

# The Sublime: Edmund Burke on the French Revolution

Karzan A. Mahmood<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, Komar University for Science and Technology, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analysing the concept of the sublime, which is a pioneering concept of the English Romantic poetry, in relation to the French revolution in the works of Edmund Burke. Burke, unlike all other thinkers who view sublimity as delightful and elevating feeling, perceives sublimity as an element of dangerous and terrifying incidents and objects mainly in relation with the great incident of the French Revolution. Hence, the paper concentrates on that essential metamorphosis in the content of the concept from progression to regression in the concept of sublime. Burke himself witnessed the revolution in France and propounded his philosophical viewpoints revolving around the notion of the sublime. He contended that the sublimity is whatsoever that brings about terror or is what terrifies the subjects. From this, he concluded that the French revolution was sublime because it was dangerous and threatened the natural laws and order, religion and God's genuine sublime, traditions and constitution. In this paper, in addition, his ideas to illustrate sublime will ultimately, to some degree, be evaluated and criticised. The second part will be dedicated to demonstrating the aesthetics nature and aspect of the concept of the sublime. While the third part will display the relation of the concept, the way it is exhibited in chapter two, in relation to the great revolution in France.

**KEY WORDS:** Aesthetics, Burke, French, Revolution, Sublime

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The concept of sublime has been a central theme since the first century AD after Longinus's work entitled 'On the Sublime'. Sublime, for Longinus, meant anything that is great and elevated (Doran, 2015, 41). The notion of sublime changed when it was examined by other thinkers; therefore, the focus of this paper will be dedicated to Edmund Burke's views of the concept in relation to the French Revolution. Burke's sublimity, unlike all other thinkers, was to criticise the revolution in France and any other revolutionary events as he thought that revolutions bring about a kind of negative sublimity that threatens the genuine and true sublimity

which resided in God, religion, natural order and monarchy. His argument of the sublime is centred on the idea that anything horrible or terrible is sublime and he believed that the French Revolution was horrific as it threatened religiosity and eventually doomed at bringing about a new system to rule instead of the old one; hence it is sublime. Burke's discussion of sublimity can be found in his two major works 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful' (2008) and 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' (1989), and also in some of his speeches and letters.

This philosopher has greatly extended the idea of the sublime into other realms of thought. For instance, he took it into political philosophy. In addition, his proposition divergent of the thesis of the sublime attributes negativity and regression to the revolutionary sublime because it is radical to everything else established prior and it is rapid when it comes to any necessary changes that have to be made in traditions and this endangered Burke's conservatism.

Thus, due to that significant shift in the meaning of the concept realised by Burke, the paper will be devoted

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Corresponding author's e-mail: [karzan.mahmood@komar.edu.iq](mailto:karzan.mahmood@komar.edu.iq)

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to clarifying the Burkean notion of the sublime in the light of the French Revolution both aesthetically and politically. Therefore, it is fundamental to demonstrate where or at which point he specifically stood against the revolution; because Burke rejected the revolution as an act of destruction of what is constructed.

It will be vital for the paper to demonstrate the basic Burkean definitions of the sublime in its aesthetical terms and its rapport with politics, morality and history particularly. In addition, a main concern is to jolt the reader to address the important questions of what is sublime, how it is reached, what it leads to, whether it occasions regression or progression and all linking to the remarkable incident in France? Also proposing a critical reading of the idea of Burkean aesthetic distance 'self-preservation' that transforms the horror of the sublime to delight; because Burke found delight in the danger and terror of any terrifying thing when he kept some distance or when the object did not press too close, including the terror of the revolution in France which led to violence and horror.

## 2. EDMUND BURKE'S AESTHETIC SUBLIME

Burke's perspective upon the sublime revolved around the notion of terror or horror as the ruling principle for the judgment of the sublime. For example, in a *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke defines the sublime as the following:

'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling' (Burke, 1968 p.39). Additionally, to support what has been said about the relation between the sublime and terror, in the revised edition which was published in 1759, he adds the following sentence which upholds his previous notion of the sublime as terror 'Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime' (ibid p.58).

