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Dying between the Lines: Infinite Blindness in Lessing's *Laokoon* and Burke's *Enquiry*

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Abstract The essay studies the ways in which *death*—the word, the concept, and the friction between word and concept—informs aesthetic programs of Lessing and Burke. Both writers turn (and return often) to death as a kind of artistic touchstone and, in doing so, illustrate divergent schools of Enlightenment aesthetic thought. Lessing wants to define and maintain, if only conceptually and only pragmatically, the borders between spatial and temporal representation; Burke, to collapse the borders between space and time, if only imaginatively and momentarily. Lessing, in both the *Laokoon* and *How the Ancients Represented Death*, although nervous about the slipperiness of the word *death*, seems to embrace death's certainty; it is an end, the end, the limit to end all limits. Burke, on the other hand, treats death as “the king of terrors”; he opens himself, at least nominally, to the “obscurity” of death, to the possibility of the infinite. Beneath the surface, though, Burke is profoundly ambivalent about giving up finite, spatialized representation in favor of a potentially infinite temporal flow, and his treatment of Milton’s “universe of death” is a fascinating study in this ambivalence. This essay closely studies the tropes—blindness, for instance—with which Lessing and Burke approach death and suggests that their strategies are at root more similar than may appear. Both find themselves in a linguistic predicament, and *death* becomes for both a metaphor for the strife between natural and arbitrary signs.

'Tis a strange place, this Limbo!—not a Place,
Yet name it so;—where Time and weary Space

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Fettered from flight, with night-mare sense of fleeing,
 Strive for their last crepuscular half-being . . .
 But that is lovely—looks like human Time,—
 An old man with a steady look sublime,
 That stops his earthly task to watch the skies;
 But he is blind—a statue hath such eyes . . .
 Lip touching lip, all moveless, bust and limb—
 He seems to gaze at that which seems to gaze on him!
 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Limbo”

In the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, St. Augustine (1963: 11.13) asks a simple, impossible question of his God: “What then is time? I know what it is if no one asks me what it is; but if I want to explain it to someone, I find that I do not know.” Augustine professes an intuitive awareness of temporal extension and continuity, but when he attempts to define time ontologically, he finds himself forced into a kind of provisional nihilism: “Nevertheless, I can confidently assert that I know this: that if nothing passed away there would be no past time, and if nothing were coming there would be no future time, and if nothing were now there would be no present time” (ibid.). Like Aristotle’s (1982: chap. 7) famous definition of *mimesis praxeos* (the “imitation of an action”) in the *Poetics* as a continuity possessing “a beginning, a middle, and an end,” Augustine’s definition of time is both ridiculous and profound; it states the obvious in a way that shows it to be anything but obvious. Augustine’s sense of temporality is suspended between a past that “no longer is” and a future that “is not yet,” and he despairs of finding time’s being in an illusionary “now” which “has no extension” (1963: 11.21). He finally arrives, after much consideration, right back where he began: with the confession of a primal desire to freeze time in an infinite, deathlike instant and a prayer for his blindness to be lifted (“Heal my eyes and let me share the joy of your light” [ibid.: 11.31] so that he might catch a glimpse of eternity’s pure, unadulterated stasis: “Can we not hold the mind and fix it firm so that it may stand still for a moment and for a moment lay hold upon the splendor of eternity which stands forever, and compare it with the times that never stand, and see that no comparison is possible?” (ibid.: 11.11). The answer to this question is, of course, that we cannot. Augustine asks for a comparison that will allow us to see that no comparison is possible, but if we could see the latter, we would never attempt the former. The message (that no comparison is possible) contradicts the viability of its medium (perceptual comparison), which in this case means that the medium, insofar as it is unable to mediate, is the message.

Augustine’s experience of time hinges on his own limitation, his own

finitude, which in turn is defined by a presupposition of infinitude that maintains a conceptual position just out of reach. (I draw here on the French word *maintenant*, a “now” that suggests etymologically Augustine’s spatialized sense of “laying hold,” or “holding in hand”—thus “maintains for now.”) The friction between temporal flow and spatial stasis, as it is represented by Augustine’s untenable comparison of times that never stand with an eternity which stands forever, thus parallels an ontological friction between life and death.¹ From the perspective of a living consciousness, death never *is*; it exists as an always impending border, as the finitude that makes life de-finable, but its potential can never be realized. Just as Augustine’s experience of now is defined as an arbitrary moment in which the significance of now passes, so must the temporal realization of death be defined as the moment in which realization itself is obviated: “It appears that we cannot truly say that time exists,” he concludes, “except in the sense that it is tending toward nonexistence” (1963: 11.14).

For the purposes of this essay, Augustine’s paradoxical ruminations prefigure and introduce a nexus between two seemingly divergent schools of Enlightenment aesthetic thought. On one side, in what we might call Lessing’s aesthetics of definition, there is a desire to define and maintain, if only conceptually and only pragmatically, the borders between spatial and temporal representation; on the other side, meanwhile, there is the impulse to collapse the borders between space and time, if only imaginatively and only momentarily, that characterizes Edmund Burke’s aesthetics of the indefinite. I suggest this opposition of Lessing and Burke for much the same reason that Augustine would have us compare times that never stand with an eternity which stands forever. The comparison is intended not so much to differentiate one from the other as to establish a useful conceptual friction that will allow us to open the spatiotemporal enclosures and/or dividers—what I call the *maintenants*—of both aesthetic theories and to glimpse their mutual dependence on and anxiety about the implications of finitude and infinity.

Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1990 [1757]) was written just a few years before Lessing’s *Laokoon* (1962 [1766]), and the two texts share remarkably similar concerns.² Burke

1. The most useful essay on the ontological implications of time in the *Confessions* is Ricoeur 1984: 5–30.

2. Lessing knew Burke’s *Enquiry* well. His friend Moses Mendelssohn wrote a review of it, Lessing exchanged letters with both Mendelssohn and Nicolai about it, and Lessing himself began a translation of it. William Guild Howard (1907: 618–19) speculates that Lessing did not acknowledge Burke’s influence on the *Laokoon* because of his “substantial agreement with Burke’s conclusions concerning painting and poetry,” and the fact that “Lessing developed his case by refuting propositions made by theorists with whom he did not agree.”

and Lessing substantially agree both in opposing the *ut pictura poesis* tradition of poetic representation and in basing their refutations at least in part on an assumed difference between the “natural” signs of painting, or the spatial arts, and the “arbitrary” signs of poetry.³ They differ significantly, however, in the aesthetic function they ascribe to language’s arbitrary sign. Lessing wants to reinscribe language in a natural system of representation, by emphasizing the way that its inherent temporality and transparency call forth the reader’s own “painterly” imagination.⁴ Burke goes the other way in emphasizing the sublime obscurity and unnatural (at least from Lessing’s perspective) combinations of ideas that can be conjured by the opacity of words as abstracts signs. While Lessing (1962 [1766]: 86) praises Homer for his practice of representing “nothing but successive actions,” Burke (1990 [1757]: 5, 7) commends Milton for his ability obscurely to represent “ideas not presentable but by language; and an union of them great and amazing beyond conception.” I suggest that Lessing and Burke constitute flip sides of the same aesthetic coin, and that each side is, by definition (and indefinability, obscurity, or the impossibility of limits), both bound by and blind to what the other one sees. At the center of this coin and at the center of our concerns here, meanwhile, abides the same liminal aporia described by St. Augustine: in the conceptual space opened and framed by the conflict between Burke’s “obscurity” and Lessing’s “limits” lie the opposing representational impossibilities of diachronic flow and synchronic stasis, infinity and definability, eternity and death. Ultimately I offer a revisional reading of the tension in Enlightenment aesthetics between definition and indefinability as means or modes of mimetic representation. At stake in this tension is a sensual, sighted semiotic that allows but elides the possibility of the infinite and that shields (in the protecting and projecting sense of an *ekphrastic* shield) a visionary aesthetic of not-quite-nihilistic blindness behind the concept of its arbitrary sign. My reading revolves around the only arbitrary sign that, signally, both Lessing and

3. “Natural” signs supposedly derive from a connection given by nature and are grounded in the senses, while “arbitrary” signs are instituted in the human intellect and grounded in convention. Painted grapes look like real grapes, and thus represent grapes by a natural connection. The word *grapes*, meanwhile, has no such natural connection to the real objects of representation; we could just as easily call them *dogs*, and as long as our community agreed to it, we would know what we meant and the intellectual image of grapes would be called forth. Lessing’s distinction has long since been qualified and/or refuted by critics informed by postmodern semiotics. Two of the most notable treatments of the question are Wellbery’s (1984: 9–42) and Krieger’s (1992: 31–64).

4. Burwick (1991: 104) discusses this question profitably in terms of the drama, in which both temporal and spatial representation are natural. “A poetic narrative” for Lessing, he suggests, “describes movement and action in the temporal medium of language, and the auditor must then use his imagination to visualize spatially what is narrated in temporal sequence.”

Burke single out for extended theoretical analysis; that is, of course, the singular sign named death.

In his chapter on Lessing's *Laokoon*, Simon Richter (1992: 63) argues that "Lessing's aesthetics . . . is based on a denial of death. Appropriately, its primary trope is euphemism . . . the rhetorical maneuver of substituting a pleasant, harmless, or beautiful word in place of the terrible reality signified by another." The problem with euphemism, he argues, is that it "denies the death of the body." In dialogue with Richter, I suggest that any representation of death is already conceptually euphemistic, and that Lessing's aesthetic program persistently reveals the abyssal semiotic regress initiated by mimetic attempts to represent the unrepresentable. There is a vast difference for Lessing between "the death of the body" and what, in *How the Ancients Represented Death* (1890 [1769]), he calls "the deity of Death": the former is a corporeal event subject to mimetic representation by "natural signs," a kind of Aristotelian "object of imitation"; the latter, meanwhile, is a personified abstraction that stubbornly maintains the irreducible impossibility of its own representation in a kind of *mise en abyme* of euphemistic substitution. Death as a potential negation of subjectivity, as the impending absence of perceptual and cognitive capacity, is *not* a reality for Lessing. Instead, it is a pressing possibility whose potential realization can be conceived of only in the future anterior. There is no "I will be dead," which suggests death itself as a mode of being; there is only a paradoxical "I will have died," in which the assertion of being is suspended as an always missing moment between potential and past. Lessing's euphemization of death is not a denial of some concrete referent, or reality, to which death refers; rather, it is the semantic denial of the semantic denial that death, as a name denoting only its own name, its own incapacity to represent representational incapacity, already constitutes. As we shall see, Lessing's attempt to re-present an impending death that has not yet presented itself necessitates an intricate program of dislocation and repetition that calls the very possibility of limits—and hence, of imitation—into question.

