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The Contractility of Burke's Sublime and Heterodoxies in Medicine and Art

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With the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/59) Edmund Burke introduced a multilayered biomedical language into aesthetic theory. This language shared with the work of Christopher Nugent (his personal physician and father-in-law) significant epistemic and social features.¹ In the first section of this essay, I will suggest that this discourse drew on specific models of the theory of contractility. I have favored the term “contractility” (a later variant of “contractibility” or “contractibleness”) over the allied concepts of “irritability” or “excitability” because it points more clearly to the earlier mixed genealogies of vitalism on which I chose to focus. The language of solid contractility employed by Nugent and Burke provided an amplified vision of the economy of life, and was intertwined with the discovery of a particularly enhanced model of medical therapeutics which registered important social and professional developments. Together with the analysis of other forms of evidence, a discussion of James Barry’s portraits of Burke and Nugent will provide new insights into their heterodox ideas and identities, and also highlight significant coalitions between fringe sectors of the medical and artistic professions.

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¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (second edition, London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759).

In the second part of this piece, I will argue that the forces of contractility also provided a template for Burke's radical redefinition of the concept of the sublime as a specifically precious state of aggravated opposition—perhaps the most singular and yet neglected legacy of his sublime to modernity. This new aesthetic of amplified tension generated its own diverse discursive and political legacies, liberal as well as revolutionary, which Burke, before his death, sought to confront and reverse.

**CONTRACTILITY'S SOLID FIBERS,
DRASTIC PHYSIOLOGIES,
AND HETERODOX IDENTITIES**

Burke's use of physical language departed in a number of ways from established norms. In deciding, for example, to focus exclusively on the "primary pleasures" of aesthetic sensation and to deploy physiological language when explaining the intricate interface between mind and body,² Burke was dissenting from the authority of John Locke's associationism and the popular concept of the dominant role of "reason in producing our passions."³ With a sideways glance towards Locke, whom he in turn criticized and praised throughout the *Enquiry*, Burke protested that "it would be absurd . . . to look for the cause of our passions in association, [while] we fail of it in the natural properties of things."⁴ His definition of sublime affects in terms of "*pain or danger*," "*sickness*, and *death*,"⁵ disrupted a neo-classicist emphasis on physical rest and balance. Further, it established continuities between the physical concepts of pain, the psychological categories of terror, and a superior realm of high-intensity emotions called "delights." Burke depicted this continuity through a dynamic language of vibrating fibers, one that was increasingly popular in contemporary theories of contractility. Pain, terror, and sublime delights were coextensive precisely because they "act upon the same parts of the body and in the same manner," by causing "an unnatural tension of the nerves."⁶ Indeed, "agreeing, either primarily, or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves, they [pain, terror and delight] agree likewise in every

² *Ibid.*, 28–40 and 243–44.

³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 245–46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57–59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247–48.

thing else.”⁷ Burke repeatedly connected the sublime to a physiological image of contraction, which he understood as “no more than a violent pulling of the fibers, which compose any muscle or membrane, in whatever way this is done.”⁸ The same language underlies the physical explanation of the polar opposite of sublimity: beauty “acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system” and, together with pleasure, marks “a relaxation somewhat below the natural tone.”⁹ Burke completed these connections by linking the sublime to such states of maximal contractility as intense physical “labour” and their attendant effects of optimal health, while, at the same time, associating beauty with the relaxation of fibers and the physical disorders of lassitude.¹⁰

Literary historians and cultural critics often have dismissed Burke’s medical physiology. Their objections usually have focused on Burke’s primitivist model of description, including his concentration on nerves, muscles, and their primary motions, and on his treatment of the solid structures of fibers as the ultimate frontier of empirical observation. Yet despite this scholarly consensus, a study of medical history in this period demonstrates that attention to the gross phenomena of neuromuscular motion and to forms of methodological severity such as Burke’s were only deceptively unrefined. His endorsement of the immediacy of solidism was part of an eighteenth-century avant-garde and far-reaching endeavor to modernize physiological research.¹¹ This is made quite clear in the first four pages of Part IV of the *Enquiry*, which take the form of a manifesto for late eighteenth-century “phenomenalism” as against the fictive “corpuscularianism” of Newton’s theory of “elastic aether” (and, more implicitly, against equally speculative forms of mechanical fluidism such as hydraulic Newtonianism and iatromathematics).¹² In the modern history of contractility, this minimalist pragmatism is not at all unprecedented. Starting with Francis Glisson, the seventeenth-century English physician and medical philosopher, the systematic study of solid contractile fibers was conducted within a similarly empirical and pragmatic context. This reorientation of focus to

⁷ *Ibid.*, 248–49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 287–88.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 254–58.

¹¹ Theodore Brown, *The Mechanical Philosophy and the “Animal Economy”* (New York: Arno Press, 1981), 341–66.

¹² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 241–44. Karl M. Figlio, “Theories of Perception and the Physiology of Mind in the Late Eighteenth Century,” *History of Science* 12 (1975): 177–212, 179–85 (184).

fibers and their verifiable properties was central to the epistemic shift from fluid mechanics to vitalist physiology.¹³ Theories involving the concept of innate contractility gradually provided more efficient solutions to the problems of life precisely because they were simultaneously more economical in form and better adapted to them.¹⁴

Moreover, the formerly intractable vital phenomena that contractility was summoned to tackle had one important common feature: they were all attached to singularly dynamic activities of life. This was a crucial factor in exciting Burke's fascination with contractility. First, physiologists were surprised to notice that the forces exerted in contraction were too powerful to be explained by the flow of fluids which, Newtonians supposed, rushed into sacs of fiber in order to facilitate the contraction of muscles. Second, experimenters were astounded by the observation that the muscular fibers of recently deceased organisms still retained their ability to contract, even after their removal from the body.¹⁵ Finally, the involuntary nature of reflex action intensified existing skepticism about the supposedly placid, orderly, and superior operation of the rational "soul" or the "intelligent principle." In this context, the positing of a new concept of contractility as an innate "force in the fibers themselves, a life which makes them contract," allowed physiologists to shift their focus to formerly inexplicable phenomena with minds both uncluttered by past preconceptions and sufficiently stimulated by the singular energies of the phenomena that they sought to harness.¹⁶ This inbuilt dynamic component of contractility, one still captured by the terms "psychodynamic" or "biodynamic," was inseparable from its holistic operation in all parts of the body as well as its ability to incorporate a new aesthetic of systemic tension and sensitive interdependence. The tendency of fibers and muscles to contract was always responded to and "held in balance by the opposing muscles" and fibers in a continuous antagonism.¹⁷ Such influential medical figures as Bernard Siegfried Albinus or Hieronymus Gaub viewed fibers as being in "continuous oscillation, in constant movement as an expression of the *vis vitalis*."¹⁸ Indeed, without contractil-

¹³ Owsei Temkin, "The Classical Roots of Glisson's Doctrine of Irritation," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 38 (1964): 297–328 (301).

