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Edmund Burke
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A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful

By the eighteenth century, the term 'sublime' was used to communicate a sense of unfathomable and awe-inspiring greatness, whether in nature or thought. The relationship of sublimity to classical definitions of beauty was much debated, but the first philosopher to portray them as opposing forces was Edmund Burke (1729–97). Originally published in 1757 and reissued here in the revised second edition of 1759, this influential treatise explores the psychological origins of both ideas. Presented as distinct consequences of very separate emotional lineages, beauty and sublimity are traced back through a web of human feelings, from self-preservation instincts to lust. Burke's doctrine of the sublime was to have far-reaching effects. In Britain, it informed perceptions of landscape in art and literature for years to come. Meanwhile, on the continent, Kant regarded Burke as 'the foremost author' in 'the empirical exposition of aesthetic judgments'.

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EDMUND BURKE

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BEAUTIFUL.

The SECOND EDITION.

With an introductory DISCOURSE concerning TASTE, and ſeveral other Additions.



LONDON:

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THE PREFACE.

I Have endeavoured to make this edition ſomething more full and ſatisfactory than the firſt. I have ſought with the utmoſt care, and read with equal attention, every thing which has appeared in publick againſt my opinions; I have taken advantage of the candid liberty of my friends; and if by theſe means I have been better enabled to diſcover the imperfections of the work, the indulgence it has received, imperfect as it was, furniſhed me with a new motive to ſpare no reaſonable pains for its improvement. Though I have not found ſufficient reaſon, or what appeared to me ſufficient, for making any material change in my theory, I have found it neceſſary in many places to explain, illuſtrate and enforce it. I have prefixed an introductory diſcourſe concerning Taſte; it is a matter curious in itſelf; and it leads naturally enough to the

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principal enquiry. This with the other explanations has made the work conſiderably larger; and by increaſing its bulk has, I am afraid added to its faults; ſo that notwithſtanding all my attention, it may ſtand in need of a yet greater ſhare of indulgence than it required at its firſt appearance.

They who are accuſtomed to ſtudies of this nature will expect, and they will allow too for many faults. They know that many of the objects of our enquiry are in themſelves obſcure and intricate; and that many others have been rendered ſo by affected refinements or falſe learning; they know that there are many impediments in the ſubject, in the prejudices of others, and even in our own, that render it a matter of no ſmall difficulty, to ſhew in a clear light the genuine face of nature. They know that whilſt the mind is intent on the general ſcheme of things, ſome particular parts muſt be neglected; that we muſt often ſubmit the ſtyle to the matter, and frequently give up the praiſe of elegance, ſatisfied with being clear.

The

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The characters of nature are legible it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them. We must make use of a cautious, I had almost said, a timorous method of proceeding. We must not attempt to fly, when we can scarcely pretend to creep. In considering any complex matter, we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce every thing to the utmost simplicity; since the condition of our nature binds us to a strict law and very narrow limits. We ought afterwards to re-examine the principles by the effect of the composition, as well as the composition by that of the principles. We ought to compare our subject with things of a similar nature, and even with things of a contrary nature; for discoveries may be, and often are made by the contrast, which would escape us on the single view. The greater number of these comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is like to prove, as built upon a more extensive and perfect induction.

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If an enquiry thus carefully conducted, ſhould fail at laſt of diſcovering the truth, it may anſwer an end perhaps as uſeful, in diſcovering to us the weakneſs of our own underſtanding. If it does not make us knowing, it may make us modeſt. If it does not preſerve us from error, it may at leaſt from the ſpirit of error, and may make us cautious of pronouncing with poſitiveneſs or with haſte, when ſo much labour may end in ſo much uncertainty.

I could wiſh that in examining this theory, the ſame method were purſued which I endeavoured to obſerve in forming it. The objections, in my opinion, ought to be propoſed, either to the ſeveral principles as they are diſtinctly conſidered, or to the juſtneſs of the concluſion which is drawn from them. But it is common to paſs over both the premiſes and concluſion in ſilence, and to produce as an objection, ſome poetical paſſage which does not ſeem eaſily accounted for upon the principles I endeavour to eſtabliſh. This manner of proceeding I ſhould think very improper.

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improper. The taſk would be infinite, if we could eſtabliſh no principle until we had previouſly unravelled the complex texture of every image or deſcription to be found in poets and orators. And though we ſhould never be able to reconcile the effect of ſuch images to our principles, this can never overturn the theory itſelf, whilſt it is founded on certain and indiſputable facts. A theory founded on experiment and not aſſumed, is always good for ſo much as it explains. Our inability to puſh it indefinitely is no argument at all againſt it. This inability may be owing to our ignorance of ſome neceſſary mediums; *to a want of proper application; to many other cauſes beſides a defect in the principles we employ. In reality the ſubject requires a much cloſer attention, than we dare claim from our manner of treating it.*

If it ſhould not appear on the face of the work, I muſt caution the reader againſt imagining that I intended a full diſſertation on the Sublime and Beautiful. My enquiry

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went no further than to the origin of these ideas. If the qualities which I have ranged under the head of the Sublime be all found consistent with each other, and all different from those which I place under the head of Beauty; and if those which compose the class of the Beautiful have the same consistency with themselves, and the same opposition to those which are classed under the denomination of Sublime, I am in little pain whether any body chuses to follow the name I give them or not, provided he allows that what I dispose under different heads are in reality different things in nature. The use I make of the words may be blamed as too confined or too extended; my meaning cannot well be misunderstood.

To conclude; whatever progress may be made towards the discovery of truth in this matter, I do not repent the pains I have taken in it. The use of such enquiries may be very considerable. Whatever turns the soul inward on itself, tends to concenter its forces, and to fit it for greater and stronger flights

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ſlights of ſcience. By looking into phyſical cauſes our minds are opened and enlarged; and in this purſuit whether we take or whether we loſe our game, the chace is certainly of ſervice. Cicero, *true as he was to the Academic philoſophy, and conſequently led to reject the certainty of phyſical as of every other kind of knowledge, yet freely confeſſes its great importance to the human underſtanding:* " Eſt animorum ingeniorumque " noſtrorum naturale quoddam quaſi pa- " bulum conſideratio contemplatioque " naturæ." *If we can direct the lights we derive from ſuch exalted ſpeculations, upon the humbler field of the imagination, whilſt we inveſtigate the ſprings and trace the courſes of our paſſions, we may not only communicate to the taſte a ſort of philoſophical ſolidity, but we may reflect back on the ſeverer ſciences ſome of the graces and elegancies of taſte, without which the greateſt proficiency in thoſe ſciences will always have the appearance of ſomething illiberal.*

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