Both the terms of terror and the sublime might refer to external conditions, objects which are terrible and objects that are seen as sublime in themselves or to any state of mind or any experienced emotions of the sublime as terror. The first question to be addressed is the relation between terror and the sublime. An essential point to include is the time when Burke had posed his ideas of terror and sublime; because people, in today's usage of the word, attach the term sublime to positive things which all negative connotations are detached. For example, a sunset, great works of art or landscapes are sublime, which is in sharp contrast to the Burkean

sublime. Burke by the sublime refers to things which are negative and terrifying, although the positivity or enthusiasm which is caused by the sublime leads to a state which can be called a psychic or mental elevation. To expand, Longinus who wrote in the first century A.D, in his treatise 'On the Sublime', was the great defender of the innocent or noble sublime. Longinus describes the elements from which sublimity is derived as the 'elevation of mind, power of forming conceptions, a sort of concentration (intensity) occasioned from vehement and inspired passion and noble diction which is a strong command of figurative language.' He, in one of his famous formulations, states that 'Sublimity is the echo of a great soul'; this puts the greatness of the soul in a central position as a source of sublimity - also his crucial point is the spiritual transport in the sublime, which is a sense of being elevated and uplifted beyond one's self. Based on this, one can say that the Burkean interpretation of the sublime is dramatically changed from Longinus (Longinus, 1970 p.59-70).

The contrast is between positive things being sublime in Longinus and the Burkean usage of the term. Longinus, in particular, says that there are passions which cannot be sublime such as pity, grief and fear. But for Burke, the negative things become sublime such as terror or terrifying things, though this does not mean that every negative thing is sublime because for the negative thing to be sublime it should also incorporate the idea of horror. In other words, every negative thing does not impose horror, therefore, only both features of horror and negativity in an object or event represent the sublimity of the thing, or any negative thing that is on the boundary of horror. However, Longinus and Burke both speak about the sublime on the aesthetic level. For example, for Longinus, the sublime is particularly a matter of rhetoric as an aesthetic classification regarding apposite composition; Burke also approaches the sublime at the aesthetic level, for example, as in the dichotomy between the pleasure of beauty and the delight of the sublime is an essential part of its interpretation and will be an important point to return later. For example, when Burke lived in Dublin, he had a negative experience with the floods that took place, and they informed his notion of the sublime as an experience of terror. In a letter to a very close friend, he speaks about how this experience influenced his idea of the sublime. He mentions his new experience of seeing the flood rising slowly, along with the fear of death rising, though gradually, and not as an immediate threat. This gave him time to reflect, and the fear inflicted with the flood was fused with some element of pleasure:

'No one perhaps has seen such a flood here as we have now.... All our Cellars are drowned not as before for that was but a trifle to this, for now the water comes up to the first floor of the House

threatening us every minute with rising a great deal higher [.] the consequence of which would infallibly be the fall of the house' (White, 1994 p.31).

Burke distinguishes two categories under which he defines the sublime and the beautiful. The first category is self-preservation and the second is society; the former concerns the passions such as weakness and finitude, but the society includes the feelings of intimacy, reproductivity and communication. He places pain under the domain of self-preservation, for when it comes to 'pain' the individual must save him or herself from it, whereas society is the domain of pleasure. Nevertheless, the sublime, for Burke, which is the domain of pain, can also cause some sort of delight or pleasure (White, 1994 p.28).

For Burke, the sublime is directly occasioned by one's experience of objects and conditions such as vastness, obscurity and darkness, and most importantly, those forms of power that threaten the aesthetic distance of self-preservation, and thrust danger and terror upon one's existence. Hence, the term sublime, which Kant sees as an aesthetic judgment, converts to be an outcome of one's reaction to external objects which are recognised and perceived as horrible or terrifying. In Burke's words, the rapport between the external influence and the internal reaction or response that occasions the feeling of sublimity, is as follows 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain' (Burke, 2008 p.53).

Burke's notion of the sublime as one's response to terror necessarily directs us to power and political power in particular, because man's relation to power and politics occupies a huge part of his sublime theory. He concentrates on forms and objects external to one's existence as crucial in the construction of the feeling of the sublime, and contends that the sublime is manifested through power, as he says, 'I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power' (ibid, p.59). Consequently, not only awe-inspiring and irresistible natural forces, such as volcanoes and earthquakes, sublime, but also the political powers that endanger one's survival. Due to this, Burke sees the kings and leaders' power which are derived from their institutions as compatible with the terror that causes sublimity. From this viewpoint, the sublime associated with spiritual anguish is as well connected to physical pain, that is, the notion of bodily pain including its entire degrees and modes (ibid p.59-60-61-62).

