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## Edmund Burke and the Sublime 2nd March 2015

## The idea of the sublime is central to a Romantic's perception of, and heightened awareness in, the world. It was Edmund Burke, who in 1757 published a treatise of aesthetics called A Philosophical Enquiry into the

By Simon Court

feel in the world.

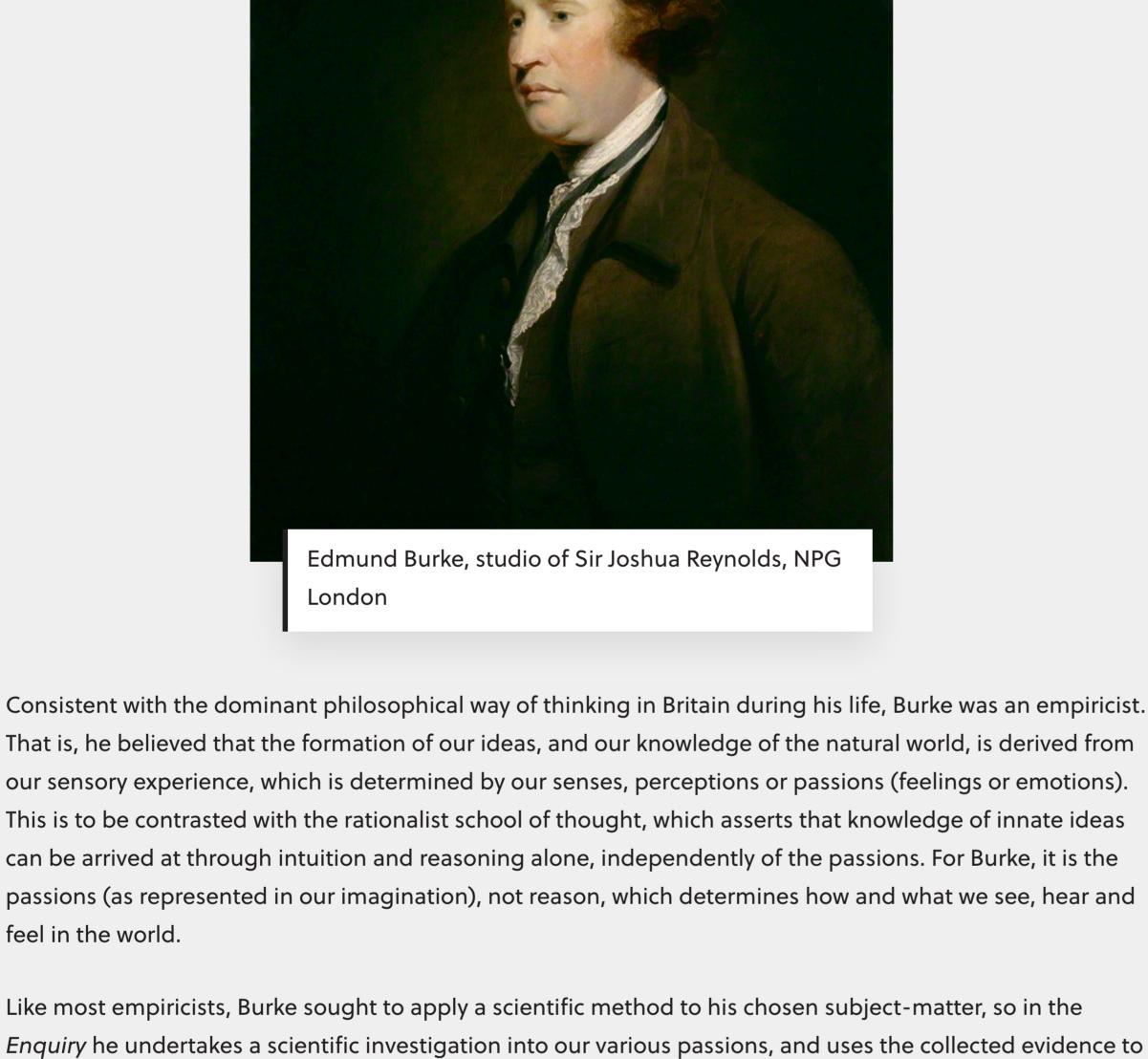
some degree of horror.

