailed information, elucidation or clarification. Do not try to reproduce or meticulously record terrible visual facts, but try to create an atmosphere of brooding and awful premonition in which the *effects* of some terrible thing or scene described can be felt by your audience. Hint, vaguely allude, or encircle rather than exhaustively describe. Try to induce tensions of uncertainty, blind your audience so they will fear every next step or move, every turn around the corner. Do not inform but, to speak with Mary Shelley, seek "to make the reader dread to look round, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart" (Shelley [1817] 1985: 57-58). Undermine, in a word, your audience's ability to predict,

foresee, and place confidence in the unknown, so as to give rise to ideas of danger. Make them fear the worst.

Or, as Burke probably learned from John Dennis, to evoke the sublime by artificial means, terror must be made to feel as if it were real. Thus, Dennis observes in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704): to “bring even absent terrible Objects” before a public’s eyes and ears, the speaker must become like a magician who makes us “sensible of the same Passion that we should feel from the things themselves” (Dennis 1939: I, 363). This may be called a realism in effect, or an expressive realism: something is brought to life not as it is, but as it is or has been felt. Dennis maintains that this can be achieved by drawing any terrible object “in violent Action or Motion”. In this way one can surprise an unsuspecting soul before it can even pause to reflect (ibid.: I, 362).² The speaker must strike, suddenly and powerfully, so that the terrible nature of an idea or object (say, thunder) is, as it were, enacted in the way it is presented to the public.

Dennis, moreover, adds to this that those things “are the most terrible which are the most wonderful”, i.e. strange, unimaginable, and incomprehensible. For “that seeing them both threatening and powerful, and not being able to fathom the Greatness and Extent of their Power, we know not how far and how soon they may hurt us” (ibid.: I, 362). Terror thus builds on insecurity, on a not (completely) knowing where one stands. Yet if that which is the most terrible is also the most unexpected and uncontrollable, and if it is the feeling of terror that “contributes extremely to the Sublime”, Burke corrects Dennis. The sublime, he says, thrives not on agitated but *obscure* images, if not on the *absence* of any image at all (ibid.: I, 361). The sublime, Burke believes, has not to do with seeing, but with not-seeing, not with vision but with vision obstructed, not with showing but with not-showing. There is for Burke a limit to representation where the sublime is concerned – and this limit is transgressed when the invisible, incomprehensible, and unknown are downgraded to the distinct, conceivable, and determinable:

[when a] grand cause of terror makes its appearance, what is it? is it not, wrapt up in the shades of its own incomprehensible darkness, more awful, more striking, more terrible, than the...clearest painting could possibly represent it? When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of...very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think almost always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous. (Burke 1990: II, sect. IV, 58)

²Such violent motion would also enhance what S.T. Coleridge was to call much later a willing suspension of disbelief; a willingness to take something fictional or even improbable momentarily for real: “an absent Object can never be set before the Eye in a true Light, unless it be shown in violent Action or Motion; because unless it is shewn so, the Soul has leisure to reflect upon the Deceit” – and, recognizing the illusion, fails to be “deeply penetrated” (Dennis 1939: I, 362).

Thus, I will explain below, Burke re-instates the Biblical ban on images in the realm of aesthetics, thereby knowingly or unknowingly reinforcing the original link between the awful yet ecstatic religious experience of an angry, jealous God and the eighteenth-century sublime feeling: “You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman, or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air, or like any creature that moves along the ground or any fish in the waters below” (Deuteronomy 4: 15-18).

Imitation and Substitution

Burke maintains, therefore, that any *visual* evocation of the sublime as a felt terror of uncertainty is a contradiction within the terms. Pictures, he believes, reveal and thus cannot keep things in the dark long enough to exploit and sustain ideas of impending danger. Why this should be so can, for Burke, be explained by the simple fact that pictures work by means of imitation and resemblance, or an exact copying and showing of the ‘facts’ of reality: “nothing is an imitation further than as it resembles some other thing” (Burke 1990: V, sect. VI, 157). As Burke argues somewhat naively, it is pictures rather than words that are particularly apt at imitation. For only the former would have an exact “resemblance to the ideas for which they stand” (ibid.: V, sect. VI, 157). This may in fact imply that due to their very nature (guaranteeing an exact, one-to-one relationship with the reality they represent), pictures for Burke *cannot but* imitate as they *cannot but* resemble, and hence *cannot but* completely and exactly show or reveal a presumed original. As such, as a clear and exact duplication, either in form, content, manner, or action, of something else, the business of imitation is to enlighten and inform. It is “by imitation far more than by precept that we learn everything; and what we learn thus we acquire not only more effectually, but more pleasantly” (ibid.: I, sect. XVI, 45).³ This means that

³Evidently, Burke's association of imitation with the pleasures of learning and instructing is derived from Aristotle's *The Art of Poetry*. Aristotle argues that “inborn in all of us is the instinct to enjoy works of imitation...The reason for this is that learning is a very great pleasure, nor for philosophers only, but for other people as well, however limited their capacity for it may be. They enjoy seeing likenesses because in doing so they acquire information (they reason out what each represents, and discover, for instance, that 'this is a picture of so and so')...The instinct for imitation, then, is natural to us” (Dorsch 1965: 35). It could, for that matter, even be suggested that Burke's dissociation of imitation (as a means of making things completely visible again) from the rousing of passions like terror is ultimately founded on Aristotle's observations on tragedy. Thus, Aristotle notes: “Fear and pity [the two emotions, as Plato had also said, belonging to tragedy] may be excited by means of spectacle; but they can also take their rise from the very structure of the action, which is the preferable method and the mark of a better dramatic poet. For the plot should be so ordered that even without seeing it performed anyone merely

pictures, as imitations, are restricted to registering things as they are in a world that can be perceived with the senses, and register these things very clearly and reliably. Beyond this world they should not move.

To be sure, this Burkean connection between pictures, imitation, and learning is deeply rooted in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British empirical tradition. This tradition considered the sense of sight the only reliable source of empirical truth. As Angela Leighton has pointed out, philosophers like Locke and Hume “present an epistemology based on the authenticity of sense perception. This authenticity is determined mainly by the criterion of clarity or vividness; by a language which falls back, willingly or unwillingly, on a metaphor of sight. The mind’s ideas or impressions are the source of true knowledge to the extent that they are clear, distinct, simple” (Leighton 1984: 3-4). Not surprisingly, Leighton goes on to say, this bias toward sight results in the “problematic assumption” that “if truth is to be found in perceiving ideas vividly and distinctly, it is not to be found in the language by which ideas are communicated” (ibid.: 4). As mere communicators of mental ideas (i.e. mental images), words are conceived of as deceptive fabricators and even obfuscators. Therefore, their “rhetorical and figurative susceptibilities become all the more menacing” (ibid.: 4). Words move in their move away from visible truth: they absorb and reshape the world of sense.

In elaborating on this word-picture difference, Burke’s strategy is first of all to fully grant the opaqueness and unreliability of words. As he argues in accordance with Lockean empiricism, unlike pictures words do not have an exact resemblance to the ideas for which they stand. The relation between image-ideas and words is rather one of *difference*: words do not visually reflect the ‘original’ which they would bring so vividly to life. In fact, in Burke’s view words have little or nothing to do with the (sensuous) things they represent. Unlike pictures, they operate by means of sounds which on the basis of certain codes and conventions function as signs of a visible world that plays no part whatsoever, is indeed almost entirely lost, in a newly created, verbal reality. The latter effaces, replaces and makes anew the former (Burke 1990: V, sect. II-V, 149-155).

As W.J.T. Mitchell has observed, in thus emphasizing the arbitrary nature of language, Burke tries to correct Locke’s argument that words

hearing what is afoot will shudder with fear and pity as a result of what is happening – as indeed would be the experience of anyone hearing the story of Oedipus. To produce this effect by means of stage-spectacle is less artistic, and requires the cooperation of the producer. Those who employ spectacle to produce an effect, not of fear, but of something merely monstrous, have nothing to do with tragedy, for not every kind of pleasure should be demanded of tragedy, but only that which is proper to it” (ibid.: 49). There is already a strong tendency towards the anti-pictorial as concerns the powerful affect of fear here, and it is not difficult to see a parallel between Aristotle’s downgrading of the merely monstrous in spectacles to provoke fear on the one hand, and Burke’s depreciation of visual representations of the sublime as pompous and ridiculous on the other.

produce “three effects...in the mind of the hearer. The first is, the *sound*; the second, the *picture*, or representation of the thing signified by the sound; the third is, the *affectation* of the sound produced by one or by both of the foregoing” (ibid.: V, sect. IV, 152; Mitchell 1987: 124). The correction consists mainly in eradicating the second effect, so as to claim an anti-pictorial quality for poetic diction in particular and, in Burke's less “cautious moments”, linguistic usage in general (Mitchell 1987: 125).

In this respect, compounded abstract words, such as honour, justice, liberty, and the like (ideas of reason, Kant would say), are no problem for Burke. They occasion only the first and third effect: these words are beyond sensuous images. Still, simple abstracts such as ‘blue’ or ‘cold’ and more so “the *aggregate* words, man, castle, horse, &c.” can produce all three prescribed effects as they are partly rooted in sense-perception (Burke 1990: V, sect. IV, 152). However, as Burke now takes Locke's doctrine of words into his own hands, the pictorial effect of simple abstracts and aggregate words is often obscured not just in poetry and rhetoric, but even in everyday linguistic practice.⁴ That is to say, “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” (Burke 1990: V, sect. IV, 152).⁵ Indeed, Burke remarks, “it is not only of those ideas which are commonly called abstract and of which no image at all can be formed, but even of particular real beings [or sights and scenes], that we converse without having any idea of them excited in the imagination” (ibid.: V, sect. V, 155). We rather steer our habitual blind course in ordinary reading and conversation. For instance, in either offering or listening to a description of the course of the Danube through Europe one need not continuously skip, so to speak, to and fro the world of sense to make sense of that description. Instead, one quite consistently remains within ‘the (prison-)house of language’, making sense of arbitrary signs, not of mental pictures:

⁴As Burke learned from Locke, simple abstracts and aggregate words are painted not so much clearly as strongly in poetic and rhetoric language, so that the images they might raise easily become confused and obscure instead of distinct and recognisable (Mitchell 1987: 124).