¹⁴ Hubert Steinke, *Irritating Experiments: Haller's Concept and the European Controversy on Irritability and Sensibility, 1750–1790* (Amsterdam, N.Y.: Rodopi, 2005), 19–40 (33–5).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

¹⁶ Albinus quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37 and 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. These points are also excellently analysed in H. Punt, "Albinus's Vitalistic Foundation of the Mechanistic Concept" in Bernard Siegfried Albinus, *On "human nature" Anatomical and Physiological Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Leiden* (Amsterdam: B. M. Israel, 1983), 83–127.

ity, fibers would be either in constant rest or trapped in an unchanging movement. Put forward in order to confront the excessive forces of contraction, contractility was from its very inception a concept compatible with Burke's definition of the sublime as a concept designed to encompass extreme states of power. In addition, the continuing semantic affiliations of the discourse of nerves and contraction with the mechanical notions of "steel chords" and "elasticity" invoked traditional metaphors of hardness, power and energy, which further amplified the force-oriented nature of the concept.¹⁹ These discursive intensities embedded in the biological model would happily join forces with Burke's new aesthetic program in his *Enquiry*: sublimity and contractility formed a felicitous union of concepts and languages. Moreover, in Burke's case the creation of this union was facilitated by the more intimate paths of human contact and personal biography. The same discursive regularities between phenomenalism, solidism, contractility, and the sublime that characterized Burke's thought at this stage can be found in Nugent's work as well.

Like so many other minor writers on animal contractility, Christopher Nugent (d. 1775) remains a neglected figure in the history of medicine. Little is known about his life apart from his association with Burke, except that he was born in Ireland, was a fervent Roman Catholic, studied medicine in France and practiced in fashionable Bath. Nugent entered Burke's life during the latter's little-documented nervous breakdown in 1750. Burke, who had already begun the first draft of the *Enquiry*, travelled to Bath and consulted Nugent on several occasions between 1750 and 1752.²⁰ Burke would fall in love with the physician's daughter, Jane Mary, and they married on the eve of the *Enquiry*'s publication early in 1757. Subsequently, Nugent moved to London and remained close to the Burkes. In association with his upwardly mobile son-in-law, Nugent developed a network of influential friends, including the eminent co-members of Samuel Johnson's famous "Literary Club," and he earned a modest reputation which was ratified by his election in 1765 to the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal Society. Burke's affection for Nugent and his respect for the doctor's precious talents are well documented in his correspondence.²¹ In Nugent, Burke found a rare example of "real good men" but also "a father,

¹⁹ See, for example, "Elastic Body" and "Contraction" in Abraham Rees, *Cyclopaedia; A Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1786).

²⁰ *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, eds. T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 1: 185, and *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 1: 115.

²¹ "An Epistle to Doctor Nugent," in McLoughlin/Boulton, 50–53.

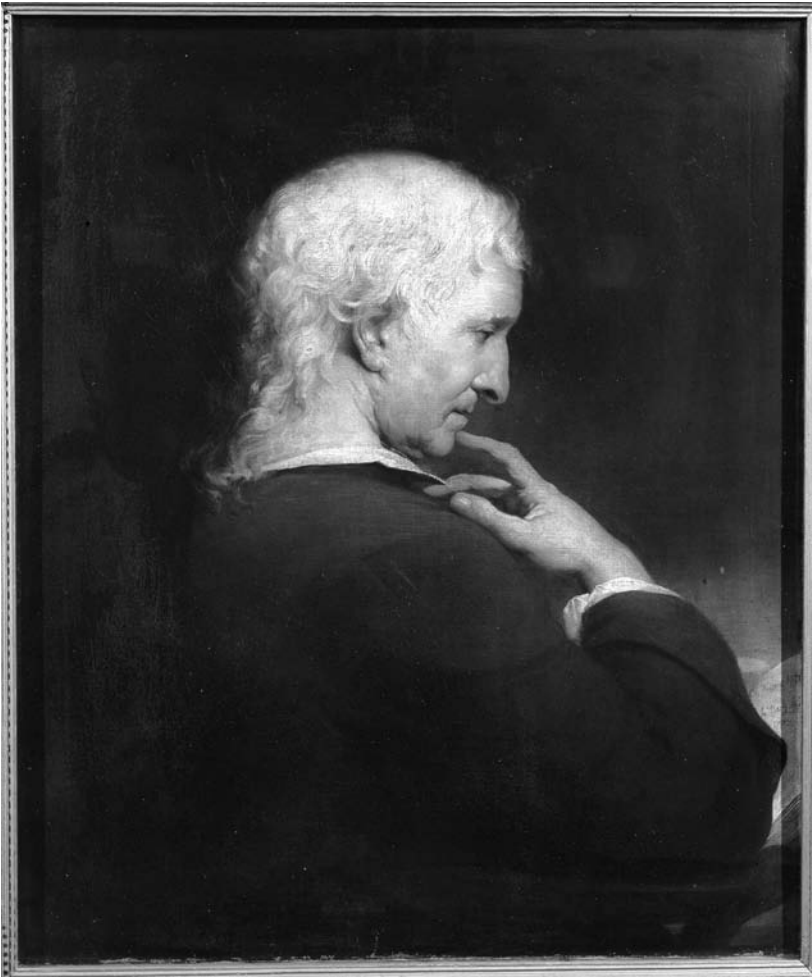


FIGURE 1: James Barry, *Christopher Nugent, M.D.*, 1772, Oil on Canvas, Victoria Art Gallery, Bath City Council, Bath.

a friend, and physician in one.”²² Nugent’s moral and intellectual integrity were captured in James Barry’s portrait (Figure 1), commissioned by the Burke family in 1772 after the former had returned from a trip to Italy which Burke had funded.

