

Edmund Burke and the Paradox of Tragedy

by

Douglas Westfall B.A.

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Approved

Dr. Darren Hick  
Chair of Committee

Dr. Daniel Nathan

Mark Sheridan  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a reinterpretation of Burke's solution to the paradox of tragedy. The paradox of tragedy asks why we seek out tragedies, which make us feel sad, when we avoid feeling sad in real life. I present Addison and Hume's responses to the paradox in order to present the paradox and contextualize the moves Burke makes in his discussion.

Primarily, I construct an interpretation of Burke's solution which argues we enjoy tragedies because we are naturally drawn to human suffering in order to exercise the sympathy which God made us feel. For Burke, there is sorrow in the depiction, but pleasure in our sympathetic response. I argue that Burke's hanged man experiment does not show a sympathetic response and that his account of the sublime does a better job of accounting for our response to and thus desire for encountering the tragic.

Finally, I consider Reid and Kant's objections that artwork cannot in itself be sublime. In different ways, Reid and Kant argue that only the human mind is sublime. I argue that tragedies can influence the mind in ways compatible with Reid and Kant's theory in order to produce sublimity within us.

## CHAPTER I

### BURKE'S CONTEMPORARIES ON TRAGEDY

This essay examines Edmund Burke's response to the paradox of tragedy and argues against his answer that the pleasure found in experiencing sympathy adequately explains our desire to encounter the tragic. Contra Burke, I argue that his account of sublimity and his answer that we enjoy the suffering of others does a much better job at explaining the thought experiment he utilizes in attempting to prove his case and at explaining our response to tragedy. Because Burke's account contains an implicit response to both Joseph Addison and David Hume, presenting these authors' accounts will both help to better ground Burke's response and help to flesh out the paradox of tragedy itself.

The paradox of tragedy raises a question concerning our peculiar response to tragic productions. In general, people do not enjoy feeling anguish, and yet, people pay good money and invest their time to go see those tragic productions that they know will produce anguish. If a tragedy fails to move us, we believe the production a failure. We want that feeling of anguish when encountering the tragic, even though we flee from it in real life. Put simply, we seem to want what we do not want. What is the relation between the feeling of anguish the play produces in us and the enjoyment that anguish causes? How can the same thing produce both pleasure and pain simultaneously? These two questions lie at the heart of the paradox of tragedy.

Although earlier thinkers wrestled with this puzzle (Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, et. al.), Addison began modern discussion of the paradox with his brief essay, "On the

Pleasures of the Imagination.”<sup>1</sup> Addison asks why “we should take delight in being terrified or dejected by a description, when we find so much uneasiness in the fear or grief which we receive from any occasion?” (482). He answers that the pleasure does not arise from the source but rather the reflection on our own safety from that danger. He argues that to the degree the danger or sorrow is described, our pleasure is magnified in relation to the distance between our safety and the scene depicted (482). I might feel a little reassured when reading about someone having an unpleasant day when mine is going well, but I am greatly relieved to read accounts of terrible tragedies and see the distance between their terrible day and my uneventful one. The extent of my pleasure seems directly correlated to the unpleasantness of the protagonist’s experience.

In addition to taking pleasure that my day is relatively fine, by being exposed to possible dangers, I gain a new perspective on my own life as a whole. Addison says that the tragic teaches “us to set a just value upon our own condition, and make us praise our good fortune” (482). After returning from a trip to a less fortunate country or the hospital, people often say something like “I didn’t realize how good I had it.” Encountering even fictional tragedies allows people to experience a smaller version of this experience. To the extent that the artist through description is able to motivate this awareness in the reader or theatregoer, the artist can draw forth the pleasure that leads to the paradox. There is pain in the presented situation, but the pleasure in our awareness of the distance between the depicted scene and us overwhelms the pain we initially felt.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Addison. “On the Pleasures of the Imagination” in *The Spectator*, (London: Isaac, Tuckey & Co, 1836), 482-483.

Burke responds to Addison through two brief arguments. First, Burke denies that our passions are generally caused by the process of reasoning rather than “the mechanical structure of our bodies ...[or the] constitution of our minds” (I§13).<sup>2</sup> There seems to be little evidence that seeing a tragedy causes us to consciously reflect on our safety, and then suddenly feel a rush of pleasure. I have enjoyed many tragedies without thinking about myself or safety at all. Burke’s second move is to point out that while my safety is a necessary condition of being able to enjoy a tragedy (just as my being alive is a necessary condition for my being able to be murdered) it is a mistake to reason that because something is necessary for my enjoyment it must be the cause of my enjoyment (I§15). Without further support, it just seems that Addison is mistaken to treat a necessary condition as a sufficient condition for explaining our enjoyment. If neither of these explanations fully resolves the paradox then Addison’s account is inadequate.

David Hume’s answer in “Of Tragedy” is that our pleasure stems from the presentation of the artistic elements. He says:

The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgment displayed in disposing them... along with the force of expression, and beauty of oratorical numbers, diffuse the highest satisfaction on the audience, and excite the most delightful movement. By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole movement of these passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight, which the eloquence raises in us.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in *The Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 1, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, University Press: John Wilson & Son, 1881).

<sup>3</sup> David Hume. “Of Tragedy,” in *Philosophy of Literature: Contemporary and Classic Readings*, ed. Eileen John and Dominic McIver Lopes (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 26. Hume uses the word “delight,” but for reasons that will become clear later, I am avoiding using this word since it is a term of art for Burke with an entirely different meaning.

It is clear from this that Hume takes the artistic presentation to be the key to resolving the paradox. He says “tragedy is an imitation, and imitation is always of itself agreeable.”<sup>4</sup> However, it is unclear how the pleasure garnered from witnessing the product of an imitation accounts for this conversion of passions. Unlike Addison, there is not a bad experience that is simply outweighed by the better experience of positive reflections. For Hume, the bad passions are the *source* of the strength of the positive experience we receive when encountering the tragic.

Hume argues that the delight we experience comes from both the imagination and passion. The artistic elements Hume describes engage our imagination. But, if our imagination is engaged on a dull subject then there is no experience of pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The best description of a boring subject cannot move us. If however, the imagination is utilized in expressing a subject that has a strong impact on our passions, then this pleasure is possible. So far though, Hume’s account only explains how the artistic elements incite our passions to a strong effect, but this does not yet explain the conversion that is necessary for pleasure to arise from sorrow.

Hume makes the obvious point that the best artistic representation of a personally painful subject could in no way create pleasure. For instance, he asks us to imagine that someone recreated the moment of a dear child’s death to his or her parents.<sup>6</sup> No matter how great the presentation, the parents could not experience pleasure at the presentation. In fact, the better the presentation the worse their experience of grief would be.

