



## Appendix B

### Dangerous Beauty

At least since Burke, but perhaps already since Addison, the ideas of the sublime and beautiful have been binarily opposed: the former, in the traditional view, refers to a feeling of pleasure mediated through a displeasure, the latter refers to a feeling of pure pleasure alone. The former presents a complex experience of two contradictory feelings, the latter a simple experience of one pervasive feeling alone. For Burke, moreover, the distinction between the sublime and beautiful is based on the presumed fact that only the former is conversant about ideas of pain and danger, constituting the specific feeling of displeasure relative to it. However, I will show in the following, with a (critical) view to the *Enquiry*, it is in fact not so easy to posit a strict demarcation-line between the sublime and beautiful on this basis. As much as the sublime, beauty can become a source of terror and danger, in so far as it can posit a possibly lethal threat.

Recall, in this instance, the encumbrance of melancholia already discussed in chapter 2, which Burke considers not just troublesome but in fact dangerous: it undermines one's vitality, one's sense of being alive. As such, interestingly enough, this encumbrance is directly connected to the seemingly harmless, positive feeling of the beautiful. Thus, in so far as melancholia connotes an almost deadly relaxation, an absence of vigour or energy, Burke tightly connects it to the feeling aroused by beautiful objects. It involves "that sinking, that melting, that languor, which is the characteristical effect of the beautiful, as it regards every sense. The passion excited by beauty is in fact nearer to a species of melancholy, than to jollity and mirth" (Burke 1990: III, sect. XXV, 112). If the sublime involves difficulty and activity, beauty involves ease and idleness; if the sublime requires effort and tension, beauty grants repose and drowsiness: "The head reclines something on one side, the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed and the hands fall idly to the sides." (ibid.: IV, sect. XIX, 135). This is the Burkean response to beauty, and he calls it the physical cause of love: a being "softened, relaxed, enervated, dissolved, melted away by pleasure" (ibid.: IV, sect. XIX, 136).

Love, in turn, is either 'pure' or 'mixed'. This is a distinction which Burke presents as being founded on two "sorts of societies", but it is in fact founded on a culturally construed, and highly politicised notion of sexual difference (ibid.: I, sect. XVIII, 47). Thus, the first society is

the society of sex. The passion belonging to this is called love, and it contains a mixture of lust; its object is the beauty of women. The other society is the great society with man and all other animals. The passion subservient to this is called likewise love, but it has no

mixture of lust, and its object is beauty; which is a name I shall apply to all such qualities in things as induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness, or some other passion the most nearly resembling these. The passion of love has its rise in positive pleasure. (ibid.: I, sect. XVIII, 47)

The beauty of women is strictly the beauty of sex, and this is a beauty, disturbingly enough, which builds on weakness, smoothness, delicacy, and inferiority:<sup>1</sup> “we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance” (ibid.: III, sect. XIII, 103). Sublimity overpowers, beauty entices and embodies subservience.

Now, although love for Burke generally builds on a positive pleasure,<sup>2</sup> he nevertheless allows that ‘mixed’ love can easily turn into a feeling of pleasure and displeasure – or at least uneasiness – at the same time. This, obviously, happens when the subject is deprived of the object of its love/lust; that is, when an idea of the love/lust object “is excited in the mind with an idea at the same time of having irretrievably lost it” (ibid.: I, sect. XVIII, 47). Although Burke does not want to associate this uneasiness with pain – the jilted lover is for him not consumed by pain, but by the memory of something pleasant no longer present; by a frustrated pursuit of enjoyment and gratification – it can nevertheless be easily read as a *privation*: the lover is deprived of something vital, which is to say, quite explicitly, the pleasures of orgasm (ibid.: I, sect. VIII, 37). Again, Burke believes, or wants to believe, that such a privation affects but little, if at all: he somewhat stubbornly and naïvely sticks to the ‘golden rule’, firstly, that gratification does not belong to self-preservation (involving terror and pain) but to generation (involving pleasure), secondly, that only the passions belonging to the former affect the mind powerfully, and thirdly, that therefore even the loss of gratification (not belonging to self-preservation) can never achieve a powerful, but at best a troublesome, effect. Moreover, the implication is

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<sup>1</sup>As Burke remarks on delicacy: “I need here say little of the fair sex, where I believe the point will be easily allowed for me. The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it” (Burke 1990: III, sect. XVI, 106).

<sup>2</sup>Just as for Burke, positive pain has little to do with the diminution of pleasure, so positive pleasure is of an independent nature and, as opposed to delight, does not arise out of a suspension of pain. There is nothing disagreeable to positive pleasure, while there is to delight. If, moreover, delight is the result of a suspended pain or terror, and positive pleasure revolves around love, the former belong to self-preservation, while the latter belongs to generation: “The passions belonging to the preservation of the individual, turn wholly on pain and danger; those which belong to *generation*, have their origin in gratifications and *pleasures*” (Burke 1990: I, sect. VIII, 37). Only the passions belonging to self-preservation are, according to Burke, “the strongest of all the passions” (ibid.: I, sect. XVIII, 47). All the same, there is an obvious connection between generation and preservation, as the former, to speak in Darwin’s terms, functions to guarantee the preservation of the species.

that the very absence or suspension of gratification is conducive to rational conduct.

