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## From the Sympathetic Principle to the Nerve Fibres and Back

Revisiting Edmund Burke's Solutions to the  
»Paradox of Negative Emotions«\*

### Introduction

Imagine that we take the most gripping tragic play Western literature can offer, and set it on stage, spending whatever cost it takes to create a beguilingly spectacular stage design and to hire the greatest actors alive. Everything is set: it is that moment before the curtain goes up, when, after members of the audience have finally taken their seats, the buzzing abates, and everyone turns toward the stage, filled with expectation. But, at that very moment, it is reported that a high ranking state criminal will be executed nearby: the news spreads like wildfire in the theatre, the whispering quickly swells to a noisy turmoil, and the theatre empties: members of the audience are rushing to witness the public punitive spectacle. Imagine, then, that someone suggested to you that this incident does not demonstrate the darkest side of human nature or the blood-thirsty barbarity our civilised public can sink into at any moment in history. On the contrary, this person had the audacity to claim that incidents like this »demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy.«<sup>1</sup> This puzzling scenario is from mid-eighteenth century Britain: the last decades of these public rituals of human death and suffering, soon to be replaced by the modern legal process and punishment, invisible to the public.<sup>2</sup> It is contained in one of the most widely-read works of eighteenth-century aesthetics, a short book that first came out in 1757, entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*.

\* The research for this essay was funded by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH 134719).

1 Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757, 21759]. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford 2008, 1.15, 43.

2 Cf. Steven Wilf: »Imagining Justice. Aesthetics and Public Executions in Late Eighteenth-Century England«. In: *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 5 (1993), 51–78, here: 51.

At the time, its author, the Irish-born Edmund Burke (1730–1797), was not yet the inspired speaker in the House of Commons, nor the formidable political philosopher who later came to be seen as the ‘founder of modern conservatism’, but an aspiring young author living in London.<sup>3</sup>

My goal in this paper is to revisit Burke’s *Enquiry* and reconstruct the framework of this infamous scenario, i.e. to understand Burke’s take on what came to be called ‘the paradox of negative emotions’: the perplexing psychological (and moral) problem of our attraction to and appreciation of terror, suffering or somehow painful things in certain circumstances (most notably, through representation) that has haunted critics since Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and proved to be one of the most widely discussed problems in eighteenth-century aesthetics and criticism, when it became associated with various genres as well as certain aesthetic properties, most notably tragedy and the sublime. I aim to reconstruct Burke’s twofold resolution of the paradox with the help of recent (Anglo-American) literature on Burke’s aesthetics. However, while most historical reconstructions seem to have focused only on one of the resolutions elaborated in the *Enquiry*, I will treat the two Burkean solutions alongside each other. By focusing on Burke’s teleological anthropology, the interconnectedness of Burke’s two solutions can be explored, revealing how the *Enquiry* unites the cutting-edge medico-physiological research of Burke’s age with the anthropocentric providentialism of the British Enlightenment.

But first things first: by Burke’s ‘aesthetic’ theory I do not mean his famous account of the sensible properties that make an object sublime or beautiful and the perceptions they generate in the mind. I am using this anachronistic term in the context of mid-eighteenth century Britain to refer to the *anatomy of sensibility*: a multidisciplinary venture that applied the inductive, experimental approach to sensory/sensual and affective phenomena, our encounters with the surrounding world as embodied, sensitive beings, and used these phenomena as *experiments* to arrive at ‘facts’, ‘fixed principles’, ‘some invariable and certain laws’ – ‘established in our common nature’ – in short, the ‘logic of Taste’.<sup>4</sup>

3 For a detailed account of Burke’s life, see F. P. Lock: *Edmund Burke. Volume I–II*. Oxford 2008. For recent accounts of Burke’s life and thought, see David Bromwich: *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke. From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence*. Cambridge, MA 2014; Richard Bourke: *Empire and Revolution. The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton 2015. For the historical process that constructed the image of Burke as the ‘founder of modern conservatism’, see Emily Jones: *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914*. Oxford 2017.

4 Burke: *Enquiry*, ‘Introduction on Taste’ (= note 1), 11 f.

Similarly to his contemporaries, Burke's »splendid, truly Newtonian system«<sup>5</sup> aimed to explain, through observing how we respond to beautiful and sublime objects, the way certain sensible properties, by striking the senses, produce certain ideas and evoke certain passions in the mind. Just like his contemporaries in the empirico-psychological tradition, Burke held that aesthetic perceptions (i.e. the ideas of beauty or sublimity) are not the products of rational reflexion but of »certain affections of the mind, that cause certain changes in the body; or certain powers and properties in bodies, that work a change in the mind.«<sup>6</sup> However, unlike his contemporaries, as Samuel H. Monk already noted, he went »beyond the passions to the body«:<sup>7</sup> pointing out the close interaction between body and mind, Burke wanted to identify the »efficient causes« of our aesthetic perceptions in the physiological mechanisms of the nerve fibres, while also paying attention to their various functions in human life.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, eighteenth-century British ›aesthetics‹, taken in this sense, goes well beyond the philosophy of beauty or the theory of art: the analysis of the sublime and the beautiful is only the first step, followed by revealing our psychological – or, in Burke's case, our physiological – make-up. Aesthetics – both the discipline in Germany and the various British and French discourses running up to it – emerged as anthropology:<sup>9</sup> Burke's theory of beauty and theory of sublimity are engulfed by his aesthetic theory, which is, in turn, engulfed by ›the science of man‹. Read in this light, the *Enquiry* is not a ›literary‹ enclave within the oeuvre of a genius in political philosophy, and neither, as it is often read, is it political philosophy in disguise, an ›aesthetic ideology‹ reflecting the social changes of the time.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it provides us, as Richard Bourke wrote, an

- 5 Johann Gottfried Herder: »On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul« [1778]. In: *Philosophical Writings*. Transl. and ed. Michael N. Forster. Cambridge 2004, 202. The quotation is from a 1775 draft. For the Burkean »appropriation« of the Newtonian method, see Steffen Ducheyne: »Communicating a Sort of Philosophical Solidity to Taste«. Newtonian Elements in Burke's Methodology in *Philosophical Enquiry*«. In: *The Science of Sensibility. Reading Burke's Philosophical Enquiry*. Ed. Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard. New York 2012, 57–68.
- 6 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 118.
- 7 Samuel H. Monk: *The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-century England* [1935, reprinted]. Ann Arbor, MI, 1960, 96.
- 8 See Koen Vermeir and Michael Funk Deckard: »Philosophical Enquiries into the Science of Sensibility. An Introductory Essay«. In: Idems (Eds.): *The Science of Sensibility* (= note 5), 3–56.
- 9 See Ernst Stöckmann: *Anthropologische Ästhetik. Philosophie, Psychologie und ästhetische Theorie der Emotionen im Diskurs der Aufklärung*. Tübingen 2009.
- 10 Tom Furniss: *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology. Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution*. Cambridge 1993.

»access to Burke's theory of human nature«, a »science of the passions«. <sup>11</sup> Its significance for Burke's political philosophy is not the ideology it encapsulates, but that »in the process of analysing aesthetic responses, Burke presents us with an account of the psychological reactions that support society, religion and politics in general«. <sup>12</sup> The implications of Burke's anthropological aesthetics go beyond ethics and politics: »The *Enquiry* – as Burke's biographer, F.P. Lock, sums it up – is at bottom a theological work.« <sup>13</sup> I will argue that what makes Burke's work a »theological work« is his account of the physiological mechanisms that engender our aesthetic perceptions: the medical, the political, and the theological are inextricably interwoven in the very fibres of the human body within Burke's teleological conception of human nature.

## 2.

The problem of negative emotions has been with us, in its clear theoretical formulation, since Aristotle's *Poetics*. <sup>14</sup> In its simple form, it looks something like this: how are we to explain the fact that we enjoy the representations of objects that are otherwise disagreeable (terrible, ugly, disgusting etc.) and elicit painful feelings in us (terror, aversion, pity etc.)? Or in Hume's formulation from 1757: what explains the »unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy.« <sup>15</sup> The answers given to this question by eighteenth-century authors varied, <sup>16</sup> but the main configurations

11 Richard Bourke: *Empire and Revolution. The Political Life of Edmund Burke*. Princeton 2015, 119.

12 Ibid., 124.

13 F. P. Lock: *Edmund Burke, Volume 1. 1730–1784*. Oxford [etc.] 1998, 98.

14 Cf. Aristotle: *Poetics*. Transl. Anthony Kenny. Oxford 2013, 14, 1453b10–13.

15 David Hume: »Of Tragedy« [1757]. In: Idem: *Selected Essays*. Ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar. Oxford 1998, 126.

16 For a general philosophical classification of the solutions to the problem of negative emotions (with the categories of »compensatory«, »conversionary«, »organicist«, »revisionary« and »deflationary« explanations), see Jerrold Levinson, »Emotion in Response to Art. A Survey of the Terrain«. In: *Emotion and the Arts*. Ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver. Oxford 1997, 29–31. For a monographic study of the eighteenth-century development of the paradox of »delightful horror« that differentiates solutions based on the appreciation of apt mimesis (1), the enjoyment of emotional stimulants (2), the illusion of immersive, imaginary experiences (3), and the moral exercise of sympathy (4), see Carsten Zelle: »*Angenehmes Grauen*«. *Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur Ästhetik*

can be grouped into five arguments. Even though it is often held that the key element of resolving the paradox consists in the (implicit) knowledge that the object that evokes the negative affects is fictitious or not immediately before us (e.g. represented or recollected), a closer look at the main 18<sup>th</sup>-century solutions will show that this is not the case: even though some kind of *distance* (physical or psychical) from the negative object is always a necessary prerequisite of aesthetic pleasure, it is not sufficient in itself to resolve the paradox. Needless to say, the five solutions discussed here rarely appeared in their pure forms and were usually combined in some way or another. First, I will briefly survey these eighteenth-century solutions to the paradox of negative emotions, to give us the historical context of Burke's *Enquiry*.