Additionally, if the presentation of the tragic event were too graphic in nature, the scene

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 28.

would repulse rather than please. He says “such movements of horror . . . will not soften into pleasure.”<sup>7</sup>

From this, it seems that Hume argues for a Goldilocks window in which certain subjects presented in a certain light are suitable for this conversion while others are not. There are two ways in which the artistic presentation can be so strong that pleasure cannot come from the tragedy. The presentation must be about something interesting but must not go too far such that it repulses by dealing with subjects too close to home or too violent in nature. Hume’s key question seems to be: can this subject excite passion while still being able to soften the painful elements into pleasure? Though he has told us that this conversion is a softening into pleasure, he has not yet told us what this means. After limiting our focus to those subjects suitable for conversion, I would like to now turn to an interpretation of what this conversion might mean.

Some emotions are essentially negative (i.e. unpleasant). For there to be pleasant sorrow, something essential to the nature of sorrow has changed or been converted into something else. Hume says, “it is thus the fiction of tragedy softens the passion by an infusion of a new feeling, not merely by weakening or diminishing the sorrow.”<sup>8</sup> Hume disregards the experience we will turn to when examining Burke. Excepting the indolent that are just happy to feel anything, Hume argues that the reduction of sorrow could never be pleasant. His claim is that sorrow is inherently negative and by itself can never give pleasure. For us to experience pleasure from sorrow something must have been added to it to convert it. Hume disagrees with Addison’s theory in that the sorrow is still a strong part of the feeling we experience when encountering the tragic and not merely the fodder

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 27.

for the happy reflections the tragic causes in us. That feeling we experience is a new feeling that retains the essence of sorrow (we are still sad) but has a peculiar addition of satisfaction. The artistic elements and the imitative aspects of the tragedy have not diminished the emotion but have converted it into a new emotion altogether.

Now that we know what is supposed to have happened, all that is left is to account for how it might happen. Passions have both a force and a content. The eloquence redirects the natural flow of that emotion from the experience of pain to the experience of pleasure. Hume argues that “the impulse of vehemence arising from sorrow, compassion, indignation, receives a new direction from the sentiments of beauty...The latter [beauty] being the predominant emotion, seizes the whole mind, and convert the former into themselves, at least tincture them so strongly as totally to alter their nature.”<sup>9</sup> Sorrow and these other negative emotions are powerful. Their natural inclination is to cause pain when produced. However, the eloquence of the play and the art of imitation causes an awareness of beauty that tends towards the production of pleasure. The force of sorrow is redirected upon encountering the artistic and imitative aspects and like a bypass valve, it redirects the force of sorrow towards pleasure. This explains why we feel such strong pleasure at the experience of tragedies. But, in addition to this forcefulness, that which is carried into pleasure still retains the content of that emotion. The strong pleasure we feel maintains the sadness essential to the emotion we felt. In short, sorrow has become pleasant sorrow. Hume has explained both what we experience and given a rough sketch of how we have come to experience it.

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<sup>9</sup> Hume, 26.

Despite having an answer, Hume's answer is still confusing. As Susan Feagin notes, the mechanism for this production is unclear and in effect, Hume resolves one mystery by relying on another.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there seems a strong motivation to avoid his basic account. On his account, since pain is negative and pleasure is positive, we cannot simultaneously experience both from the same source since this is inherently contradictory. A single source can either give us pain or pleasure but not both at the same time.<sup>11</sup> But, it seems possible that we could experience both pain and pleasure simultaneously rather than a predominant mixture that retains the character of the subordinate. The move he makes to account for this conversion depends upon pain and pleasure being unable to stem from the same source, but this is not obviously true. If a different basic account of the passions can better explain our experience, then there is no need for a mysterious conversion account. Since much of Burke's account is a direct response to Hume's view, I will not further raise issues with Hume's strategy here but do so when explaining Burke's account.

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Feagin, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no.1 (Jan., 1983): 95.

<sup>11</sup> A complex source may provide both (e.g. we may receive pleasure from being hugged by a good friend while being pained by him or her stepping on our foot), but the precise source of one or the other cannot simultaneously provide both.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION TO BURKE

Edmund Burke's *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, contains a solution to the paradox of tragedy that argues we enjoy the suffering of others for the feeling of sympathy it brings. Since he means his discussion of the paradox to illustrate the passions of sympathy and imitation, his reasoning regarding the paradox itself is not always clear. In this paper, I will work to interpret these passages and then fix a problem in Burke's line of thought. While there is much Burke gets right, his solution relies on an *entirely* and overly charitable interpretation of human nature. He argues that people enjoy the witnessing the suffering of others as a means of experiencing sympathy. Using Burkean categories, I shall argue that he is right to point out that we enjoy the suffering of others, but wrong to account for this in terms of sympathy. With tragedies, we have the enticement of another's suffering framed to evoke the powerful feeling of sublimity, and this explains why they draw us to them. I will defend the experience of sublimity as central to understanding the paradox of tragedy and close with a few comments that show the sublime's role in explaining the strengths and weaknesses of other solutions to the paradox.

### CHAPTER III

#### BURKE'S VIEW OF THE PASSIONS

Burke bases his aesthetic theory upon our psychological responses to pleasure, pain, and indifference. Unlike John Locke, who says “the removal or lessening of a pain is considered, and operates, as a pleasure: and the loss or diminishing of a pleasure, as a pain,”<sup>12</sup> Burke held that pain and pleasure are simple, independent ideas (I§2). He argues that “the diminution or ceasing of pleasure does not operate like positive pain; and that the removal or diminution of pain, in its effect, has very little resemblance to positive pleasure”(I§3). Since these two states are unconnected, someone experiencing relief from pain does not experience any pleasure nor does someone experiencing a decrease of pleasure experience any pain. The cessation of a pleasure simply does not feel like the introduction of a pain, and thus, we need to keep separate the reduction and introduction of these simple states and the indifference that we feel when experiencing neither.

Burke's treatment of pain and pleasure as separate, rather than belonging to a continuum, forces us to look for the paradox's solution in different terms than other authors. On his reasoning, we no longer need to explain how the same object causes both pain and pleasure since pain and pleasure are mutually independent (I§2). While we still need to account for why people choose to watch something that causes them pain, there is no mystery regarding how we can simultaneously experience both since they come from different sources. Moreover, given their independence, it is a category error to view one as the source of the other. We must still keep track of pain and pleasure when considering the tragic, but we must keep them conceptually separate.

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<sup>12</sup> John Locke *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 2.20.16.

After differentiating between pain and pleasure, Burke examines our responses to these two psychological states. He recognizes that we enjoy the diminishment of pain, and if this diminishment is not pleasure, it is something nearly like it; however, owing to their separateness, he cannot refer to this decrease in pain as “pleasure” but instead refers to it as “delight” (I§4). Burke intentionally uses “delight” in a peculiar sense because he would prefer to alter the use of an existing word rather than introduce a new one (I§4). Since Burke uses “delight” to mean the experience of reduced pain, I will substitute it with “relief” in my discussion so that there is no confusion with “delight’s” colloquial use. Additionally, as a blanket term for pleasure or delight/relief, I will use “enjoy”. Having understood Burke’s use of language and psychology in a way sufficient for the purpose of this paper, we can understand how pleasure and pain inform those passions directly related to the paradox.