All the same, the privation of love or a beloved – which generally involves more than a mere absence of gratification – intersects with the privations of the sublime to the extent that it may well be conversant about death, both literally and metaphorically. It has to do with sterility (the absence of sexual gratification here also implying a lost prospect of procreation), solitude (an absence of company), and emptiness (the loss of a loved one, of hope, of an envisioned future). Burke is, for that matter, well aware of love's "violent" and "extraordinary effects" that can sometimes even be "wrought up to madness" (Burke 1990: I, sect. VIII, 38, 37). The loss can easily become an obsession, and this is where love appears to be less about subservience than domination after all: "When men have suffered their imaginations to be long affected with any idea, it so wholly engrosses them as to shut out by degrees almost every other, and to break down every partition of the mind which would confine it" (ibid.: I, sect. VIII, 37).

The implication is one of complete surrender and mental confusion – a surrender and confusion that is no less dramatic than the submission and disorientation at stake in sublime experience, as it concerns sheer madness. Adam Phillips has, in this respect, already pointed to "the possibility of getting lost" in both the experience of the beautiful and sublime (Phillips 1990: xxiii). Although beauty entices and sublimity overwhelms, intoxication pervades both experiences, causing an uncertainty or diffuseness which, as Phillips indicates, Burke describes quite explicitly in one of his more erotic moments:<sup>3</sup>

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. (Burke 1990: III, sect. XV, 105)

This is a dizzy and unfocused, rather than a controlled looking; an excited and open gaze which has no definite end, and which seems guided by the object of perception instead of the perceiving subject. Such lack of focus and self-control, as if connoting a helpless engrossment, is also implied in Burke's remark that "beauty demands no

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<sup>3</sup>On the basis of the *Enquiry*, however, I suggest that it is only the mixed, and not the pure love, that is capable of such an intoxication or ravishment. Beauty, says Burke, is smooth and relaxing, offering no resistance. Beauty only becomes overwhelming as a beauty of sex, and the feeling of the beautiful only becomes "violent" as a mixture of love and lust – as, for instance, in the pleasures of orgasm: "the pleasure most directly belonging to [the purpose of gratification] is of a lively character, rapturous and violent, and confessedly the highest pleasure of sense" (Burke 1990: I, sect. VIII, 47). This is not quite a feeling close to melancholy, but rather to jollity and mirth.

assistance from our reasoning; even the will is unconcerned" (ibid.: III, sect. II, 84). Indeed, beautiful objects are endowed with such powers and properties that seize "upon the senses and the imagination, [and] captivate the soul before the understanding is ready either to join with them or to oppose them" (ibid.: III, sect. VII, 97). Like the sublime, beauty is an 'outlaw' of "rational enquiry. Both are coercive, irresistible, and a species of seduction" (Phillips 1990: xxiii). Both come 'before' reasoning and both tend to transport. Just as love/lust can turn into an obsession haunting and controlling the subject, so the sublime feeling involves a mental suspension or astonishment whereby

the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on as by an irresistible force. (Burke 1990: II, sect. I, 53)

A neat distinction between the sublime and beautiful is, therefore, not all that easily made – apart from some general distinctions such as terror, ruggedness, and greatness being assigned to the former, and love, smoothness, and smallness being assigned to the latter. In fact, the ecstatic pleasure of sexual orgasm associated with love/lust is an adequate example of Burkean sublime delight: tension built up in a considerable effort and subsequently released in relaxation or ejaculation.

As an obsession, moreover, love/lust can prove to be less easily resolved than the more incidental, though violent, transports of the sublime. That is to say, as we have seen, if the feeling of the beautiful is nearer to a melting melancholy than to mirth, the giddiness of love/lust is not just indicative of a soft and easy relaxation, but also of a self-diffusing, uncontrolled fixation and a heavy, possibly incurable dejection (an obsession with loss, a denial of desire). Seen in this light, it could be hypothetically proposed that the Burkean beautiful object of sex can be just as much an object of fear as, say, sublime ideas of death or destruction: it paralyses the male-connoteed subject in either a consuming desire, a being lost, or in a desire denied, a vital pleasure lost, which causes an emptiness and inability to enjoy that is central to Burke's dangerous, life-negating encumbrance of boredom. Experiencing beauty, as traditional Western views have it, can be deadly, experiencing the sublime is just a toying with death. Not coincidentally, and as Suzanne Guerlac (1990) has admirably shown in her studies on the grotesque and the sublime, such associations between danger, terror, death, and beauty will be of topical concern over half a century later in the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, or the (prose) poems of Charles Baudelaire, where, indeed, the elevating experience of the sublime is translated into a crushing, sensual experience of terrible beauty.