### 2.1. The Imitation Argument

The first resolution of the paradox originates in Aristotle's *Poetics*,<sup>17</sup> and appeared as an obvious solution in early eighteenth-century British aesthetics in works such as Francis Hutcheson's *Inquiry* or Joseph Addison's famous Imagination series – the point zero of eighteenth-century British aesthetic thought.<sup>18</sup>

*des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*. Hamburg 1987, 114–186. Also see Zelle's »Über den Grund des Vergnügens an schrecklichen Gegenständen in der Ästhetik des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts (mit einem bibliographischen Anhang)«. In: *Schönheit und Schrecken. Entsetzen, Gewalt und Tod in alten und neuen Medien*. Ed. Peter Gendolla, Carsten Zelle. Heidelberg 1990, 55–91. For further recent insightful typologies of the various eighteenth-century solutions, see Daniel Jerónimo Tobón Giraldo: »On the Paradox of Tragedy. Notes for the Balance of Its Theoretical Heritage«. In: *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* 4 (2012), 564–569; Carole Talon-Hugon: »The Resolution and Dissolution of the Paradox of Negative Emotions in the Aesthetics of the Eighteenth Century«, transl. C. Henrik Borgstrom. In: *Suffering Art Gladly. The Paradox of Negative Emotion in Art*. Ed. Jerrold Levinson. New York 2014, 29–37; Carolyn Korsmeyer: »A Lust of the Mind. Curiosity and Aversion in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics«. In: *Suffering Art Gladly*, 47–49. The typology I offer here draws on all of these but I hope it will offer some new insights and details as well.

- 17 Aristotle: *Poetics* (= note 14), 4, 1448b8–19. For a reading challenging the traditional »intellectualistic interpretation« of Aristotle, see Pierre Destrée: »Aristotle on the Paradox of Tragic Pleasure«. In: Jerrold Levinson (Ed.): *Suffering Art Gladly* (= note 16), 3–27.
- 18 See Francis Hutcheson: *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* [1725]. Ed. Wolfgang Leidhold. Indianapolis 2004, »Treatise I«, I.II., I.IV.; *The Spectator*. Ed. Donald F. Bond. Oxford 1987, vol. III, No. 416 (27 June 1712), 558–561; No. 418 (30 June 1712), 566–570.

Let's call it the Imitation Argument. The argument is based on the notion that the mind's own activity of comparing the ideas of representation with the ideas of the originals results in pleasure, a pleasure distinct from the various feelings evoked by the particular ideas. This can explain, to adapt Addison's example, why even a »Description of a Dunghill is pleasing to the Imagination, if the Image be represented to our Minds by suitable Expressions«. <sup>19</sup> Given Addison's distinction between primary and secondary pleasures (pleasures raised by present objects vs. pleasures raised by represented objects), the Imitation Argument implies that our pleasure in the terrible, revolting, or tragic is the product of the understanding – an additional pleasure that overbalances our *aesthetic* aversion, i.e. the immediate negative sensory impression: »we are not so much delighted with the Image that is contained in the Description, as with the Aptness of the Description to excite the Image.« <sup>20</sup>

## 2.2. The Conversion Argument

The second widespread argument is similar to the Imitation Argument, but the two are not to be conflated. The Conversion Argument, as it is often called, was also designed to explain the aesthetic allure of represented calamities. Its best elaboration was probably proposed by David Hume in his 1757 essay »Of Tragedy«. Here, Hume argues that »the pleasure which poets, orators, and musicians give us, by exciting grief, sorrow, indignation, compassion« is produced not simply by the »force of imitation« but also by »the energy of expression, the power of numbers, the charms of imitation« which are intrinsically agreeable. <sup>21</sup> As opposed to the Imitation Argument based on the pleasure of cognitive activity, this argument appeals to the *aesthetic* force of the means of representation that somehow overbalances or transforms the painful emotions felt. The cause of felt pleasure, again, is different from the disagreeable object represented: it is not only the act of comparison but the expressive »energy«, metrical »power« and subtle »charms« of poetic representation that can see to it that an originally disagreeable feeling is »converted into pleasure« in the overall experience. <sup>22</sup>

19 *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. III, No. 418 (30 June 1712), 567.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Hume: »Of Tragedy« (= note 15), 131.

22 Hume: »Of Tragedy« (= note 15), 129. See Christopher Williams: »On Mere suffering. Hume and the Problem of Tragedy«. In: *Suffering Art Gladly* (= note 16), 68–83.

### 2. 3. The Dead Monster Argument

The third argument, famously formulated originally at the beginning of Book II of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, launched its eighteenth-century career with John Dennis's *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) and Addison's already mentioned Imagination essays (1712). This argument, which proved to be an important adversary in Burke's *Enquiry*, might as well be called the Shipwreck Argument, giving Lucretius his dues.<sup>23</sup> But let us not forget that Addison offered a much more fantastic topos for his polite readership. So as an acknowledgment of Addison's ›fairy way of writing‹,<sup>24</sup> let us call it the Dead Monster Argument instead. Similarly to the Imitation Argument, this argument presupposes that the disagreeable object is represented, recollected, or distanced from us in some other way, i.e. it is not immediately before us or not immediately threatening to us. More importantly, the Dead Monster Argument also states that the pleasure of tragedy comes from cognitive activity *superadded* to the immediate sensory perception of and affective response to the disagreeable object. However, in this case, it is the act of *reflection on our own safety* that accounts for this pleasure: »[I]t is sweet to perceive from what misfortune you yourself are free«<sup>25</sup> – Lucretius sums up. When we witness a terrifying scene represented by art, remember a horrible event from the past, or look at »a Precipice at a distance, which would fill us with a different kind of Horror, if we saw it hanging over our Heads«, we *compare* the dangers or sufferings we witness to our own safety. Recognizing the objects as »Dreadful and Harmless« at the same time (which, needless to say,

- 23 Titus Lucretius Carus: *On the Nature of Things*. Transl. Cyril Bailey. Oxford 1910, II, 65. For Dennis's claim that our pleasure ›proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us‹, see John Dennis: *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*. London 1704, 84. For a collection of early modern references to the ›Lucretian doctrine‹, see Baxter Hathaway: ›The Lucretian ›Return upon Ourselves‹ in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Tragedy«. In: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 62 (1947), No. 3. 672–689. For the intellectual history of the ›shipwreck with spectator‹ metaphor, see Hans Blumenberg's seminal work: *Shipwreck with Spectator. Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Transl. Steven Rendall. Cambridge, Ma 1997. For connections to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century German aesthetic discussion about the paradox of tragedy, see Carsten Zelle: ›Schiffbruch vor Zuschauer. Über einige populärphilosophische Parallelschriften zu Schillers Abhandlungen über den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen in den neunziger Jahren des 18. Jahrhunderts«. In: *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 34 (1990), 289–316.
- 24 Addison refers to Dryden's phrase in *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. III, No. 419 (1 July 1712), 570.
- 25 Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things* (= note 23), II, 65.

is a very problematic pairing in itself), our pleasure »does not arise so properly from the Description of what is Terrible, as from the Reflection we make on our selves at the time of reading it. When we look on such hideous Objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no Danger of them.«<sup>26</sup> Thus, Addison concludes that »we look upon the Terrors of a Description, with the same Curiosity and Satisfaction that we survey a dead Monster.«<sup>27</sup>

A refined amalgam of the three arguments reviewed so far was created in Alexander Gerard's »An Essay on Taste«, a work published in 1759, the same year as the second edition of Burke's *Enquiry*. Gerard echoes the Imitation Argument when he writes that even »imperfect or faulty originals«, »rude«, »deformed« objects and morally »detestable« characters »acquire beauty when skilfully imitated [...] notwithstanding the uneasy sentiments of disapprobation and abhorrence.«<sup>28</sup> Beauty, I believe, should be understood broadly here, not necessarily in terms of sensible qualities. The wording of Gerard's statement quoted above clearly suggests that for him the pleasure (i.e. beauty) in this case is the product of the cognitive activity of discovering and comparing resemblances (just like in Addison's Imitation Argument). This, however, does not change the fact that the immediate, affective, i.e. *aesthetic* reaction is painful, something that must be »overpowered« or »converted« in the overall experience: »The pleasant sensation resulting from the imitation is so intense, that it overpowers and converts into delight even the uneasy impressions, which spring from the objects imitated.«<sup>29</sup> Gerard also adds the Dead Monster Argument to his graceful account when he refers to the »implicit knowledge« of the fictionality of the object: »When thus secondarily produced [i.e. through representation], they agitate and employ the mind, and rouse and give scope to its greatest activity; while at the same time our implicit knowledge that the occasion is remote or fictitious, enables the pleasure of imitation to relieve the pure torment, which would attend their primary operation.«<sup>30</sup>

26 *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. III, No. 418 (30 June 1712), 568.

27 *Ibid.*

28 Alexander Gerard: *An Essay on Taste*. London 1759, 53 f. [My italics – B. Cs.]

29 *Ibid.*, 54.

30 *Ibid.*, 54 f.



## 2.4. The Exercise Argument

So far all these arguments have confined themselves to mimetic art, resolving the paradox through the potential of the representation to overbalance or convert into pleasure the negative emotions, and through the mitigation of »pure torment« by the implicit knowledge that the object is fictitious and that we ourselves are safe and sound. Thus, they all carefully avoided the aesthetic power of *actual suffering*. They cannot explain – and do not wish to explain – the aesthetic allure Burke found in the scaffold. Addison, for instance, rebuts the charge of sadistic voyeurism by claiming that his Dead Monster Argument was designed to explain only represented, imagined, and recalled suffering, not actual distress in front of us. The argument, Addison suggests, is simply inapplicable to actual tragedies unfolding before our very eyes because the force of immediate sensory impressions makes the mind's superadded reflective activity – the bedrock of his Dead Monster Argument – impossible: »the Object presses too close upon our Senses, and bears so hard upon us, that it does not give us Time or Leisure to reflect on our selves.«<sup>31</sup> In this account, then, it is the immediate, obtrusive force of the aesthetic that hinders »the pleasure of the understanding«. Burke, however, as his initial example already showed, is adamant that actual suffering and pain is not only a source of delight but a superior one of that, exactly because of its capacity – the trademark of the Burkean sublime – to paralyze any discursive thought.