How the Ancients Represented Death is built around a response to "Herr Klotz's" opinion that the Greek and Roman visual artists depicted "Death, the personified abstraction of Death, the Deity of Death" (180), as a skeleton. Lessing counters Klotz with an interesting (though long-since refuted)⁵ argument that Death, as the "twin brother" of Sleep, was visually portrayed by the ancients as a little Eros-like genius leaning on an upside-down torch: "What can more distinctly indicate the end of life," he contends, "than an extinguished, reversed torch? If it is Sleep, this short

5. See Uhlig 1986 and Richter 1992: 78.

interruption to life, who here rests on such a torch, with how much greater right may not Death do so?" (184). This comment is typical of Lessing's statements on Death in the essay; we must provisionally untie the strands of his sometimes specious logic in order to separate his historical and aesthetic concerns from his underlying opinions and anxieties about death⁶ as a humanistic imperative. On one hand, Lessing consistently refuses to speculate in the essay upon the temporal possibility of death as anything other than a conceptual border defined by absence. For him it is always an "interruption to life," a purely potential condition of "insensibility," or even just "the end."⁷ On the other hand, he feels compelled—if only as a way of defending his historical argument—to discuss its representation by natural signs in some kind of positive way. Lessing's argument about the extinguished torch encapsulates this bifurcated mimetic desire.

Death's claim to the torch is initially grounded in the relationship of Death to Sleep, and yet Death, Lessing argues, has a "greater right" than Sleep to pictorial representation by an extinguished, upside-down torch. Does this mean that death is more like sleep than sleep is? In order to establish this greater right, Lessing implicitly appeals not to Death and Sleep as they were represented by the ancients but, rather, to his own sense of what death and sleep really signify. In asserting Death's superior claim to the torch, Lessing characterizes sleep in the negatively defining terms that he has already reserved for death—that is, as an interruption to life. It takes little close examination to determine that this is a logically paradoxical means of comparison. The life to which death puts an end consists of extended periods of both sleeping and waking. These states may be opposed to each other, but neither is temporally opposed to life; indeed, both are contingent on life's continuation. Lessing himself says elsewhere in the essay that "in reality Death makes an end to both sleeping and waking" (201). From the perspective defined by death, then, sleep is no more an interruption to life than is being awake; the terms of both are defined, made finite, by death's permanent interruption of life. To characterize sleep as a short interruption seems to imply that death is a long interruption, which in Lessing's own terms it cannot be; instead, it is *the* interruption, the definitive end that makes a life measurable in reality and causes terms like *short* and *long* to be meaningful. In this instance, therefore,

6. I use *death*, with a lower-case *d*, as a way of distinguishing between death as an ontological boundary and Death as the "personification of Death" that Lessing talks about in the essay; the tension and crossover between the two will be important in our analysis of Lessing's aesthetic schema.

7. See Uhlig 1986: 83–84.

the vehicle of comparison (the measurable duration of an interruption) is viable if and only if the comparison itself is specious.

Lessing's second response to his representational dilemma is to color death with certain of the corporeal attributes he has already assigned to sleep. First, he suggests that "Night" is the "mother of Sleep and Death" and that both are characterized by a closing of the eyes. Then he argues that "if art wishes to make the personified idea of Death recognizable by us, by what must she, by what else can she do so, than by that which is common to Death in all possible cases? And what is this but the condition of repose and insensibility?" (211). Lessing here invokes spatial and perceptual representations of death as well as Death, reifying what had heretofore been for him a defining temporal potential. What characterizes death as an abstract temporal border is not, as Lessing's allusions to the darkness of Night and the state of repose would seem to imply, our blindness and insensibility *in* that state; rather, it is our blindness and insensibility *to* that state which, by definition (indeed *as* definition), cannot, as a subjective event, be represented to the senses. But this is no longer the personified abstraction of Death, the Deity of Death that represents death's conceptual unrepresentability as the inevitable end of life. By assigning a natural figure (repose) to death, Lessing implicitly constructs it as an object of mimetic desire.

Lessing creates, in effect, a bifurcation between death as a temporal and death as a material phenomenon, a fact that becomes clear in the paragraph following the one on repose:

The condition of being dead has nothing terrible, and in so far as dying is merely the passage to being dead, dying can have nothing terrible. Only to die thus and thus, at this moment, in this mood, according to the will of that person, to die with shame and agony, may be terrible and becomes terrible. . . . Death is the desired end of all these horrors, and it is only to be imputed to the poverty of language if it calls both conditions, the condition which leads unavoidably to Death, and the condition of Death itself, by one and the same name. (212)

Death is here constructed for Lessing as a locus of both terror and desire; we fear dying, the temporal condition which leads unavoidably to Death, but the static conceptualization of death as a fixed state seems to offer the comforting prospect of an end to that fear. Lessing may have begun with the assumption that death, as an inherently abstract subjective imperative, is most appropriately represented by the arbitrary linguistic sign *death*; but in his attempt to find a viable visual representation for death he is drawn back from the threatening ambiguity of linguistic abstraction—ambiguity attributable, for him, to language's poverty rather than its fertility—and toward the objective essence of the natural sign. I am provisionally using

the terms *subjective* and *objective* here in order to draw a distinction that Lessing himself does not make clear in the *Death* essay, but that he does imply in the *Laokoon* (1962 [1766]: 107–9, 126–28). The subjective implies the conscious capacity for temporal action and perception; a subject has potential. The nature of the objective, meanwhile, is that it can only be acted on in time; its eternalizing, material stasis both reaffirms the acting and perceiving subject's sense of temporal mastery and calls the impending finitude of that mastery into question. The problem that Lessing runs into in representing death is that it has both subjective temporal and objective material implications, and they are not compatible. This is nothing new to us as the successors of twentieth-century phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosophers who have long since utilized the irreducible exigency of death to rid us of simple subject-object dichotomies. For Lessing, however, the problem of death threatens to undermine the very possibility of mimetic representation, calling into question the fundamental assumptions of similarity and difference on which he constructs his aesthetics of definition.