The painting, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1773 and reviewed in the contemporary press, focuses on the physician’s *gravitas*,

²² Burke to Charles O’ Hara (18 November 1771) in *Correspondence*, 2: 286.

depicted here with an unusual economy of visual means. From Nugent's dress to the minimalism employed in the depiction of space, everything contributes to the timelessness of the portrait and the probity of the sitter, firmly linking his medical identity with moral authority. In this respect, the portrait provides a visual equivalent to Burke's poem dedicated to Nugent in 1752. Indeed, Burke described Nugent as medical expert and moral agent, who "to the extreme had brought, the strictest Virtue, and the deepest thought," and had resolved the painful contradictions that split apart Burke's mind and body.²³ More importantly, this tribute to Nugent's medical ability was coming from a patient who already was well-versed in medical knowledge. Among the precious scraps of information that survive from the period of obscurity surrounding his nervous breakdown and salutary trips to Bath, there is, for example, a telling anecdote of Burke publicly engaging "in conversation with a [local] physician and displaying so much knowledge in that science, as surprised the professor of it."²⁴ At least as far as its physiological language of contractility was concerned, the *Enquiry* seems to be another informed tribute to Burke's physician, but this time as a medical writer and thinker.

Burke owned a copy of Nugent's only published text, the *Essay on the Hydrophobia*,²⁵ as well as an unpublished treatise on digestion and miscellaneous related papers. Nugent's *Essay* is a mixed work: on the one hand, it is an empirical "narrative of facts" and, on the other, a theoretical treatise on medical physiology. In the first part, Nugent described the case of Elizabeth Bryan's hydrophobia, an excessive fear of water occasioned by dog bites. He had attended to and cured her between July 27 and September 4, 1751, the same summer when the ailing Burke visited his physician at Bath. The nature of Bryan's case allowed Nugent to focus on a wide range of extreme phenomena of "fright," "convulsive agonies," "dizziness," and "violent risings" that frequently blurred the boundaries between body, mind, and the imagination.²⁶ Nugent was particularly interested in Bryan's complex psychosomatic afflictions, including the way her face convulsed in "signs of great terror at the sight" of objects akin with her current sufferings,²⁷ and her "frightful . . . dreams of falling into large pools of water or

²³ "Epistle," 52 and 50.

²⁴ Dixon Wecter, "The Missing Years in Edmund Burke's Biography," *PMLA* 53 (1938): 1102–25 (1113).

²⁵ Christopher Nugent, *An Essay on the Hydrophobia* (London, 1753).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

being pursued by dogs and the like.”²⁸ These themes converged with Burke’s attraction to extreme phenomena of primary or secondary sensations as well as with his interest in the physical dimensions of the violent passions of terror and fear.

The similarities between the epistemic model and language adopted by the two men went further. Nugent focused on the nervous system and, in the second section of the *Essay*, found that it regulated all phenomena of life. This emphasis on nerves was again articulated within a solidist environment, where their physiology was understood as a function of their contractility, a notion with dominant mechanical characteristics but not without a distinct proto-vitalist tenor. Nugent’s programmatic announcement that “Vibration, Pulsation, and Oscillation” were “the principal causes” for “the Subsistence of an animal Function” coincided with the physiological premises of Burke’s research. Nugent’s theory of contractility was also based on the same phenomenalist “primitivism.” Expressing the same impatience with the “great deal of curious speculation” regarding “the structure of an animal fiber” and its “various Kinds of Motion” that Burke later repeated almost verbatim,²⁹ he waved aside such pedantic distinctions, insisting instead that the plain and simple property of the fiber’s “elasticity” was a sufficiently solid starting point of research. Indeed, the fiber’s

Contractions and Dilatations; its being liable to be stimulated into greater and quicker Efforts of Contraction and Dilatation; and sometimes into constrictive Spasms; these are *Facts*, that, I think, are not denied by any body.³⁰

Moreover, for Nugent as for Burke, the motility of the nervous system oversaw the passage from health to disease. Health, “the natural and vital action of the Nerves,” consisted in their “natural salutary oscillations.” By contrast, disease was envisioned as a kinetic disorganization of the contractile motions of the fibers, an issue of “excited” and “irregular” spasms in the solids caused by “spasmodic strictures.”³¹ Disease had a fixed model of advancement proceeding from the most minute filaments towards the most complex plexuses of nerves and fibers—the human organs.³² More signifi-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 249.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

³² *Ibid.*, 83–87, 118–21, 125–29 and 138–40.

cantly, only when this purely solidist “contagion” was completed were the fluids affected. While the body, according to Nugent, “consists of solid fibres, which are constantly in exercise and softer fluids that are constantly in motion,”³³ their relative importance for the operations of life and health was far from equal. Compared to the forceful effects of the “tremulous virulence” of the solids triggered by the mechanical forces of impact, poisonous fluids were only a secondary consideration.³⁴ Indeed, Nugent’s study reads as an indictment of medical fluidism that overturned the long established medical aetiologies and theories of poisoning associated with hydraulic Newtonianism. In fact, the *Essay* was from its inception conceived as a polemical work, designed, as Nugent put it in his preface, to “weaken an implicit deference, that hath so long, and so unsuccessfully, been paid to certain opinions.”³⁵ As the *Essay* progressed it became clear that it was the work of Richard Mead, the Newtonian physician to George II and leading medical professional, which Nugent had chosen to denounce.³⁶

Nugent also relied upon a heterodox perception of therapeutic action, which approximated Burke’s maximalist ideas about the physical benefits of the sublime. Nugent’s new ideas of drastic therapy were based on the dynamic principle that as long as disease was primarily the result of “preternatural spasms,” first and foremost affecting the solid fibers of the organs,³⁷ therapy should consist in “counteracting” and “subduing”—in literally overpowering these spasms by superior forces “of a stronger but less dangerous kind.”³⁸ Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy, not only translated Nugent’s book into German in 1777, but also learned a great deal from Nugent’s medical perspective. By similarly treating disease as a derangement of the organism’s vital vibrations, Hahnemann, like Nugent, saw therapy as a matter of subduing kinetic dissonance by overlaying it with similar but stronger forces of another, remedial derangement.³⁹ In accordance with such active principles, Nugent endorsed a series of tonic and stimulant therapies: scorching by fire; searing with caustics; stimulating with salts and other pungent applications; or chafing with oils.⁴⁰ At first

³³ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83, 132–52 and 175.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, iii–iv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 124 and 130ff.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁹ John S. Haller, *The History of American Homeopathy* (New York: Haworth Press, 2005), 1–19.