⁵Burke observes in this respect that in relation to aggregate words and simple abstracts, the mind, it is true, “possesses a faculty of raising...images [of man, woman, flower, river, or red, blue, hot, or cold] at pleasure; but then an act of will is necessary to this; and in ordinary conversation or reading it is very rarely that any image is at all excited in the mind” (Burke 1990: V, sect. V, 155). The implication is that it takes a willed effort to raise images to the mind of spoken or written phrases. When, for instance, “I say, ‘I shall go to Italy next summer’...I believe that no body has by this painted in his imagination the exact figure of the speaker passing by land or by water, or both; sometimes on horseback, sometimes in a carriage; with all the particulars of the journey” (ibid.: V, sect. V, 155). In other words, the implication is that if one were to raise exact images to the mind of every word spoken in conversation, this would hinder instead of enhance communication. These images need, in fact, not be raised for the words spoken to be adequately understood.

Indeed, it is impossible, in the rapidity and quick succession of words in conversation, to have ideas both of the sound of the word, and of the thing represented; besides 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, in such a manner as to answer the purposes of life; nor is it necessary that we should (ibid.: V, sect, IV, 153)

Rather, to speak with Wittgenstein, it is necessary to know how to play the appropriate language game: relations between a sign and its signified are neither natural nor necessary but socially, culturally, or even randomly construed. What is required for reading, speaking, and listening is simply to acquire the relevant rules determining the applications of such relations within a language community.

It should be realized that in this context, the "sound of a word" does not so much connote an aural sensation as a convention and even a mediation. As Burke believes, it is through habit and association that certain sounds become attached to certain "occasions" which gradually come to be replaced by these sounds (ibid.: V., sect. II, 150). That is to say, in Burke's view, sounds 'stand for' certain occasions on the basis of an initial tie or connection between the two. For instance, that which is experienced as or found to be unpleasant "often appears under the name of evil" (ibid.: V, sect. III, 151). Eventually however, through habit and frequent use, the immediate tie between sound and occasion becomes, as it were, unstuck. The former usurps the latter, as it can be used and made sense of without any image-idea of the occasion needing to be raised in the mind:

...words are in reality but mere sounds; but they are sounds, which being used on particular occasions...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 [i.e. without a (distinct) idea of that occasion being raised in the mind], and carrying still their first impressions, they at last utterly lose their connection with the particular occasion that gave rise to them; yet the sound without any annexed notion continues to operate as before (ibid.: V, sect. II, 150-151)

What Burke wants to argue for on the basis of this anti-pictorial semiotics, is that words can operate *like* the occasions or realities they replace, without these occasions requiring to be visually present or recalled. That is to say, what words can, and pictures cannot do is to at once hide and simulate their referent. They create an illusion of presence not by dishing up the visual 'facts' of a thing represented, but by supplanting and, in this way, operating as that thing: pictures resemble, words *substitute* the

things they represent. In thus absorbing, as it were, their occasion, words – and this is substitution's crux – can produce “*effects similar to those of their occasions*”. Words communicate by means of “sounds, which by custom have the effect of realities”: they suggest the presence, the ‘being there’, of a reality not or no longer ‘there’ through sounds that feed on the power of habit, convention, and association (ibid.: V, sect. VI, 157).⁶ Nevertheless, Mitchell has rightfully observed, words produce these reality-effects at a distance. As substitutions of either visible (sensible) or invisible (supersensible or abstract) ‘occasions’, words at once invoke *and* mediate the effects of these occasions, so that they also moderate the effects associated with them (Mitchell 1987: 139).

Burke is now precisely where he wants to be to make his case for the implicit suitability of words for artistic or artificial evocations of the sublime. First, he has established that words operate in the visual absence of a represented object or idea. This evidently is an advantage where the sublime is concerned, as the latter is to be evoked without being seen. Due to their non-pictorial qualities, Burke believes, it is words that can realize most ‘naturally’ and efficiently the suspension of revelation essential to the tense blindness at the heart of the sublime. Moreover, least bound to the world of sense, words are most appropriate in tentatively evoking “ideas [which] have never been at all presented to the senses of any men” yet nevertheless, or rather just because of that, tend to have an awe-inspiring effect: “God, angels, devils, heaven and hell” (ibid.: V, sect VII, 158). Secondly, and in relation to this, as substitutes words do not register or reflect the facts of reality. Rather, they simulate its *effects*: they do not just register a thing “as it is” – although they are nevertheless capable of doing that in dry, matter-of-fact descriptions – but can also evoke a thing “as it is felt” (ibid.: V, sect. VII, 160). Such an affective realism, I have already shown, is of central significance to artistic evocations of the sublime. John Dennis already makes the point in the early eighteenth century, while Burke likewise argues that words are particularly effective in relation to the sublime. What they can do is to simulate the emotional impact of a (terrible) thing, while at the same time, as mere substitutes, preventing this impact from becoming all too real. Words, that is, can make a reader/listener feel, rather than see “with coolness enough”, a threat recounted or represented as *if* (and this as *if* marks a safe distance) it were real (ibid.: II, sect. IV, 56).

A Reference to Music

Thus, showing and instructing, pictures operate on the understanding, while words, not-showing and emotively stimulating, primarily work the passions. Although Burke posits these two forms of mediation as

⁶Unlike pictures, as Burke puts it elsewhere, words are “capable of being the representatives of... natural things” in so far as they are “able to affect us...as strongly as the things they represent” (ibid.: V, sect. VII, 161). For the Longinian roots of both Burke's and Dennis's idea of affective realism in relation to the sublime, see chapter 3.

diametrically opposed, it should nevertheless be noted in this instance that the pictorial copying of facts and the verbal reproduction of effects suggests a common mimetic basis after all. The former may turn on a visible and 'factual' likeness, but the latter revolves around likeness after all in the form of *functional* likeness: as replacements words function *like* the things they represent, occasioning similar effects. Thus they allow an auditor to experience an 'original cause' as it allegedly would have felt in reality. Burke, however, takes his propagated distinction between pictures and words so seriously as to propose a hierarchy of the fine arts with painting at the bottom and poetry at the top. Frequently noting the superiority of poetry over painting, he argues that not in spite but just because of "all its obscurity", poetry is the greater art as "a great clearness... is some sort of an enemy to all enthusiasm whatsoever" (Burke 1990: II, sect. IV, 56). Thus, and in anticipation of the age of sensibility, the qualifications of the different art forms depend on an ability to make an audience feel intensely. As such, these qualifications also depend on the ability to keep an audience in suspension: intense feeling presupposes not-seeing and not-knowing.

Burke, in this instance, professes to correct the authoritative Abbé Dubos. In his *Réflexions critique sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719) the latter expresses his preference for painting over poetry "principally on account of the greater *clearness* of the ideas it represents" (ibid.: II, sect. IV, 56).⁷ According to Burke, this is a sorry mistake – if, indeed, "it be a mistake" (ibid.: 56). Basically judging the various arts by their capacity to rouse powerful passions, he exactly reverses things: "a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions", and it is poetry, because it can raise 'crowded', 'confused' and 'indistinct' images, if not not-raising any image at all, which "has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art" (ibid.: II, sect. IV, 56, 57). Somewhat casually, but nonetheless significantly, Burke tries to substantiate this claim of poetry's affective superiority over painting by pointing to the "acknowledged" emotive power of instrumental music:

...so far is a clearness of imagery from being absolutely necessary to an influence upon the passions, that they may be considerably operated upon without presenting any image at all, by certain sounds adapted to that purpose; of which we

⁷As Peter Le Huray and James Day point out, Dubos' *Réflexions* went "through nine French editions between 1719 and 1770..., and translations were published in Amsterdam, Leipzig, Berlin, Copenhagen, Breslau, and London" (Le Huray and Day 1981: 17). The British translator, Thomas Nugent was a "close acquaintance of Edmund Burke" and found so many interesting references to music in the work that he translated it as *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting, and Music* (London 1746, enlarged edition 1748) (ibid.: 18). Dubos has been generally considered "the father of modern aesthetics because he made 'sentiment' – feeling – the *raison d'être* of art" (ibid.: 17). However, because Dubos sticks to the classical term imitation for the expression of such sentiment, including in music and poetry, this may have caused some confusion for Burke.

have sufficient proof in the acknowledged and powerful effects of instrumental music (ibid.: II, sect. IV, 56)

Like instrumental music, poetry operates in the absence of distinct image-ideas. It is on the basis of this shared Burkean virtue of obscurity that both appeal to the passions instead of the understanding: these arts can enrapture and transport. If, Burke seems to argue, instrumental music can affect powerfully without painting things clearly and distinctly to the eye, indeed without apparently individualizing anything at all, it serves as a case in point for the potentially captivating power of the equally non- or poorly image-raising ways of words. Could this allusion to instrumental music – however brief and by-the-way – imply that this art is just as suitable as, if not more suitable than, poetry to evoke the sublime in its even more radically obscure, non-individualizing ways?