Just before his lament about the poverty of a language that has only one word for both the event and the state of death, Lessing (*ibid.*: 211) declares that “language has already elevated abstract ideas to the rank of independent beings, and the same word never ceases to awaken the same idea, no matter how many contradictory contingencies [the poet] may unite with it.” But the problem with *Death* is precisely that it does *not* always awaken the same idea; indeed, it does not really awaken any distinct idea at all. What *Death* invokes, ultimately, is nothing other than itself, an arbitrary sign for an unrealized potential; there is no concrete anterior referent for *Death* as a subjective event, and hence any mimetic representation of it is always, and only, an imitation of an imitation. For someone such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who argues that aesthetic imitation should never be anything other than an imitation of imitation (specifically, an imitation of classical imitation), this would not pose much of a problem; but Lessing makes clear in the *Laokoon* that he does not entirely agree with Winckelmann's feeling that “the ideal cannot be achieved, either in art or in poetry, through a mere imitation of nature” (*ibid.*: 153).

Lessing clings to a residual conception of what death is or might be in reality, and we can see this clearly in a passage from the *Laokoon* where he uses Aristotelian terms to explain why the aesthetic representation of a dead body can be pleasing to us even though the sight of a real corpse cannot: “It is the keener feeling of pity, the terrifying thought of our own destruction, that makes a real corpse repulsive to us; but in imitation this pity loses its keenness through our awareness that it is a deceit, and the addition

of soothing circumstances can either divert our thoughts from this fatal recollection or, by uniting itself inseparably with it, cause us to believe that we can see in it something more desirable than terrible” (128). Once again Lessing proposes death as a nexus between terror and desire. Its representation is terrifying when it connotes the subjective and unimaginable abyss of our own impending destruction but desirable when it constructs death as an object of imitation. But Lessing is no more dead for seeing a real corpse than he would be for beholding a fake one, and if, as he suggests in the *Death* essay, the condition of being dead has nothing terrible, then why should he be terrified by something that confronts him with the thought of his own death? I suggest that Lessing’s terror derives from a representational rather than an existential crisis—or better, that his existential crisis *is* a representational one. When Lessing beholds the real corpse, the boundaries between the subjective and the objective connotations of death become blurred. On one hand, the corpse is a safely objectified, material representation of death that has been removed from the temporal order; on the other hand, though, it solicits Lessing to imagine its subjective implications because of the fact that it was once, like him, subject to temporal definition. The pity that invokes the terrifying thought of our own destruction is an Aristotelian term that might be better translated as sympathy—a suffering-with (the German word is *mitleid*)—than what we now think of as pity, and it is because of this sympathy that the real corpse cannot satisfy Lessing’s ideal of aesthetic re-presentation. The corpse is both too similar to and too different from us to engage our imagination. The death that it marks is an imitation of nothing other than itself, and it prefigures our own death only insofar as it insists on its own singularity. There is no way for us to frame the death of this other, this death *of* the other; it is not our own death, and we can share it only insofar as our death is not our own either. But herein lies the crux of the problem; we do share in the death of this other because we do not own our death. Without an experiential basis we cannot make even our own death—especially our own death—our own; it frames us, but we cannot frame it, repeat it, or re-present it to the senses.

Of course the very characterization of death as the end already suggests an almost material sense of boundedness. Conceiving the end of something inherently implies at least an imagined perspective outside the thing that is ending. The problem, though, is that we, as subjects bound by temporality, must always be blind to our own ending. It is simply not possible for us to hold or behold the moment, the *maintenant*, of our own death; the best we can do is to picture what we might look like once we are dead, which is hardly the same thing. Death as a subjective temporal boundary is always and only an impending event that cannot be mimetically

represented by natural signs. The death of one's perceiving consciousness is by definition inimitable, and any aesthetic invocation of it invites the imagination to enter a kind of ontological black hole, to imagine the utter absence of temporal potential and idealizing imagery. As the shared etymology of the words *image* and *imagination* suggests, death's invocation to imaginative blindness is, in effect, a call for the imagination to imagine its own impossibility. Only once an illusion of replicability is offered can Lessing perceive death as a stabilizing object of imaginative desire; only an imitation of death can be imitated. Ironically, then, the fiction of a purely arbitrary presentation of death is what allows for death's re-presentation by natural signs. By limiting death to an already objectified event representable by natural signs, however, Lessing must elide the evocative power of death as a pressing subjective impossibility—or, to anticipate our discussion of Burke, he must sacrifice the sublime for the beautiful.

The difference between Lessing's two kinds of death—death as a subjective temporal potential and death as an already objectified representation—is related to the difference between what Murray Krieger (1992: 94) describes in his seminal study of *ekphrasis* as *enargeia I* and *enargeia II*: “the difference between the cool aesthetic based on distance between audience and object and the heated aesthetic based on fusion, or empathy, between audience and the object into which they enter (feel themselves into) as imaginary subjects.” What makes Krieger's book so useful is that he traces the distinction (and, of course, the crossover) between these two aesthetic tendencies from an originary classical split between, on one hand, Plato's characterization of mimesis as grounded in an objective or imagistic natural sign and, on the other hand, Longinus's sense that subjective human emotion and expression form the fundamental ground of reference from which we derive what is natural. Whereas, in the *Symposium*, Plato (1993: chap. 33) conceives of a “divine beauty” that is “pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality, and all the colors and vanities of human life,” Longinus (1985: 177) conceives of a sublimity that is *grounded* in mortal fallibility, in a visceral “erotic passion” that drives “man's intentness on perceiving often everywhere . . . beyond the limits of what holds him in.” If “anyone gazes around at life in its cycle,” argues Longinus, “he will swiftly understand for what purpose we were born, by seeing how much what is ‘too much’ and great and fine holds more advantage in all things” (ibid.: 178). What Longinus prefigures for us is an aesthetics of infinitude grounded in what eighteenth-century England would label “sensibility.”