For Burke, sympathy is the most important passion.<sup>13</sup> He notes that whenever people act in accordance with the way God designed them “it is attended with a delight or a pleasure of some kind.”<sup>14</sup> Sympathy is such an important passion that God provides enticements in both the pleasure and pain categories. Regarding the enticement in the pain category, Burke argues, “Our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportional delight . . . The delight

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<sup>13</sup> Passion is Burke’s blanket term for various mental states including strong emotions that act as a motive force. He refers to them as “the organs of the mind.” Burke, *Inquiry*, (I§19). For further discussion on Burke’s use of passion see Adam Phillips, “Introduction” to *A Philosophical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> This general claim (I§14) is further supported by Burke’s repeated use of this to explain his reasoning beyond sympathy: At the end of (I§10) He admits that he doesn’t know why Beauty affects us the way it does, but it must be owing to God’s providential design, In (I§15) he argues that God gave us ambition to motivate us to achievement, and in (I§19) he argues that his work explaining our passions can be “considered as an hymn to the Creator.” For Burke, our passions are the result of God’s design and God uses pleasure and/or delight (depending upon the passion) to motivate our compliance to them.

we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer.” (I§14). In short, because we enjoy experiencing sympathy, our natures compel us to seek out those in distress. After witnessing another’s distress, we too become distressed (since sympathy is “a sort of substitution”) and we then seek relief by doing what we can to ease our suffering by easing theirs (I§13). Since the experience of relief is enjoyable, we would not mind it happening again and continue to seek out the suffering of others for that enjoyment.

In addition to the relief of pain, God provides an enticement in the pleasure category as well, in that “pity is a passion accompanied with pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection” (I§14). Though he says little about this, by casting pity as a societally beneficial passion, it produces both the pleasures that come from acting according to God’s design and that feeling of companionship that affords pleasure (I§8-9,11). Thus, Burke divides the enjoyment caused by sympathy into two types: pleasure through pity and relief of pain (i.e. delight) through assistance. One need not agree with his view that God designed humanity to be this way to agree that sympathy operates in the affective manner he describes.

Before continuing, it is important to clarify that Burke sees these processes as antecedent to reasoning. Burke reflects that “the influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed” (I§13). Burke is not arguing that we have the conscious reflection that when we see another suffer we think to ourselves that we would feel better if we helped them, realize this works and then set about repeating the process. Nor do we think about the bonds of friendship and how much pleasure that gives us and realize that pity is a way of sustaining that. Our passions,

including the desire to see the suffering of others are not directed by reason but the result of our natures (I§13).

Finally, we need to examine Burke's view of imitation before turning to the paradox itself. While his view of sympathy helps explain our response to real tragedy, it does not explain why we feel sympathy at what we know to be artificial tragedy. He contends that, "as sympathy makes us take concern in whatever men feel, so this affection [to imitate] prompts us to copy whatever they do; and consequently we have a pleasure in imitating, and in whatever belongs to imitation, . . . without any intervention of the reasoning faculty" (I§16). Like sympathy, God gives us a passion to imitate others, and there is, therefore, a corresponding joy whenever we do so. This faculty helps people conform to society so that they may fit within it. It "forms our manners, our opinions, our lives . . . [and] it is a species of mutual compliance, [by] which all men yield to each other" (I§16). We copy manners and customs and derive pleasure from others and ourselves doing so. Since this passion, along with the others, is prior to reason, the rationality of our response is directly proportional to our awareness of the artificiality of the work (I§16). In those areas in which the work fools us, we enjoy our sympathetic response, and in those areas in which we are aware of the artifice, our reason intervenes as we compare the work to the real object and we enjoy the imitation as imitation.

However, the pleasure found in the products of imitation has limits. Burke's rule for discerning whether the pleasure we find is primarily in the artistic imitation or the source of that imitation depends upon which we would rather see if given the choice. If one is satisfied in staring at a still-life painting, without a desire to see the original object, then the pleasure he or she experiences is from imitation. If, however, when one sees a

painting it causes the person to want to rush out and see the real object that the artwork reproduced, then the power the copy held over the viewer primarily lays in the compelling nature of the portrayed object itself rather than the mimetic qualities of the artwork.<sup>15</sup>

As a whole, Burke's rule may seem problematic. It seems doubtful that a person necessarily makes an implicit claim regarding the original's quality or interestingness by choosing to stare at a representation instead of the original. However, because this side of the rule does not relate to his solution to the paradox, we may avoid addressing this worry, for the other side of his rule seems *prima facie* true. If a person leaves a reproduction to see the original, or something of the same kind, then this strongly indicates that their enjoyment of the artwork was primarily caused by the power of the object through the representation rather than the representation itself.

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<sup>15</sup> Burke, *Inquiry*, (I§16).. It should be noted that Burke thought of art exclusively in terms of mimesis. For further discussion of this, see Paddy Bullard, "Burke's Aesthetic Psychology" in the *Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, ed. David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2012), 55-59.

## CHAPTER IV

### BURKE'S SOLUTION TO THE PARADOX OF TRAGEDY

After understanding the relevant portions of Burke's psychological views, we can now understand his solution to the paradox of tragedy. Burke's solution is that we like tragedies because we like the products of imitation and because our natures compel us to seek out suffering. He observes, "There is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight" (I§14). His view is essentially that since tragedies are depictions of human suffering, and because we enjoy witnessing the suffering of others for the pleasure our sympathetic response brings, we are naturally drawn to them. This might sound monstrous, but Burke does not mean it to be, and this is why he carefully couches it in terms related to the production of virtuous human feeling and behavior.

It should be remembered that, according to Burke, God made us to experience pleasure and/or relief, at the suffering of others, as a means of prodding us toward the exercise of sympathy (I§14). So while he argues that people like the tragic for what could appear a monstrous reason, it is ultimately good that they do. However, it seems like both sides of sympathy are not relevant to the enjoyment of representational tragedies. No one seeks out fictional, tragic stories to aid the protagonist and thereby obtain relief. We may often wish we could enter the story to aid the protagonist and obtain relief in our wishing, but it seems doubtful that the experience of noble wishing is why we go to tragedies. After all, with most tragedies "we know in advance that it will end badly, that we will be

unable to help” and yet, we go all the same.<sup>16</sup> Thus, only one aspect of sympathy, that which finds pleasure in pitying, can be in operation when encountering artistic tragedies.<sup>17</sup> Burke’s solution to the paradox must be that we primarily enjoy depictions of human suffering because we enjoy that branch of sympathy devoted to seeking out suffering for the pleasure that pitying others brings.