The fourth popular eighteenth-century answer to the paradox of negative emotions was categorically rejected by Hume as well as critics like Lord Kames, but it was this argument that helped Burke resolve the problem posed by the aesthetic appeal of actual pain and suffering. The argument was proposed at the beginning of the century by l'Abbé Du Bos in his *Critical Reflections* of 1719, a work that became indispensable in the British Isles as well, and was translated in 1748. For the sake of simplicity and its significant medico-physiological overtones, let us call this the Exercise Argument. Based on the Lockean presupposition that the only motive to human action is the »removal of uneasiness«<sup>32</sup>, Du Bos argues that the reason we enjoy tragedies and are attracted to the distress of others and even to risky excitements that have the potential to harm us is that

31 *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. III, No. 418 (30 June 1712), 569.

32 Cf. John Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford 1975, II.XXI.35.

we have an anthropological disposition that drives us towards intense affective experiences, because we wish to escape the pain of ennui, the inactivity and languor of the mind. Indeed, Du Bos's aesthetics is an »aesthetics of diversion«, as Carsten Zelle pointed out.<sup>33</sup>

The arts, according to Du Bos, by exciting »superficial« or »artificial passions« – passions that are less intense and less lasting – can function as stimulants by »exercising« our passions. Du Bos, however, extends his arguments beyond represented suffering: the pain of inaction is so dreadful, he argues, that we are easily drawn to real-life »perils which we see other men exposed to, whilst we are exempt ourselves from danger«, like the »frightful spectacles« of rope-dancers, gladiatorial bouts or public executions, just to keep ourselves »in continual agitation« by exercising our passions. These spectacles, Du Bos writes, traumatize spectators, leaving »so deep and so forcible an impression, as not to be easily effaced«. However, even in these cases, reason and pain are insufficient to convince the crowds not to expose themselves to these painful stimulants: »the attractive of the emotion felt on those occasions, carries a greater weight with it than all the reflections and advice of experience.«<sup>34</sup> Du Bos mentions »the unhappy consequences of high gaming«, the fortunes lost to »cards and dice« to demonstrate that we are often willing to sacrifice even our own interests just to achieve such affective stimulants.<sup>35</sup>

Right at the beginning of his *Reflections*, Du Bos invokes a providential framework: he asserts that it is an »uncontested truth« that providence employs »various precautions and methods to induce man, by the allurements of pleasure, to attend to his own preservation«. From this, Du Bos infers that the »allurement« of suffering must be naturally programmed into human sensibility by divine providence to ensure our self-preservation: given that our chief anthropological drive is to remove uneasiness and that even painful passions are better than no passions at all, the seemingly unaccountable and morally dubious attraction to suffering and pain is revealed as part of a wise providential engineering.<sup>36</sup>

33 Zelle: »Angenehmes Grauen« (= note 16), 139–157.

34 Jean-Baptiste Du Bos: *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music*, vol. 1–3. Transl. Thomas Nugent. London 1748, vol. 1, 11, 10, 20.

35 Ibid., vol. 1, 19.

36 Ibid., vol. 1, 4–5.

## 2.5. The Sympathy Argument

The fifth argument is based on the Shaftesburian notion of human sociability, »a kind *Instinct* of Nature, a secret Bond between us and our Fellow-Creatures«. <sup>37</sup> It became popular among 18<sup>th</sup>-century British thinkers, who, following Shaftesbury, rejected the ›egoist‹ presumptions of the Dead Monster Argument. One of its most concise formulations was given by Lord Kames in his 1751 essay, »Our Attachment to Objects of Distress«. Just like the Exercise Argument, the Kamesian Sympathy Argument expands the paradox of tragedy and investigates the paradox of negative emotions outside mimetic art. Besides adapting the Imitation and Conversion Arguments to explain the paradox of negative emotions in art, <sup>38</sup> Kames's 1751 essay also offers an explanation for our attraction to actual suffering. He proposes a solution to the problem in terms of *final causes*.

Kames, similarly to Hume, rejects the Lockean presupposition of the Exercise Argument that the only motive to human action is the avoidance of pain – a presupposition taken by Kames to be grounded in self-love and, thus, to be egoistic. He nevertheless keeps the providential framework to propose an explanation in terms of finality. There are certain social passions that are painful but still instinctively produce affection in us: Kames holds that these phenomena cannot be explained in terms of a hedonistic theory of value that works with Locke's presupposition that the »removal of uneasiness« is the only stimulant to action. He mentions grief and compassion as examples of such passions: »Objects of distress raise no aversion in us, though they give us pain. On the contrary, they draw us to them, and inspire us with a desire to

37 Francis Hutcheson: »Hibernicus's Letters« [5 June 1725]. In: James Arbuckle: *A Collection of Letters and Essays on Several Subjects, Lately Published in The Dublin Journal*. London 1729, vol. I, 86, quoted in Hathaway: »The Lucretian ›Return upon Ourselves‹ in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Tragedy« (= note 23), 682.

38 As for art, Kames's contribution is less original. In his extremely influential *Elements of Criticism* (1762), Kames discusses the paradox of negative emotions raised by mimetic art: in the case of visual representations of ugly objects, Kames – repeating Addison's Imitation Argument – simply argues that the pleasure caused by proper imitation »overbalances« the disagreeableness of the object. In the case of the verbal representation of disagreeable objects, Kames's solution resembles the Conversion Argument proposed by Hume in 1757: in these cases, Kames maintains, it is the (intrinsic) beauty of language (independent of the appreciation of imitation) that transforms the overall character of the experience: »the pleasure of language is so great, as in a lively description to overbalance the disagreeableness of the image raised by it.« Henry Home, Lord Kames: *Elements of Criticism* [1762]. Ed. Peter Jones. Indianapolis 2005, vol. 2, 642.

afford relief.«<sup>39</sup> Kames infers that there is »a singular phaenomenon in human nature; an appetite after pain«. <sup>40</sup> For Kames, an ardent deist, »singular phenomena« in nature do not exist without a reason: they function to promote the goals of the providential design – wise, benevolent and calibrated to our needs.

Next, Kames proposes an explanation of our attraction to pain in terms of final causes, which might well be the original source of Burke's teleological account of the sublime: »[N]ature, which designed us for society, has linked us together in an intimate manner, by the sympathetic principle, which communicates the joy and sorrow of one to many. We partake the afflictions of our fellows: we grieve with them and for them; and, in many instances, their misfortunes affect us equally with our own. Let it not therefore appear surprising, that, instead of shunning objects of misery, we chuse to dwell upon them; for this is truly as natural as indulging grief for our own misfortunes. And it must be observed at the same time, that this is wisely ordered by providence: were the social affections mixed with any degree of aversion, even when we suffer under them, we should be inclined, upon the first notice of an object in distress, to drive it from our sight and mind, instead of affording relief.«<sup>41</sup>

In order to promote the purposes of providence, Kames maintains that »self-love does not always operate to avoid pain and distress«. <sup>42</sup> On the contrary, the »social principle« makes us voluntarily partake in suffering of others so that we could relieve it, which explains the reason why »tragedy is allowed to seize the mind with all the different charms which arise from the exercise of the social passions, without the least obstacle from self-love.«<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, as Rachel Zuckert pointed out, Kames's argument »dissolves« the very paradox of negative emotions, because it rejects the very principle it

39 Henry Home, Lord Kames: »Our Attachment to Objects of Distress« [1751]. In: Idem: *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion*. Ed. Mary Catherine Moran. Indianapolis 2005, 15.

40 Ibid., 16.

41 Kames: »Our Attachment« (= note 39), 16 f. Kames repeats this argument concerning »the curious mechanism« of sympathy in the *Elements* as well: »The whole mystery is explained by a single observation, That sympathy, tho' painful, is attractive, and attaches us to an object in distress, the opposition of self-love notwithstanding, which would prompt us to fly from it. And by this curious mechanism it is that persons of any degree of sensibility are attracted by affliction still more than by joy.« Kames: *Elements* (= note 38), vol. 1, 309.

42 Kames: »Our Attachment« (= note 39), 19.

43 Ibid., 20.

is based on, the presumption that the sole motives behind human action are the avoidance of pain (such as pity or fear). This presupposition also implies that disagreeable objects necessarily evoke painful emotions, and, therefore, aversion. Kames, however, by differentiating between qualities of objects (e.g. disagreeableness) and natural propensities (e.g. aversion) is able to reject this presumption: some of our natural propensities such as sympathy do guide us towards pain, or, to put it in Kamesian terms, the exercise of some painful emotions turns out to be *agreeable*. Characteristically, Kames argues that these propensities attract us towards the suffering of others because of their function in the providential design.<sup>44</sup>

Our natural attraction to painful social passions not only serves as a cohesive force in human societies by promoting moral action but it also pleases us *reflectively*. Proposing quite an interesting argument, Kames adds that the reflexive pleasure of *moral self-approbation* is also involved in our engagement with tragedy. What we approve of, Kames says, is our emotional response to tragedy, i.e. the exercise of social passions when faced with the suffering of others: »When we consider our own character and actions *in a reflex view*, we cannot help approving this tenderness and sympathy in our nature. We are pleased with ourselves for being so constituted: we are conscious of inward merit; and this is a continual source of satisfaction.«<sup>45</sup>

First, note that Kames here talks about how we approve our emotive response *after* the actual experience, i.e. it does not explain the problem of tragedy itself, and rather it is an additional, subsequent pleasure that follows such experiences. This also makes it clear that Kames does not revert to a self-congratulatory gesture to explain tragic pleasure: »Kames' moral reflective pleasure is intrinsically *dependent upon* the emotional – painful – engagement with characters' fates« – as Zuckert pointed out.<sup>46</sup>

Second, note that Kames here uses the term »approbation«, a term he uses elsewhere to denote a judgment that »imports a *peculiar beauty*, which is per-

44 See Rachel Zuckert: »Kames's Naturalist Aesthetics and the Case of Tragedy«. In *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 7 (2009), 2, 152–153. Zuckert adds a further point, which is consistent with the Kamesian view: »though he does not do so, Kames might have argued not only that the problem of tragedy (as problem) presupposes the Lockean principle, but *also* that it presupposes (implicitly) the falsity of this principle. For without spectatorial sympathy (i.e., without other-regarding tendencies), there would be no pain to be explained.« *Ibid.*, 154.