⁴⁰ Nugent, 172–76.

glance, such aggressive techniques appear similar to the shock therapies adopted by traditional medicine, including an assortment of indiscriminately applied techniques of bloodletting, emetics or clysters. Such methods were frequently called “drastic” on the basis of their vehement form of application. However, Nugent’s cures allow a glimpse into the slow appearance of another new meaning of the term “drastic” which was soon to prevail, namely an economical rather than formal meaning of the term. This is to say that if traditional violent therapies aimed to deplete and debilitate, Nugent’s drastic therapies were actually aiming at fighting disease by directly energizing the body. In Nugent’s solidism, disease was no longer conceived in terms of fluidist notions of repletion, of morbid plethora clogging and impeding the circulation of fluids in the hollow nerves and tubular arteries. It did not primarily necessitate cathartic techniques of cleansing and removal, or debilitating evacuations to cure it. Within Nugent’s framework of contractility, vitalist notions of augmentation of the mass or energy of the solids made a first but unmistakable appearance, inflecting the tone of medical narrative towards therapies that were now drastic in the fullest sense of the word.

However, this change was never completed by Nugent: the practical first section of his book does not include therapies either particularly new or fully commensurate with the theoretical reflections on therapeutic intervention in the second part. By contrast, Burke’s championing of “pain” and “labor,” but also “tensions,” “convulsions,” “spasms” and other unorthodox types of extreme contractile activity explicitly operating “beyond the natural tone” was perhaps one of the earliest and most unembarrassed extrapolations of similar ideas into a fully developed rhetoric about the value of extreme states of contractility in the maintenance and optimisation of the health of body and mind.

Burke and Nugent’s expanded approach to the economies of sensation, health, and therapy challenged established ideals of polite moderation, whose social and professional scope would only be fully revealed much later. Brunonianism, the doctrine of John Brown, the Scottish disciple of William Cullen in the 1780s, provides an enlightening example of the maverick character and radical potential of these propositions. Although Brunonian adaptations of these ideas to the militant cause of Jacobin reform in medicine and society would certainly have been seen by Burke and Nugent as very unwelcome collateral effects,⁴¹ there are many significant ways in

⁴¹ *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe*, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1988).

which Brunonianism is connected with Nugent and Burke's sublime visions of life. Among these many connections were Brown's anti-speculative methodology, his enthusiastic focus on the nervous system, muscular contraction, and emotions. His positive re-evaluation of exciting powers in the operation of health, and his militant championing of maximal stimulation in the pursuit of therapeutic efficiency, share striking affinities with Burke's physiological vision. Brown's attempt to provide a historical lineage for his new sublime vision of medicine allowed for a retrospective but rare glimpse into the heterodox genealogy of Burke and Nugent's ideas. Indeed, in Brown's revisionist medical history, the examination of the history of drastic therapies was of singular value, as he used them to draw the fault-lines between obsolescence and modernity in medicine.⁴² However widely "regular practitioners in physic" might "have differed" in theory, they were, in Brown's eyes, "from the first accounts we have of the profession," agreed on a "universal" plan of therapeutic practice.⁴³ The only exceptions that Brown managed to locate, admittedly with various reservations, originated in groups operating on the margins of orthodox medicine. These included the "Alexipharmac brethren" who "opposed the practice of Dr. Sydenham"—the "English Hippocrates" and seminal figure of seventeenth-century medicine—and the "Empirics."⁴⁴ Brown especially appreciated the "drastic remedies" and "heating stimulant articles" of the Alexipharmac group, although he criticized the conservative rationale on which their theories were frequently predicated.⁴⁵ Likewise, he applauded the fact that the Empirics' pragmatism occasionally led them "to stumble upon a more successful [i.e. stimulant] cure," at least more frequently than the "dogmatism" of "regular practice."⁴⁶ And although he lambasted their lack of any sense of professional and social propriety,⁴⁷ Brown was sufficiently intrigued by such itinerant "quacks" as the notorious "Dr. Graham" and his invigorating baths of electrical currents and magnetic thrones.⁴⁸ Although maximalist perspectives on health and physiology, despite Brown's claims to the contrary, had already gained significant currency in established circles of medicine,—those whom Brown derisively called the "regulars"—in

⁴² John Brown, *Observations on the Principles of the Old System of Physic* (Edinburgh, 1787).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, lxi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, lxi-lxii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, lxxvi-lxxviii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, lxxix.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, lxxix-lxxxiii.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, lxxix.

Burke and Nugent's era such ideas were almost incomprehensible outside a vibrant but little-understood medical fringe. That fringe included not only Brown's underworlds of "irregulars," but also practitioners of plebeian medicine such as John Wesley, nonconformists like Francis Fuller, and Irish reformers and deists such as Richard Brocklesby, Burke's closest friend in London.⁴⁹

The heterodox forms of subjectivity invested in the medical languages that Burke and Nugent adopted were epitomized in the heterogeneous field of art. Portraiture, perhaps the most powerful field for the formulation and public circulation of images of the self in this period, is especially valuable for recovering these otherwise elusive textures of identity formation. A comparison of Barry's portrait of Nugent with Allan Ramsay's portrait of Richard Mead (Figure 2), whom Nugent criticized in his *Essay*, indicates that the social and medical world of outsiders to which Nugent belonged was also active in generating its own alternative and influential visual identities.

In the full-length portrait of Mead,⁵⁰ Ramsay exploited every standard visual device of civil portraiture for upwardly mobile medical men who sought acceptance by polite society. He chose an almost frontal angle, placing his sitter's left hand in a conventionally elegant gesture that connoted clemency. Mead is dressed in layers of costume and a long wig, placed in a stately red-backed chair underneath an opulent scarlet curtain, and situated within an authoritative classical interior complete with a dais, niche, and the statue of Hygeia. Hefty leather-bound books and letters on the table are eloquent testaments to the physician's extensive social networks and civil learning. They also attest to his reputation as an eminent antiquarian with a vast collection of coins, paintings and sculptures that frequently attracted the attention of such continental connoisseurs as J. J. Winckelmann. This regal image done in the grand manner was a fitting homage to the "prince of physicians," a professional not only extremely self-conscious of his status but also active in elevating the image of the medical profession as a whole. The type of medical fluidism that Mead came to emblemize signalled ambitions for professional patronage and political respectability, which "aug-

⁴⁹ The relations between such fringe figures and Burke's radical ideas on pain and labor are discussed in my "Pain, Labour and the Sublime: Medical Gymnastics and Burke's Aesthetics," *Representations* 91 (2005): 58–83.

⁵⁰ Ludmilla Jordanova, "Portraits, People and Things: Richard Mead and Medical Identity," *History of Science* 41 (2003): 293–313, and Alastair Smart, *Allan Ramsay: Painter, Essayist and Man of the Enlightenment* (London: Yale University Press), 65ff.