Burke wants to compel agreement that our enjoyment of tragedies really is about genuine sympathy and argues against the imitative elements of tragedies as being necessary to the paradox’s solution. In tragedies, we have the pleasure of pity combined with the pleasures of imitation. David Hume, in “Of Tragedy,” argued that the pleasure we feel at tragic productions is best accounted for by the greatness of the imitative aspects. Hume argued that:

the very eloquence with which the melancholy scene is represented...[leads to a state of affairs such that] the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind, but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us.<sup>18</sup>

We feel anguish for the protagonist and his or her sad fate, but the beauty of the production overwhelms the sadness and leads to pleasure. The play forces the audience to wrestle with a strong passion and the effectiveness of the production converts that strong sorrow into an equally strong pleasure. Since this conversion depends upon the quality of the artistic elements (i.e. imitations), we must look to the imitative aspect to explain our motivations in seeing the play. While Burke agrees with Hume that our pleasure increases

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<sup>16</sup> Comment from Francesca di Poppa on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> A later unpublished essay confirms this when Burke says that tragedy turns upon the passion of pity without mentioning sympathy as he more broadly conceives it. Edmund Burke, “Hints for an Essay on the Drama,” in *The Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 7, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, University Press: John Wilson & Son, 1881), 150.

<sup>18</sup> Hume, 25.

the higher the imitation's quality, he argues that Hume is mistaken that this accounts for our motivation in pursuing the tragic.

Burke argues that what we are *really* drawn to human suffering rather than the artistic elements when we pursue the tragic (I§15). To demonstrate this, Burke provides an ingenious thought experiment, which asks readers to imagine that they are at what will be the finest production of a tragedy possible:

Appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations, unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting, and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy (I§15).

Burke makes the executed a "state criminal of high rank" so that his thought experiment will be as fair a test as possible. In another place he argues, "Our delight ... [in tragedy] is very greatly heightened, if the sufferer be some excellent person who sinks under an unworthy fortune" (I§14). By making it a test between the best of these two kinds of tragedies (fictive and real), he is able to show that real tragedy beats the non-real decisively.

Burke's rule regarding imitation is that if someone would leave an imitation to see the original, then what he or she cares about is some element or elements of the original rather than of the imitation. If his thought experiment seems true, we cannot look to the fictive elements to explain the paradox of tragedy, for the audience has abandoned fictive suffering in favor of authentic suffering. If his intuition-pump succeeds, it is both incredible and troubling for it leaves us with the conclusion that people like tragedies precisely *because* of, and not in spite of, the suffering they portray. Whether or not you

think you would go outside, believing most people would go outside is enough for his argument to proceed. After all, some might avoid the hanging only because they do not wish others to see them as the type of person that would or perhaps because they are squeamish. If Burke is right, then solutions like Hume's are wrong. What people *primarily* care about in tragedies is human suffering and the pleasure that experiencing sympathy brings.

To sum up, responses to the paradox usually assume we dislike seeing human suffering but like something else about tragedy. Burke's radical idea is to claim that we do enjoy seeing another's suffering. If our attraction to tragedy is rooted in our desire to see suffering, then those who try to explain away our enjoyment of human suffering and look to other aspects of tragedies to resolve the paradox are bound to misunderstand what occurs when we encounter the tragic. For Burke our enjoyment of suffering is acceptable because a good and social feature of our divinely created natures (namely the grounding of sympathy) motivates this; therefore, the enjoyment we derive from the suffering of others is good. Yet, it seems like his view is far too charitable regarding human nature. He accounts for almost every aspect of our behavior, even those that seem troubling, in noble terms.<sup>19</sup> Should we agree with Burke's rosy picture of humanity? If we do not primarily enjoy the suffering of others for the sake of experiencing a virtuous feeling then something other than Burke's solution of sympathy must be the answer.

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<sup>19</sup> Burke virtually ignores those with ignoble desires. In part, the *Inquiry* responds to Rousseau by arguing that passions like sympathy and imitation operate from a societal impulse that works towards the betterment of all. There are other specific features of the *Inquiry* that hint at an attack upon Rousseau. See Adam Phillips intro to the Oxford edition of *A Philosophical Inquiry* for more on this. Additionally, Burke uses our passions as evidence of God's magnificence and insists that, "The more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger traces we everywhere find of his wisdom who made it." (I§19). Given these considerations, it would not have done for Burke to conclude that we enjoy witnessing another's suffering without giving a socially beneficial reason for our doing so.

## CHAPTER V

### A CRITIQUE OF BURKE'S SOLUTION

Despite appealing to the tragic to explicate his account of sympathy, the moves Burke makes do not support the conclusion that experiencing sympathy is our primary motivation in witnessing the tragic. Burke claims that, if given the chance to leave a theatre to see an execution “the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy” (I§15). Fortunately, because this discussion occurs in the midst of his explaining sympathy, Burke has provided readers with the tools to ascertain whether the triumph he describes is indeed one of “real sympathy.” I am now going to utilize those tools to raise doubt about the conclusion Burke derived from his compelling thought experiment.

Burke gives us two types of sympathy, and it seems neither delight through relieving others nor pleasure from pity explains what happens in his thought experiment. Do the people rush outside to assist the criminal and thereby experience delight by relieving the victim from his suffering and thereby their own? It is important to remember that executions were a popular event for the masses. What is important is not the merit of the death penalty but that this group of people is obviously not expressing sympathy of the relief variety. Rather than hoping to prevent the hanging, they likely wish it carried out. This desire to see the hanging also seems to preclude pity since Burke talks about sympathy arising from instances that “we would by no means choose to do, ... [but] would be eager enough to see if it was once done” (I§15). Given that, the people approve of what is happening, pity seems a peculiar explanation. After all, it is hard to express

your pity by throwing food at the condemned. Whatever their actual motivations, Burke gave us two categories of sympathy and since neither type of sympathy is obviously present in the hanged man case, whatever they are there for, it seems unlikely to be to experience sympathy. Whatever his example shows, sympathy alone seems insufficient to resolve the paradox.

Modern cases bear out that the suffering of others attracts people in a way that does not require sympathy to explain. In a modern day example of Burke's experiment, millions have used their internet access not to watch an array of entertainments but to witness the Taliban behead journalist Daniel Pearl. If people did not wish to see the innocent executed for propaganda purposes, they could avoid those films so that the motivation for their production would be removed. Clearly, they are doing nothing to remove the suffering of another. A quick Google search reveals dozens of cases in which someone is beaten and people are so caught-up in looking on that they do not even attempt to call the police.<sup>20</sup> Somewhere a car wreck has just happened and nearly everyone will slow down to get a good look before going about his or her day as though nothing happened. Clearly, in these instances, no one rushes forward to find delight in the relief of pain by aiding the victim nor do they seem to be taking pleasure from *pity*. Ask a thoughtful person why they look at a car wreck (assuming they still do), and I doubt their answer will be pity.