45 Kames: »Our Attachment« (= note 39), 17. [My italics – B.Cs.]

46 Zuckert: »Kames's Naturalist Aesthetics« (= note 44), 156.

ceived, upon considering the object as fitted to the use intended.«<sup>47</sup> In short, we approve our sympathetic engagement with the distress of others in subsequent reflection because we consider our passions to be working *properly* – »fitted to the use intended« in the providential order – during the (affective) exercise of virtue occasioned by engaging with an artwork.

## 2. 6. Finding a place for Burke

It is these five arguments – appealing distinctively to (1) the recognition of apt imitation, (2) the aesthetic excellence of the means of representation, (3) the reflection on our own safety, (4) the stimulation of the passions, and (5) the proper working of sympathy – that formed the space into which Burke entered in 1757. Similarly to Du Bos and Kames, Burke is adamant that our response to »the feelings of our fellow creatures in circumstances of real distress« will give us the clue to represented distress, as well. »I am convinced« – Burke boldly writes – »we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others«. Scenes of suffering and calamities make us »approach« and »dwell upon« them, Burke holds, explicitly saying that »there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity«. <sup>48</sup> Again, we are back at the scaffold. It seems that »terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too closely; and pity is a passion accompanied with pleasure, because it arises from love and social affection.«<sup>49</sup> Some distance from the object of experience is, again, considered to be a necessary condition of delight – nothing new here. But why is terror always delightful? And how is it different from pleasure?

Referring to the Imitation Argument, Burke acknowledges that when we encounter human suffering in art, there is »a pleasure resulting from the effects of imitation«. <sup>50</sup> This superadded pleasure caused by the aptness of imitation, however, does not change Burke's position concerning the aesthetic allure of suffering itself. The latter, Burke clarifies, cannot be explained away by alluding to the fact that what we see is fiction: reason, as always in Burke's aesthetics, is silenced. The aesthetic force of an artwork – its power of engag-

47 Henry Home, Lord Kames: »Foundation and Principles of Morality«. In: Idem: *Essays* (= note 39), 27. [My italics added – B.Cs.]

48 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 42 f.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 43.

ing our passions, that is – depends upon the reality effect of imitation, which can be destroyed by an act of reflection. However, Burke, pace Addison,<sup>51</sup> holds that representations can never have as powerful effects upon us as real suffering, and since everything in his aesthetic comes down to the affective force of an object, the imitative arts will be given a secondary place in the Burkean aesthetic hierarchy: the aesthetic force of staged suffering is dwarfed by the blood and guts of the scaffold.

Burke rejects the Dead Monster Argument off-hand as a faulty one, a category error, the result of not making a distinction between the necessary condition and the efficient cause of aesthetic pleasure.<sup>52</sup> Reflecting the mechanical and physiological approach of the *Enquiry*, Burke also adds that the Dead Monster Argument erroneously attributes »the cause of feelings which merely arise from the mechanical structure of our bodies, or from the natural frame and constitution of our minds, to certain conclusions of the reasoning faculty.«<sup>53</sup> For Burke, however, our passions are not the products of reflection. It is especially true in the case of the sublime: in the state of astonishment, we simply cannot compare our »good Fortune« to the suffering of others because every cognitive activity is paralyzed by fear.

Burke actually gave us two answers that are rarely discussed together in the literature. Interestingly, Burke aimed to combine two arguments that stand in stark contrast to each other – Du Bos's Exercise Argument and Kames's Sympathy Argument – to solve the problem of negative emotions. Both arguments are designed to explain our (supposed) anthropological attraction to the distress of others and, thus, painful emotions, but the former offers an explanation in terms of self-preservation, while the latter in terms of sociability. Even though the two arguments occupy different areas of the Burkean anthropological scheme, they mutually inform each other through the physiological

51 »Words, when well chosen, have so great a Force in them, that a Description often gives us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves. [...] The Reason, probably, may be, because in the Survey of any Object we have only so much of it painted on the Imagination, as comes in at the Eye; but in its Description, the Poet gives us as free a View of it as he pleases, and discovers to us several Parts, that either we did not attend to, or that lay out of our Sight when we first beheld it. As we look on any Object, our Idea of it is, perhaps, made up of two or three simple Ideas; but when the Poet represents it, he may either give us a more complex Idea of it, or only raise in us such Ideas as are most apt to affect the Imagination.« *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. III, No. 416 (27 June 1712), 560–561.

52 See Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 44.

groundwork of Burke's aesthetics, working together to account for our puzzling encounters with negative emotions and explore their anthropological underpinnings and utility in human life.

### 3.

In the first part of the *Enquiry* Burke explicitly joins the discussion on the paradox of tragedy. Here Burke explains the problem by focusing on the conditions that make affective engagement with artworks and other persons possible in the first place: *sympathy*, the favourite passion of the British Enlightenment. In his teleologically-ordered anthropological model, Burke lists sympathy among the social passions – emphatically differentiating them from the passions of self-preservation. In the Burkean teleology of the passions, the social passions serve the purpose of maintaining propagation («the society of the *sexes*») and social cohesion («the more *general society*»). Designed by providence, they serve these purposes by directing us towards other individuals through *love* or other social passions such as *sympathy*, *imitation* or *ambition*.<sup>54</sup> The passions of self-preservation such as *fear* or *terror*, on the other hand, are «selfish» insofar as they are designed to ensure the preservation of *the individual* when his life or health is threatened. We can see here, as Rodolphe Gasché noted, that Burke's teleology of the passions combines the Hobbesian and the Shaftesburian conceptions of human nature and presents human beings as driven by *selfish* as well as *sociable* passions.<sup>55</sup> However, as I will try to show, even our selfish drives for self-preservation are designed in such a way in Burke's Providential Order that they, by the *cunning of providence* hidden in our very fibres, eventually lead to social bonds and moral conduct.<sup>56</sup>

53 Ibid., 41.

54 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 37–40.

55 Rodolphe Gasché: «...And the Beautiful? Revisiting Edmund Burke's ›Double Aesthetics‹». In: *The Sublime from Antiquity to Present*. Ed. Timothy M. Costelloe. Cambridge 2012, 27. For the history of modern Western aesthetics as a »double aesthetics«, a tradition split between beauty and sublimity, see Carsten Zelle: *Die doppelte Ästhetik der Moderne. Revisionen des Schönen von Boileau bis Nietzsche*. Stuttgart 1995. Richard Bourke pointed out the similarities between Burke's and Grotius's anthropology based on fear (self-preservation) and pity (society). See Bourke: *Empire and Revolution* (= note 11), 127–128.

56 For a somewhat different argument for the sociability of the Burkean sublime, see Richard Bourke: »Pity and Fear. Providential Sociability in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*«. In: Koen Vermeir et al. (Eds.): *The Science of Sensibility* (= note 5), 151–175. For discussion and context, see Bourke: *Empire and Revolution* (= note 11), 128. f.



## 3. 1. Sympathy, the sublime, and the ›transfusion‹ of negative emotions

The social passions are grounded in *pleasure*, while the passions ›which are conversant about the preservation of the individual turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*‹, which makes them ›the most powerful of all the passions.‹<sup>57</sup> The primacy Burke attributes to the sublime in his aesthetic hierarchy rests on this anthropological foundation. Grounding the passions of society in pleasure and the passions of self-preservation in pain can fortify the first distinction because pleasure and pain, for Burke, are positive qualities, ultimate ends, independent from one another. Burke, pace post-Lockean philosophers, rejects the idea that ›positive pain‹ resembles the feeling raised by the cessation or moderation of pleasure, or that ›positive pleasure‹ resembles the cessation or moderation of pain. He introduces the term ›delight‹ to label this ›relative pleasure‹, defining it as that agreeable ›feeling which results from the ceasing or diminution of pain.‹<sup>58</sup> It is this third kind of agreeable feeling, an ambivalent pleasure mingled with pain, that characterizes the experience of the sublime and distinguishes it from the beautiful rooted in positive pleasure.<sup>59</sup> Burke's argument, as we will see, is far from unambiguous in this matter.

As a social passion, sympathy breaks our indifference as insipid spectators by allowing us to ›enter into the concerns of others‹ and to be ›moved as they are moved.‹<sup>60</sup> We are ›naturally‹ – instantly, instinctively, one might even say aesthetically – drawn to ›almost any thing which men can do or suffer.‹<sup>61</sup> Sympathy, in other words, is ›a sort of substitution‹ or ›transfusion‹ of affective states<sup>62</sup> – a conception similar to the one proposed in Hume's *Treatise* a few

57 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 36.

58 Ibid., 33.

59 Pointing out the significance of Burke's anthropological distinctions for his value distinctions has long been a customary step of every interpretation. See, for instance, Walter John Hipple, Jr.: *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*. Carbondale 1957, 87–88; Aris Sarafianos: ›Pain, Labour and the Sublime. Medical Gymnastics and Burke's Aesthetics‹. In: *Representations* 91 (2005), 1, 58–83, here: 59–60; Furniss: *Edmund Burke* (= note 10), 18–19; Gasché: ›...And the Beautiful?‹ (= note 55), 25; Paul Guyer: *A History of Modern Aesthetics. Vol. 1. The Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge 2014, 151; Timothy M. Costelloe: *The British Aesthetic Tradition. From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*. Cambridge 2013, 71–73.

60 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 41.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

years earlier.<sup>63</sup> It is, thus, not surprising that Burke discusses sympathy under the rubric of social passions that serve the purpose of society in general. But do social passions not turn on pleasure? Well, this is the point where the argument gets interesting.