Lessing does not address the infinite as such in his *Laokoon*, but I suggest that it is very much there—in his aesthetic blind-spot, as it were—as a constitutive factor in his discussion of the limits of poetry and painting. What

is opened in the strife between Lessing's two kinds of death is precisely what was opened for Augustine in the strife between his static and the ephemeral nows: a conceptual abyss that solicits an imaginative confrontation with the impossible possibility of the unrepresentable. The moment of death is, for Lessing, the liminal moment between time and time's impossibility, between representational capacity and imagistic annihilation, between definition and infinity. Lessing's *Laokoon* is signally about limits, but it is the pressing possibility of the absence of limits that variously enables, obstructs, and necessitates his writing. The infinite, of course, is also the inimitable; it has no antecedent, real or imagined; it cannot be owned (possessed or even admitted to). The infinite is impossible to imitate, but it is also, as we shall see, what makes imitation possible. Every imitation, every reiteration with difference depends on the assumption of a former iteration and the possibility of another iteration; the difference between now and now is nothing but an undefined gap of time, but it is precisely time's undefinability, and our own finitude within it, that allows the acknowledgment of a difference (*our* difference), and hence for the possibility of imitation on a canvas of otherwise overwhelming possibility. I will address Lessing's concept of limits in terms of the abstract ideas of death and the infinite as they are represented and/or elided by Burke, drawing specifically on Burke's invocation of two famous lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and shades of death / A Universe of death" (2.621–22). First, however, we must briefly consider two related issues that will pave the way for our discussion of the infinite by concretizing some of the necessarily abstract concepts above: the first issue is how Burke's own semiotic confusion about death prefigures and helps to explain Lessing's confusion; the second is how Burke's and Lessing's respective selections of Milton and Homer as poetic exemplars inform, and are informed by, their treatments of imaginative blindness.

Early in his *Enquiry* Burke declares that "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible . . . is a source of the *sublime*" (1.7). It is important that Burke says here the ideas of pain and danger, and not pain and danger themselves. Ideas for the post-Lockean Burke depend on the absence of the thing itself; indeed, ideas are defined precisely by *not* being the thing itself, although they do depend on some kind of residual sensory experience.⁸ The sublime

8. Burke's conception of ideas and imagination was in some ways very much characteristic of eighteenth-century thought. The imagination for Burke (1990 [1757]: 16) has "a sort of creative power of its own." It can recall experiential images "in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses," and it can also combine those images "in a new manner, and according to a different order." The imagination is "incapable," however, "of producing any thing absolutely new."

springs from our instincts of self-preservation, says Burke, but it is associated with a kind of cathartic delight that depends on the absence of any real threat: “The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances; this delight I have not called pleasure, because it turns on pain, and because it is different enough from any idea of positive pleasure. Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*” (1.18). Interestingly, the delight produced by the sublime requires an absence of both pain *and* danger, and yet it turns on pain. Why does danger drop out here? Burke does not tell us, but I suggest that it is because danger, like death, is intangible, inescapably grounded in temporality. Danger exists as an unactualized threat to self-preservation, whereas pain is tangible, real, and undeniably grounded in the senses. Burke effects something very similar to this elision of danger when he discusses death itself. Much as Lessing associates the objective reality of sleep with the subjective impossibility of death, Burke uses pain to replace danger as death’s worldly precursor: “Death is in general,” he writes, “a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death; nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors” (1.7). Why should death be a much more affecting idea than pain? We have felt pain, lived it; it is a Lockean idea grounded in sensation, and because we have experienced it as sensation, we can feel delight in its absence. Burke insists that delight is always “a sort of *Privation* . . . the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger” (1.4). But would that not tend to make death the ultimate form of delight, the Burkean version of what Lessing calls “the desired end of all these horrors”? It is at the undefined (and undefinable) point represented by death that Burke’s chain of reasoning must begin to unravel.

The problem is that the word *death* seems ultimately to stand as both signifier *and* signified in Burke’s semiotic of the sublime. Simultaneously ungrounded word and unadulterated referent, *death* is both what invokes the idea of danger and what is meant by it. (Burke will later suggest that we can have no real idea of death itself.) As we have already seen in our discussion of Lessing, death as a subjective event is precisely not realizable; it is a pure abstraction of a purely potential privation—a denial of denial or, in Burke’s terms, a privation of privation. Death is not sensual, and it does not make sense in a semiotic that relies on the senses. What Burke thus requires is some kind of experiential privation to relate to death’s negation, some substantive indicator of the absence of absence. Pain becomes

that indicator for him, serving as emissary for the absent king of terrors, as an embodied idea of death. But there is a profound ontological sleight of hand going on here. Just as Lessing objectifies death by comparing it to sleep, Burke seems to shield death's negating power by associating it with pain. Pain, after all, is precisely the indicator that one is *not* dead. What is really terrible in the Burkean sublime is uncertainty and obscurity, and pain is of all things perhaps the most certain.

Danger is simply not as useful as pain because it offers a disembodied abstraction of a disembodied abstraction. Both danger and death are about an inevitable potential; both are temporally distanced but not physically removable from their categorizing subject. Danger signifies to us that death is coming, but death is always coming; hence, we are always in danger. Danger is entirely too much like death to represent death; neither is tangible, but both are unavoidable. But there is a real comfort in pain, which can be both experienced and avoided. The idea of pain is less painful than pain itself; it is a privation of pain, and therefore delightful. Pain itself, meanwhile, is less physically disturbing than the very *possibility* of death. In Burke's own words it is exquisite, an excruciating reminder of life that, when compared to the potential negation of death, is delightful. The idea of pain then, as it plays out in Burke, is a compound idea that relates an embodied feeling (pain) to a pure abstraction (death) in order to create a privative chain of delight. The idea of pain is an idealistic privation (the idea is never the thing itself) of a temporary privation (pain is precisely *not* death, but death is still coming) of an inevitable privation. The chain itself is a linguistically embodied privation of the ultimate privation, privating its own impossibility in a sensual semiotic that allows but elides its non-sensical signs.