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<sup>20</sup> Here are two compelling examples. In one of them the onlookers even took to mock-interviewing the victim rather than calling the police for assistance "91-Year-Old Beating Victim Calls Bystanders 'Low-Class'" *Good Morning America*, May 15, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3175187>.; Casey Gane-McCalla, "Girls Beat Man On D.C. Subway While Onlookers Record." *News One*. June 6, 2011, <http://newsone.com/952895/girl-beats-man-on-d-c-subway-while-onlookers-record-without-helping/>.

Burke's strategy in reply to Hume's solution was to develop a case in which the supposed key to solving the paradox was absent and people still chose to see it. Hume relied on the power of the artistic elements, so Burke removed the artistic elements from the tragic with the hanged man case, and people still chose to go see it. Leaving aside the merits of Hume's solution, the artistic elements do not seem to be a necessary condition to enjoying the tragic. However, contra Burke, it seems that sympathy is not a necessary condition either. It is certainly true that both of these elements are usually present in fictive tragedies and constitute a portion of our enjoyment, but they cannot be the primary motivation if they are not necessary conditions to that enjoyment. Something else would seem to have to be going on here.

## CHAPTER VI

### ARTISTIC SUFFERING

I think it difficult to prove that we enjoy the suffering of others as it seems an intuitional matter; however, I hope that an examination of other entertainments will help to further elicit this intuition. If what we primarily care about is enjoying the witnessing of suffering, then our initial reasoning about the paradox of tragedy should include those other genres in which suffering is present. Even genres like slasher films, that Burke could not have anticipated, should be included. We will consider genre distinctions later but, in the initial stages, they are irrelevant to what I argue motivates us.

Not every tragedy — be it film, novel, or play — treats human suffering the same. Some “tragedies” are quite clearly only about enjoying another’s suffering. Although there are arguments about why the *Saw* film series has a deeper meaning about valuing life, I find these arguments implausible (see Wan, 2004). Jigsaw, the film’s protagonist, creates elaborate mechanisms that torture people to death unless they are willing to go to extreme, often murderous, lengths to preserve their own lives. This experience theoretically teaches the victims the value of their own lives. However, the film pays far more attention to the graphic scenes than any purported message. One can learn that life is valuable without turning to a source that constantly demeans it in order to do so. While it is possible that some people watch *Saw* for its message, in spite of its violence (just as it is possible that some people really do pick up the latest issue of *Playboy* only for the articles), I strongly doubt that they constitute a significant enough portion of the audience to warrant consideration. It seems the majority of its audience is comprised of people wishing to see suffering.

The common description of films like *Saw* as *torture porn* seems a perfect summation of the slasher genre as a multitude of people receive some form of gratification from the fictional torturing of others. The *Saw* films have made nearly a billion dollars worldwide and they are hardly the only films of their type.<sup>21</sup> Clearly, many people simply love to see others brutalized. One can argue that this type of person is irrelevant to the paradox; but often the persons who enjoy these movies enjoy “traditional” tragedies as well. Are we to believe that they enjoy watching others suffer in these movies but not in the others? This seems highly suspect and the success of these types of “art” is at least some evidence towards my claim.

In addition to these kinds of horror films, there is a huge body of comedy based on the suffering of others. The Three Stooges are nothing if it not a celebration of violence and pain. *America’s Funniest Home Videos* had over a decade’s worth of high ratings by mostly showing people getting hurt. On the internet, a steady parade of people hurt themselves and each other for a large, appreciative audience. I am not denying the humor of these videos, but rather asking why we enjoy them. Is it not even crueler to *laugh* at real suffering? Whatever the explanation is, one thing is clear: plenty of people enjoy the suffering of another, and it seems absurd to suggest, as Burke does, that we enjoy their suffering because of sympathy. Moreover, many of those unwilling to watch gory films like *Saw* are quite content to watch slapstick comedy and this provides further confirmation of my claim by expanding those under consideration beyond those who enjoy the most brutal forms of suffering.

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<sup>21</sup> "Saw," *Box Office Mojo*. *IMDB*, Accessed on December 6, 2012, <http://boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=saw.htm>.

Two objections to my use of comedy and horror examples need to be dealt with before moving on. The first is that it might be tempting to argue that in comedy it is really the surprise and humor that makes us enjoy them and with horror films it is the suspense we gravitate towards. While there is suffering in these genres to focus on this misses the point of our enjoyment of these genres. I have no doubt that this is true of many comedy and horror presentations, however those elements seem clearly lacking in *Saw* and *AFHV*. I do not need to show that our enjoyment of suffering is the motivating force in every work within the genre to show that is clearly the motivating force in these highly successful examples. The second objection is that perhaps I am not enjoying the suffering of someone else but rather the depiction of suffering. But this too seems false if we consider whether our laughter would be diminished at *AFHV* were we to find out that the video was staged rather than real. Are the videos less funny if the people do not genuinely suffer as much as they seem to be? For me they clearly are less funny and this indicates that the crucial element is a desire for that person's actual suffering.

Given the ample evidence that people love to watch others suffer, why do we assume something different occurs in traditional tragedies like *King Lear*? The main reason is that it does not seem like we watch these in order to enjoy another's suffering. When they suffer, we suffer, and this seems different in kind rather than degree from a film like *Saw*. Arguing that we enjoy suffering in these works runs squarely against our intuitions and experience. When a movie scene grows too violent, I wince or turn my head. I, and many others, are clearly made uncomfortable by depictions of suffering and this runs counter to my claim. If what we really enjoyed was the suffering of others, then

why would we turn our heads? If I am right, would we not be disappointed when a character in a movie simply dies without being tortured first?

The idea that we must gleefully look upon another's suffering in order to be said to enjoy it is an easy mistake to make given Burke's thought-experiment and my broad use of "enjoy"; however, one can enjoy another's suffering without desiring to see the cruelest form of it. Burke argues it is a mistake to simply call our enjoyment pleasure because of its connection with unease (I§14). Moreover, I am not arguing that the nature of everyone's enjoyment at suffering is identical. With a variety of people, a variety of kinds of enjoyment and tastes in the suffering portrayed will likely be present. One who enjoys a film like *Saw* and one who is a Stooges fan both enjoy another's suffering, but they do not seem to experience the same kind of enjoyment. Therefore, people like me who avoid graphic violence do not present a problem for my claim. In my case, I wince because of squeamishness and a realization that I do not want a memory of those images. However, I can watch a film like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which a character continually experiences emotional suffering at embarrassment, and derive a greater pleasure as her suffering is increased. My response shows the type of suffering I enjoy rather than evidence that I do not enjoy suffering at all. It is unnecessary, and seemingly false, to require that we like all forms of suffering, or enjoy it as a sadist might, in order to hold that we broadly enjoy suffering.

Appealing to other genres to lend credence to the argument that we enjoy suffering raises an additional difficulty. If we enjoy the suffering of others across genres, then it is hard to see how it accounts for our enjoyment of tragedy in particular. As I previously mentioned, the answer to this question could be a taste preference regarding

the type of suffering we want to witness, but then that becomes an answer to why people prefer different genres and not a solution to the paradox itself. Thus, there must either be something unique about suffering as presented in tragedy or it will turn out that the enjoyment of suffering while present is unhelpful at resolving the paradox.