As in Music, So in Poetry?

This question is not easy to answer in direct and exclusive relation to Burke. His references to music are scarce for the simple reason that, as he puts it, “it is not an art in which I can say I have any great skill” (ibid.: III, XXV, 112). And yet, Burke’s choice to validate and illuminate the – affective, non-imitative – ways of poetry by referring to instrumental music might grant this art form an important role behind the scenes in the *Enquiry*. That is to say, since Burke evidently seeks to get rid of the traditional, Horatian *ut pictura poesis* in his anti-pictorial theory of words and poetry, it may be wondered to what extent instrumental music is implicitly thought to serve as a model instead. An *ut musica poesis*, let me hypothesise, based on the presumed fact that neither would raise (distinct) image-ideas: poetry successfully evokes the sublime in so far as it parallels the uncertain, affective and non-pictorial mode of mediation ascribed to instrumental music.

As Kevin Barry has noted in his interesting *Language, Music, and the Sign*, such an *ut musica poesis* already becomes evident when comparing Burke’s theory of words in the *Enquiry* to James Harris’s earlier views on music in his *Three Treatises* (1744) (Barry 1987: 29-31). For what, simply said, Harris observes about music in the *Treatises*, Burke will also, and precisely, observe about words and poetry in the *Enquiry*: as in music according to Harris, so in poetry according to Burke.⁸ Most

⁸The *Three Treatises* were widely read in the second half of the eighteenth century, a fifth edition being edited in 1794. Burke will most probably have been familiar with the work, and Barry – whose discussion of the *Treatises* is, incidentally, all too brief and one-sided – proposes a link from Burke to Harris through David Hartley, the famous author of the *Observations on Man* (1749). Hartley here more or less repeats Harris’s ideas on music that I will set forth below and, in relation to this, anticipates Burke’s anti-pictorialism by singling out the ear, rather than the eye, as being of paramount importance to us “as spiritual Beings” (in Barry 1987: 31). This supremacy is “chiefly owing to the great Use and Necessity of Words” which, precisely, act not on the eye but the ear, not on visual resemblance but on a principle of contiguity linking effects to causes (ibid.: 31). As a patron and organiser of the Salisbury music festival, it should be

obviously, this agreement between the two is materialized in Harris's claim that music cannot be properly called an imitative art. Instead, it would derive "its efficacy from another source" (Harris [1744] 1981: 36). This other source is the "raising [of] affections" – not an uncommon claim in the eighteenth century, feeding very much on seventeenth-century theories attributing to instrumental music the capacity to project deep and intense feeling (ibid.: 38). "From about 1600 until the last decade of the eighteenth century", John Neubauer writes, "it was generally held that the purpose of music was to arouse certain...passions by the appropriate use of key, meter, rhythm, and other musical elements" (Neubauer 1986: 6). These keys and rhythms were pretty much standardised, as were the affections (often related to the four classic temperaments: melancholic, sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic) they were supposed to transpose.⁹ This means that a specific use of keys, etc. was thought to produce a predictable result: music could influence the passions in predetermined ways – use key x and you may produce affection x, key y may rouse affection y.

Harris does not dissent from this common view, although he reserves a large space for the principle of association to account for the relation between musical sounds and the different affections. Thus, he first points out that various affections can be excited by music: there "are sounds to make us cheerful, or sad; martial or tender; and so of almost every other affection which we feel" – for almost any feeling, music has a sound, a key, a rhythm, an interval, a melody in stock (Harris 1981: 37). Secondly, Harris states that there is "a reciprocal operation between our affections and our ideas": certain affections raise analogous ideas (of pain, danger, pleasure, love) and vice versa (ibid.: 37). By way of example, Harris somewhat naively (if not downright comically) suggests that "ideas derived from funerals, tortures, murders and the like, naturally generate the affection of melancholy. And when by any physical causes that affection happens to prevail, it as naturally generates the same doleful ideas" (ibid.: 37). This actually parallels Burke's assertion that the passions can be operated upon in music "by certain sounds adapted to that purpose" – that is, by certain sounds which do not raise (distinct) image-ideas, but which excite affections to which, as Harris puts it, "ideas [say, of pain or danger] may correspond" (ibid.: 38, my emphasis). Music thus does not transfer ideas but passions that may be analogous to certain ideas.

added here, Harris's musical hero was G.F. Handel: his genius, Harris observes, "being in itself far the sublimest and most universal now known, has justly placed him without an equal or a second" (Harris [1744] 1981: 38).

⁹The most well-known eighteenth-century work on this issue is, of course, Johann Mattheson's massive *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* [*The Complete Music Director*] of 1739. Here, Mattheson famously declares that instrumental melodies can do without words but not without affections and shows how music can be developed into an independent 'language' of feelings.

In this capacity music can, for Harris, even anticipate ideas in so far as it can rouse passions to which ideas correspond that have not yet been pronounced. Indeed, music will for him basically serve to bring the audience in the right temper so as to be properly receptive to whatever a poet has to profess later on. Music, that is, is to be literally used as a prelude or an overture, warming up its listeners and instilling in them precisely that affection corresponding to an idea to be “exhibited” subsequently by the poet in words:

...whenever the proper affection prevails, it has been allowed that then all kindred ideas, derived from external causes, make the most sensible [i.e. strongest] impression. The ideas therefore of poetry must needs make the most sensible impression when the affections peculiar to them are already excited by music. For here a double force is made to cooperate to one end. A poet, thus assisted, finds not an audience in a temper, averse to the genius of the poem, or perhaps at best under a cool indifference, but by the preludes, the symphonies and concurrent operations of the music in all its parts, roused into those very affections which he would most desire. (ibid.: 37)

The poet, in a word, finds an audience completely prepared for the end he seeks to achieve (ibid.: 37).¹⁰ This is why Harris deems music such a “powerful ally” of poetry, although he would not like to see this ally operating purely on its own: music is to serve poetry and is only accepted in this subservient role (ibid.: 38).

Interestingly, therefore, if the power of music is not to be attributed to the ideas but to the passions it can raise, this will be precisely Burke’s argument in relation to *words* in the *Enquiry*. For Burke, I have shown, words operate by means of sounds which *by custom* have the effect of realities. This is to say that, in accordance with Harris’s theory of music, certain sounds have as it were cemented into their original ‘occasion’, whereby the relation between these sounds and their occasions is one of contiguity. The sounds create the same, or similar effect, as their original occasion. Thus, words can create a realism in effect in so far as they can bring about an experiential verisimilitude: the emotion I am more or less manipulated into feeling through words, or for that matter

¹⁰In arguing for such a fusion of music and poetry, Harris refers to Quintilian. As John Neubauer points out, the “application of rhetoric to music was most intense and widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though the roots of their intertwining go back to antiquity, particularly to Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* (ca. A.D. 95), which seems to have been the first work to draw an explicit analogy between music and rhetoric, by describing the rousing power of martial instruments and the solace drawn by galley slaves from singing. Quintilian argued that the study of music can help to refine the modulation, tone, rhythm, and inflection of an orator’s voice” (Neubauer 1986: 31). Neubauer goes on to say that Quintilian’s examples “show that music helps language to persuade and to transport the listener into the desired emotional state” (ibid.: 31). Music would thus be an essential instrument for the rousing of Longinian transports and raptures.

music, is the emotion I supposedly would have felt when witnessing an 'original cause' in reality. As such, the idea of that cause is evoked *indirectly* instead of directly, to the extent that it is only by way of the passion induced that the idea of this 'cause', from which the passion was originally derived, is made present to the listener.

If, on this basis, Burke grants words a superior emotive capacity, enrapturing its audience, Harris had already described the captivating power of musical sounds in a similar vein. For Harris, music exerts a "force irresistible", penetrating "into the deepest recesses of the soul. 'Pectus inaniter angit, irritat, mulcet, falsis terroribus implet'", as Harris quotes from Horace's *Epistolae*: He tortures his breast over nothing; he rouses it, soothes it, he fills it with imagined terrors (*ibid.*: 38). Such a vicarious thrill, we have seen, will be fundamental to Burke's fictive experience of terror in the *Enquiry*, but by that time poetry – and language in general – seems to have entirely absorbed the qualities Harris reserves for music.

Thus, the similarities between Harris's conception of music and Burke's theory of words are evident. Firstly, both emphasize a reproduction of effects rather than a reproduction of facts, allowing for things to be brought to life in a primarily experiential way. This view would be a persuasive one. To name but one example, Sir William Jones (1746-1794) (a future member of Burke's and Reynolds's Literary Club, who ended up as a judge in Calcutta) would raise the Burkean idea of a realism in effect to a central artistic principle in his *Poems...with two Essays on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations and on the Arts called Imitative* (1772). Any artist, he says, will "gain his end, not by imitating the works of nature but by assuming her power and causing the same effect upon the imagination which her charms produce to the senses" (Jones [1772] 1981: 147). Art absorbs, not copies nature, art deceives cunningly instead of instructing comprehensively.

Secondly, as Barry observes, both Harris's musical sounds and the sounds that Burke associates with words "bypass fixed and specific ideas/pictures and construct an indirect, associative and relatively uncertain link between the sounds and the effects [they] produce. The signifier is released from the specificity of a pictorial signified" (Barry 1987: 31). Although the idea of anti-pictorialism is correct, the prominence of indeterminacy – however appropriate to Burkean terror – is here nevertheless all too rashly and enthusiastically decided for. For especially in the *Treatises* the effects of musical sounds appear very much calculated – if only because, for Harris, sounds are to induce in a listener exactly the right temper, the desired receptivity, for a corresponding idea yet to be exhibited. Moreover, the cemented, customary experiential association of an affection with a corresponding idea makes the link between the two relatively certain. True, what many eighteenth-century theorists thought of as the 'magic' of association allows for some openings and surprises in the relation between sound (signifier) and idea (signified). Still, Harris's theory of reciprocity is much

too mechanistic and convention-bound to leave things merely and completely to (subjective) chance.