FIGURE 2: Allan Ramsay, *Richard Mead*, 1747, Oil on Canvas, Thomas Core Foundation of Children, London.

ured” the type of “success for physicians” that is clearly testified by this painting.⁵¹

Between Ramsay’s painting in the late European baroque tradition and Barry’s portrait there is a world of difference both in an artistic and a medical sense. If Mead’s portrait is a resolutely public picture, Barry’s emphasizes Nugent’s introversion. Nugent is seen almost from behind through an unusually taciturn angle of vision: his figure is turned towards the inside of the picture, thus avoiding visual contact with the viewer. While the head is depicted in a more conventional profile position—a veritable visual topos in mid-century professional portraiture evoking the austere kudos of antique coins—its downward tilt deliberately breaks away from tradition in order to emphasize once again the sitter’s inner mood. This atmosphere of solitary reflection is further enhanced by the soft yellow light that spotlights the physician’s head and hand, as well as by an almost complete omission of the material culture of status so central in Mead’s portrait. The one exception is the glowing book in the sitter’s hands inscribed proudly “Ch^r. Nugent, M.D.”: clearly the *Essay on the Hydrophobia*, Nugent’s only work. From the handling of body, light, and composition to complex iconographic metaphors and sophisticated art historical references for learned viewers, Barry’s portrait articulated a new mode of eulogy for the medical professional. This formula emphasized the sublimity of critical enquiry in medicine and its superior role in the combined pursuit of secular and religious enlightenment.

This private portrait remained in the Nugent family until the mid-twentieth century. Yet this image attempts to create for the sitter a limited public sphere of his own, paradoxically by emphasizing Nugent’s individuality. Among the reasons why this piece has been praised as one of Barry’s most technically impressive works, a real “*tour de force* of rich painting,”⁵² is the minute, energizing, and sympathetic way in which he treated all the individual traits of Nugent’s head: the flesh, hair, skin textures, and wrinkle patterns. Barry’s is an aesthetic of “particularities” and “details” with significant connections to radical cultures hostile to the polite abstraction of the period’s neoclassical ideal.⁵³ Moreover, in the context of debates regarding the proper relations between polite society and scientific knowledge, the

⁵¹ Anita Guerrini, “The Tory Newtonians: Gregory, Pitcairne, and their Circle,” *The Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 288–361, esp. 310 and 288–90.

⁵² William Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry* (London: Yale University Press, 1981), 69.

⁵³ David Solkin, *Painting for Money: the Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 264–76.

combination of individualism and solitary study forged by Barry's painting was bound to raise negative associations in gentlemanly society. Nugent would have epitomized all the wrong stereotypes for which "scholars," as Steven Shapin has explained, were regularly lambasted in the discourse of politeness: selfishness, bookishness, enthusiasm, and lack of civility and of usefulness.⁵⁴ Like his fluidism, Mead's portrait solicited the support of polite society and represented the new adjusted persona of the "gentleman-scholar" as promoted by genteel institutions of experimental science such as the Royal Society.⁵⁵ In contrast, Barry's Nugent relied on alternative spheres of legitimacy, that is, on emergent reinterpretations of the image of "scholars." Barry's "romantic" visual language and Burke's discussion of the sublime constitute early versions of this process. In their hands, the scholar increasingly re-emerged not as a bizarre creature "at once commendable, contemptible and strange" whom civil society preferred to view as a "failed gentleman,"⁵⁶ but rather as a man of intellect dedicated to the superior delights of mental labor. Faithfully following Burke's poem, Barry created for Nugent a new mix of identity which was "so little allied" to "the Courtly or pedantick pride,"⁵⁷ that is, allied neither to representations of the gentleman nor to those of the scholar in the old sense. Quite early in our current chronologies of "romanticism," Nugent emerged from Barry's portrait as a "genius" and "a holy man" who, as Burke again emphasized, "loved science" and simultaneously saw it "as a road to God."⁵⁸

As the century drew to a close, parallel processes were at work within the cultures of science and religious dissent. New nonconformist institutions of science and education, and new literary and philosophical societies in the provinces, would increasingly come under the control of the mercantile, industrial, and professional classes (among them, most prominently, medical men), in a process that consolidated the potent constellations of ideas and identities discussed here. Barry's portrait successfully captures these emerging, transitive, and highly-volatile models of self-presentation, not least because of the painter's own position as an outsider. In contrast to Ramsay, who had a profound understanding of the social importance of refinement and would rise to become a loyal "Painter to the King," Barry

⁵⁴ Steven Shapin, "'A Scholar and a Gentleman': The Problematic Identity of the Scientific Practitioner in Early Modern England," *History of Science* 29 (1991): 279–327, esp. 287–92, 299–312.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 295–99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁵⁷ "Epistle," 52.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*



FIGURE 3: James Barry, *Edmund Burke*, c. 1771, Oil on Canvas, The Board of Trinity College, Dublin.

was a “lowborn” republican from Ireland, who would eventually be ousted by the king himself from a hard-won post in the Royal Academy.

Similar patterns of interlocking identities and aspirations between painters and sitters were evident in Barry’s 1771 portrait of Burke (Figure 3). As William Pressly has noted, the similarities between the Nugent and Burke pieces are so extensive that they may well have been intended as

pendants.⁵⁹ The Burke portrait is not a virtuoso tour-de-force, but both in composition and in color it captures the subtleties of thoughtful suspense found in Nugent's, and communicates a similarly mixed style of identity. On the one hand, it presents another marginal man of "mean birth" and uncertain fortune who was employed as a hired hack, or, in Horace Walpole's more abrasive terms, another "Irish adventurer . . . born a papist."⁶⁰ Burke associated himself, perhaps too closely, with those on the social fringe, especially during the period of the *Enquiry's* composition to which the portrait alludes. Yet the portrait's judicious representation of the sitter also registers the tactful ambitions of a political agent and man of letters, whose socially upward climb as a politician and leading spokesman of the Rockingham group had already begun to yield results through carefully cultivated aristocratic patronage.

The medicine of contractility encoded a multiple series of tensions—simultaneously textual, visual, epistemic, and professional. The passages from fluidism to solidism and from hydraulic contraction to vitalist contractility; or, from quietist ideas of health to maximal strategies of living, and from the professional ideal of polite science and gentlemen-scholars to dissenting approaches to "genius," were by no means always neatly sketched out. Yet the distinctions drawn here do register important changes of emphasis and texture which, I would suggest, provide valuable new contexts for a fuller understanding of the scientific ideas, social aspirations and scholarly identities that Burke's theory of the sublime both endorsed and facilitated. Moreover, Burke's insertion of fraught histories of contractility into the *Enquiry* had larger implications for his redefinition of the sublime, and for the text as a whole. The discourse of contractility is capable of bringing into focus some notoriously elusive but no less important aspects of the concept of the sublime as it embarked on its long artistic and political career.