For both Lessing and Burke, then, death as a subjective temporal possibility creates representational problems even in a system of linguistic abstraction. Since it is not imaginatively linked to any concrete sensual reality, the abstraction invoked by the word *death* becomes a floating, parasitic signifier that constantly threatens to attach itself somewhere that it does not really belong. For Burke, however, this kind of arbitrary connection is not theoretically unwelcome, however much it may disturb his post-Lockean associationist system. Indeed, Burke argues that arbitrary connections constitute the very wellspring of language's sublime power: "There are many things of a very affecting nature," he argues, "which can seldom occur in the reality, but the words which represent them often do; and thus they have an opportunity of making a deep impression and taking root in the mind, whilst the idea of the reality was transient; and . . . perhaps never really occurred" (5.7). The very ambiguity and obscurity of

words such as *death*, for Burke, allow them to build up their “great influence over the passions.” At the end of his *Enquiry*, Burke goes so far as to suggest an aesthetic preference for those unpolished languages in which obscurity is most pervasive, reasoning that they possess a correspondingly greater power to move the emotions: “Very polished languages,” he argues, “and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength” (ibid.). This is the aesthetic crossroads at which Lessing and Burke part ways. As we have already witnessed, Lessing laments the poverty of a language that cannot distinguish between the subjective and the objective connotations of *death*. He is not unaware of the aesthetic possibilities inherent in such ambiguity; he simply does not approve of the trade-off: “I know that this poverty can often become a source of pathos and that the poets thus derive advantage from it, but still that language unquestionably merits the preference that despises a pathos which is founded on the confusion of such diverse matters, and which itself obviates such confusion by distinctive appellations” (Lessing 1890 [1769]: 212).

For Lessing, the most effective poetic language is one that conceals its own artificiality in an illusion of natural representation. The poet, for him, should “make the ideas he awakens in us so vivid that at that moment we believe that we feel the real impressions which the objects of these ideas would produce on us. In this moment of illusion we should cease to be conscious of the means which the poet uses for this purpose, that is, his words” (Lessing 1962 [1766]: 85). The poet should bring us as close as possible to “real impressions” of “real objects” by allowing us to paint in his transparent linguistic signs. As David Wellbery (1984: 143) puts it in his rigorous analysis of Lessing’s aesthetic and semiotic strategies, Lessing’s ideal poet will “provoke an imaginative process of concretization that reaches into the content material, transforming the linguistic content substance into a total, quasi-visual image.” The name of Lessing’s ideal poet, of course, is Homer, and it is useful to see how Lessing, in his notes, compares Homer to Burke’s poetic exemplar, Milton: “Distinction between poetic paintings where the traits can easily and successfully be painted in and those where they can’t. The former are the Homeric paintings, the latter the Miltonic. . . . Homer has only a few Miltonic images. They are striking, but they don’t attach. And it’s precisely for this reason that Homer remains the greatest painter. He thought each image completely and neatly.”⁹ Not only does Homer stay within the limits of language’s natural temporal sequence by representing “nothing but progressive actions,” but he also limits his descriptions to just what is required to make his audience fill in

9. These notes are translated and quoted in Wellbery 1984: 141–42.

the blanks: “He depicts bodies and single objects only when they contribute toward these actions, and then only by a single trait” (Lessing 1962 [1766]: 79). Homer’s images, as Lessing describes them, are so transparent that it almost seems as though Homer himself had imagined rather than beheld them; but then, perhaps he did.

It is remarkable that Lessing never mentions the possibility of Homer’s blindness as one of the reasons that he represents nothing but progressive *actions* and gives only one single characteristic to each object. We do not know for certain, of course, that Homer was blind, but there is certainly a rich historical tradition to suggest it. The only place that Lessing even alludes to Homer’s blindness, however, is in relation to Milton: “The loss of sight, he [Count Caylus] says, may well be the strongest point of similarity between Milton and Homer. Milton cannot fill picture galleries, it is true. But if the range of my physical sight must be the measure of my inner vision, I should value the loss of the former in order to gain freedom from the limitations of the latter” (ibid.: 74). This is the chapter in which Lessing attacks Count Caylus for his attempt to “rank poets according to the number of paintings for which they furnish subjects to the artist.” His defense of Milton is spirited and almost Burkean in its implications; for Lessing, however, it does not quite ring true. Far from wanting absolute freedom for his inner vision, Lessing seems generally to depend on the limitations imposed by his physical sight in order to maintain a sense of semiotic stability. Lessing’s word for *moment*—the concept that he uses to stabilize time’s dizzying progression—is *augenblick*, which suggests etymologically a brief glance, or fixation, of the eye. Milton’s images are striking, but they don’t attach precisely because they exceed the limitations of what is natural and draw the imagination beyond the bounds of its own possibility. Homer, meanwhile, remains the greatest painter and the greatest poet because he conceives each image completely and neatly; he does not attempt to paint with his words but instead allows his audience to paint with their imaginations.

For Burke (1990 [1757]: 2.3), of course, Milton’s multiplicity of obfuscating images is precisely what makes him the greatest epic poet: “No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton.” It should not be surprising, then, that when Burke discusses blindness, it is in a section titled “Examples that WORDS may affect without raising IMAGES.” Using the example of “Mr. Blacklock, a poet blind from his birth,” Burke argues that “so little does poetry depend for its effect on the power of raising sensible images, that I am convinced it would lose a very considerable part of its energy, if this were the necessary result of all description” (5.5). The energy of poetry

originates, for Burke, not from its clarity but, rather, from its obscurity, not from the transparency of its signs but, rather, from their opacity. A word such as *death* is not so much a canvas to be painted on as it is a conceptual shield that can never be lifted. What we fear is not the word itself but what lies behind it; but since what lies behind it is pure privation and not understandable, we necessarily fall back on a word that both invokes and veils, allowing us publicly to imagine an inherently private privation.