Imperfection

However, and notwithstanding this, when comparing Harris's conception of music to his conception of poetry, the former nevertheless comes out as the less determinate of the two. This can be inferred from the simple fact that Harris represents music (probably as exemplified by the sacral music of his champion Handel) as anticipating the poetic pronunciation and delineation – read: confirmation – of an affection. Although Burke would later make poetry out of Harris's conception of music, Harris himself still posits poetry as an art raising distinct ideas. More so, precisely on account of this capacity, it is to be placed on a higher level than instrumental music in the hierarchy of the fine arts.¹¹ In fact, the union of poetry with instrumental music is such a happy one for Harris because in this fusion poetry is no longer “forced to waste many of its richest ideas in the mere raising of affections” – instrumental music can see to that and leave poetry to, apparently, more important tasks (ibid.: 39).

As such, the relation – or division of labour – between instrumental music and poetry is a straightforward one: instrumental music raises affections to which ideas may correspond, poetry exhibits image-ideas to which affections correspond. The merely preparatory role of instrumental music in the fusion with poetry thus indicates that the affections it arouses have an imperfect or, more positively put, nascent status. They await further development, completion, substantiation: poetry is to finish the job. When alone, Harris remarks, music “can only raise affections, which soon languish and decay if not maintained by the nutritive images [i.e. image-ideas] of poetry” (ibid.: 39). Transient and unnamed, these affections cannot be sustained until the poet elaborates the ideas to which they may correspond.

Thirty odd years after the *Treatises*, James Beattie would observe something similar in his *Essay on Poetry and Music as they affect the Mind* (1776).¹² Like Harris, Beattie grants that certain ideas are sometimes

¹¹Harris maintains that in the union with music, poetry must “ever have precedence, its utility as well as dignity being by far the more considerable” (Harris 1981: 39). Barry suppresses this fact.

¹²Like Charles Avison's *Essay on Musical Expression* (1753), Beattie's *Essay* has often been heralded as a landmark in the departure from mimesis in eighteenth-century music aesthetics. The reason for this is that Beattie proposes to stop thinking of instrumental music as an imitative art. With no offence to Aristotle, Beattie believes that “modern” music requires a different approach and denomination than “the ancient” (Beattie [1776] 1981: 151). For how can music be said to imitate something if, “when I am asked what part of nature is imitated in Handel's ‘Water-music’, for instance, or in Corelli's eighth concerto, or in any particular English song or Scotch tune, I find I can give no definite answer?” (ibid.: 152). To imitate is to imitate *something*, to mediate a precisely defined content, and Beattie is often at a loss to recover any such content in modern (instrumental) music. If, therefore, for Beattie contemporary instrumental music

annexed to a tune or a melody or a harmony “in consequence of certain accidental associations” (Beattie [1776] 1981: 154). But, as he reduces the significance of such correspondences, this is “the effect of mere habit” and dependent on personal circumstances as well as socio-cultural contexts (ibid.: 155). When left to its own devices, Beattie claims, purely instrumental music such as Corelli’s or Handel’s cannot communicate anything specific, neither objects from nature, nor mental affections. Thus, a piece of music – say, Domenico Scarlatti’s beautiful sonata for harpsichord in G minor K.8 (L.488) – may effectively excite a general feeling of gentleness or tenderness. Yet it cannot be ascertained without further explanation whether this music is more “expressive of romantic love than of conjugal, parental or filial affection, tender melancholy, moderate joy, or any other gentle passion” (ibid.: 155). “So ambiguous”, Beattie concludes, “is musical expression” – and he does not like it at all (ibid.: 155). In his view, “music merely instrumental” is “imperfect” when it comes to inspiring and elevating an audience (ibid.: 156). Like Harris, Beattie believes that instrumental music needs words to become wholesome expressively. After all, though striking immediately, it can just vaguely evoke a general “sensibility” and it is only useful to “prepare the mind for being affected” by beautiful images or lofty thoughts to be raised by words (ibid.: 156). As he still wants music to definitely convey and even “mean” something affectively, Beattie thus wants it only in the company of its “most accurate interpreter” poetry:

Without this auxiliary, a piece of the best music, heard for the first time, might be said to mean something, but we should not be able to say what. It might incline the heart to sensibility: but poetry or language would be necessary to improve that sensibility into a real emotion, by fixing the fancy upon some definite and affecting ideas. A fine instrumental symphony well performed is like an oration delivered with propriety but in an unknown tongue; it may affect us a little, but conveys no determinate feeling; we are alarmed, perhaps, or melted, or soothed, but very imperfectly because we know not why: the singer, by taking up the same air and applying words to it, immediately translates the oration into our own language; then

cannot be properly called imitative it should be classified as an art of expression (ibid.: 153). Yet as Neubauer has argued, this hardly implies a radical departure from mimesis. For Beattie would do little to distinguish his idea of musical expression from older ‘affect theories’ holding a resemblance or, as Beattie himself says, “similitude” between certain sounds, keys, etc. and certain mental affections (Neubauer 1986: 154). Moreover, even if, as I will show below, Beattie nevertheless also holds that in and by itself music cannot rouse any *definite* feelings, this still does not mark him as a radically anti-mimetic theorist (Beattie 1981: 155). For the same man who rejects imitation so decisively cannot find it in himself to embrace an expressive ambiguity that he sees at the heart of modern instrumental music. He wants this ambiguity resolved by words and consequently thinks of music as being successful expressively only in combination with poetry.

all uncertainty vanishes, the fancy is filled with determinate ideas, and determinate emotions take possession of the heart. (ibid.: 155).

Burke argued precisely the opposite: when uncertainty vanishes, strong feeling will vanish with it. For Burke, it is the raising of indistinct ideas that allows for terror – the most powerful feeling of all – to be experienced. If poetry is capable of such indefiniteness, it is an indefiniteness exemplified by the ‘imperfect’ and inexact operations of instrumental music already described by James Harris.

Incompleteness

Oddly enough, however, only seven years after the publication of the *Essay*, Beattie sides with Burke after all in his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783). Here, and in stark opposition to his earlier claims, Beattie makes a strong case for indeterminacy, and for the possibility of powerful feeling in the absence of distinct ideas. To “captivate the fancy, and interest the passions”, Beattie observes in a lengthy note, poetry need not be “picturesque” – i.e. to place things clearly before the eye as in painting (Beattie [1783] 1996: 192-193). In fact, when a poet seeks to evoke things that lie “*beyond the visible diurnal sphere*”; when, that is, this poet seeks to “raise astonishment or terror...it is impossible for him to be strictly picturesque. Figures so deeply shaded cannot present a definite outline: forms of...terrific grandeur must be to a certain degree invested with darkness” (ibid.: 193). Obscurity is thus conducive to strong feelings such as wonder and terror.

However, Beattie argues in the plain text of his “Illustrations on Sublimity”, not just the supra-visible, if you will, but also scenes and objects within the visible world will benefit by not “too minute” or specified a description when it comes to evoking the sublime (ibid.: 192). Basically, and in accordance with Burke’s dictum that a ‘sublime cause’ can and should not be determined or revealed, Beattie says that the sublime thrives on incomplete, or at least very brief, descriptions which leave something to be established (read: pictured) in the mind of an auditor:

sublime description, though the circumstances that are specified be few, yet, if they be well chosen and great, the reader’s fancy will complete the picture: and often, as already hinted, the image will not be less astonishing, if in its general appearance there be something indefinite. When Hector forces the Greek entrenchments, the poet describes him by several grand allusions, and by this in particular,

Now rushing in the furious chief appears,
Gloomy as night, and shakes two shining spears.

In what respect he resembled night, Homer leaves to be determined by the reader's fancy. This conveys no positive idea; but we are hence led to imagine, that there must have been something peculiarly dark and dreadful in his look, as it appeared to the enemy: and thus we make the picture stronger perhaps than it would have been, if the author had drawn it more minutely. (ibid.: 192)

In this way, one can say, Beattie takes Burke's aesthetics of the sublime to a most logical conclusion: he points out that sublime description, as an incomplete description, requires a considerable imaginative effort from its auditors. It leaves out the hard facts of a thing or person described and, by way of analogy, metaphor, or simile leaves it to that auditor to divine and configure what has not yet been presented. Thus, not-conveying a positive or distinct idea, such a description waits to be mentally-pictorially finished and filled in by its auditors.

Granted, at times Burke is very close to this kind of imaginative or, if you will, interpretive activity as highlighted by Beattie. In poetry, says Burke, the "picturesque connection is not demanded" (Burke 1990: V, sect. V, 156). What, for instance, in the *Iliad* "is said of Helen by Priam and the old men of his council, is generally thought to give us the highest possible idea of that fatal beauty" (ibid.: V, sect. V, 156). Yet the thing is, that this fatal beauty is never minutely described. It is only alluded to indirectly or in general terms: there "is not one word said of the particulars of her beauty; no thing which can in the least help us to any precise idea of her person; but yet we are much more touched by this manner of mentioning her than by these long and laboured descriptions of Helen, whether handed down by tradition, or formed by fancy, which are to be met with in some authors" (ibid.: V, sect. V, 156). The implication here is that since Helen is not depicted in detail in the 'picturesque' manner, the reader is left to form her or his own picture of her – and this makes the depiction not less but more affecting.