THE CONTRACTILITY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE SUBLIME AND ITS RADICAL LEGACIES

The question of the subject/object relation in the operation of the sublime has long been central to the way in which the history of the concept in the

⁵⁹ William Pressly, *James Barry: The Artist as Hero* (London: Tate Gallery), 69.

⁶⁰ Martin Kallich, "Horace Walpole Against Edmund Burke: A Study in Antagonism," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 9 (1968): 834–63 and 927–45 (846–47).

eighteenth century has been told.⁶¹ In these histories Burke's sublime occupies an awkward place between the older sublime of external nature and the Kantian relocation of the concept in the subjective experience of the mind. In this context it has not always been possible to highlight the fact that the *Enquiry's* deliberate emphasis on charting the sources of the sublime in external nature did not aim to produce a simplistic taxonomy of fixed objects, but rather a dynamic model that bound together external objects and subjective experience in a highly interactive relationship.

First, Burke's "sources" of the sublime are not exactly "objects," but rather unstable tangles of conditions of possibility. "Infinity" and "vastness," "succession and uniformity," "darkness" and "light," "obscurity" and "power," or "intermittence" mark out processes, or rather fluctuating frameworks of general conditions of appearance that can, in principle, be applied to any object. Moreover, a closer examination of the *Enquiry's* list of sources of the sublime reveals that they operate like "hinges" that tie subject and objects together according to the rhythms of contractility, which in turn force them to move between antithetical points of reference. Indeed, Burke's sections on different types of "privation" such as "vacuity," and uniformity,⁶² for example, offered him the opportunity to appreciate the sublime nature of their opposites, namely, "magnificence" and the "great profusion of things."⁶³ Likewise, the analysis of the delights of "vastness" and "greatness of dimension" beckoned to the sublimity of such microscopic phenomena as the "wonders of minuteness" and "the infinite divisibility of matter."⁶⁴ Just as the sublime of every "great extreme of dimension" conjures up the intensity of every "last extreme of littleness," every other category of Burke's sublimity continually summons up its opposite.⁶⁵ Most importantly, there are points within the *Enquiry* where Burke directly acknowledges the importance of these contradictory movements, and treats them as *per se* sublime conditions. The section on "Light" is particularly eye-opening in this respect, erecting a veritable hierarchy of sublime stimuli. Indeed, at the bottom of Burke's scale of the sublime is "such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye."⁶⁶ On a

⁶¹ Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935), 1–9, 106; Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2–4.

⁶² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 125, 132ff.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 140–42.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 127–29.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 128–29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

similar level, a “light of an inferior strength to this if it moves with great celerity, has the same power”: “lightning” is a good example of how “extreme velocity” can be “productive of grandeur.”⁶⁷ At a step higher, “darkness” becomes “more productive of sublime ideas than light”; and, finally, and most significantly, “a quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light, has yet a greater effect.”⁶⁸ Thus the force of the sublime is not reliant on the independent impact of a single source of immense power. In fact, “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” is staked on bipolar forms of motion.⁶⁹ Burke repeated this in the section on “Intermitting”—the place where this aesthetic of contrasts acquires its own separate name and category: “A light now appearing, and now leaving us, and so off and on, is even more terrible than total darkness.” Likewise, “a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, repeated after intervals,” is “more alarming than total silence.”⁷⁰ The dynamic rule of passing across opposite states of stimulation marks for Burke the most intense form of sublimity, a type of hyper-sublimity that is distinctly superior to that predicated on the generally overrated principle of privation.⁷¹

Burke rooted these aggravated cycles of contradiction characteristic of the sublime in the body. Cases abound where the description of the sublime as a passage between extremes replicated the physiological function of contractility as an alternate crossing between contraction and dilation. This is explored at different corporeal levels, from the ultimate structural unit of the fiber to the body as a whole. Such situations as taking a false step after descending a flight of stairs, or having a “dream of falling down a precipice” in “first inclining towards sleep” are abrupt states of relaxation that generate the kind of “most violent start,” “convulsive spring,” or bodily jolt, essential to the feeling of the sublime.⁷² Indeed, Burke located the “origin of our ideas of the sublime” at what he perceived to be a baffling, contradictory, but clearly physiological threshold, where “a change as produces a relaxation should immediately produce a sudden convulsion”; where “any change made contrary to expectation” causes the body to “restore itself by as quick and vigorous an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles.”⁷³

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 154 and 152.

⁷¹ For examples of this disproportionate emphasis on “privation,” see Jean Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” *Art Forum* 22 (1984), 36–43, esp. 40–41.

⁷² Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 281 and 284.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 282–84.

The section on “darkness” brings together these different functions of the sublime. In the second edition of the *Enquiry*, Burke responded to Oliver Goldsmith’s objections that types of “relaxation” such as the simple “dilatation of the pupil” in darkness “may be [as] productive of the sublime” as painful contractions.⁷⁴ Burke used Goldsmith’s example to reassert the drastic and contractile logic of sensation upon which his approach to the sublime was based. The pupil, for, Burke was a complex kind of “sphincter,” “furnished with antagonistic muscles” called “the radial fibers of the iris”: the pupil begins to relax “no sooner . . . than these fibers wanting their counterpoise, are forcibly drawn back.” It is precisely this painful reflex, Burke added, that, in darkness, “opens the pupil to a considerable wideness,” and gives the false impression of relaxation, when it actually is a maximal state of contractility.⁷⁵ Moreover, in situations of great darkness, this mechanism of reflex contractility was aggravated to the point of extraordinary phenomena of painful hallucination. Indeed, “in such a state [of tension and] whilst the eye remains open, there is a continual nusus to receive light” that is accompanied by “flashes, and luminous appearances.”⁷⁶ Burke had already noted that the inverse effect was also true. Such “extreme light” as the dazzling sun not only left an “impression” of “two black spots” in the eyes, but also “by its very excess” is frequently “converted into a species of darkness.”⁷⁷

Darkness was transformed into light, and light into darkness: the Burkean sublime was best captured in this ideal of rapid slippage of light into darkness, of each category into its opposite; ultimately, of dilatation into contraction. In an unmistakable evocation of the physiology of contractility, Burke insisted that such sublime phenomena can be understood as “nothing but the effect of spasms.”⁷⁸ At the level of the fiber, medical writers had indeed already described similarly sublime phenomena of spasmic passage with comparable astonishment. As Glisson put it, sensitive and contractile parts of the body, “as soon as they are distended beyond their wont, or more than they can bear conveniently, enter into immediate opposition”: “their resistance” to extreme relaxation precipitates an equally rapid and extreme “contraction of all fibers.”⁷⁹ In replicating Glisson’s awe, Burke shaped the sublime not just as a high-intensity passage,

⁷⁴ *Monthly Review*, May 1757, 473–80 (480).

