

In A Philosophical Enquiry, Edmund Burke attempts to distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful. After an exploration into taste, Burke focuses on the sources of pain, pleasure, joy and grief before settling on his concept of the sublime. Ultimately, Burke asserts that “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger ... is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). Representations of the sublime in art frequently focus on the grand and uncontrollable forces of nature. Joseph Mallord William Turner expresses these Burkean ideas of the sublime through the depiction of natural destruction in his watercolors *The burning of the Houses of Parliament* (1834) and *Eruption of Vesuvius* (1817).

Central to his conception of the sublime is Burke’s assertion that pain is, in all cases, more severe than pleasure. According to Burke, any man would choose a lack of pain over the experience of pleasure, and further, Burke doubts “whether any man could be found, who would earn a life of the most perfect satisfaction, at the price of ending it in the torments” (36). Moreover, Burke distinguishes between personal and societal concerns as they relate to the sublime and beautiful. The sublime is related to self-preservation and so is focused upon the experience within the individual, while society and community, not self-perpetuation, are the driving forces of beauty (37). Having established the severity of sensation elicited by pain, Burke connects the concept of the sublime, which is the strongest emotion possible, to a source capable of inducing that feeling of pain or terror. Burke recognizes, however, that in order for a source to produce delight out of its terror, the observer must judge himself to be as close to harm as possible without it pressing too closely, for no delight is derived from a source when danger or pain are too threatening (36). Furthermore, the sublime source must also be realistic in order to produce such a feeling of terror, for its power is lost by the idea of fiction (43). To that end,

Burke claims that “there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight” (42). It is this connection with calamity and danger that is often represented in the artwork of the sublime.

Turner’s *The burning of the Houses of Parliament*, which occurred on October 16, 1834, represents the sublime by depicting the natural and destructive powers of fire over man-made creations. The terror elicited by viewing this violent assemblage of fiery colors is exactly the sort of passion Burke describes as necessary of the sublime. This watercolor representation of the fire at the Houses of Parliament induces Burke’s astonishment, which “is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (51). The viewer can make out a single tower remaining to the Houses of Parliament, but ultimately the threatening fire and smoke overwhelms him with a powerful sense of mortality and a lack of control. Again, these feelings correspond with Burke’s clear articulation of the self-preservation aspect of the sublime.

While the representation of the destructive power of nature is obvious in *The burning of the Houses of Parliament*, the sublime resulting from the terror of the painting is not due to enormity of scale. Burke recognizes this notion, as well, by stating “whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror be endued with greatness of dimensions or not...” (51). As Burke explains and Turner suggests with his artwork, the sheer destructive power of this fire and its supremacy over man’s creations is enough to elicit terror in the viewer. The sublimity of the representation is not lost simply because the scene does not involve a vast mountainous terrain or an enormous natural disaster, and the fact that the fire is violently overtaking and destroying the calm night is means enough

for horror. The painting is also in accordance with another of Burke's requirements of the visually pleasing sublime in that the viewer remains at a safe distance from the destruction. Burke believes that "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too closely" (42). As a result, Turner was necessarily careful to depict the scene at a substantial distance so that the viewer is affected by the destruction, yet safe from harm. It is interesting, however, how Turner employed the smudge of light color in the center of the foreground in order to represent the reflection of the fire. In its location at the bottommost point, this reflection of the fire is as close to the viewer as possible. So, while the viewer feels sufficiently removed from the fire itself, its effects are still in close range.

*Eruption of Vesuvius* is a more perfectly sublime work by Turner. This watercolor piece depicts a group of individuals witnessing the eruption of the enormous Mt. Vesuvius by a body of water. It is interesting to note the division of the grounds in the painting. Vesuvius is the clear focus of the work, and from the base to the fire and ash it spews, the mountain consumes a large portion of the piece. Turner purposefully represents the volcano as a massive form that easily dwarfs the human figures in the foreground. The fury of the eruption takes over the skies, which are plagued by fire, ash and menacing clouds. The volcano even affects the water, and the foremost boat, which is perhaps attempting to escape the fury at sea, appears to be unstable. Again, Turner is careful to place the volcano at a reasonably safe distance from the viewer because, as Burke explains, "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful..." (36).

The realistic features of this illustration are chiefly responsible for its sublime character. Every detail, from the billowy clouds to the man taken aback at the shore, serves an important

task in creating the desired affect in the viewer. This attention to detail is especially important to Burke, who claims that “the nearer it approaches the reality, and the farther it removes us from all idea of fiction, the more perfect is its power” (43). Again, Turner utilizes the reflection from the fire in the water as a source of connection between the destructive forces, the characters in the painting and the viewer. On this occasion, the reflection is particularly striking because a character standing on the shore is met and illuminated by the reflection of the eruption in the water. Though the eruption is taking place at a distance, it is able to reach those at shore by way of its reflection. Interestingly, Burke makes a comment about the destructive sublime that is especially applicable to Turner’s *Eruption of Vesuvius*. Burke says, “suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins...” and we know this to be true of Pompeii (43).

For Burke, “terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime” (52). He believes that the delight one experiences through interaction with the sublime is a direct result of the fear and astonishment produced by the work. For Turner, the best way of achieving the sublime was by depicting powerful destruction by natural disasters, and *The burning of the Houses of Parliament* and *Eruption of Vesuvius* are two such works. Through these paintings, the calamitous power of nature is utilized to induce terror in the viewer. In order to produce those strong emotions, however, the viewer must be as close to danger as possible without actual threat to his physical safety. As Burke declared, “so it is certain, that it is absolutely necessary my life should be out of any imminent hazard, before I can take a delight in the sufferings of others...” (44).