One could even derive a similar imaginative engagement from Burke's claim that darkness and uncertainty make one "fear the worst" (ibid.: II, sect. XIX, 76).¹³ This easily implies a seeing more than is actually at hand: to fear the worst is to anxiously imagine or anticipate more, an unknown more, than can be presently seen – a principle much exploited

¹³The phrase 'imaginative engagement' may appear out of place here, as Burke seems to posit the power of imagination not as an actively creative but as a merely reproductive capacity. Imagination is for him the mere "representative of the senses" that "can only be pleased or displeased with...images from the same principle on which the sense is pleased or displeased" (Burke 1990: 17). Like Kant's empirical imagination as described in the *Anthropology*, so the Burkean power of imagination "is incapable of producing anything absolutely new" although it can "combine" images received by the senses "in a new manner, and according to a different order" (ibid.: 16). However, and this is what the phrase 'imaginative engagement' in the above refers to, imagination is nevertheless "the most extensive province of pleasure and pain, as it is the region of our fears and hopes and of all our passions that are connected with them" (ibid.: 17).

by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literatures as well as twentieth-century cinematic thrillers. For terror to work, it could be proposed, one needs an audience willing to imagine the worst before a danger hinted at in the dark has positively materialized itself: not-showing kindles a (more or less desperate) desire to see after all. However, even if such an imaginative activity be at stake here, the difference between Beattie and Burke still remains that the latter only appears to associate obscurity or uncertainty with dread, while the former also recognizes a peculiar delight in it. That is to say, when an author, in communicating anything great, awful, or dreadful, "says every thing that can be said, he confounds his readers with the multitude of circumstances; and, instead of rousing their imagination leaves it in a state of indolence, by giving it nothing to do" (Beattie 1996: 193).¹⁴ Boredom, in this case tied to descriptive completeness, should be countered by an indecisiveness requiring imaginative labour or exertion. This, at least in the Burkean scheme of things, makes for a sense of (creative) vitality that is experienced as delightful.

Suggestiveness

It is precisely this delight of indeterminacy that Thomas Twining, one of the most interesting theorists of the later eighteenth century, would argue for in relation to what he calls the 'suggestiveness' of contemporary instrumental music. Twining was the translator of Aristotle's *Treatise on Poetry* with two dissertations on poetry and music annexed to it (1789). He was, furthermore, well-versed in both classical Greek and modern theories of imitation (including the French, such as Diderot, Condillac, and d'Alembert); equally well-versed in violin-, organ-, harpsichord-, and pianoforte-playing, and friend as well as advisor to that celebrated eighteenth-century British historian of music, Charles Burney. As Kevin Barry reports, especially the early volumes of Burney's *General History of Music* (1776-1789) are greatly indebted to Twining's scholarship and modern musical tastes. These, Twining had in turn developed under the influence of Thomas Gray at Cambridge (Barry 1987: 94-95). Twining's concept of suggestion, developed in the second of the two *Dissertations*, is of interest here as it will help to elucidate and expand the significance of indeterminacy to the Burkean sublime feeling.

It must first of all be said that Twining launches the term suggestion not simply as a scoop. Rather, he proposes the term to end a burning confusion over the then current terms 'imitation' and 'expression' as applied to instrumental music. Modern theorists such as Harris, Charles Avison, and Beattie, Twining writes, had proposed to use the term 'expression' for music as an art reproducing and thus transferring

¹⁴Beattie adds to this in his lengthy note that "the mind is often better pleased with images of its own forming, or finishing, than with those that are set before it complete in all their colours and proportions" (Beattie 1996: 193). The delight brought about by imaginative labour thus also connotes a specific delight in one's own creative activity.

affections. They had done so to make clear that modern instrumental music – such as Arcangelo Corelli, Handel, and, later on, C.P.E. Bach, Carl Friedrich Abel, Franz Xaver Richter, Johann Stamitz, or Haydn – no longer befits the general, classical conception of ‘imitation’: music lowering itself to imitating the sounds and motions of nature is not worthy of itself.¹⁵ However, Twining notes, the irony is that “the ancients” precisely called music imitative to the extent that it could effectively replicate and transpose mental affections (Twining [1789] 1972: 46). Therefore, Twining concludes, “Aristotle differs only in the *mode* of expression from Mr. Harris, when *he* affirms that ‘there are sounds to *make us chearful or sad, martial or tender, &c.*’ – from Dr. Beattie, when he says, ‘Music may *inspire devotion, fortitude, compassion*’ ” (ibid.: 47). The difference is nominal, not substantial: it is a “definitional trick” (Neubauer 1986: 154-155).

If, therefore, modern instrumental music can or should not be imitative, and if in Twining’s analysis expression is not the opposite of but integral to imitation, how can the operations of such music be described? Granted, if imitation includes resemblance, music may still be imitative indirectly. This is, at least, what Twining implies when stating in un-Baroque fashion that though there can be no exact resemblance between “*sounds themselves and mental affections*”, purely instrumental music can still achieve another kind of resemblance (ibid.: 48). This is a “resemblance of *effect*: – the *general emotions, tempers, or feelings* produced in us by certain sounds, are *like* those that accompany actual grief, joy, anger, &c.” (ibid.: 48). Like sounds for Burke, so sounds for Twining – and he claims to be basing himself on Aristotle here – can at once hide and simulate their ‘original cause’. They occasion an experiential verisimilitude, a realism in effect.¹⁶

All the same, in music such a resemblance can never be definite or exact. As Twining puts it in imitation of Harris and Beattie, “the [so called] *expressions of Music considered in itself, and without words, are, (within certain limits,) vague, general, and equivocal*. What is usually called its power over the *passions*, is, in fact, no more than a power of raising a *general emotion, temper, or disposition*, common to several different, though *related passions*; as *pity, love – anger, courage, &c.*” (ibid.: 48). Twining, however, rather takes to this ambiguity of the effects of purely instrumental music. He does not believe that its indefiniteness should

¹⁵Mainly on the basis of research by Stanley Sadie (1958), Barry points out that already by the mid-eighteenth century Britain had a very rich and varied concert life: “In the provinces, not only in the market towns and industrial centres but also in small villages, concerts after the 1740’s included both the late Baroque or ‘ancient’ styles...and also the *galant* and Mannheim, or ‘modern’ styles...East Anglia, where Thomas Twining lived, had an extraordinary busy concert life. So too did Chichester and London” (Barry 1987: 19). The same can be said for Edinburgh and Bristol.

¹⁶As will already be evident from this, Twining was well familiar with Burke’s *Enquiry*. In Note 136 to his translation of Aristotle’s *Treatise on Poetry*, he refers to Burke as “the admirable author of the *Inquiry concerning the Sublime and the Beautiful*” (Twining 1972: 375).

always, as a rule, be underpinned by what he considers to be the more determinate effects of words. That is to say, “by confining” musical ambiguity, “by giving it a precise direction, supplying it with ideas, circumstances, and an *object*” (ibid.: 48). This can, at least, be inferred from a lengthy note that Twining devotes to the delights of ambiguity when listening to modern instrumental music:

...Music is capable of raising *ideas*, to a certain degree, through the medium of those *emotions* which it raises *immediately*. But this is an effect so delicate and uncertain – so dependent on the fancy, the sensibility, the musical experience, and even the temporary disposition, of the *hearer*, that to call it *imitation*, is surely going beyond the bounds of all reasonable analogy. Music, here is not *imitative*, but if I may hazard the expression, merely *suggestive*. But, whatever we may call it, this I will venture to say, – that in the *best* instrumental Music, expressively *performed*, the very indecision itself of the expression, leaving the hearer to the free operation of his *emotion* upon his *fancy*, and, as it were, to the free *choice* of such ideas as are, *to him*, most adapted to react upon and heighten the emotion which occasioned them, produces a pleasure, which nobody, I believe, who is able to feel it, will deny to be one of the most delicious that Music is capable of affording...The complaint, so common, of the separation of Poetry and Music, and of the total want of meaning and expression in *instrumental* Music, was never, I believe, the complaint of a man of true musical feeling. (ibid.: 49 s ff).¹⁷

Like Beattie, Twining maintains that “indecision” can be a pleasure rather than just a pain. However, this pleasure seems to be an even more radically private and subjective one in relation to instrumental

¹⁷It would, of course, be interesting to know which or whose music precisely Twining is thinking of when referring to its delicious “indecision” of expression. Like C.P.E. Bach, Joseph Haydn stands a good chance for he was – not altogether unconventionally – one of Twining’s favourites. Still, as Twining writes in a letter to Burney of May 4, 1781, he preferred Luigi Boccherini as an ‘earnest’ composer: “Boccherini is my first favourite...I admire Haydn in his way; but Boccherini many degrees more; to me, Haydn is Comedy, Boccherini is Tragedy; in Music, Tragedy is better than Comedy. When I play Boccherini, my very soul is at my finger’s ends” (Twining [1781] 1991: I, 197-198). Then again, reprimanded by Burney, Twining hastens to explain two years later in a letter to the same of October 22 that it is not Boccherini’s music but his “genius” which is predominantly “Tragic, & that in Haydn the graceful, the fanciful, the *enjoué*, the playful, etc., prevails upon the whole” (Twining [1783] 1991: I, 253). He even turns round completely when stating that “were I obliged to give him [Haydn] up for Boccherini, I do believe I shou’d turn to Haydn in preference. His wonderful variety & *intaressable* fancy wd. turn the scale” (ibid.: I, 253). Though today one would rather associate suggestiveness with ‘Impressionist’ composers like Claude Debussy or Frederic Mompou, Twining might have recognized a certain ‘indeterminacy’ in Haydn’s noted variety in expression and material, feeding on a (well-ordered) diversity of contrasting rhythms, textures, melodic themes, and instrumental colours.

music. In Burke's and Beattie's account of sublime poetry, imagination labours on an *obscure* object – say, a dreadful (Hector) or a fatally beautiful (Helen of Troy) figure that has not been exhaustively described but only encircled by indirect allusions. However, in Twining's account of instrumental music imagination labours in the *absence* of any object whatsoever. 'Sublime' poetry thus has, so to speak, an invisible object hid behind a curtain of metaphors and analogies. On the other hand, instrumental music offers an entirely open space in which the listener has to fall back completely on her or his own resources to invent any (narrative) object at all.