As a result, the French revolutionists standing against their leaders can be considered as contesting the legitimacy of the power which was bestowed on them by the institutions. The focal point here is to assess

Burke's idea of the revolution as sublime - because he also attaches sublimity to the political power in the hands of the kings or leaders. On the one hand, he thinks that political power is sublime as it could endanger one's being, but on the other hand, he thinks that revolution's violence or opposition as a form of power is sublime because it is revolting against the power granted by institutions, and threatens the order which protects society from chaos.

In addition, Iain Hampsher-Monk thinks that Burke's views on the notions of the sublime and the beautiful is a response to other thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, who undermine the objectivity of the moral and aesthetic judgments and their independent standards. For Hobbes, this rejection of moral objectivity was reliant on the belief that human psychological features vary, and this variety leads to a development in man's aesthetic and moral judgments as Carlo Burrelli puts it this way:

'The good is subjective because it is reduced to the subject's desires. However, this conception still admits objectivity in two ways. First, by reducing values to individual preferences, they become brute facts, objectively recognizable as true or false. Second, subjective desires still have factual objective consequences that one might ignore or misjudge. Therefore, even if Hobbes's notion of the good is subjective, one can still be objectively wrong' (2018, 99).

Burke, however, perceives the judgments of the sublime and the beautiful as instinctive reflections emerging as objective realities by influencing the imagination (Hampsher-Monk, 1987 p.49-50).

A key dimension of Burkean sublime is self-preservation. For him, although the sublime is terrible for the dreadful feeling originates from the encounter with the external object, one can still find delight in the experience of horror. This feeling of exaltation which Burke terms 'delight' results from one's awareness of one's preservation from the devastating horror of the sublime. One cannot, in Burke's analysis, straightforwardly sense the delightfulness of the sublime moment because this is not an effortless situation which is merely constructed by the terrifying object or imposed by the object. He also, to some degree, finds the delight on the part of the beholder or the experiencing subject by referring to the concept of sympathy towards the victims of terrifying, dreadful events and instances. In addition, alternatively, the victim through self-preservation reaches delight in terror, because though the person is a victim until he discovers that he can keep some distance from the horrifying event, save himself, and find the pleasure that arises by spectating the incident. By self-preservation, Burke means when one is

close to the terror, but not too close to be destroyed and annihilated by the terrible objects and experiences; as he famously claims, "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close" (Pres, p.135-146).

He also, in another place in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, illustrates this state of delight in more detail as below:

'In all these cases, if the pain and the terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person, as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which as it belongs to self-preservation is one of the strongest of all the emotions. Its object is the sublime' (Burke, 2008 p.136).

Here, the reason that Burke uses to persuade the reader to have faith in the sublime, as it is evoked by the terror which can be avoided in self-preservation, is that the subject or the beholder protects him or her from the object's terror that would otherwise terminate him or her. This preservation is an aesthetic distance because, in the moment of the encounter, the mind becomes a kind of onlooker of the possibility of its own destruction, if it is not too close to the object of terror, but since it consciously recognises the terror and keeps the distance between itself and the object, then delight appears when the mind is aware that its existence could be extinguished by the object if it approaches too close. But it delights him or her when he is certain that his existence or survival is guaranteed by that distance. This aesthetic distance is hugely significant and plays a major role in the analysis of the revolution because it is that distance that allows Burke to be out of direct danger from the revolutionaries. A crucial point here is that the distance that should be kept between Burke, and Britain in general, and the revolution in another country, or the revolution's terror, is not just aesthetic but physical, since he warns against the occurrence of revolution in Britain because of its violence and its endangering of the entire constitution.

Therefore, one can, after the formulation of the essential questions of what is the relation between terror and sublime, and also what the mind processes in the moment of experiencing or arriving at the sublime, and relating sublimity with terror, answer why Burke attaches the sublime to the French Revolution, and what processes are involved in the mind to derive sublimity from that historical event. The relation between terror and the sublime is only understood when the notion of self-preservation is included because that is the concluding moment in a form of mental reaction to the

object - it is the final event in the whole experience of sublimity. When an object, state or condition of terror threatens the observing subject, then the subject feels the oppression imposed by the object; for example, the French revolutionaries posing danger to those in power and their supporters ends up creating sublimity. The manifestation of power is of central importance for Burke because anything sublime is in some way or another powerful and puts man in the position of the powerless. The power of the revolution could also pose such a threat to the mind or of the minds of the people who will be ultimately unable to think because they are assaulted by psychical or physical pain and fear. But as mentioned earlier, this oppression or danger is not sufficient to cause the sublime moment because this only minimises and oppresses the subject.