It is perhaps appropriate that the final quotation in Burke's *Enquiry* should be of Milton's famous lines on death:

Here is displayed the force of union in

Rocks, caves, lakes, dens, bogs, fens and shades;

which yet would lose the greatest part of their effect, if they were not the

Rocks, caves, lakes, dens, bogs, fens, and shades —

—of Death.

This idea or this affection caused by a word, which nothing but a word could annex to the others, raises a very great degree of the sublime; and this sublime is raised yet higher by what follows, a "*universe of Death*". Here are again two ideas not presentable but by language; and an union of them great and amazing beyond conception; if they may properly be called ideas which present no distinct image to the mind. (5.7)

The ideas of *universe* and *Death* are not presentable but by language, but they are not really presentable by language either, because the presentation of ideas *may* depend on some kind of distinct image. In this word *may* we can see the tension between Burke's sensual semiotic and his imaginative aesthetic: *death* and *universe* cannot quite be comprehended as ideas or presented as images; these words are more like the hidden promise of a presentation that can never and yet must inevitably occur. It is not that the words present an indistinct rather than a distinct image, but that they present no distinct image, no image at all; they solicit an imagination of imagistic annihilation.

Part of what is at stake here, which Burke significantly does *not* comment on, is a concealed temporal imperative; for ultimately it is time, not image, that provides the metaphoric center around which Milton's linguistic meaning revolves. The sublime in this passage hinges on a temporal sequence of signification for the graduated obfuscation of its imagery. Milton's lengthy chain of monosyllabic word-images becomes a kind of sacrifice to abyssal possibility as the seemingly concrete images deteriorate linguistically into *shades* and metrically into mere metronomic markers of an inexorable progression toward an impossible conclusion. There is a hollow space of time, marked both by Milton's ambiguous *shades* and by Burke's inserted dashes after the word *shades*, between the concluding

physical image and the obfuscating genitive of *Death*. Burke's dashes figure the irreconcilable tension between picturable image and purely abstract privation by signaling a hiatus in meaning even while drawing us forward in an unavoidable temporal progression.

Whatever illusion of concrete referentiality remains after the metronomic metrical succession is further disfigured by the obfuscating genitive of *death*, and finally annihilated by the concluding nonimage of "A Universe of death." In this tour de force of sublime linguistic opacity, Milton calls even the most basic building blocks of language's syntactical structure into question as transparent transporters of meaning. The word *of* that annexes *shades* and *Death* abruptly becomes both impossible and inevitable, a preposition posing as a link between grammatical sense and imagistic non-sense, the syntactically definable and the referentially undefined; it is initially posited as a sensible idea of syntactical union but is ultimately revealed as the agent, the emissary, of a non-sensical possession. *Shades of death* conjures not so much an image as a conceptual vacuum. Even if we think we know what shades might look like, we cannot imagine shades of death. Are the rocks and caves and lakes and fens also of death? If so, are they also shades? We expect some explanation for this *of*, but we do not get one; or, perhaps better, we receive our explanation in Milton's very refusal to explain. The word *death* is followed not by a clarifying image or explanation but, rather, by a purely linguistic annihilation of imagery as the completion of the temporal sequence: a *universe of death*. The preposition *of* is now posed between two encompassing impossibilities, its temporal position fixed sequentially but its indication of possession undecidable (which abstraction, which privation, contains the other?).

It is as though Milton pulls us word by word out of our comfortable world of static, visualizable, sensible images and into a blind and purely poetic underworld where time and rhythm are the ultimate arbiters of meaning—that is, until they, too, come to a halt with the arbitrary abstraction of "a Universe of death." There is simply no way for us to keep up with the imagistic progression of even the seemingly visualizable signs, a fact that is ironically highlighted by Burke's own inadvertent transposition of the words *fens*, *bogs*, *dens* to *dens*, *bogs*, *fens*. Milton writes *fens* before *dens* in *Paradise Lost*, and Burke himself quotes it that way earlier in the *Enquiry*; the fact that Burke transposes the words the next time he quotes them serves nicely to illustrate how interchangeable their imagistic significations have become. What we are left with at the conclusion of the sequence is a linguistic union between the temporally unrepresentable (death) and the spatially unrepresentable (universe), a union that invites the imagination beyond the bounds of its own possibility. Milton solicits, in short, an imagi-

native confrontation with the irreducible possibility of the infinite, and he does so by exploiting the conceptual borders between language's arbitrary referential capacity and its natural temporal sequence.

Milton's almost anti-imagistic mode of seeing can reveal to us, I think, both the limits of Burke's sublimity and the sublimity of Lessing's limits. Burke enthusiastically embraces Milton's imagistic obscurity but is troublingly blind to his assertion of temporal exigency; Lessing, meanwhile, is more alive than Burke to the temporal possibilities of poetry, and the borders he delineates between a poet's temporal license and his imagistic responsibility are precisely the borders that Milton depends on—if only to transgress and explode them—in order to achieve his sublime effects. The difference between the spatial and temporal arts corresponds, for Lessing, to a difference between the “coexistent” and the “consecutive”; the problem with this, as E. H. Gombrich makes clear when he discusses Lessing in *The Image and the Eye* (1982), is that both the coexistent and the consecutive depend on the fiction of a *punctum temporis*, an infinitesimal fixed instant that constitutes the basic building block of time's supposed succession. Spatializing time allows Lessing to objectify and aestheticize it. With the *punctum temporis* the comparison between the spatial and the temporal arts is no longer between apples and oranges, but between one apple and many. “Painting,” says Lessing (1962 [1766]: 78), “can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.” The illusion of the *punctum temporis* puts time, as it were, in our hands; once we conceive of a *maintenant*, we can imagine ourselves defining time instead of temporality defining us.