Take Milton's portrait of Satan:

with a systematic analysis of what constitutes the sublime, and the various qualities which it possesses, and hence gave the English Romantics a theoretical foundation, and a legitimacy, to their artistic expression. Burke (1729-97) was born in Dublin and educated there at Trinity College. He is best known for his political achievements: firstly as a Whig MP; and then as the founder of modern conservatism with the publication in 1790 of the Reflections on the Revolution in France, in which he expressed mistrust in the rationalism of the French Revolutionaries, who believed that politics can be conducted according to a priori principles not

Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and therefore provided the English Romantic movement

rooted in previous experience and practice. Yet much earlier in his life, when only 28 years old, and whilst establishing himself in literary London, he wrote his *Enquiry*, which precedes the publication of *Lyrical* Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge, by 41 years.



where he observes that although we have a shared sensory apparatus, our idea and knowledge of a particular taste (and whether we like it or not) is the product of our own individual physical experience, combined with our social and cultural context: Thus opium is pleasing to the Turks, on account of the agreeable delirium it produces. Tobacco is the delight of Dutchmen, as it diffuses a torpor and pleasing stupefaction. Fermented spirits please our common people, because they banish care, and all consideration of future or present evils. Burke then turns to his observations on the sublime. He asserts that ideas of pain are much more powerful than those of pleasure, and that the strongest pain of all is the fear of death, which causes terror. As such:

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.

explain the nature and power of the sublime. His Enquiry opens with an introductory discussion on taste,

The sublime, then, is our strongest passion, and it is grounded in terror. Yet it is not exclusively an unpleasant emotion, for danger or pain can, in certain circumstances, give us delight. And the sublime has other qualities: it overwhelms our faculty of reason, such that we are rendered incapable of rational thought. As Burke puts it: The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully,

is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with

This heightened state of astonishment, where reason is driven out by "an irresistible force", and "the mind is

accompanied with a sense of the unknown (or what Burke calls obscurity). For Burke, obscurity is an absence

of clarity, whether in the sensory darkness of sight (or blinding lightness), or mental uncertainty of thought.

As he observes, "everyone will be sensible to this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread". He

in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks". Further, it is

vastness, or "greatness of dimension", which is "a powerful cause of the sublime", where "looking down

source of the sublime is what Burke calls infinity, where the eye is not able to "perceive the bounds" of

notes how religions have used darkness to create fear, such that "the druids performed all their ceremonies

from a precipice" on a mountain has greater impact depending of its depth and steepness, and where "the

effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished". Finally, another

so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain another", is more terrible to us when it is

something, or "see an object distinctly", and this gives rise to a "terrible uncertainty of the thing" perceived. For Burke: "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime". Burke believed that poetic verse is the most powerfully effective art form in evoking an emotional response, and Milton's Paradise Lost the finest example of "heightening, or of setting terrible things". In Milton's description of Death, says Burke, it "is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors. The other shape, If shape it might be called that shape had none Distinguishable,......black he stood as night: Fierce as ten furies: terrible as hell:..... In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree."

It is, for Burke, "the terrible uncertainty of the thing described" which generates the fullest emotional force.

his imaginative vision.)

English Romantic poets.

walking tour in Germany in 1799:

District. It was getting dark as he wrote in his notebook:

...Stood like a tower; his form had yet not lost

All her original brightness, nor appeared

Less than archangel ruin'd, and th' excess

Of glory obscured: as when the sun new ris'n

Looks through the horizontal misty air Shorn of its beams;.....

For Burke, these "images raised by poetry" of Death and Satan are of an obscure and infinite kind and are "great and confused", and only great because they are confused: to obtain clearness is to "lose much of the greatness", such that "A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." This leads Burke to assert that painting is inferior to poetry: "When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous." (As with, perhaps, Hieronymus Bosch's depiction of Hell in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, however impressed we may be with

The extent of Burke's influence is well evidenced in Coleridge. His friend Carlyon later recalled a mountain

magnificent scene, a long discussion took place on the sublime and beautiful. We had much of

This contribution appears to be heavily drawn from Burke's idea that the sublime comprises a state of

infinity of an object who cannot be seen distinctly, and therefore cannot be compared against others.

astonishment, where "all its motions are suspended" and the power of reasoning is lost, coupled with the

On the evening of 31st August 1800 Coleridge found himself on the ridge called Striding Edge, in the Lake

Am now at the top of Helvellyn, a pyramid of stones, Ullswater, Thirlmere, Bassenthwaite, Windermere, a

below me to my left no, no! no words can convey any idea of this prodigious wildness that precipice its

down like a waterfall, reaches a level steepness and again plunges! The moon above Fairfield almost at

tarn in Patterdale. Travelling along the ridge, I came to the other side of those precipices, and down

precipice I stand on, and to my right hand, the crag which corresponds to the other! how it plunges

the full now descended over a perilous peat moss, then down a hill of stones, all dark and darkling. I

climbed, stone after stone, down a half crag torrent, and came out at the Raise Gap. And, O my God!

ridge sharp as a jagged knife, level so long and then ascending so boldly, what a frightful bulgy

length, pronounced it to consist in a suspension of the powers of comparison.