Recently Jean-Jacques Nattiez has, for that matter, argued in a similar vein. As he puts it, much eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century instrumental music does not offer a full-fledged narrative, it only forms an "incitement to make a narrative". Its listeners, as your average "symbolic animals", eager to interpret and make meaning out of even the most meagre signifying traces, "will be seized by a desire, to complete in words, what music does not say" (Nattiez 1990: 128). This basically means that signification here takes place *in the act of listening*. It means that the signifying focal point is not the work but *the listener* and his or her emotive and imaginative engagement with the work. To put it in Kantian terms, a music heard gives to the listener what the listener gives to or bestows onto it on the basis of her/his 'fanciful' activity, sensibility, musical experience, personal recollections or expectations, cultural context, and temporary disposition.

Perhaps inspired by Denis Diderot's writings on music's "suggestive multiplicity" – purporting that the effects of instrumental music are so forceful because, precisely, it shows little and therefore leaves more to the imagination¹⁸ – Twining thus posits instrumental music as a deeply personal art. An art designed, as Neubauer puts it, "to stimulate the imagination, to generate ideas and emotions that are unique to the character and experience of the listener" (Neubauer 1986: 112, 155).¹⁹ The pleasure it occasions, both in its stylistic, structural, dynamic, and in

¹⁸For more on Diderot's critical elaborations on suggestiveness, and music, see Neubauer (1986: 109-120).

¹⁹Involving, as it does, an indecision of expression which precludes equivocal signification and, secondly, a free employment of imagination, Twining's idea of suggestion thus anticipates quite remarkably Kant's theory of the aesthetic idea as discussed in the previous chapter. The only – but important – difference between the two is that Kant does not relate this aesthetic idea to instrumental music. For the latter, I have shown, however indecisive the aesthetic idea, however ineffable the thought it induces, and however much it may move one *beyond* concepts, it cannot completely do *without* concepts. It *relies*, rather, on concepts in a playful, associative manner. If aesthetic ideas raise much and perhaps much elusive thought on account of a vague representation, for Kant, I have said, music raises no thoughts at all. Operating in the absence of any concept whatsoever, music is an empty, meaningless art of and for the senses, not for the cognitive faculties – and it is precisely the latter which are said to be 'quickened' by aesthetic ideas. Nevertheless, Kant's notion of the aesthetic idea appears firmly embedded in eighteenth-century, British speculations on suggestiveness both in relation to poetry and to music.

its material, sonorous aspects, is mostly internally oriented. It is a pleasure connected to a proto-Kantian sense of freedom. A freedom, that is, arising from the subjective awareness of an internal mental process – the free play of emotions on the fancy – rather than a pleasure taken in a perfectly and completely presented object. As if a screen that can be projected and appropriated at will, modern instrumental music “hurries the listener back to his [or her] own subjectivity”:

The pleasure lies in the excess of signification over and beyond the initial and incomplete sign the music had offered. The meaning of music depends upon the enigmatic character of its signs which, instead of replacing a source which they would imitate or express, turn the listener to his own inventive subjectivity. (Barry 1987: 104)

Focusing on such a free activity of imagination, Twining's account of musical suggestiveness holds perhaps more significance to – especially – Kantian ideas of the beautiful than Burkean ideas of the sublime. Twining describes a harmonious experience of indeterminacy, which is not even a partly painful one, pertaining to the freely inventive operation of imagination, not to an imagination stupefied by obscure ideas. For Burke, conversely, indeterminacy excites a “fearful anxiety”, undermining, as it does, one's confidence in the unknown (Burke 1990: II, sect. XIX, 77). Still, the ways of modern instrumental music as described by Twining epitomize the very indecisiveness that is required for artificial excitations of Burkean fear and trembling. As with Twining, indeterminacy here prevents a definite picture or idea to be connected to such sounds. The difference is that Burke points to specific circumstances in which “uncertain sounds” may leave one in a dreadful suspense “concerning their causes”: one cannot (yet) definitely ascertain the meaning of such sounds, what is ‘behind’ them or what they entail (ibid.: II, sect. XIX, 77). Thus, the excess of possible significations becomes painful. ‘Subjective inventiveness’ boils down to a fearing the worst, to a frantic entertaining of ideas of danger in the absence of clear-cut, visual information.

However, if in his reflections on terror Burke only emphasizes the downside of indeterminacy, he nonetheless stresses its peculiar pleasures in his discussion on the artificial infinite. Much like Twining's experience of instrumental music, Burke's experience of the artificial infinite revolves around an absent, rather than an obscure object. It is typified not just by a painful but also delightful revelling in the irresolute and indefinite. Thus, in Burke's physiological terminology pleasure is a relaxation, and pain an exertion or contraction of the ‘grosser’ (i.e. muscular or nervous) or ‘finer’ (i.e. mental) organs. Centring on the ‘finer’ organs, his experience of infinity is, however, a bit of both at the same time. It involves an agitated, labouring imagination, yet also, and at once, a seemingly liberated imagination deeming itself limitless in the absence of any perceivable bounds. As will be seen, this double feeling opens the way

for a (re-)conception of sublime experience as an unsettled experience at odds with itself, rather than a successive experience of pain and pleasure organised along the lines of an Aristotelian plot.

Infinity

In the previous chapter, I have already touched upon Burke's conception of the artificial infinite, referring to it as a cunning illusion of ideas of endlessness and boundlessness. More precisely, for Burke the idea of the infinite can be described as the idea of an open-ended progression of similar parts – say, a straight line of dots, which can be potentially multiplied without end. There is no limit to successively placing one dot after another. Such parts, indeed, “may be continued so long” that they “impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits” (ibid.: II, sect. IX, 68). What this ultimately means is that the artificial infinite revolves around “a *repetition of similar ideas*”: a reiterating the same again, and again without ever coming to a close (ibid.: IV, sect. XIII, 129).

No doubt, Burke has derived this special connection between repetition, the suggestion of indefinite succession, and (artificial) infinity, from John Locke. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), the latter observes that the idea of infinity is based on a “power we observe in ourselves of repeating, without end, our own *ideas*”. In this “endless repetition, there is continued an enlargement”. Or at least, there is the open possibility of such a continuous enlargement, to which there is potentially no conclusion or resolution (Locke [1690] 1991: II, XVII, 98). Thus, Locke observes in a passage that remarkably anticipates Kant's mathematical estimation of magnitude:

Everyone that has any *idea* of any stated lengths of space, as a foot, finds that he can repeat that *idea*; and joining it to the former, make the *idea* of two feet; and by the addition of a third, three feet; and so on, without ever coming to an end of his additions, whether the same *idea* of a foot, or, if he pleases, of doubling it, or any other *idea* he has of any length, as a mile, or diameter of the earth, or of the *orbis magnus*: for whichsoever of these he takes, and how often soever he doubles or any otherwise multiplies it, he finds that, after he has continued his doubling in his thoughts and enlarged his *idea* as much as he pleases, he has no more reason to stop, nor is one jot nearer the end of such addition than he was at first setting out: the power of enlarging his *idea* of space by further additions remaining still the same, he hence takes *the idea of infinite space*. (ibid.: II, XVII, 96)

Typically the empiricist, Locke therefore presumes that the idea of infinity is ultimately derived from experience: the idea of infinity is ‘begotten’ when one finds that a length of space can be multiplied indefinitely. When, that is, one finds that one's mental capacity to multiply similar

ideas remains equally unbounded even, if not especially, when one is not “one jot nearer the end” of such multiplication than the initial addition of one foot to one foot into two feet. One can go on *ad infinitum*, and it is this realization that makes for an idea of infinity.

Ironically, therefore, the idea of an incessant progression ultimately turns on a certain stasis or immobility: a remaining within the same place, brought about by the continuous return to one’s initial position (having ultimately come not one bit further to the end of the addition than at the starting point). The idea of infinity can thus be defined as a never coming one step closer to an end or goal: it is like running after the moon, the distance between yourself and the moon remaining ever the same. Moreover, and perhaps contradictorily, the possibility of such a continuation (or stasis) without end is conditioned by an idea of *divisibility*. As Locke implies, only those ideas that can be divided into (infinite) parts can be multiplied into (infinite) parts: “All the *ideas* that are considered as having parts, and are capable of increase by the addition of any equal or less parts, afford us, by their repetition, the *idea* of infinity” (ibid.: II, XVII, 98).²⁰ Apart from space, these concern ideas of number and duration – only these can be extended without end, “augmented to what proportion men please, or be stretched beyond what they have received by their senses” (ibid.: II, XVII, 98). There thus being no limit to the (virtual) increase of such ideas, this repeated augmentation leaves “in the mind an *idea* of endless room for more; nor can we conceive anywhere a stop to a further addition or progression, and so those *ideas* alone lead our minds towards the thought of infinity” (ibid.: II, XVII, 98). Infinity is, in a word, indeterminacy – it is the absence of a fixed ending or conclusion in which a ‘next’ is ever-possible.