## CHAPTER VII

### TRAGEDY AND THE SUBLIME

As shown by my discussion of the theatre case, Burke's answer that we pursue the tragic because we desire to experience sympathy does not resolve the paradox. When we remove sympathy as an answer from Burke's response, it leaves us with the conclusion that people enjoy tragedies as an opportunity to witness human suffering; however, this distasteful conclusion need not require that people seek the suffering of others solely for the sake of enjoying the suffering itself. Just because we do not see suffering for the sake of sympathy does not mean that we do not do it for something else. As previously noted, Burke finds that "[t]here is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight" (I§14). Since Burke's conception of delight is connected to the sublime, then perhaps sublimity can do the job that sympathy could not. I want to suggest that Burke's solution to the paradox of tragedy could be better grounded on a view that people seek out tragedy to see that suffering of people which evokes sublimity.

As an aside, there are reasons to think that Burke saw connections between tragedy and sublimity. When describing the fictional play in the hanged man case, he asks that we imagine it to be "the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have" (I§14). As noted, the sublime is a source of delight, and delight is one of the two ways sympathy pleases. Finally, his explication of sympathy occurs in sandwiched between discussions of the sublime. There are good reasons to think that sublimity is influencing his consideration of the tragic, and yet, nowhere does he explicitly make this connection in

order to address the paradox. Saying a play must be sublime is not the same as saying we go to it for the sake of sublimity.

I take for granted that we believe we ought not to enjoy another's suffering. Assuming this is true, and providing that you share my intuition that we actually do enjoy the suffering of another, then we are in a position of enjoying what we find to be terrible. Burke has a term for this dual feeling: the sublime. Burke rarely defines passions since he holds that despite our being unable to define them well, we have an accurate sense of what they are (I§2). As such, he does not define the sublime but rather examines a list of things which evoke sublimity. He observes that "[w]hatever 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" (I§7). He further clarifies the sublime by noting that it rests upon a "delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime" (II§8). While we could work through his list and examine each in turn, like Burke, I find that most people have a working understanding of the sublime. That feeling one experiences when standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, of being simultaneously afraid and for the same reason awed, is the sublime. Sublimity occurs when we narrowly avoid a car wreck, are confronted with our mortality, and as our heart stops pounding the fear lessens and we find an enjoyment in the thrill, which he refers to as delight. In general, when apprehension or fear is moderated, it leads to that sense of delight that is a byproduct of our encounter with sublimity. In fact, a thing's being awful seems the best description of

sublimity in that it carries with it the dual-meaning of inspiring awe and of being “terrible, dreadful, [or] appalling.”<sup>22</sup>

I believe that if you reflect upon your experience of those tragedies you found most moving and those other times in which you experienced the sublime (whether through nature or some other source), you will find a matching. I have stood before Iguazu Falls, the world’s widest waterfall, and felt dwarfed by the world around me. As I stood before the rickety guard rail, I felt the world’s power and was made keenly aware of my insignificance and how easily one slip on the wet stones would end my life. It was awful. To me that experience is a clear example of sublimity. I have seen and read hundreds of accounts of the way our lives seem to be at the mercy of chance and the wicked. I have seen how easily one’s life can be ruined, and it was awful. These two experiences seem to me to be of the same general kind.

While it is easy to see how the majestic in nature could inspire this dual feeling, it is less apparent that the product of an artist could inspire the same result. Why should the suffering of others be a source of the sublime? Firstly, because the anguish of another is almost always terrible to the observer, and as Burke explains, “whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight is sublime” (II§2). Moreover, Burke observes that “it is our nature, when we do not know what may happen to us, to fear the worst that can happen; and hence it is that uncertainty is so terrible” (II§19). Because we do not know what the future holds, all of us are in the position Burke describes. Tragedies show the worst that could happen to an individual and thereby offer a terrible, plausible account of what

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<sup>22</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. s.v. “awful.”

might also happen to us.<sup>23</sup> While this is terrible, because the worst is not currently happening to us, the terror is moderated in a way that is enjoyable, just as Burke has continually said. Moreover, additional aspects within staged tragedies are evocative of sublimity, such as dark lighting, the score, and the actors' anguished faces; however, it seems to me that fear of the unknown coupled with an awful representation is likely the foundation of sublimity within tragedy.

At this point, you may wonder why we should find enjoyment in the suffering of those in tragedy when we clearly do not enjoy the suffering of those we personally know. When reflecting upon the need for safety, Burke provides an insight that might clarify this issue. Burke points out that our safety is a necessary condition of our enjoying the suffering of others (I§15). When we know someone, that person's suffering affects us in a manner that is not equivalent to the suffering of those we do not know. The emotional proximity of those we care about prevents moderation and thus, their suffering is simply too painful to be a source of enjoyment.

Finally, sublimity helps address the issue of tragedy's uniqueness in the presentation of suffering. The suffering within tragedy evokes the sublime, while horror and comedy generally do not. It seems that in horror and comedy, the suffering of others is framed in such a way that it dilutes the effect of the suffering and in so doing fictionalizes it to a degree in which it is no longer suitable for the sublime. In comedy,

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<sup>23</sup> This is also Aristotle's view when he claims that fear is aroused in us at the witnessing of the destruction of another *Poetics* 13. Moreover, an observation very much like this one inspires Schopenhauer theory that sublimity is the key to solving the paradox. He argues that tragedy induces sublimity which leads us to freedom in that "the dreadful dominion of chance and error...[helps lead us to resignation] which redeems us from them," and we find enjoyment at the release: Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E.F.J. Payne, (Dover: New York, 1958), 434. For more discussion on Schopenhauer answer to the paradox of tragedy, see Alex Neill, "Schopenhauer on Tragedy and the Sublime" in *A Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Bart Vandenabelle (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 206-218.

genre conventions frame the suffering in a manner that distances the viewer from the suffering and lessens it. Alternatively, many horror films go to the opposite extreme and in portraying an overabundance of suffering, turn the suffering depicted into the absurd. There is something about the suffering of The Three Stooges and the latest Freddy Krueger victim that while enjoyable, I find impossible to take seriously.<sup>24</sup> When the suffering of others becomes implausible, it cannot serve as a source of the sublime. We can derive satisfaction from it as a product of imitation or it can affect us with thrills, laughter, and screams, but it cannot move us in the same way as a *La Strada*.