If by sympathy »we are put into the place of another man«, it follows that – depending on the feelings of the other – the object of sympathy can be both pleasure and pain, that is, both social affection and self-preservation. Thus, when »turning upon pain«, sympathy »may be a source of the sublime.«<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, sympathy, just like the social passions of ambition and imitation, is »a limit case« in Burke's theory of the passions, an »intermediate zone of love and terror«, as Rodolphe Gasché put it.<sup>65</sup> Throughout his treatment of the passions of general society, as Robert Doran noted, Burke utilizes concepts that invoke the sublime (he explicitly refers to Longinus in the case of the self-aggrandisement of ambition). As a result, Burke's social passions subvert his bipartite anthropological structure.<sup>66</sup>

Be that as it may, we have arrived at the paradox of negative emotions: if sympathy can »transfuse« negative emotions as well, why are we attracted to the suffering of others? Why do we, according to Burke, actively search for these painful experiences? In order to explain this paradox in terms of sympathy, Burke turns to finality and offers a teleological explanation that is very similar to that of Kames: »Whenever we are formed by nature to any active purpose, the passion which animates us to it, is attended with delight, or a pleasure of some kind, let the subject matter be what it will; and our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy; he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distress of others.«<sup>67</sup>

Following Kames, Burke's Sympathy Argument also *dissolves* the paradox: we are attracted to and strangely pleased by the suffering of others simply because God annexed delight to sympathetic engagement in order to promote

63 The principle of sympathy, Hume famously writes, assures »the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another«, making »the minds of men [...] mirrors to one another«. David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature. A Critical Edition*, Vol. 1. Texts. Eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford 2007, 2.2.5., 234, 236.

64 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 41.

65 Gasché: »...And the Beautiful?« (= note 55), 34, 30.

66 Robert Doran: *The Theory of the Sublime. From Longinus to Kant*. Cambridge 2015, 154–160.

67 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 42.

social cohesion: »If this passion [i.e. sympathy – B.Cs.] was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion«. <sup>68</sup> Again, we arrive at Burke's »theological instinct theory«. <sup>69</sup>

### 3. 2. Regaining the sociability of the sublime

Even though the Burkean sublime was originally linked to self-preservation and conceived to be individualistic, the sympathetic principle built into our make-up turns the sublime to be a significant force of social cohesion. What is more, the sublime can also lead *to moral conduct* – actively contributing to the preservation and rebuilding of social bonds. Burke, following Kames, also argues that the ultimate goal of Providence is to make us help others: »This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight 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; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence.« <sup>70</sup>

The sublime, when it is raised by the distress of others, is a force of social cohesion and moral conduct due to a wise providential design, operating independently from any rational reflection. Vanessa L. Ryan saw in this argument Burke's most original contribution to the debate about the paradox of negative emotions: providence ensured that by being attracted to suffering we are faced with existential and bodily fragility, but since it is an experience »blended with no small uneasiness«, we will cease being mere sympathetic spectators and help the suffering when they need it the most: »Rather than leading us to an experience of self-presence or self-exaltation – Ryan concludes –, Burke's sublime overpowers the self and our instinct to self-preservation motivates us to relieve our pain by relieving that of others.« <sup>71</sup> Moral

68 Ibid., 42 f. [My italics – B.Cs.]

69 Sándor Radnóti: »A társas lét és a fenséges« [Sociability and the Sublime]. In: *Edmund Burke esztétikája és az európai felvilágosodás* [Edmund Burke's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment]. Ed. Ferenc Horkay Hörcher and Márton Szilágyi. Budapest 2011, 15–44, here: 37.

70 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 43.

71 Vanessa L. Ryan: »The Physiological Sublime. Burke's Critique of Reason.« In: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2001), 265–279, here: 277. Also see Richard Bourke's assertion that »Delight thus offers an incentive to affectionate identification with affliction, lending support to social solidarity in general. [...] Burke's innovation here was to claim that a mental state derived from the instinct for self-preservation fortified the impulse to society.« Bourke: *Empire and Revolution* (= note 11), 132.

action is, therefore, the product of social as well as selfish passions, the amalgam of pleasure and pain.

However, there seems to be a hitch when we apply Burke's teleological argument to our initial example of the aesthetic allure of the scaffold. If Providence made the painful social passions agreeable (to use Kames's terminology) to ensure social cohesion, is it not strange that Burke brings up the aesthetic pull of public executions as »the triumph of the real sympathy«?<sup>72</sup> After all, our sympathetic engagement can hardly relieve the suffering of the condemned in these cases. Even if one accepts Burke's teleological account, the sympathetic principle seems to be at work here as a blind force – pointless from the point of view of its original providential purpose of relieving the suffering of others. Just like our emotive response to suffering exhibited by mimetic art. But maybe it was exactly his point: the workings of our passions, as I have pointed out, are not governed by reason.<sup>73</sup> On the contrary, Burke insists that they must be running independently of any reflection if they are to fulfil their role in the Providential Order. It is this blind sympathetic instinct that draws us out from the theatre, from the feigned calamities of the stage, and towards the real suffering exhibited on the scaffold. But Burke's example, built on the affective superiority of the real over the feigned, also leads us to his second explanation.

#### 4.

Burke modifies the Exercise Argument by reconfiguring Du Bos's psychological argument in terms of neuro-physiology. Recent scholarship has shown that Burke did not join the scientific debates of his age merely through adopting the experimental method: in developing his aesthetic theory, Burke drew heavily on the medico-scientific theories of the mid-eighteenth century. As interpreters like Aris Sarafianos have compellingly revealed, »a specifically medical discourse of *exercise* is the ›archaeological territory‹ of Burke's science of sensibility.«<sup>74</sup> In the third part of my paper, I will focus on Burke's physiological aesthetics and the solution it offered him to resolve the paradox of negative emotions.

72 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 43.

73 Ibid., 41, 43.

74 Sarafianos: »Pain, Labour and the Sublime« (= note 59), 70. [My italics – B.Cs.]

## 4. 1. »Right down to the tissue of fibres«. Burke's physiological aesthetics

Burke himself – partly because of a nervous breakdown in the 1750s that he attributed to a period of overstrained work – was well conversed in medicine and physiology, and was friends with several physicians. Among the latter was Richard Brocklesby (1722–1797), the avid vivisectionist<sup>75</sup> and early British adherent of Albrecht von Haller's vitalism, interested in pain and »irritability« – both crucial in Burke's physiological aesthetics.<sup>76</sup> Even more importantly, Christopher Nugent (1698–1775), the physician who »restor'd his Life, and taught him how to Live«<sup>77</sup> in the 1750s. Nugent was a physician in Bath, »that famous center of polite amusement«,<sup>78</sup> and later became Burke's father-in-law, and remained his beloved mentor for the rest of his life.<sup>79</sup> By eighteenth-century standards, Nugent's therapeutic practice seemed drastic: it consisted of forcing the fibres to contract and the fluids to keep in motion by shocking the body with various stimulants. By pointing out the similarities between Nugent's and Burke's medical language, Sarafianos has recently argued that Nugent's »shock therapies« and the physiology behind them might have influenced Burke's aesthetics of the sublime.<sup>80</sup>

However, it is probably futile to search for a single medico-physiological model behind Burke's physiological aesthetics. Like-minded authors like Addison elaborated their aesthetic theory at the beginning of the century against the

75 See Richard Brocklesby: »An account of some experiments on the sensibility and irritability of the several parts of animals; in a letter from Richard Brocklesby, M.D. F.R.S. To the reverend Thomas Birch, D.D. Secr. R. S.«. In: *Philosophical Transactions* 49 (1755), 240–245.

76 See Sarafianos: »Pain, Labour and the Sublime« (= note 59), 62 f.

77 Burke quoted in Lock: *Edmund Burke* (= note 13), vol. 1, 75.

78 Tobias Smollett: *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* [1771]. Ed. Günter Jürgensmeier. Munich, 2005, 11. One of Smollett's other characters, the hypochondriac Mr. Bramble, offers us a glimpse of what it meant to be the »centre of polite amusement« in the eighteenth century: »this place, which Nature and Providence seem to have intended as a resource from distemper and disquiet, is become the very center of racket and dissipation. Instead of that peace, tranquility and ease, so necessary to those who labour under bad health, weak nerves, and irregular spirits; here we have nothing but noise, tumult, and hurry; with the fatigue and slavery of maintaining a ceremonial, more stiff, formal, and oppressive, than the etiquette of a German elector.« *Ibid.*, 34.

79 See Lock: *Edmund Burke* (= note 13), vol. 1, 73–76.

80 See Aris Sarafianos: »The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art«. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008), 1, 23–48, here: 27–32. For Nugent's therapeutics, see his *An Essay on the Hydrophobia*. London 1753.

backdrop of iatromechanism,<sup>81</sup> which largely became obsolete by the time of the 1750s. Instead of the mechanistic vision of the body as a hydraulic machine, a vitalistic model started to become accepted throughout Britain, through debates concerning, among others, reflex action and the involvement of the soul, or the animating principle of life itself. The vitalistic model, which was itself polarised by mechanistic (Haller) and animistic (Whytt) approaches, revealed the body as a sensitive network of *contractile fibres*, irritable and/or sensible.<sup>82</sup> Medicine and neuroscience, however, remained in constant flux with transfusing models and ideas: »The old framework of ideas, animal spirit, subtle fluids, spiritual substances and hollow nerves lived on, in spite of the evidence, because it was difficult to see until the very end of the period with what they could be sensibly replaced.«<sup>83</sup> Burke drew on iatromechanists like Fuller or Cheyne (emphasizing the unhindered flow of fluids), but was also influenced by Hallerian vitalists, such as his friend Brocklesby, or other adherents of the physiology of contractility, like Nugent (emphasizing the elasticity of fibres).<sup>84</sup>

In his aesthetics, Burke wants to trace back the various passions, pleasures and pains to certain neuromuscular mechanisms, and thus to the minute components of the human frame, the fibres. In using the terms ›nerves‹, ›muscles‹ and ›fibres‹ interchangeably, I am not being inconsistent or negligent: it is Burke's vitalism that does not follow the clear-cut Hallerian distinction between ›sensible‹ nerve fibres (feeling) and ›irritable‹ muscle fibres (motion). According

81 »I consider the Body – Addison writes, disclosing his iatromechanist commitments – as a System of Tubes and Glands, or to use a more Rustick Phrase, a Bundle of Pipes and Strainers, fitted to one another after so wonderful a Manner as to make a proper Engine for the Soul to work with.« *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. I, No. 115 (12 July 1711), 471.

82 See Theodore M. Brown's seminal essay: »From Mechanism to Vitalism in Eighteenth-Century English Physiology«. In: *Journal of the History of Biology* 7 (1974), 2, 179–216. On the famous debate concerning »irritability« and »sensibility« between Albrecht von Haller and Robert Whytt in the 1750s, see Eugenio Frixione: »Irritable Glue. The Haller–Whytt Controversy on the Mechanism of Muscle Contraction.« In: *Brain, Mind and Medicine. Essays in Eighteenth-Century Neuroscience*. Eds. Harry Whitaker, C.U.M. Smith, Stanley Finger. New York 2007, 115–124.