In the *Enquiry*, Burke points to the peculiar pleasure taken in the idea of such an ‘ever next’ when considering a special and ‘imperfect’ form of – of all things – pictorial representation. He here claims in remarkably proto-Romantic fashion that in “unfinished sketches or drawings” he has found “something which pleased [him] beyond the best finishing” (Burke 1990: II, sect. XI, 70). Why? Because here “the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more, and does not acquiesce in the present object of the sense” (ibid.: II, sect. XI, 70). Imagination is tense, restless and *must* in fact not be “acquiesced” for the delightful expectation of ‘something more’, something as yet immaterialised, to be preserved. This restless imagination implies an imagination which has not yet been able to come to a full stop, to a final synthesis or complete visual representation. It keeps on searching for more in an apparently empty space that, precisely, sustains the promise of a fulfilment yet to come. Without such an opening, the

²⁰Thus, an idea of whiteness would not apply here since if I add “to the perfectest *idea* I have of the whitest whiteness,...another of a less or equal whiteness (and of a whiter than I have, I cannot add the *idea*), it makes no increase, and enlarges not my idea at all” (ibid.: II, XVII, 98). There is, therefore, a limit to increase with respect to one’s ideas of so called simple abstracts.

promise of continuation would be lost. There would be nothing left to desire, fear, or hope for – the latter two passions explicitly belonging to the province of Burkean imagination, as well as “all our passions that are connected with them” (ibid.: 17).

For the same reason, Burke takes to spring and youth, rather than summer and the fully grown. He also states that a rose is “more beautiful before it is full blown; in the bud; before this exact figure is formed” (ibid.: II, sect. XI, 70; III, sect. II, 86). If this moves into the direction of Twining’s notion of suggestiveness, then indeterminacy indeed proves to be of more significance to the Burkean sublime than a mere breeding ground for terror alone. It becomes an undermining not just of existential but rather of imaginative certainties in what I would like to call an anticipating without end: confronted with a mere fragment before any ‘exact figure’ has been formed, the power of imagination operates in a suspension that indefinitely postpones any full and definite determination of a figure or form.

One could probably call this fascination with the indecisive and indefinite a Romanticism of the Enlightenment – with imagination running wild and restless in a landscape of ruins and fragments that never more than suggest the possibility of fulfilled figures. If not quite the transcendental and holy creative, transformative power it would become for the Romantics, imagination is here nevertheless already actively engaged in divining or anticipating what has not yet been given.

A similar activity of imagination – if not truly creative, then at least expansive – can be observed in Burke’s private adaptation of Locke’s theory of infinity as an endless repetition of uniform parts. Here, too, imagination is said to find “no rest” in projecting an excess of similar ideas, in continuing a repetitive rhythm or succession of uniform parts *ad infinitum* (ibid.: IV, sect. X, 126). Though it could be suggested that imagination in this instance merely mechanically reproduces such parts as perceived by the senses – that it is just a passive sounding board of the senses, involuntarily repeating what they have ‘registered’ in endless, reactive monotony – Burke’s observations on the pleasures of ‘incomplete’ presentation in the sections on the artificial infinite also allow for a rather different reading.

I would, indeed, suggest that in the experience of the artificial infinite imagination is actively, though abortively, *searching for a way to represent a complete idea*. Somehow, it wants to arrive at such a complete idea. It remains restless *only* so long as it “can no where fix a boundary”, so long as it cannot finish or resolve something (ibid.: II, sect. IX, 68). Restlessness connoting agitation, impatience, and eagerness, it suggests the possibility of an imagination *desiring* an ending, desiring a final conclusion to an open-ended succession. Desiring, that is, to forge a “perfect unity”, but its attempts are fruitless (ibid.: II, sect VII, 66).

This, I suggest, can be called the pain, the labour, of Burke’s experience of infinity. It is the agitation of an imagination that does not

“acquiesce in the present object of the sense”, i.e. the part, but looks forward toward “something more” to finish off, if you will, a wanting, unwholesome object (ibid.: II, sect. XI, 70). Like the Romantic fragment, Burke's fragment presupposes a larger whole and this is, I believe, what the Burkean imagination here seeks to, but cannot, arrive at.

At the very same time, however, the absence of an encompassing form tricks imagination into a delightful illusion: it “meets no check which may hinder its extending” any given number of parts to infinity (ibid.: II, sect. VIII, 67). Imagination, that is, *itself* takes on the apparent boundlessness it encounters. It feels no limits in reiterating the same over and over again. What is more, this reiteration is not experienced as such, that is, as an insistent repetition, but as a *progression* or *extension*. As with Locke, stasis, a consistently remaining within or returning to the same place, here allows for the idea of an indefinite continuation or expansion: repetition precludes change or development yet precisely because of that there is in the mind the idea of endless room for more. Just as in Burke's passage on unfinished drawings a space must be kept open in which the promise of ‘something more’ can be preserved, so in the artificial infinite the absence of any boundaries preserves the illusion of an ‘ever next’. This open horizon occasions the pleasure of the Burkean experience of artificial infinity: it makes for an agreeable and even joyful suspension in which, firstly, imagination is deemed to expand itself without effort, and, secondly, the tension or labour required for change or development is happily postponed. Instead, the subject can painlessly and tirelessly revel in a continuous return that is felt as a progression without end.

Seen in this double light, the Burkean experience of artificial infinity can be described as an experience pointing in two different directions at the same time: it moves forward and backward at once. On the one hand, Burke's impatient imagination looks forward toward an ending, toward fulfilment, over-activating itself without becoming productive in a conclusive sense. At the same time, it looks backward toward a return, suspending any tension of change or renewal in a reiteration of the same in the face of an always-open space. In this way, a lack of fulfilment allows for pain and pleasure at once, and on one and the same level: while Kant proposes two different faculties of mind, imagination and reason, whose respective limits and limitlessness make for the mediation of a pleasure through a displeasure, it is in Burke's experience of artificial infinity that the same power of mind – imagination – gets caught in an internal and irresolvable double-movement: it wants to progress and regress, to transcend and suspend at once, hesitating in-between pain (tension) and pleasure (respite through deferral).

A Mighty Unknown Want

Burke's compatriot James Usher – an Irish teacher converted to Catholicism – would likewise stress the curious two-facedness of the

sublime feeling in his then immensely popular *Clio, or a Discourse on Taste* (1767). As Usher maintains, ideas of infinite might or extent create such a peculiarly double effect on the mind that “while we tremble [with silent fear] we are seized with an exquisite delight”. This paradox is, for him, the trademark of the sublime (Usher [1769] 1998: 108). In nature, he continues, this “mixed sensation weighs upon us, when we see an ocean disturbed and agitated in storms; or a forest roaring, and bending under the force of a tempest...We are struck by it with more calmness...in the starry heavens; the silence, the unmeasured distance, and the unknown power united in that prospect render it very awful in deepest serenity” (ibid.: 109).

What Usher calls his “novel” explanation of the paradoxical “combination of passions in the sublime” often appears like a religious version of Burke’s sublime feelings of terror and infinity (ibid.: 107, 103). More precisely, his idea of sublime experience centres on a religious passion resisting its own resolution. Partly, this is because the object of this passion remains eternally beyond human grasp, vision, or comprehension. As Usher puts it, the object of this “religious passion is not an *idea*, it is unknown” (ibid.: 110). This is to say that the object of the sublime is, in the end, not so much obscure (though eventually retrievable, like a dark secret behind the curtain) as open or *vacant*. Comparable to Twining’s experience of instrumental music, Usher’s experience of the sublime revolves not around a hidden but a fugitive object that the mind forever labours but never fully succeeds in bringing into view:²¹

...whence you may conceive the distress, that obliges the poet to fly from image to image, to express what he feels. No idea, however grand, answers his purpose; yet as he feels strongly he still hopes, and rushes to snatch into view another grand prospect. The variety of his efforts shows the object the mind labours with to be different from anything we know; to be beyond the power of utterance...(ibid.: 120-121)

The curious nature of Usher’s sublime feeling is, in this instance, not so much due to the fact that the “mighty unknown power” – the Deity – here alluded to occasions “obscure fears” but on the other hand also “obscure hopes” (ibid.: 113, 110). This may be your regular *tremendum* and *fascinans*, a trembling with fear but fascination at the same time typical of religious experience, but in Usher’s text it never comes to light if and how such obscure fears and hopes would interlock or coincide. What does come to light, however, is the double nature of a religious passion that, as the “source of the sublime sensation”, is made up of an internally conflicting feeling of hope and curiosity (ibid.: 110).

²¹As such, Kantians would refer to Usher’s vacant object as an object of reason: a supersensible idea of which no ‘instance’ can be given in sensibility, and which cannot be cognised.

The conflict, in this instance, significantly compares to the aporia detected in Burke's experience of the artificial infinite. Basically, what Usher tries to show is that hope, like curiosity, involves pain and pleasure at the same time in an openness that holds the future in suspense. As Usher explains, hope carries with it "the plainest symptoms of a passion that wanders, and is astray for its object". In its "anxious search" this wandering passion is directed toward a prospect "whose completion lies in the dark" – it is without a positive destination and, for that reason, even without a name (ibid.: 111). Its non-directedness, I would say, is toward a radical alterity that can never be appropriated or even approached.