The aesthetic distance which results from the subject's observation or awareness of the terror of the revolution can maintain the subject's survival because this preservation from the terrifying things evades the possibility of destruction. Burke sees physical pain and torture in particular as the strongest feeling of the sublime. For instance, he says that there is no one who agrees to have a good life but is to suffer at the end of his life or tortured under the so-called justice of the revolution; Burke, by this, refers to Louis XV who had a good life but was eventually put to death by the revolutionaries (Pres, p.139-140). In addition, he regards the physical pain-terror as the disintegration of human identity, as in the following passage:

'A man who suffers under violent bodily pain; (I suppose the most violent, because the effect may be more obvious.) I say a man in great pain has his teeth set, his eye-brows are violently contracted, his forehead is wrinkled, his eyes are dragged inwards, and rolled with great vehemence, his hair stands on end, the voice is forced out in short shrieks and groans, and the whole fabric tortures. Fear or terror, which is an apprehension of pain or death, exhibits exactly the same effects' (Burke, 2008 p.119).

Additionally, the Burkean emphasis on 'pain and pleasure' involves a new focus on pleasure and displeasure as autonomous or independent states, and this became an indispensable departure from the way John Locke saw them as continuous feelings depending on each other. For example, the existence of pain meant the removal of comfort and contrarily the onset of pleasure entailed the extinction of pain. For Burke, the phenomenon of pain is related to the sublime and the pleasure can be derived from the third state of feeling which is 'delight', which is a combination of pleasure and positive danger consequent upon the achievement of safety or aesthetic distance (Sarafianos, 2005 p.59-60).

The point to be analysed in Burke concerns his view of

self-preservation and the delight felt by the subject's distance from the terrifying object, because he thinks that the subject must keep some distance which includes both physical and aesthetic distance. But this idea has to be questioned because this delight springs from a threat or danger that may claim lives. It can be argued that, for Burke, terror is aesthetised to delight us; and there are examples from contemporary life of this same Burkean dynamic. For example, huge numbers of people attend amusement parks and enjoy the roller coaster - this kind of attraction arguably replays Burke's aestheticisation of danger. The self finds delight in the distance between terror, and the position on the roller coaster, which provides him with a safe place to look over the danger - he is pressed close but not too close to lose his/her life, and thus experiences a negative pleasure which ultimately occasions sublimity. There are ample examples of this in our lives; for instance, this could be explained in terms of horror films, or watching boxing and wrestling.

This criticism could be supported by Theodor Adorno's opposition to the Holocaust when it is represented or aesthetised in/by poetry, art and literature. One of his famous statements is 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Anna, 2010, p.1). By this, he obviously does not mean writing poetry only, but rather, the conflict that takes place between ethics and aesthetics in a poetry that addresses the Holocaust. It can be argued that, in the aestheticisation of unethical, terrifying objects and moments so as to reach some delight, which results from the aesthetic distance between the cognising subject and horrifying object, Burke anticipates the terms of Adorno's critique. Another crucial term in Burke's sublime concerning the manifestation of terror and power is 'astonishment' which leads the mind to be flooded with terror or horror. In consequence, the subject in confronting the object is disabled from reasoning or thinking of the object, because horror brings perplexity and paralysis to the intellect and also the mental processes are temporarily suspended. He thinks that astonishment is an internal response aroused due to the external object's influence. Additionally, he states that astonishment is the passion by means of which the sublime's greatness moves the soul and suspends all its emotions. In the moment of paralysis by astonishment, or when the subject is bewildered by a natural object, then the sublime arises. In other words, the irresistibility of the power of astonishment can paralyse the subject due to its greatness, which ultimately leads to the emergence of the sense of sublimity in the subject (Burke, 53).

The problem with Burke's state of 'astonishment' is that it does not lead to any further development, as when the subject is astonished by an object then he is halted and his capacities to comprehend will be limited,

which shows man's finitude. For example, an essential ontological condition for Heidegger's conception of authentic 'Dasein' is going beyond being just astounded or astonished as in Burke; but, for Heidegger, an astonished being can surmount his bewilderment through the mode of wonder which refers to the transformation of Dasein from inauthentic being to authentic being. Therefore, one can, from a Heideggerian perspective, oppose the Burkean mode of astonishment because it does not make the subject a being that could transgress his limitedness and transcend beyond the boundaries so as to achieve authenticity (Vettiyolil, p.484-485).