When we were ascending the Brocken, and ever and anon stopping to take breath, as well as survey the

Burke.....Many were the fruitless attempts made to define sublimity satisfactorily, when Coleridge, at

Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights, 1490-1500,

Terror, horror, darkness: we can see how Burke's elucidation of the emotional power which these qualities of

the sublime hold on us would have contributed to the later 19th-century English Gothic literature; but it is

also the qualities of obscurity, vastness and infinity in the sublime, "which comes upon us in the gloomy

forest, and in the howling wilderness", which made an earlier, and more significant literary impact, on the

Museo del Prado, Madrid

How did that opposite precipice look in the moonshine, its name Steel Crags!"

A tax lawyer by profession and living with a novelist and two cats, Simon Court indulges his passion for

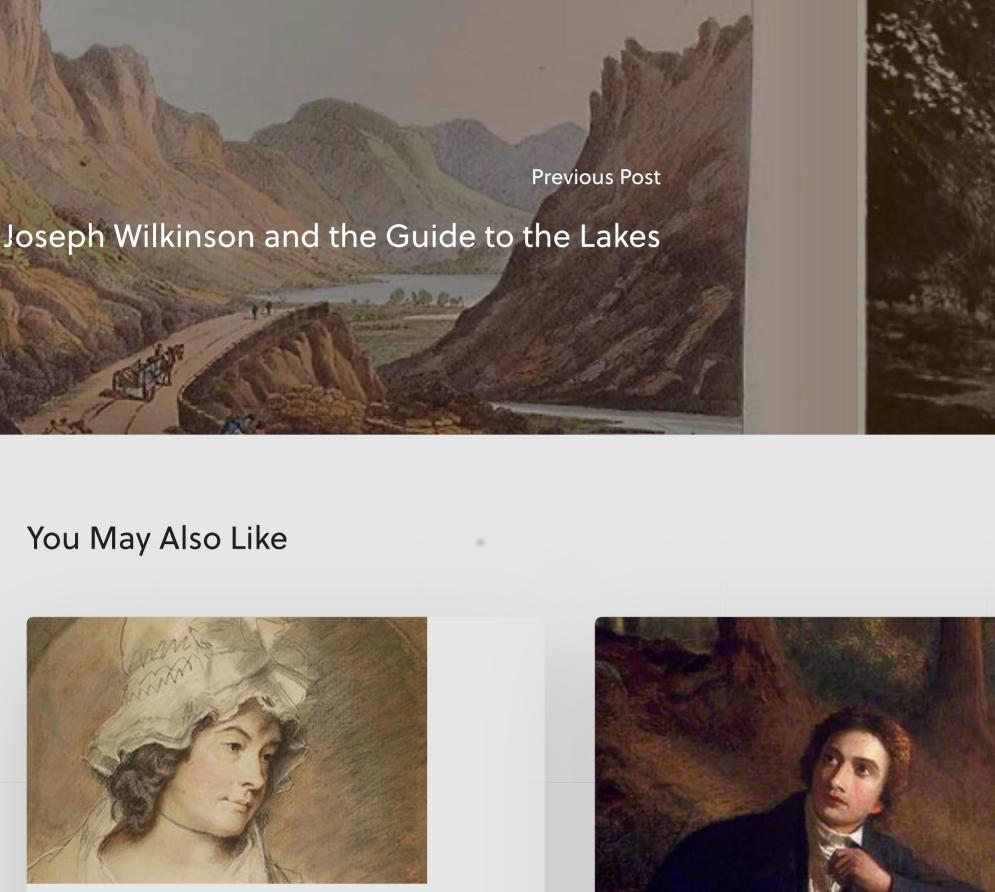
Civil War and has also written a biography of Henry VIII for the 'History in an Hour' series. When not

immersed in the past he can be found in the here and now, watching Chelsea Football Club.

history by diving into the Bodleian Library at every opportunity. He has previously written about the English

Striding Edge

A wonderful illustration of the landscape, language and emotion of the sublime.



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