83 C.U.M. Smith: »Brain and Mind in the ›Long‹ Eighteenth Century«. In: *Ibid.*, 15–28, here: 16.

84 For Aris Sarafianos' uniquely instructive attempts to entangle Burke's medical background, see Sarafianos: »Pain, Labor, and the Sublime« (= note 59), 58–83. (Fuller's therapeutic use of exercise, Brocklesby's vitalism and experiments on irritability and pain) and »The Contractility of Burke's Sublime« (= note 80). (Nugent's drastic therapies and physiology of contractility).

to the Burkean model, fibres »compose any muscle or membrane« in the body.<sup>85</sup> In this »integrated perception of sensibility«, Sarafianos aptly observes, »nerves move, muscles and organs feel, and pain, like pleasure, is both a kind of feeling and a specifically important kind of motion.«<sup>86</sup>

Even though the physiological and medical aspects were largely neglected by historians and were only recently rediscovered by scholarship, the importance of the physiological groundwork in the *Enquiry* was widely acknowledged in the second half of the eighteenth century, meeting with dismissive criticism as well as enthusiastic support.<sup>87</sup> The reception of the *Enquiry* among German-speaking authors clearly shows that it was received as a radical physiological aesthetic programme that traces the aesthetic back to the visceral depth of the body.<sup>88</sup> Herder, for example, sums up the *Enquiry*'s radical physiological programme in the following way: »[Burke] pursues both these feelings [i.e. the sublime and the beautiful – B.Cs.] deep into our nature, right down to the tissue of fibers that immediately surrounds the soul, as it were, and [...] everywhere traces the sublime to a feeling of *tension* and the beautiful to a gentle *relaxation* of the nerves.«<sup>89</sup> The true shortcoming of Burke's work, according to Herder, is that it did not go further in revealing the »specific varieties« of aesthetic

85 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 140.

86 Sarafianos: »Pain, Labor, and the Sublime« (= note 59), 63.

87 The striking contrast between the vivid eighteenth-century disputes about and the later scholarly ignorance of Burke's physiological aesthetics is also pointed out in Aris Sarafianos: »Edmund Burke's Physiological Aesthetics in Medico-Philosophical Circles and Art Criticism, 1757–1824«. In: *The Reception of Edmund Burke in Europe*. Ed. Martin Fitzpatrick and Peter Jones. London 2017, 207.

88 Thus, the *Enquiry* was not only a »bridge« between the criticism of the British and the aesthetics of the German, as Robert Doran claims (Cf. Doran: *The Theory of the Sublime* (= note 66), 141), but an early proof that the former was appropriated with ease by the latter.

89 Johann Gottfried Herder: »Critical Forests. Fourth Grove, on Riedel's *Theory of the Beaux Arts*«. In: Idem: *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*. Transl. and ed. Gregory Moore. Princeton / Oxford 2006, 177–290, here: 244. For Herder's comments on Burke, see Herman Parret: »From the *Enquiry* (1757) to the Fourth *Kritisches Wäldchen* (1769). Burke and Herder on the Division of the Senses«. In: Koen Vermeir et al. (Eds.): *The Science of Sensibility* (= note 5), 91–106. For a brief account of the German reception of the *Enquiry*, see Tomáš Hlobil: »The Reception of the *Enquiry* in the German-Language Area in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century. August Gottlieb Meißner and Johann Gottfried Herder«. In: Martin Fitzpatrick (Ed.): *The Reception of Edmund Burke* (= note 87), 279–296. For the first German translation, see *Burke's Philosophische Untersuchungen über den Ursprung unserer Begriffe vom Schönen und Erhabenen*. [Transl. Christian Garve]. Riga 1773.

feelings and their distinctive neurophysiological basis. Thus, a true anatomy of sensibility is »to evaluate the *weight* of every impression, every *kind* of nervous vibration, every *communication* and *propagation* of the feelings, which rush, so to speak, from nerve to nerve, and to analyze the intertwining of a multitude of fibers to form a single main category of feeling.«<sup>90</sup> Herder seemed to have thought that Burke's genuine contribution to aesthetics was not his conceptual differentiations or theory of passions, but tracing the aesthetic back to a physiological groundwork.<sup>91</sup> This entails, however, that he read it as an »experiment« revealing the laws of sensibility – a treatise on the fringe of »natural philosophy«. It is no coincidence that when discussing the contraction and relaxation of the »irritable fibres« involved in sensation in his »On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul« (1778), Herder refers to Burke's physiological theory.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4. 2. Neuromuscular dichotomies

As we have seen, Burke grounded his distinction between social and selfish passions in the opposition between positive pleasure and pain. This latter distinction, in turn, can be traced back to opposing neuromuscular mechanisms. In a rather reductionist way, Burke argues that »a relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems to me to be the cause of all positive pleasure« and that »the passion called love is produced by this relaxation«. Given that beauty was previously linked to pleasure and love, Burke identifies this neuromuscular mechanism to be the efficient cause of the idea of beauty: »the genuine constituents of beauty have each of them, separately taken, a natural tendency to relax the fibres.« Thus, the »uniform and general effect« of beauty is taken to be that we are »softened, relaxed, enervated, dissolved, melted away by pleasure«. <sup>93</sup> In short, as soon as »a beautiful object [is] presented to the sense, by causing a relaxation of the body, produces the passion of love in the mind« and, in turn, »if by any means the passion should first have its origin in the mind, a relaxation of the outward organs will as certainly ensue in a degree proportioned to the

90 Herder: »Critical Forests. Fourth Grove« (= note 89), 245.

91 Herder's endorsement continues in his later works as well, such as his 1778 »Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele« (»On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul«.) See Hlobil: »The Reception of the *Enquiry*« (note 89), 292 f.

92 Herder: »On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul [1778]«. In: Idem: *Philosophical Writings*. Transl. and ed. Michael N. Forster. Cambridge 2002, 187–250, here: 201 f.

93 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 136.



cause.«<sup>94</sup> Body and mind interact with the presumption that their operations consist of the same neurophysiological mechanism.

By contrast, pain and fear consist in »convulsive agitations«, in the »unnatural tension of the nerves«.<sup>95</sup> Pain and terror operate almost in the same way, the only difference between them being »that things which cause pain operate on the mind by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger«. That is to say, pain is the sensation raised by the »tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves« produced by an object striking the senses, while terror is the passion raised by the suggestion of danger that produces such convulsions and, therefore, painful sensation in the body.<sup>96</sup> The common physiology of fear and pain, together with the close interaction between body and mind and the vitalist framework of sensibility, can explain why many things that are painful but not exactly terrible have a similar effect to that of terrible objects. Furthermore, given that »pain and fear act upon the same parts of the body, and in the same manner, though somewhat differing in degree« and that the »ruling principle of the sublime« is terror, it follows that »*whatever is fitted to produce such a tension* must be productive of a passion *similar* to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it.«<sup>97</sup> As we can see, this physiological argument will modify the theory of the sublime, as well: the possible sources of the sublime exceed the terrible, and encompass everything that is painful, if it is powerful enough to push the contractile nerves of the human body to their limits.

#### 4. 3. In search of a proper model: delight vs. exercise

Burke's reductionist and mechanical physiological groundwork reconstructed above can help us clarify an ambiguous point in the literature concerning the paradox of negative emotions: how can pain (and fear) be an efficient cause of our aesthetic appreciation (even of a relative or mixed kind)? There is a common interpretation of the Burkean sublime I will here call the Argument from Delight, since it is based on the *temporal delay* built into Burke's concept of delight – a concept generally deemed by Burke-scholars to be vague with an

94 Ibid., 136.

95 Ibid., 120.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid., 121. [My italics – B.Cs.]

ambiguous relation to pain/terror.<sup>98</sup> According to this explanation, the sublime is not the appreciation of pain or fear itself but *the moderation or cessation*, or, if the object is imaginary or otherwise distanced, *the anticipation of pain or fear*. Aris Sarafianos and Tom Furniss tried to reconcile the Argument from Delight with Burke's physiological account, claiming that the Burkean sublime does not consist of the painful contraction of the fibres but rather of the experience of *overcoming* pain. They cite Burke's claim concerning delight that this ambiguous feeling occurs in the mind »upon escaping some imminent danger, or on being released from the severity of some cruel pain.«<sup>99</sup> And if the sublime is a form of delight, as Burke suggests, it follows that it must also arise from the same process. In Furniss's reading, the sublime is »the experience of the threatened self seeming to overcome or master danger through *effort*«,<sup>100</sup> while Sarafianos holds that Burke remodelled »the sublime in the form of an *after-effect* of actual pain.«<sup>101</sup>

The problem with this interpretation is not only the Kantian perspective it unconsciously adopts<sup>102</sup> but that the radical implications of the Burkean sublime are neutralised: in the worst case, the sublime becomes nothing more than a thrilling gaze *from the distance*, a relief *after* the threat is gone, or maybe a suspenseful anticipation *before* it hits us. In the more nuanced readings of Furniss and Sarafianos, the sublime is the product of mastery, effort, or strenuousness on part of the individual that will eventually »reaffirm the sense of self as a kind of heroic labourer, purging itself of weakness through individual effort.«<sup>103</sup> The Argument from Delight, however, is not the definitive explanation of the *Enquiry*.

Through the medico-physiological arguments and examples in Part IV, Burke examines the ways various material properties produce – through striking the senses – a painful contraction of the nerves and, thus, the sublime. I believe that these examples show that it is *the invigorating experience of actual*

98 Cf. Furniss: *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (= note 10), 25; E. J. Clery: »The Pleasure of Terror. Paradox in Edmund Burke's Theory of the Sublime«. In: *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*. Eds. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts. London 1996, 164–181, here: 168; Korsmeyer: »A Lust of the Mind« (= note 16), 55–57.

99 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 32.