For Heidegger, the mind is not paralysed after being puzzled but it rather importantly wonders; this is a mode that authenticates the subject - whereas, for Burke, the mind is robbed and filled with the object and it ultimately causes the mind to be unable to reason (Vanessa, p.271).

As a result, the revolution in France becomes a sublime incident for Burke because it imposes terror. Because this horror occasions astonishment and sublimity, the mind is robbed and disabling from using its reasoning faculty, as explained in Burkean astonishment; thus, the only possible way for Burke to bear the revolution is through self-preservation or keeping a distance from it in order to survive its terminating power.

### 3. EDMUND BURKE'S SUBLIME AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Edmund Burke was known as a reformer, but this reputation subsequently changed to conservatism because of his resistance to events in France and support to the old traditions. After the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, his antipathy to the French Revolution was publicly known, as he opposed the rebels and the revolutionary events. This antipathy in his beliefs against the revolution became a central point because it was rooted in his political ideas; the revolution did not cause him to construct his political convictions, but the convictions became linked to the French Revolution. As a result, one arrives at the view that Burke was preoccupied by that opposing position towards any revolution and revolutionaries. The French Revolution was such a major factor in the manifestation of Burke's political convictions that the event appeared to be massively impressive and left him with no option to be silent and he eventually became a political philosopher, particularly, when the abstract ideas turned to be concrete and this was one of his fears he addressed about the revolution. There is a real sense in which one could say that it was the French Revolution that forced him to find himself as a political philosopher as it helped him to manifest his ideas (Harrington, 2005, p.1-2).

It is true that Burke stood against the revolution, but this only emerged in his later political philosophy; for instance, he first responded to the revolutionary incident in an aesthetic way, and spoke about the wonderful vision of the French Revolution in which the spectators, such as the British people, look upon the event and the revolutionary actors with astonishment. The spectators from England were amazed by the liberty that the French people were struggling for, but these 'spectators' did not know whether to praise or disclaim it. Burke finds in the revolution a state of mind which is paradoxical and mysterious - because he admires the spirit of the storming of the Bastille but dislikes the violence breaking out among the Parisians. The revolution also appears to be laughable besides its negativity. He expresses this paradoxical feeling in the following passage 'In viewing this tragic-comic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror' (Burke, 1970, p.9).

One aspect of Burke's political thought is that he resists radicalism, which is relevant to his conservatism. He opposed any signs indicating radicalism, and this created the view of him as a Christian crusader. Hence, people on the left sought to ignore or discount his thinking. It was claimed that the revolutionary events in France would bring about radical change in politics for the betterment of the lives of the citizens. This radicalism by the revolutionists was threatening for Burke because it was in danger of uprooting old traditions in the political system, a system he celebrated as 'ripen[ing] fruit that has grown from a long time' (Ibid p.22). In the revolution debate, there was an intense conflict between the conservatives and radicals, where the conservatives defended the present or old order, but the radicals challenged it and endeavoured to demolish it and replace it with a new order. Edmund Burke was classed as a conservative and staunch defender of tradition, and the revolutionists categorised as radicals. Hence, the revolution and revolutionists in France were in the camp of radicalism, but Burke was their challenger or counter-revolutionist, his principles growing out of his political philosophy. The French Revolution of 1789 was regarded as the first modern revolution, and Burke was the first critic of modern revolution (Freeman, 1980, p.3-4).

For him, the French Revolution was an ideological assault on the entire social and political order that was constructed in Europe. Burke was not a philosopher who did not believe in political or social change, but he contended that change should be positive and lead to positive and progressive outcomes. The revolution in France appeared to be a special danger; he thought it was dangerous because it threatened the British

constitution and it did not serve as a positive political change or as a force for progressive change. The revolution, in his opinion, proceeded in an incorrect way towards negative change or regression; Burke's perspective towards change in history was that it must be optimistic change and direct man's living condition to enhancement. For example, the creation of the Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 were progressive in terms of historical change, and also the constitution was not threatened to destruction by them but restored and put onto its true path. The primary reason for Burke's opposition to the French Revolution was not that the revolutionaries believed in and advocated abstract rights, but that they sought to impose such abstract rights immediately and instantaneously.