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<sup>24</sup> I realize these genres are far more wide ranging than I present here. There are several genre-bending examples of each. A horror film that presents believable suffering and a serious comedy like those involving Charlie Chaplin's Tramp would clearly evoke the sublime as Burke and I present it. However, for clarity's sake, I am bypassing these worries.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBLIMITY

Once the sublime's importance to the paradox of tragedy is understood, it helps to frame the proper role that other solutions play regarding the paradox. If my reworking of Burke's argument is right, then we enjoy tragedies for the experience of sublimity. As noted earlier, Hume looked to the imitative aspects to answer the paradox. He held that the artistic elements provide the pleasure by converting our suffering. Hume famously never answered how our suffering is converted, but if sublimity is the answer to our enjoyment, then it seems clear that the artistic elements could frame the suffering we witness in a manner that evokes sublimity and could account for Hume's "conversion."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Burke devotes the final part of his *Inquiry* to the power of words and their ability to evoke sublimity. Successful tragedies use the dark lighting, the actors' presentation, and the other artistic elements to highlight and force our attention upon the suffering of the protagonist until it creates sublimity within us. Hume noticed the role that artistic elements have in increasing our pleasure in tragedy, and Burke has given us the tools to understand how and why that would be the case.

Additionally, this revision of Burke's solution helps shed light upon Aristotle's solution of catharsis. Aristotle argues that we enjoy tragedy because we crave catharsis.<sup>26</sup> While Aristotle never defined catharsis, and there is much disagreement over what he meant, Burke alludes to catharsis when trying to account for how delight could be enjoyable and speculates that the emotions raised by tragedies "clear the parts, whether

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<sup>25</sup> For an excellent discussion of Hume's conversion theory, see Flo Leibowitz, "The Logic of Hume's Conversion Theory." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 4 (Fall 93): 625-626.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449 b 25-30.

fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance”(IV§7). On one reading, Aristotle thought we had these negative emotions that periodically needed to be expunged, Burke on the other hand thought we are made to express feelings like sympathy and when we do not for a long enough period, a discomfort arises within us that tragedies help to clear. Just as physical labor soothes the agitation that comes from having done nothing for too long, tragedies relieve that discomfort that arises from having not felt for too long. While I am not committed to the idea that we enjoy sublimity for the experience of catharsis (I think we enjoy sublimity itself and not instrumentally),<sup>27</sup> if one holds that tragedy is enjoyable for catharsis, Burke’s account helps present this idea in a more robust fashion.

Finally, my revision of Burke’s solution helps to show a significant problem with meta-response solutions to the paradox of tragedy.<sup>28</sup> Sublimity at its fullest is an experience of astonishment and thus, a bypassing of our conscious reflections. He says of this that, “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” (II§1). While it is true that we may derive a satisfaction from our later reflections on our experience and reactions to the tragic, this does not seem to be what we usually experience *during* the best of tragedies. Often people describe being caught up in a tragedy as a source of their enjoyment. Indeed, it is usually considered a mark against a tragedy if while it occurs I am thinking about my reactions to it rather than the production itself. It seems to me that

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<sup>27</sup> This reason is why I am also suspicious of Schopenhauer’s (c.f. footnote 23).

<sup>28</sup> For instance: Susan Feagin, “The Pleasures of Tragedy,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no.1 (Jan., 1983): 95-104.

we go to tragedies for what we experience during the production and not for how we may feel about ourselves after the production.

## CHAPTER IX

### CAN TRAGEDIES BE SUBLIME?

It does not do much good to show that sublimity lies at the heart of solving the paradox of tragedy if Immanuel Kant and Thomas Reid are right that art generally, and tragedy in particular, cannot be sublime. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant argues that sublimity is the result of our own experience of the superiority of our reason over nature.<sup>29</sup> In “Of Taste,” Reid argues that sublimity arises from our admiration of others’ mental qualities.<sup>30</sup> Through different routes, each of their accounts of sublimity leads to the conclusion that tragedies in particular cannot be a source of sublimity. I will briefly walk through Kant and Reid’s accounts to show how their views of the sublime preclude tragedies and then offer a response to show that their accounts should not overturn our common-sense experience regarding the connection between sublimity and tragedy.

Kant describes sublimity as a feeling associated with recognizing our superiority over nature, our imagination, and the limitation of our senses.<sup>31</sup> Kant divides this feeling of superiority into the mathematically and the dynamically sublime (§24, 247). Mathematical sublimity occurs when considering something of infinite magnitude. Although we can continue to apprehend successively more and more inputs ad infinitum, we find that there are limits to our ability to comprehend that which we have apprehended (§26, 252). However, after imagination fails, reason steps in and is able to understand the infinite, and thus, while we feel initially thwarted, our subsequent success

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<sup>29</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Reid, “Of Taste,” in *The Works of Thomas Reid* Vol. I (Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart 1872), 490-508.

<sup>31</sup> I will be explaining Kant and Reid’s attempts to ground sublimity in order to show how it precludes tragedies from sublimity, but owing to space considerations I will not be able to assess their grounding theories themselves.

at comprehension yields satisfaction since our mind “feels itself elevated in its own judgement of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its idea” (§26, 256). That which is absolutely great in quantity overwhelms imagination but surrenders to reason, and reason is flattered by its success.

Given this view, no artwork could be an appropriate object for mathematical sublimity on Kant’s account. Kant says, “Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is to be termed sublime” (§25, 250). If mathematical sublimity is a product of our encounter with the infinite, then no artwork can cause this since no artwork is infinite. The best an artwork could accomplish is indirectly to cause mathematical sublimity. Kant insists “the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime” even though he recognizes that we are wont to do this (§23, 245). He argues that the vast ocean can bring to mind the associated idea of infinity and that this idea is what causes the experience of sublimity, but it is not the ocean, which is sublime, but rather our reflections upon encountering the ocean. Similarly, an artwork (e.g. an architecturally massive building like the pyramids or St. Peter’s Basilica) could raise an associated idea that produces sublimity, but since every artwork is an object of the senses, no artwork as an artwork is ever the source of sublimity (§26, 252). Perhaps a tragic work might trigger an idea that leads to sublimity, but it itself can never be mathematically sublime.

For dynamic sublimity, objects that we realize we would be powerless to resist, but are not currently threatening us, first overwhelm us, but upon reflection of our safety produce in us joy (§28, 260). We then further have a realization that, because we are spiritual beings, we have nothing to fear from nature (§28, 261-2). Because nature cannot destroy us, we have a second source from which to take pleasure in our superiority over

nature. To prove this, he argues this is why we admire those who have courage by scorning the fear of death, because they have understood the world the way it really is (§28, 262). We have mathematical and dynamic sublimity when we are caused to realize our own superiority to the natural world via either source of pleasure. With a clearer picture of Kant's twin division of sublimity, we are in a better position to understand his challenge to my presentation of Burke's account.