⁷⁵ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 279–80.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 278–79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Temkin, 301.

but rather as a specifically accelerated kind of contradiction at the outermost thresholds of which opposite extremes collapse into each other. What is even more important, Burke was quite aware of where these discursive forces were leading his investigation, and accordingly coined a definition of the sublime which has curiously remained neglected. Burke indeed celebrated the fact that “opposite extremes operate equally in favour of the sublime, which in all things abhors mediocrity,”⁸⁰ and grounded the specificity of his concept on the principle of aggravated polarities: “two ideas as opposite as can be imagined [are] reconciled in the extremes of both; and both in spite of their opposite nature [are] brought to concur in producing the sublime.” The sublime was this unique force *in* and *by* which “extremes” were equally accommodated; indeed, Burke added, “is an idea not only poetical in a high degree, but strictly and philosophically just.”⁸¹

It is evident that Burke’s definition of the sublime seems embedded in the physiology of contractility. Yet this conclusion should not create the impression that the discourse of the sublime can be neatly reduced to a straight product of medical science. Though the growing cultural currency of medical contractility is undoubtedly reflected in the critical role it assumed in Burke’s reorganization of aesthetics, the discourse of contractility exceeded medical theory. Rather, it was a philosophical discourse, a compound hypothesis and a mode of reasoning with a long history in natural philosophy, and an impressive legacy. Moreover, contractility in medicine was inextricably bound to an aesthetic problematic. First, Glisson “realised, as Harvey [had], that reaction upon irritation implied a kind of perception” with its own distinct forms.⁸² Second, as intimated above, this aesthetic had from the very beginning its own sublime rules of birth and operation. Contractility had always been a way of naming and managing a tangle of primeval and overwhelming phenomena whose extreme energies rendered them incomprehensible. Albinus correctly preferred the Hippocratic term *enormon* (ενομοον) for describing the vital principle of contractility, a term that in Greek designated a singularly energetic and innate impetus of motion.⁸³ Here was a sufficiently capacious name for a force that was not only immanent, and thus obscure, but also uncontrollable by the will and “larger than life”: a residual material power outlasting death and surpassing life itself.⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, Nugent replicated the same

⁸⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 146–47.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸² Steinke, 24.

⁸³ Punt, 111–20.

⁸⁴ Steinke, 34–40, 194–206.

sense of astonishment when he singled out as the most essential feature of contractility the fact that fibers were “always kept upon the stretch; always beyond their natural point of rest.” In fact, the contractile fiber was for Nugent always “*in a State of Violence; and in spite of its Nature.*” More crucially, Nugent’s theory of contractility was part of a new principle of continual contrariety that pervades “all Nature,” which was now seen to be “in a constant Tenor of Pulsation through all its Parts.”⁸⁵ And this sublime vision of the world, which Nugent shared with Burke, was no less than an emerging epistemic paradigm, so intriguing and so powerful that Immanuel Kant could not have failed to notice it. Just six years after Burke’s *Enquiry* and just before he wrote his own observations on the sublime in 1764, Kant was one of the first to address the important philosophical values of “real” and “possible oppositions.”⁸⁶ In the process, his attention was riveted by the way in which natural phenomena confirmed the existence in “different forms of matter” of the same alternating “negative and positive causality.” Such phenomena included cases of electric and magnetic polarity, weather and thermal inversions, and ultimately, the polar mechanics of attraction and repulsion.⁸⁷ Kant marvelled at the singularly unyielding nature of these “great mysteries of nature,” and, like Burke, he was convinced that they “conceal important truths.”⁸⁸

It is evident that the serious preoccupation with contrarieties in nature was not an entirely new phenomenon. T. J. Clark’s insightful visual analysis of Nicolas Poussin’s landscapes highlights the philosophical and epistemic drama of oppositions in the painter’s new form of materialist rationalism as accurately and fully as any text-based interpretation would have done.⁸⁹ Likewise, even Winckelmann’s neoclassicism with its quietist ideals of simplicity and grandeur, has recently been shown by Alex Potts to have been informed by the vital value of disparities, oppositions and ambiguities, for the re-animation of art, taste, and their histories.⁹⁰ As Peter Hanns Reill has

⁸⁵ Nugent, 42–44.

⁸⁶ Kant, “Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy (1763),” in *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, ed. David Walford with Ralph Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207–41. I am grateful to Avi Lifschitz for drawing my attention to this extraordinary text.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 223–26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁸⁹ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁹⁰ Alex Potts, “Introduction” in J. J. Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 1–53, esp. 16–18, 31–37.

brilliantly demonstrated, such singularly energetic modes of “fascination with extremes—boundaries, limits,” and active oppositions would have become exceptionally productive in late eighteenth century forms of “Enlightenment vitalism” in natural science as well as the humanities.⁹¹ Yet the paradigm within which the *Enquiry* belonged opens on to something significantly different and rare. In Poussin’s paintings or Winckelmann’s writings, the fascination with opposition has continued, with different significant nuances tied to fantasies of resolution and a largely quietist rhetoric. As Reill’s analysis of the continental paradigm has shown, these fantasies ratified a “harmonic view of reality” in which “opposing or conflicting tones were resolved through the assumed existence” of some tensile and ambiguous but ultimately quietist “intermediation,” “point of rest” or “equilibrium.”⁹² In all of these cases, to paraphrase Clark, “the vertigo” of opposition “happens within limits, within a sustaining architecture.”⁹³ It is precisely in Burke’s unprecedented definition of the vertigo of slippage as in and by itself a rewarding aesthetic and epistemic experience that Burke’s originality and heterodoxy lay; and it is my suggestion that the extensive interface between the paradigms of sublimity and contractility that I have described was pivotal in bringing this new conception of aggravated oppositions to the surface of linguistic representation with unprecedented lucidity.

To match its broad cultural frames of reference, contractility had equally large implications for the *Enquiry* as a text. The endless oscillations of Burke’s *Enquiry* between natural theology and empirical science, science and emotion, reason and reflex, knowledge and ignorance; or, between clarity and obscurity, exactitude and abstraction, vision and hearing, and painting and poetry, have all perplexed scholars for a long time.⁹⁴ Burke’s “ubiquitous use of oppositions” has traditionally been treated within the framework of an “antithetical mode of thought” in a dualist quest for foundational truths.⁹⁵ Recently, more sensitive approaches to the “pulsations” and “spasms” of the concept of the sublime as well as the *Enquiry*’s “dialec-

⁹¹ Peter Hanns Reill, “Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences in Late Enlightenment Germany: The Case of Wilhelm von Humboldt,” *History and Theory* 33 (1994): 345–46, esp. 349–54.