With regard to the British constitution, Burke saw it as evolving throughout history, and the revolution was dangerous because it threatened to destroy all that had evolved naturally; therefore, he names the revolution a regressive phenomenon as it negates the process of social evolution, for example, that that kind of historical progress that was seen in the evolution of the British constitution. In consequence, the revolution in France encompasses change but excludes gradual evolution and progress, especially in the revolutionaries' abstract rights which could put all the accumulated development at risk. His aversion to the events in France can also be seen in his other works, such as letters and speeches that are not part of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The refutation of theoretical abstract rights as universal rights, progressive change or development through a slowly evolving society, and the idea of respecting what has been handed down by previous generations to the current generation, and from the current to the subsequent ones, are taken for granted as his main concerns through his different works, and these ideas relate to the idea of the sublime as horror in the fact of the revolution and its effects (Harrington, 2005, p.3).

Burke had agreed with the American Revolution and revolutionaries because they used concrete ideas and actual notions, whereas the French revolutionaries' notions were such as the Rights of Man, Liberty and Equality which were abstract, and they did not harness those metaphysical principles to maintaining traditional freedoms or the right of property, but used them to subvert the entire society. One might think that Burke resisted the change that can be brought about by revolution, but the truth is that he did believe in revolutionary change. He doubted the kind of change that resulted from revolution because it was fast and violent, whereas natural progress and change was gradual and organic. A sudden and ferocious change could risk sweeping aside the legacy that was handed down from older generations to the present generation,

centered on the meaningless and hurriedly constructed ideas and conceptions of only one generation which might threaten the constitution. Additionally, for Burke, the constitution was of central significance for bringing society together, because it was not a contract between individuals, and the individuals of one generation do not have the right to replace it by a thoroughly new constitution because it was a contract between generations that had to be preserved - changes were permissible only when they were made within the constitution. Hence, one can contend that Burke opposed to the French Revolution because he was afraid that the revolution would change and replace the constitution (Burke, 1989, p.72).

The relation between what has been said above and the sublime is obvious in the light of the analysis of Burke's sublime in the first chapter. The relation lies in the idea of horror, which is the ruling principle of the sublime, because radical change - as for example in the constitution - threatens the accomplishments that other generations have achieved. Furthermore, the abstract ideas used by the revolutionists which Burke refuted were rejected due to the fact that such abstract rights elevated some sort of supreme power that annihilated the ordinary rights of other people, and the application of these abstract rights should be placed in the hands of God and nature - they resided in the laws of nature but had been transferred to the hands of the rebels at the time. Therefore, the revolutionaries resorted to the abstract rights as if they were permitted to use them and apply them to substitute the rulers and the system in which it was thought to endanger both the abstract and the concrete or ordinary notions of the rights of man.

For Burke, Western civilisation was of great importance, and he thought that the civilising process had to be maintained. In his view, the guarantors of this process were the church because of its sublimity, and the nobility because of its beauty. This, along with other arguments, made Burke the founding father of modern conservatism because he stood against the French Revolution as the first modern political event. He considered that the event in France was nothing less than an attempt to destroy European civilisation, and believed that it was impossible to make peace with the murderers of Louis XVI (Daniel, 2004, p.201-202). Thus, one should interrogate why European civilisation was endangered by the revolution in France, or what really terrified Burke about it? Daniel I. O'Neill believes that the reason behind Burke's opposition to the events in France and seeing it as the foretelling of the Western civilisation is due to the possibility of giving birth to democracy or as an impetus for democratic society in which he was not an anti-democratic figure but regarded democracy as the collapse of the civilisation in the West (ibid p.202).

The ideas of the church's sublimity and the nobility's beauty were related to the spirits of religion and gentility - and the question of the sublime is crucially related to that of the church and religion. The destruction of the institutional church, for Burke, would lead to a catastrophic conclusion because it was a key pillar and guarantor of European civilisation. In that occurrence, the civilising process and the progress already achieved would corrode and the people who have become civilised and undergone the civilising process would regress to the onset of the process, as articulated in the following passage:

'Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilisation, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilisation, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion' (ibid p.205).