100 Furniss: *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (= note 10), 25.

101 Sarafianos: »Pain, Labor, and the Sublime« (= note 59), 61.

102 For a valid criticism of the Kantian reading of Burke, see Ryan: »The Physiological Sublime« (= note 71), 267.

103 Furniss: *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (= note 10), 29.

*fear and/or pain* – the *exercise* of our bodily and mental powers itself – that makes the sublime a source of an ambiguous pleasure, and not its removal or after-effect.<sup>104</sup> In a crucial point of this part of the *Enquiry*, Burke equates the physiology of pain and fear with the physiological mechanisms involved in *physical exercise or labour*: »labour is a surmounting of *difficulties*, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in everything but degree«. <sup>105</sup>

This physiological account of exercise will be the key to the paradox of negative emotions. The exercise model will reveal that the sublime is not an after-effect of pain, just as the pleasure of engaging in demanding physical exercise does not come *after* the often painful activity, once the physical challenge has been overcome. It is an experience of being challenged, being pushed to one's limits, hardly being able to master the activity. But there is no temporal delay: the pleasure of exercise consists in the vigorous activity of our physical and mental powers.

#### 4. 4. A persistent onslaught on the nerves. Burke on darkness

Consider, first, Burke's famous account of how darkness is productive of the sublime. After having rejected the Lockean associationist explanation of why darkness is terrifying, Burke proposes an account of the effect of darkness in purely mechanistic, that is, physiological terms: »*whilst we are involved in darkness*«, the radial fibres of the iris are »so contracted, as to strain the nerves that compose it beyond their natural tone« because of the eye's »own efforts in pursuit of its object«. As a result of these »spasms«, »the bodily organs suffer first«, producing »a painful sensation«. <sup>106</sup> The idea of the sublime is not the product

104 See the same point in Costelloe: *The British Aesthetic Tradition* (= note 59), 72. Also see Guyer: *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (= note 59), vol. 1, 152.

105 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 122.

106 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 132 f. [My italics – B.Cs.] Burke's explanation was rejected as an absurd proposition by many of his contemporaries. Richard Payne Knight, for instance, pointed out that »the slightest knowledge of optics would have informed him that the sheet of paper, upon which he was writing, being seen thus close to the eye, reflected a greater, and more forcible mass of light; and, consequently, produced more irritation and tension, than the Peak of Teneriffe or Mount St. Elias would, if seen at the distance of a few miles: – yet, surely he would not say that the sheet of paper excited more grand and perfect ideas of the sublime.« Richard Payne Knight: *An Analytic Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1805), quoted in Costelloe: *The British Aesthetic Tradition* (= note 59), 74.

of the removal or overcoming of pain but the painful exercise of the sensory organ itself, an assault on the body, which is *trying* to overcome it but cannot master it completely: the sublime is an experience of overwhelming power. The same is true for the alteration of unexpected, sudden lights or sounds with total darkness or silence that keep us alarmed and in »fearful anxiety« by striking our senses *again and again*. It is not the removal of pain but the persistent onslaught on the nerves by the sudden changes between opposite extremes that is the source of the sublime.<sup>107</sup> The senses are pushed to their limits, *to the verge of pain*, triggering the passions of self-preservation, which gives an unmatched intensity to the experience – and this is exactly the vitalising exercise, enhancing our bodily and mental alertness, which gives rise to the sublime.

Thus, it seems that, paradoxically enough, it is pain that turns out to be aesthetically agreeable (to use Kames's conceptual tools), attracting us, engaging us and making us dwell upon it. It is, though, mitigated in its intensity, and is not raw pain: »labour resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in everything but degree.«<sup>108</sup> This difference in degree is ensured by the distancing of the object by time, space or forms of representation.<sup>109</sup> If there was no distance, we simply flee, fearing for our life. Due to the distance, we stay and experience the painful or terrifying stimuli, testing our powers and pushing them to their limits. But it is still, nevertheless, an experience of pain and fear – moderated by distance but not yet overcome.<sup>110</sup>

107 Sarafianos's reading of Burke's sublime as an experience comprising »the aggravated cycles« of contraction and relaxation supports my interpretation. Cf. Sarafianos: »The Contractility of Burke's Sublime« (= note 80), 40–48.

108 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 122.

109 The Argument from Delight was also rejected by Robert Doran but he offered a different counter-argument: Burke's treatment of our delight in fear or pain, Doran argues, is not consistent. First, when Burke discusses delight as part of his anthropology, he links it to the removal of pain. Later, however, when discussing the sublime, »In place of the »removal of pain,« Burke substitutes a concept of aesthetic distance – the *idealization* of pain and danger.« What we enjoy in the sublime, Doran claims, is not actual pain but only the idea of it: »virtual terror.« This interpretation solves the problem of actual fear but raises others concerning the intensity of »virtual« passions. Furthermore, Burke's examples make it clear that it is the *bodily pain* and *actual fear* (lessened in degree) that is the source of the sublime. See Doran: *The Theory of the Sublime* (= note 66), 151. ff.

110 Also see György Fogarasi's argument, which is different from mine, but also supports the rejection of the Argument from Delight: »the sublime remains in constant danger of relapsing into danger, and thus, into a state of panic fear. [...] Neither is it immediate pain, nor is it pure painlessness. It simultaneously involves the mediatedness or structural anaesthesia of any instances of trauma (i.e. the distance of what is near), and the disruption of our safe detachment from events occurring in other spaces or times, through some sort of telesensing, or telaesthetic traumatism (i.e. the nearness of what is

## 4. 5. The »best remedy«. The medical aesthetics of exercise

The physiological similarities between pain/fear and labour/exercise make it possible for Burke to capitalize on the medico-scientific discussions of his age that argued for the beneficial effects of physical exercise, resulting in a medico-scientific solution to the paradox of negative emotions. Addison already utilized the late-seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century (iatromechanist) medical literature on physical exercise in his *Imagination* essays, where he compared the salutary psychosomatic mechanisms involved in aesthetic experience to those involved in physical exercise and labour: aesthetic pleasure, Addison argues, is »like a *gentle Exercise* to the Faculties, awaken them from Sloth and Idleness, without putting them upon any Labour or Difficulty.«<sup>111</sup> The physiologies of contractility also attributed a crucial role to the proper stimulation and exercise of the fibres. These techniques were supposed to ensure the *elasticity* of the fibres, the key to both bodily and mental health.

In line with eighteenth-century medical practice, Burke argued that »the nature of rest is to suffer all the parts of our bodies to fall into a relaxation that not only disables the members from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions.« In a body, weakened by indolence, the nerves will also become »more liable to the most horrid convulsions, than when they are sufficiently braced and strengthened«, which leads to maladies like melancholy

far away). At the same time that it articulates, it also disrupts the conceptual distinction between pain and the sublime (or, passion and sympathy), and becomes the site of their spectral contamination.« György Fogarasi: »Teletrauma. Distance in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*.« In: *The AnaChronisT* 17 (2012), 13.

- 111 Summing up these salutary mechanisms, Addison writes that »Labour or Exercise ferments the Humours, casts them into their proper Channels, throws off Redundancies, and helps Nature in those secret Distributions, without which the Body cannot subsist in its Vigour, nor the Soul act with Cheerfulness.« *The Spectator* (= note 18) vol. I, No. 115 (12 July 1711), 471. For the medical background, see, for example, Francis Fuller: *Medicina Gymnastica: or, a Treatise Concerning the Power of Exercise, with Respect to the Animal Oeconomy; and the Great Necessity of it, in the Cure of Several Distempers*. London 1711 [1705], 26–36; George Cheyne: *An Essay of Health and Long Life*. London 1724, 90–91. Addison also refers, as almost everyone in this tradition, to Francis Bacon's »Of Regiment of Health«. In: Francis Bacon: *The Major Works*. Ed. Brian Vickers. Oxford 2002, 403–405, here: 404.

and often even suicide.<sup>112</sup> »The best remedy for all these evils – Burke writes – is exercise or *labour*«, given that it is moderate and balanced by rest. Overstraining the body – just like excessive pain – »destroys the mental faculties«, while exhausting our mental powers »induces a remarkable lassitude of the whole body«. <sup>113</sup> Emphasizing the interdependence of the bodily and mental faculties throughout, Burke then sums up the importance of physical exercise or labour: »Labour is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs, in a state fit for their functions; but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination and perhaps the other mental powers act. [...] Now, as a due exercise is essential to the coarse muscular parts of the constitution, and that without this rousing they would become languid and diseased, the very same rule holds with regard to those finer parts we have mentioned; to have them in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree.«<sup>114</sup>

Burke's argument that the sublime is a physical and mental exercise is noteworthy neither because of its emphasis on the medical importance of exercise or labour, a commonplace of his age,<sup>115</sup> nor because it, like Addison's *Imagination* essays earlier, likens the physiological processes of aesthetic pleasure to those of physical exercise. Burke's argument is a noteworthy contribution to the discussion because it conceives exercise to be »a mode of pain«, based on the physiological mechanism of contraction, and still argues for its agreeableness. Given the connection established earlier between pain and terror, he argues that the experience of the sublime also functions as a salutary exercise: »As common labour, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a mode of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system [...]. In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance, they are capable of producing delight«. <sup>116</sup>

Invigorating the body and the passions through painful stimuli, the demanding experience of the sublime, challenging both to our sensory organs and to our passions of self-preservation, restores the alertness, power and stability

112 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 4.6, 122.

113 *Ibid.*, 122 f.

114 *Ibid.*

115 For some of the »intense anxieties« surrounding it in the culture of politeness, see Sarafianos: »Pain, Labor, and the Sublime« (= note 59), 67–70.