Thus, partaking of a religious passion whose 'object' – as a vacant object – remains eternally unknown and inconceivable, the completion of hope's prospect lies *forever* in the dark. As a desire in search of its object, hope's object is – and will remain – a "fugitive object", always just around the corner, just out of reach, "for ever near us and for ever [hiding] from us" at the same time (ibid.: 129). It is a desire that seems to go forward but in fact tends to go backward, always-repeating its search, as fulfilment is never more than deceptive. For, as Usher maintains in proto-Romantic fashion, "when we arrive at the point we proposed" it turns out to be the starting point for another search, equally fruitless: with every step forward, the fugitive object recedes ever further (ibid.: 111).

Thus, as with Locke's idea of infinity, Usher's wandering desire turns on a stasis or immobility: a continuous return to one's initial position, which never takes one a step closer to an end or goal. Though frustrating, this aimlessness or unproductiveness also constitutes the delight of Usherian religious hope. It leaves an openness in which (somewhat like Burke's unfinished things and drawings), the delightful promise of 'something more', an 'ever next', is preserved. The annihilation of this open space would in fact equal the "annihilation of that bright-beaming human hope, that travels on before us during life" (ibid.: 133). Hope is an end in itself, sustains its own rationale – and hope can only be sustained in the continued *postponement* of the concrete and definite realization of some dimly felt prospect. This is why Usher also refers to the religious passion as a "mighty unknown want": it expresses the 'wandering' status of a desire that has not yet found and does not yet know its object; that, indeed, comes before and suspends the materialization of an object which is always wanting (ibid.: 132). In this way, the Usherian subject can hope and desire infinitely. It is focused on an "obscure enthusiastic delight which we never enjoy", somewhat comparable to the sense of an indefinite suspension experienced in the Burkean artificial infinite (ibid.: 132).

In this way, interlocking the delight of anticipation with the frustration of want or unfulfilment, Usher's sublime experience can be defined as a deadlocked experience undermining its own resolution. In contrast to Kant, pain is not posited as something intermittent, followed

by a pleasure of self-elevation. Pain and pleasure are rather inter-reliant. The two *coexist and preserve each other* in the experience of an indefinite suspension or deferral, without a cathartic, liberating moment that allows the subject to powerfully and conclusively reassert itself. Instead, Usher's anxiety persists, as an uneasy distress and an eager desire at the same time, at best leaving the subject to an eternal wandering and wondering:

In the disorder and confusion of seas in storms, or when lofty woods struggle with high winds, we are struck with an humiliating awe, surprize, and suspense; the mind views the effects of boundless power with still amazement: it recoils upon itself in a passion made up of terror, joy, and rapture, and feels in sentiment these questions: *Who is the author of this? What is he to me?* Is he the object of my eternal curiosity, of my mighty fears and hopes? (ibid.: 111)

Intimation

In this way, Usher's sublime experience lacks the proverbial 'turning-point' where pain gives way to pleasure. Rather, it meanders in-between both, the one presupposing the other in a rhythm of endless deferral that somehow precludes a dialectic reversal. Or rather, as a wandering desire implying a hopeful suspension that is constantly subtended by a painful tension, the Usherian sublime feeling can be said to be reversing itself without end, and without mediation: there is no other 'instance' to reconcile the coinciding moments of pain and pleasure into a unified and finalized experience. As such, Usher's sublime experience undermines normative conceptions of sublime experience in twentieth-century criticism: a neatly organized experience that takes place within the same, invariable structure of beginning-middle-ending. What falls outside the range of this traditional conception, and what I have tried to put to the fore here, is an experience that is basically *un-organized*, that cannot be unequivocally controlled and resolved. This is already illustrated by Burke's experience of artificial infinity: an experience that is divided against itself, without a 'turning' from pain to pleasure and, suspending its own development in a hesitating space in-between progression and regression, without end. The keyword is indeterminacy rather than transcendence, which, in Usher's case, manifests itself as a constant – as an insurmountable obstacle, or an incurable lack, but at the same time also as a fruitful emptiness in which something wholly other might announce itself. The sublime feeling here boils down to an irresoluteness in the presence of something always missed.

In a way, the radical indeterminacy central to Burke's feeling of the artificial infinite and the Usherian sublime recalls Twining's experience of instrumental music: the listener forever labours to bring an object (mentally) into view, yet never succeeds in drawing a definite picture. Like the object of Usher's sublime experience, Twining represents the

object of musical experience as a fugitive object that ever-recedes from grasp, a not-yet-given that remains to be determined.

Interestingly, however, Usher's own account of instrumental music in *Clio* already suggests such a parallel between the experience of the sublime and that of instrumental music. Kevin Barry has, in this instance, already emphasized Usher's proto-Romantic sensibility to music, leading him to insert "a concept of music into the terms of rationalism and empiricism in such a way as to subvert their very assumptions" (Barry 1987: 61). That is to say, though on the one hand conventionally associating music with the passions, Usher on the other hand also anticipates early German Romantic theories of instrumental music by representing it as sensuous and abstract at the same time: as being "perceivable by the mind but too unstable to be grasped as knowledge or idea" (ibid.: 62). Thus, Usher observes in *Clio*, there are few

who have not felt the charms of music...It is a language of delightful sensations, that is far more eloquent than words... We feel plainly that music touches and greatly agitates the agreeable and sublime passions; that it wraps us in melancholy, and elevates in joy; that it dissolves and inflames; that it melts us in tenderness, and rouses to rage: but its strokes are so fine and delicate, that, like a tragedy, even the passions that are wounded please...Particularly the most elevated sensation of music arises from a confused perception of idle or visionary beauty and rapture, which is sufficiently perceivable to fire the imagination, but not clear enough to become an object of knowledge. This shadowy beauty the mind attempts, with a languishing curiosity, to collect into a distinct object of view and comprehension; but it sinks and escapes, like the dissolving ideas of a delightful dream, that are neither within the reach of memory, nor yet totally fled. The noblest charm of music, then, though real and affecting, seems too confused to be collected into a distinct idea. (Usher 1998: 152-156)

A sublime connection here first of all appears in music's "strokes" being so gentle that even painful passions please. Secondly, and more importantly, in eluding appropriation music becomes the very equivalent of the vacant or open, fugitive object of the Usherian sublime. Like this fugitive object, music (and I take it that Usher is here referring to contemporary instrumental music) kindles and challenges imagination, but its "visionary rapture" cannot be captured and individuated as "an object of knowledge". Imagination here labours in vain, running after something it cannot contain. At once very close and distant, at once intimate and obscure, music contradicts an exact and complete appropriation. This could well suggest – as will be proposed more emphatically in early German Romantic accounts of instrumental music – that contemporary instrumental music is, for Usher, the most adequate medium to stage the sublime in art.

Usher's analogy of musical effects with the at once lingering and dissolving ideas of a "delightful dream" are, for that matter, illuminating here. It points to the impossibility of exactly recalling and retrieving an unconscious state within the (verbal) representations of consciousness: on waking, the dream is irretrievably, if not totally, lost, has become inaccessible *as such*. Even when immediately recalled, there is always something missing, something escaping in one's very recounting or remembering of it. And one cannot say precisely *what* is escaping – all one knows is that one's reconstruction does not quite cover the strange, little details, the exact content, or the precise atmosphere, of the dream dreamt while asleep. So it is with music for Usher. Like the fugitive object of the sublime, it leaves a trace of something more, something different that could not be held or kept: something of which one cannot say if it was ever really present at all.

I would like to call this vague hint of something other, something missing, an *intimation*, and for the following two reasons. First, intimation connotes something intimate, inmost even, and distant at once, something that is privately and intensely felt (like a dream) yet at the same time dodges the full grasp of imagination, memory, and cognition. Second, and as such, intimation is a radical form of suggestion that leaves not so much an open space to be filled in as an emptiness which, one feels, *cannot* be satisfactorily and completely filled.²² An intimation is a barely perceptible hint or trace of something indefinable that cannot be entirely recovered (like a dream or, for Usher, an experience of music), that is lost or 'beyond', yet in a strange way also part of oneself. It fades as an 'unknown' but it also lingers inside as a vague and indeterminate feeling. In intimation, all one has is a rest or residue of something persisting systematically as lack. It speaks, to quote William Wordsworth from his "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807), "of something that is gone", yet never definitely (or: consciously) had or occupied. Nevertheless, somewhere "in our embers" there is

...something that doth live,
that nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive! (Wordsworth [1807] 1993: I. 53; II. 129-132)

In the course of the nineteenth century, I will show in chapters 4 and 5, this idea of intimation will come to dominate especially German Romantic aesthetics of instrumental music and the sublime-as-infinite alike, interconnecting the two in a way that will eventually make them indistinguishable. As in Usher's text, instrumental music (in its later

²²Rob van Gerwen (1996, 1998) simply posits intimation as suggestion, that is, as a not-showing or not-saying inviting a reader, viewer, or listener to supplant what has been omitted (through a so called vicarious experiencing: I feel what has not been said or shown), but I disagree. Though the difference between intimation and suggestion is not categorical but rather one in degree, intimation tends much more towards the purely indexical and metonymical than suggestion.

eighteenth- and earlier nineteenth-century realizations) will not just evolve into a 'model art' of the sublime, an example to which the other arts can only aspire. It will also be increasingly represented as an equivalent of the sublime, as, indeed, *belonging* to the sublime. In Richard Wagner's words: "in and for itself...music can only be judged according to the category of the sublime for as soon as it fills us, it brings about the highest ecstasy of the consciousness of boundlessness" (Wagner [1870] 1983: 56, my translation).