It is the desire to achieve an imaginative mastery over temporal progression that leads Lessing (*ibid.*: 20) to the seemingly paradoxical suggestion that the single moment from which we are to derive preceding and succeeding actions should *not* portray anything ephemeral: “This single moment, if it is to receive immutable permanence from art, must express nothing transitory.” A scream, in one famous example, can be represented in poetry but would become grotesque through “the seeming perpetuity of such cries when represented in art” (*ibid.*). We have returned here to the problem of repetition already encountered in our analysis of the *Death* essay, but this time from another angle. There can be no imitation, no repetition of similarity with difference, without the presupposition of some originary instant or instantiation and some concluding moment or definition—without, that is, some kind of Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end. But just as necessary is an awareness of, and an accounting for, the possibility of an undefined perpetuity—the potentially infinite fluidity that

makes succession and difference possible—and this is what Lessing would have us conceal, elide, or euphemize in the name of beauty.

The transitory moment is painting's natural-sign version of language's ambiguous arbitrary sign. It gives an unnatural appearance that forces us to confront the abyssal incongruity between temporal flow and the *punctum temporis*. In W. J. T. Mitchell's (1994: 155–56) terms, we might call Lessing's anxiety about perpetuity a kind of “ekphrastic fear.” Lessing wants to spatialize time but does not want to get caught in the act(ion). He wants in an analogous way in the *Death* essay to materialize the temporal possibility of death, but he does not want to sacrifice its ontologically constitutive power as a defining negation. We can in this sense read Lessing's ambiguous *Death* as language's displaced sign for the transitory *moment*; posed aporetically between abstract temporal potential and concrete material reification, *Death* itself stands as a euphemism for representational impossibility. This is also to say that *Death* is its own euphemism, a sign signifying its own impossibility. *Death* is a kind of shield covering the blind spot between Lessing's limits; forever threatening to emerge from that blind spot is something like Milton's universe of death or Augustine's eternity which stands forever or what Burke in his *Enquiry* labels *madness*.

Burke (1990 [1757]: 2, 8) does treat the possibility of infinity in his essay, but only by implicitly materializing it: the infinite derives, for him, from “the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things.” His treatment of the infinite is almost wholly concerned with spatial and visual representation; time makes just one appearance in this section, and that is when Burke concludes it with an astonishing treatment of “madmen”: “They remain whole days and nights, sometimes whole years, in the constant repetition of some remark, some complaint, or song; which having struck powerfully on their disordered imagination, in the beginning of their phrensy, every repetition reinforces it with new strength: and the hurry of their spirits, unrestrained by the curb of reason, continues it to the end of their lives” (*ibid.*).

The repetition of words (or even sounds, as we saw with Milton) is perhaps the most powerful reminder of their obscurity; when repeated often enough, their arbitrariness is revealed. A few years before Burke's treatise, David Hartley (1966 [1749]: 2.353) had suggested in his post-Lockean theories of mind and language that “Words refer to words, and to grammatical and logical Analogies in an endless Manner.” The pathological repetition of a word can be read as an attempt to ground language's infinite referential capacity, or to ground oneself in it, which has for the listener precisely the opposite effect—that of unveiling an abyssal absence of ground. The disordered imagination reveals its disorder through its very attempt to

maintain order; its repetitive re-marking of some remark is privative but by no means private, publicly peeling away the illusion of an originary mark to which the re-mark really refers. A madman enacts in miniature the repetitive chatter in which we all engage; speech, after all, is never anything but various combinations of repetition. But what constant repetition does, which normal speech does not, is reveal both the absolute arbitrariness of language and the defining, natural limitation of the speaker's temporal boundedness. The infinite allows Burke to restore a sense of order to the disordered repetition because the madmen are *not* temporally infinite. The projected end of their lives is the defining end of their annihilating repetition; the end thus becomes, in a sense, the beginning, the constitutive possibility of communicative articulation, the privative source of representational capacity.

For both Lessing and Burke, any representation of death as subjective possibility must be both defining and undefinable; as an ever-impending limit, death is both what obviates temporal possibility and, as the conceptual blind spot that separates (and unites) an inevitable finitude and an impossible infinite, what allows it. *Death* maintains its meaning in an arbitrary gap, a *maintenant* that both opens and traverses the difference between dying and dead, indeterminate and determined; "death" is always a reiteration of itself, a remainder and a reminder of itself, of death as the possibility of death. When we read Milton's sublime invocations of death, our aesthetic delight does not derive from some spatialized sense of filling in the transparent linguistic blanks; it resides in the more indefinite sense of looking at ourselves trying to look at ourselves in the mirror of linguistic opacity, of suspending imagination in the representational abyss between mimetic desire and temporal helplessness. The point of invoking the infinite through death may be, if nothing else, to restore meaning to the illusory present moment, to allow us briefly to maintain a sense of blind resistance (re-sistance in its *latinate*, Augustinian sense of a temporally re-duplicated standing, a standing beside but also with and against oneself) on the purely conceptual border of nonspace between the forever bounded categories of past and future, or life and death. Our imagistic blindness to the infinite is also, this is to say, the source of a uniquely temporal vision; perhaps the defining irony of Enlightenment aesthetic discourse is that through its assertion of representational capacity in a fundamentally unrepresentable universe, language's blind and arbitrary sign becomes the most natural sign of all.

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