Kant argues that tragedies could never be sublime. First Kant says "enthusiasm is sublime, because it is an effort of one's powers called forth by ideas which give to the mind an impetus of far stronger and more enduring efficacy than the stimulus afforded by sensible representations" (§29, 272). When we enthusiastically focus upon something, we have taken the sense datum and run with it far beyond the fleeting experience of our sensations. This is very much akin to his thinking regarding the possibility of nature triggering an idea of infinity. But, just as nature may trigger ideas that are in no way sublime, not all intellectual exercises beyond the reflection of our senses qualifies for his use of enthusiasm. As a specific example, and one relevant to the project of this paper, he says "A sympathetic grief that refuses to be consoled, or one that has to do with imaginary misfortune to which we deliberately give way so far as to allow our fantasy to delude us into thinking it actual fact, indicates and goes to make a tender, but at the same time weak, soul, which shows a beautiful side, and may no doubt be called fanciful, but never enthusiastic" (§29, 273). Though he does not call them tragedies by name, this clearly seems to be what he is getting at. In short, Kant seems to disagree with my theory.

It seems that tragedies can never be a source of sublimity because they do not lead to the feelings that Kant requires for dynamic sublimity. In the case of dynamic

sublimity, we recognize our freedom from the dangers of this world because we are free. By giving into grief and crying, while we express sympathy, we fail to express that nobility in the face of death that Kant requires. Our reaction reveals some admirable qualities in us, but demonstrates the absence of a feeling of dynamic sublimity. Before addressing Kant's criticism, I would like to turn to Thomas Reid's account of the sublime.

Reid argues that only admirable qualities are a source of sublimity. He says, "What we call sublime in description, or in speech of any kind, is a proper expression of the admiration and enthusiasm which the subject produces in the mind of the speaker. If this admiration and enthusiasm appears to be just, it carries the hearer along with it involuntarily...for no passions are so infectious as those which hold of enthusiasm."<sup>32</sup> Reid agrees with Kant that art cannot directly be sublime. The first reason that art cannot be sublime is that it is a material object and material objects are not sublime but signifiers of those intellectual properties that give rise to sublimity.<sup>33</sup> His commitment to this is so firm that he even says, "Those who look for grandeur in mere matter, seek the living among the dead."<sup>34</sup> The other reason art cannot be sublime is similar to Kant's reasoning. Reid argues that art can act as a conduit that allows access to the sublimity inherent in the author of a work. Reid says admirable qualities like greatness "are ascribed to the work figuratively, but are really inherent in the author: And, by the same figure, the grandeur [i.e. sublimity] is ascribed to the work, but is properly inherent in the mind that made

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<sup>32</sup> Reid, 496.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 497.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 498.

it.”<sup>35</sup> When we describe a work as sublime, we are engaged in loose talk because what we are really implying is that the author of the work has a sublime mind. For Kant our own mental powers are the source of the sublime; for Reid our reflections on another’s (e.g. a creator’s) mental powers are the source of sublimity. They are getting at something different, but there is a strong overlap in their line of reasoning.

Additionally, Reid agrees with Kant that Burke has made a mistake in believing terrible things to be a source of sublimity. Reid wants to make a distinction between those things that cause dread or admiration. Reid says both dread and admiration “are grave and solemn passions; both make a strong impression upon the mind, and both are very infectious. But they differ specifically, in this respect, that admiration supposes some uncommon excellence in its object which dread does not.”<sup>36</sup> Reid further argues that admiration is a “chief ingredient of the emotion raised by what is truly grand or sublime.”<sup>37</sup> Like Kant, dread seems to be an emotion that precludes enthusiasm, which thereby precludes sublimity. If either of them is right, then tragedies cannot be a source of sublimity since they turn more on dread than admiration.<sup>38</sup>

Although they have gotten there by different accounts of the sublime, both argue that tragedies per se cannot be sublime because they do not raise in the viewer those feelings suitable for sublimity.

Reid’s argues that tragedies cannot be sublime because they are dreadful and dreadful things cannot be sublime. But our experience of tragedies seems to undermine

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 496.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> This of course nicely fits with Hume’s account since his “conversion theory” depends upon the excellence of the artistic elements (see pages 3-4 of this paper). Given that our pleasure arises from admiration of a work and not the dread the work induces, Hume would have had no trouble accounting for the sublimity we experience should he have wished to do so.

the usefulness of this distinction. Reid says, “We may admire what we see no reason to dread, and we may dread what we do not admire.”<sup>39</sup> From this he argues that since we cannot admire dreadful things, and only admirable things are suitable subjects for enthusiasm, dread must be disconnected from sublimity.<sup>40</sup> Were this claim true, not only would it show that sublimity cannot be related to the paradox, but it also dissolves the paradox altogether. There is a paradox precisely because we experience both dread and enthusiasm. Clearly, we experience dread in tragedies while being enthusiastic about them as well (that is why we applaud at the end and see the same play more than once). If tragedies can be both dreadful and enthusiastic, then his distinction is a false one and should not undermine our confidence that tragedies can be sublime even on his schema.

Kant argues tragedies can never be sublime because our sobbing state is inconsistent with the necessary awareness of our superiority as spiritual beings that is required for sublimity. I may admire a bully’s power, but it seems harder for me to describe it or my reaction to that fear as noble. Were I to suppress that fear and face the bully there would be that nobility that Kant points to. To be fair to Kant I have had that experience of facing the bully and I know that feeling of elevation he is talking about. Although I was not thinking about myself as a spiritual being at the time free from danger, since the process is supposedly antecedent to reason, this does not necessarily preclude him from being right. My temptation is just to point to what he is getting at and agree with him that it is an experience of sublimity, but so too is that to which Burke and I point.

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<sup>39</sup> Reid, 498.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, there is an interesting way in which Kant and Reid's accounts dovetail that might show how tragedies could be a source of sublimity given both of their accounts. For Ried artworks may be sublime because they allow us access to the sublimity of the creator's mind. Kant says that our minds are ultimately what is sublime. It could plausibly be argued that what we find sublime in our own minds we have a partial access to in the creator's mind via the tragedy they have produced. Both authors saw sublimity in the human mind, they were just interested in different sources of that sublimity, but there is no reason not to see their accounts as complementary. There is some property about my mind that Kant says I should find sublime and I find that in another's mind the way Reid said I would. If this is true, then of course tragedies can be connected to sublimity.

Additionally, there might be a way in which tragedies are also mathematically sublime in the way Kant describes. Kant says that which triggers the idea of the infinite is a suitable trigger for mathematical sublimity. Tragedies bring to mind the idea of death and death is an infinite state. A character's death brings to mind our own and thus, brings to mind an infinite state and thus mathematical sublimity. It seems that everyone has an opportunity to think about the infinite when encountering the tragic, and thus everyone has an opportunity to experience sublimity through it on Kant's view.

## **CHAPTER X**

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

Despite the disturbing conclusion that we like to watch people suffer, when that suffering is framed a certain way, it evokes what is perhaps the most powerful feeling of which we are capable. While sublimity might not resolve every difficulty associated with the paradox of tragedy, Burke's understanding of it does seem to shed significant light on the problem. The paradox of tragedy is a very complex issue, and I am suspicious that any one solution will cover every person and motivation for wanting to encounter the tragic; however, I do think this revision of Burke's solution covers most cases. If my analysis is correct, we go to tragedies because they present the particular type of sadness that evokes sublimity.

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