Burke, depending on the 'habitual social discipline' which enabled people to act and live together under a natural discipline, criticised the revolution because it threatened the nobility that underpinned and sustained the social edifice. In other words, he believed that to live in civil society was to live under this discipline and under a 'natural aristocracy', while the obliteration of this aristocracy was one of the primary objectives of the revolutionaries (ibid p.208). For example, the revolutionaries, on the night of 4 August, demolished the privileges of feudalism and took power over the National Assembly and behaved under the banner of 'the people'; also, the nobles had either been forced to live in exile or killed under the name of the abstract 'rights of man' by that 'people'.

Furthermore, the church, which for Burke was both the second cornerstone of civilisation in Europe and the other crucial source of the habitual social discipline, had been threatened by the revolution. Burke contended that the church played a significant role in the civilising process and legitimised the powers of the state and natural aristocracy due to the sublimity residing in the spirit of church and religion. Therefore, aristocratic power and the state would be guaranteed political lawfulness and legitimacy through the effect of the sublime as it was embodied in religion (ibid p. 209).

Burke's political convictions were intermingled with his religious convictions. Hence, he constructed some of his political views as an outcrop of his religious belief. He believed that reason, natural religion and revelation were important - but revolution was a surplus. A key pillar of his notion of the sublime as a source of terror derived from his religious understanding of man's finitude before the power of God: the human being's limitedness before limitless nature meant that he was overwhelmed by the power of nature as the

embodiment of God's laws (White, 1994, p.30-31).

Burke was a traditionalist philosopher who clearly supported those institutions whose function was to preserve tradition as a natural state of being, a natural state of things that he describes in this way 'by a constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature, we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and privileges, in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives' (Freeman, 1980, p.19).

Burke is sometimes considered to be a metaphysician because of his hostility to abstract thought. This opposition to abstract ideas was related to his objection to the application of metaphysical ideas to political events or the social dilemmas of human beings. He thought that this use of abstract notions in complex political incidents would lead to the emergence of extremism. This did not mean that he refused to believe in metaphysical abstract notions, but he objected the revolutionaries' descendance of the intangible concepts and applying them onto the political changes in France since he regarded the superior truth or reality to be behind the actual events, as Father Canavan puts it:

'Despite his constant denunciations of 'metaphysics', his thought had unmistakable metaphysical foundations and his understanding of the structure of the state and society was based on certain definite assumptions about the nature of the universe' (ibid p.17).

This is related to what has been said in the first chapter as Burke contended that the French revolutionaries' abstract ideas such as 'liberty and rights of man' had been derived from the metaphysical concepts that even the revolutionaries themselves violated them because they threatened people's lives and killed many others. These ideas were also linked to the religious abstract ideas that were also endangered because the same abstract notions which they struggled for had become the opposite in reality.

Theology was the reason behind Burke's disagreement with the Revolution's abstract ideas because he contended that it is the duty of the theologians to use and interpret those theological abstract concepts and those who are not theologians should only abide by religion as they are brought up by it because he thought that the religious ideas would be threatened if they will be used or interpreted by the politicians. Politics, he argues, is not for religious purposes but for morality and order in society which brings people together and provides peace and security. He was not a secular thinker because his religiosity cannot be denied, and his philosophy and his political views were not separate from his belief in religion. Hence, the Burkean idea of the sublime should also be understood within a religious framework. For Burke,

religion, despite its superior reality and being beyond man's life, was of great importance in man's social life because it dignified being and provided happiness. This was the supreme power of religion and its superiority over man's power to construct society and order (ibid p.17).

It is fundamental to interrogate the relationship between Burke's religious views and sublimity. His theory of politics was based on Christian metaphysics where God and order were central. He expresses his love for order because the universe is ordered and God is the great Creator of that order; and also, he is the author of our place in the world; therefore, the order of the universe is made to accommodate human beings and man is made to belong within it. The order is tuned to a pre-existent law that governs nature and everything in it. Thus, everyone is bound by the laws of nature and man's belonging to them makes him/her transcendent as elevated to the laws and part of nature. Burke justifies his conservatism, which is essential to his conception of the sublime, with reference to God's order. He even saw God as the author of the state and civil society because he regarded such things as natural, part of state of nature. Also, Burke's confidence in rulers extended to his conviction that the revolutionists had no right to fight against the rulers because they were supposed to be part of the same law of nature that held God the benevolent inventor of order, and the rulers the guardians of that natural order. This religious perspective on God, order and nature led Burke to make a metaphysical as much as a political theorisation of the French Revolution because his consideration of order upheld stability, harmony and pattern and he held the revolution to corrupt this harmony in nature, or it seemed to be a disorder which could threaten the order that already existed, despite the fact that the revolutionists did not intend disorder but a different kind of order (ibid p. 18-19). He held the French Revolution accountable for the chaos and disorder it created as a threat to the universal order, and this determined his response to the event in France "as 'a wild attempt to methodise anarchy; to perpetuate and fix disorder'. It was a foul, impious, monstrous thing, wholly against God, against nature, against order, against 'a mild and lawful monarch', against property and rational liberty" (ibid, p.23-24).