⁹² Clark, 198 and 156, Reill, 353, and Kant, 226.

⁹³ Clark, 127.

⁹⁴ These oppositions are the core of Burke’s contractile trope of analytical exploration and their significance for future materialist science and art is analysed in my book in progress *Sublime Realism: Bodies, Medical Men and Art Professionals, 1757–1824*.

⁹⁵ Boulton and McLoughlin, 15–20.

tical reversals” and “giddy reversibility” have been developed.⁹⁶ They have generated, however, no further efforts to unpack either the historical and discursive provenance or the literary functions of these fluctuations. This essay has argued that such large-scale discursive rhythms were developed in close association with the historically-specific practices surrounding the language of contractility. Numerous signs indicate, for example, that in his epistemological approach, Burke was consciously exploiting alternating oppositions in order to introduce the much needed forces of “energy” and “error.” This might, perhaps, be the proper context for understanding his conviction that “nothing tends more to the corruption of science than to suffer it to stagnate.” The “waters” of science “must be troubled before they can exert their virtues,” and it is through this mediation of turbulence that the scholar may get the “chance to make even his errors subservient to the cause of truth.”⁹⁷ This specimen of stochastic exploration epitomises a whole Enlightenment tradition of “errant modes of discovery,” whose importance as the necessary subplot of the “age of reason” we have only recently started to understand more fully.⁹⁸ Such pronouncements clearly reveal the larger epistemological role that Burke assigned to the sublime forces of contradiction. The originality of Burke’s *Enquiry* is that it consciously produced with the concept of the sublime a historically specific way of generating oppositions and tensions as modes in themselves of positive exploration and singular delight. In this sense, I would suggest, Burke’s theory of the sublime marks one of the possible Enlightenment genealogies of current models of critical inquiry and related notions of slippage and ambiguity. And in this sense, it underlines the more general point that the principles (deconstructionist and other) that cultural historians sometimes borrow from present-day theoretical models are frequently to be found within the historical fabric of the texts that they analyse, in forms often far better adapted to the specific labor of interpretation that they undertake.

Finally, Burke’s new definition of the aesthetic of the sublime as a state of extreme oppositions also had its own political implications in light of the medical and social politics of contractility. It is not coincidental, for

⁹⁶ See Ashfield/De Bolla, 128; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 51–73 (56); W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 128, and Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37–54, respectively.

⁹⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 92.

⁹⁸ David Bates, “The Epistemology of Error in Late Enlightenment France,” *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 29 (1996): 307–27.

example, that despite his other disagreements with Burke, it was William Hazlitt, the “Revolutionist,” who was among the first to identify the “force of contrast” in Burke’s writing and his unique ability “to unite the most opposite extremes,” while viewing both as the essence of the author’s “gusto” and “genius.”⁹⁹ Burke indeed knew that “bringing together . . . the most opposite and unpromising materials would [set them up to] blaze out into glorious light by their collision.”¹⁰⁰ The delights of contrariety encoded in the contractile sublime could provide a useful platform to rethink the ways in which the *Enquiry* might be linked to some of its most dangerous political legacies within a variety of oppositional discourses, including plebeian and middle-class examples of radical opposition at the turn of the century. “The extraordinary appeal of the sublime for Revolutionary thought” frequently revolved around the “binary oppositions” and “dual qualities of the sublime experience,”¹⁰¹ and helped generate new cultural and political forms of “affective revolution.”¹⁰² Despite eventually reverting to Toryism, such young radicals as Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Humphry Davy left behind them ideas that “would remain markers for others.”¹⁰³ In his conversion to the anti-revolutionary politics of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1791), Burke was similarly contradictory, without compromising the far-reaching implications of his earlier work.

The complex interfaces between theories of the sublime and the French Revolution continue to stimulate highly sophisticated scholarly discussions. Considerable work remains to be done, however, in charting the continuities and discontinuities between the drama of revolution and the Burkean sublime as seen from the perspective of contractility discussed here. Many of Burke’s contemporaries saw these continuities, but the discontinuities are equally numerous. On the one hand, Burke became increasingly keen to

⁹⁹ William Hazlitt, “The Character of Burke” (1807), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M Dent, 1932), 7: 301–13 (310–13). Kevin Gilmartin has analyzed the indispensable role played by “the right of contradiction” in Hazlitt’s advanced understanding of “the structure of radical opposition” in *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Oppression in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 227–33.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁰¹ Marie-Hélène Huet, “The Revolutionary Sublime,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 (1994): 51–64, esp. 51–52, 62–63.

¹⁰² Jean-Pierre Dubost, “The Sublime Adverse and Its Sadian Reverse: Kant, Sade, Schiller,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 (1994): 83–93, and Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, “The Affective Revolution in 1790s Britain,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2001): 491–521.

¹⁰³ Hunt/Jacob, 497.

keep the energy of his aesthetic of binary oppositions within the bounds of contemporary liberal politics, the “tumult” of parliament, “the dissention and rage of party,”¹⁰⁴ and the socio-economic ups and downs and “mad scramble” of middle-class ascendancy.¹⁰⁵ One of the *Enquiry*’s reviewers could already in 1757 grasp the problematic affinities between Burke’s sublime and the unforgiving fluctuations of the new market economy of the stock exchange, i.e., of the kind of “stock jobbing” in which Burke’s life was frequently seen to be “immersed”¹⁰⁶ (and not always to the benefit either of his finances or his political image). However, Burke was right to be alarmed by the ease with which the unorthodox propositions of his youth could be reworked to accommodate more dangerous struggles such as the sublime spectacle of revolutionary violence. This may explain why his *Reflections*, which advocated a political aesthetic of moderation, also included a patently anti-scientific language that revived the much older rhetoric of the “body politic.” Burke, in the 1790s, could see more clearly the uncontrollable elements specific to the rigorous materialism of contractile sensation in his earlier treatise, and thus took deliberate steps to renounce it.

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¹⁰⁴ Burke to Charles O’ Hara (31 May 1769) in *Correspondence*, 2: 26.

¹⁰⁵ Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 21–45.

¹⁰⁶ *Literary Magazine* 2 (1757): 182–89, esp. 187–88, and Krallich, 853.