116 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1) 123.

of the body as well as the mind (as a kind of ›mental hygienic function‹).<sup>117</sup> A vehicle of self-preservation, designed by Providence, the sublime is an experience of self-presence and vital energy: ›Astonishment, the state of ›delightful horror‹ – as Gasché writes – is nothing more but the sudden awareness of being alive.«<sup>118</sup>

Given that the Burkean aesthetics consist of the fragile opposites of ›the insipidity of the beautiful‹ and the ›labours of the sublime‹, as Sarafianos put it,<sup>119</sup> Tom Furniss famously argued that this opposition introduces class distinctions into the *Enquiry*: the sublime stands for the hard-working emerging middle class against the indolent, softened and weak aristocracy. The Burkean sublime presents an ›aesthetics for the strong‹, constructing a ›heroic‹ sense of self, a competitive individual for a new, competitive world.<sup>120</sup> E. J. Clery rightly pointed out that what motivates Burke's strenuous and masculine aesthetics is not a revolutionary bourgeois work ethic but the ›patrician‹ ethos of civic humanism. Thus it is not a puritan but rather a republican critique of indolent luxury, and the sublime exercises are meant to be techniques to help maintain a vigorous body amidst the pleasures of modern commercial society.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, both Furniss and Clery seem to share the idea that ›beauty comes to be framed as part of the problem the sublime must remedy‹.<sup>122</sup> But even if this claim is tenable, it is so only with regard to the historical context of the emerging commercial society, and not because the relaxing physiology of beauty is inherently bad.

As the above reconstruction shows, both labour/exercise and rest were regarded to be significant in eighteenth-century medical practice: it is the balanced oscillation between contraction and relaxation that constitutes health. The reason why the former was given more emphasis is the fact that it was the lack of physical exercise that threatened the well-being of urbane Enlightenment élites. Burke's argument draws not just on the civic humanist but also on

117 Cf. Endre Szécsényi: *Társasság és tekintély. Esztétikai politika a 18. századi Angliában* [Sociability and Authority. The Politics of Aesthetics in 18th-century England]. Budapest 2002, 152.

118 Gasché: ›...And the Beautiful?‹ (= note 55), 29.

119 Sarafianos: ›Pain, Labor, and the Sublime‹ (= note 59), 63.

120 Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology* (= note 10), 27, 29. For a recent take on Furniss's approach that treats the sublime and the beautiful as ›proxies for socio-political categories‹ and Burke's aesthetics as an attempt to create a ›heroic subjectivity‹, a ›bourgeoise hero‹, see Doran: *The Theory of the Sublime* (= note 66), 160–164.

121 See Clery: ›The Pleasure of Terror‹ (= note 98), 172–177.

122 *Ibid.*, 171.

the medico-scientific critique of the sedentary and luxurious lifestyle of urban living in the new commercial world: »nervous disorders« such as melancholy, whether they consisted in the »disorder of the spirits« or the lack of »elasticity and force in the fibres«, were understood as products of modern society.<sup>123</sup> Exercise was seen as a remedy that can counterbalance the malaises of civilisation. However, the emphasis on exercise in the age of gout and melancholy does not change the fact that the relaxing pleasures of the beautiful were also seen as beneficial *if* balanced by exercise. And just like in the maintenance of health, László Kontler has argued, the two forces of the beautiful and the sublime cooperate in »mutually reinforcing ways to maintain a sound social and political order«, functioning much like »a system of checks and balances«.<sup>124</sup> Burke's politics, anchored in his neurophysiology of sociability and self-preservation, is based not on the antagonistic struggle but on the equilibrium of opposing forces.

It is clear, however, that in itself the medico-physiological account of the sublime reconstructed above cannot sufficiently resolve the paradox of negative emotions. Burke has not yet answered – to use Kames's terminology once again – what makes such painful exercises – however salutary they may be – *agreeable* to us. At this point, he turns from efficient to final causes: »Providence has so ordered it, that a state of rest and inaction, however it may flatter our indolence, should be productive of many inconveniences; that it should generate such disorders, as *may force us to have recourse to some labour*, as a thing absolutely requisite to make us pass our lives with tolerable satisfaction«.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, Burke's medico-physiological argument, ultimately rooted in the teleology of the neuromuscular activity, clearly echoes Du Bos' Exercise Argument. Locke's presumption that the sole motive for action is the »removal of uneasiness«, now with medico-scientific underpinnings, returns at a crucial point of the *Enquiry's* argument: it is the physical and psychological »inconveniences« of inaction that »force« us back to some form of activity (if we are insipid). But as we can see, Kames teleological argument that certain painful exercises are

123 See George Cheyne: *The English Malady, or A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds*. [1733]. Ed Roy Porter. London 1991, 7.

124 László Kontler: »Beauty or Beast, or Monstrous Regiments? Robertson and Burke on Women and the Public Scene.« In: *Aspects of the Enlightenment. Aesthetics, Politics, and Religion*. Ed. Ferenc Hörcher and Endre Szécsényi. Budapest 2004, 238–271, here: 254. For a subtle analysis of the »constitutive function of the aesthetic« in the Burkean politics of organic order and balance, see Szécsényi: *Társiasság és tekintély* (= note 117), 152–166.

125 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 122. [My italics – B.Cs.]



naturally agreeable also had an impact on his solution: it is the agreeableness of exercising our physical and mental faculties, their painful yet energizing experience, that keeps us busy (if we are engaged in it). Thus, Burke's providential aesthetics introduces checks and balances into the dynamic economy of pleasure and pain, grounding the good life – physical, psychological, moral, and political – in the providential design of our neuromuscular make-up.

Needless to say, Burke is not alone in this. A characteristically anthropocentric providential framework – the order of things calibrated specifically to improve the human good<sup>126</sup> – was often evoked in the eighteenth-century medical literature discussing the salutary effects of exercise and labour. One of the recurring arguments was that health, just like prosperity, is not something that we are given: we are only given the tool to obtain health, namely the marvellous but fragile human body, but we have to *work* for it. Fuller and Cheyne emphasized how the human body is made an optimal vehicle for work: it improves through exercise and use, unlike our everyday objects that wear away. Behind these words is the Scripture itself: Cheyne, writing about exercise, reminds his readers to God's words to Adam after the Fall: »That in the Sweat of his brow he shall eat bread«. These words, Cheyne argues, reflect the beneficence and prudence of Providence: it is »a salutary penance«, a »punishment«, that is, which also functions as a »remedy« against diseases of indolence and luxury.<sup>127</sup> Thus, exercise takes its place in the »exchange of advantages«<sup>128</sup> of the new,

126 First in his *The Sources of the Self* (1989), then in *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argued that one should take seriously the transitional character of eighteenth-century providentialism. What makes the eighteenth-century »Providential Deism« a transitional phase pregnant with secular modernity is that this providential plan was described exclusively from the point of view of human beings. In this anthropocentric Providential Order of things, the laws of nature – including those of human nature – are primarily designed to promote human flourishing, which means that living according to »the intention of nature« consists simply in preserving and improving our own good. See Charles Taylor: *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA 2001 [1989], 267. *passim*; Charles Taylor: *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA 2007, 221–234.

127 Cheyne: *An Essay of Health* (= note 111), 90. See also Addison's similar argument: »nothing valuable can be procured without it. Not to mention Riches and Honour, even Food and Raiment are not to be come at without the Toil of the Hands and Sweat of the Brows. Providence furnishes Materials, but expects that we should work them up our selves. [...] and as for those who are not obliged to Labour, by the Condition in which they are born, they are more miserable than the rest of Mankind, unless they indulge themselves in that voluntary Labour which goes by the Name of Exercise.« *The Spectator* (= note 18), vol. 1, No. 115 (12 July 1711), 472.

128 Taylor: *A Secular Age* (= note 126), 177.

eighteenth-century Providential Order, assured by the universal laws of nature, operating silently and invisibly through the human body and mind: the law-governed world created by God became a »great interlocking universe, in which the parts are so designed as to conduce to their mutual preservation and flourishing.«<sup>129</sup>

Burke's teleological solution to the paradox of negative emotions finds its place in this medical and theological discussion, in the »moral biology«<sup>130</sup> of eighteenth-century pathology, where the anthropological and the therapeutic, the explanatory and the normative, the natural and the social were inextricably intertwined. Burke's teleological anthropological aesthetics is a prime example of the peculiar fusion of various discourses in the »Age of Sensibility«, uniting the medical, the moral, and the political in the framework of a Providential Order designed to improve human life. Burke's physiological aesthetics proves to be a mechanistic theory that sacrifices aesthetic individualism and pluralism not just for universal scientific principles but also for the purposes of Providence concerning individual as well as social flourishing.<sup>131</sup> The *Enquiry's* originality lies in the fact that it identified the operation of Providence in the mechanisms of nerve and muscle fibre, fusing the medical, the moral, and the political within a Providential Order. Indeed, »no part of this discourse may be judged of by itself, and independently of the rest«.<sup>132</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Exploring Burke's twofold solution to the paradox of negative emotions has proved to be intriguing because the two models employed in the *Enquiry* stand on opposing anthropological principles: Du Bos's Exercise Argument is guided by the principle of self-preservation, while Kames's Sympathy Argument by the principle of sociability. Burke's anatomy of sensibility interlocks these two arguments through a teleologically-ordered physiology, in which the natural laws of the human body and mind, secretly working in the depth of the nerve fibres,

129 Taylor: *The Sources of the Self* (= note 126), 264.

130 See Kevin Siena: »Pliable Bodies. The Moral Biology of Health and Disease«. In: *A Cultural History of the Human Body. Vol. 4. In the Age of Enlightenment*. Ed. Carole Reeves. London 2014, 33–52.

131 Cf. Ryan: »The Physiological Sublime« (= note 71), 266.

132 Burke: *Enquiry* (= note 1), 50.

ensure both self-preservation and sociability. Utilizing both efficient and final causes throughout his *Enquiry*, Burke argues that the experiences of pain and terror – under certain conditions – are made agreeable (delight) by providence, so that the physiological mechanisms underlying these experiences could ensure the health and strenuousness of the nerve fibres amidst the corrupting pleasures of commercial society (Exercise Argument). Furthermore, due to the ambiguous character of this delight annexed to such experiences, they also function as exercises for our social passions (Sympathy Argument). The ›egoistic‹ anthropological drive to remove the visceral uneasiness that dominates these experiences facilitates moral action when it is needed the most: when others in pain need our help. In accordance with the anthropocentric providentialism of the moderate Enlightenment, it is the design of the human frame that ensures the activities essential to our health (self-preservation) and moral conduct (sociability), a design that not only guarantees that pleasure, if exclusive and excessive, is »inconvenient«, and pain, if mitigated and harmless, is aesthetically agreeable, but also that our ›egoistic‹ drive to self-preservation ultimately improves sociability. This is what I have called the cunning of Providence in Burke's *Enquiry*.