A harmonious universe and divinely instituted order are considered to be the foundation of the sublime in nature, with God superintending all. Burke's belief in terror as sublime, such as the horror and violence of the revolution in France, was on a temporal or historical level – but he wished to connect the idea of the sublime to the theological level. This is more evident when one investigates his notion of God as sublime. God is viewed as the object of understanding; an object that brings



power, knowledge, morality and justice together. God is extended to a level of definition which lies far beyond man's ability to comprehend him. One considers deity to a degree in the light of abstraction - that there is almost no link between it and the passions and the imagination. But human beings are naturally bound to rise to those pure notions and ideas through sensible images. The sensible images are related to the contemplation of divinity and its effect on the imagination. When one envisages deity, then a means of self-comparison with God comes in and then the ultimate thing that occurs is opening one's eyes when God's might, power, morality, wisdom and justice are presented to be understood. In the result of this comparison, the person shrinks into his minimal natural existence, perhaps to the degree of obliteration before God's existence. After man traces the power of God via multiple levels, one after the other, until reaching the supreme and the highest grade, then one's imagination is ultimately lost, and the person will be terrified due to the sublimity in its power (Burke, 2008, p.62-63).

The point that should be made, in linking the sublimity of God, nature and divine order with the sublimity of man, and the order that is claimed by man himself on a worldly level, is that the former sublime is the real sublime because God, for instance, overwhelms, empowers and transcends man, whereas the latter, for example, the French Revolution and the rights that were used by the revolutionaries for a worldly order, showed that it was a debased sublime because they, on the contrary, threatened and reduced man to the minimum. For example, when he speaks about the bible's book of Job, he believes that man's mind is elevated to the idea of God.

Burke, in *Observations on the Late State of the Nation* (1769), warned of the imprudent change or reform of the British constitution; he also characterised the British constitution as an old building which 'stands well enough, even though it is part Gothic, Chinese and Grecian; therefore, the only task is to amend and unify it'. He saw the British constitution as irregular, irrational and untidy, and the solution was uniformity, not replacement by a revolutionary constitution. His point is clearly that the roots of the constitution are linked to the past and the accumulated wisdom of past generations. Burke's idea of change is ambiguous, however, because one is not certain to what extent change is permitted, but changes were permissible and crucial to the constitution only when they were carried on within it (Burke, 1969, p.175).

Many metaphors were created in the Enlightenment. One of the oxymoronic metaphors created by the revolutionaries was light and darkness, where the light referred to the success of the revolution and darkness indicated the oppression by former rulers. For example,

soon after the fall of the Bastille, Richard Price spoke to his associates about the Glorious and Great Revolution of 1666 in the following terms:

'I see the adore for liberty spreading and catching... Behold, the light you have struck out, after seeing America free, reflected to France, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms the illuminates all Europe! Tremble all ye oppressors of the world!... you cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality' (Sermon, 1789).

Price's use of this enlightenment imagery is significant because Burke, in response to Price's employment of it, revised the metaphor into the fake sun of man's cognition - as "not the light of heaven, but the light of rotten wood and stinking fish - the gloomy sparkling of collected filth, corruption, and putrefaction" (Paulson, 1983, p.59). This Burkean contestation of Price's language of light and darkness is part of Burke's fundamental aesthetic work, 'Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', where he contends that darkness is sublime and light is not; but he importantly adds that excessive or extreme light paralyses the sight as darkness does, because their effect is the same which is the overpowering of sense and the paralysis of the sight (ibid).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Burke had proposed novel ideas towards the sublime in relation to the French Revolution and his arguments became a turning point in the analysis of the concept as he had investigated the concept in the light of aesthetics and ethics and politics. His profound discussions spinning around the revolutionary sublime paved the way for more philosophical and literary texts. However, they differed in their point of views of the sublime because Burke viewed the French revolutionary sublime as dangerous or terrifying incident and endangering what all previous generations have historically accomplished. Burke's fear of the sublimity of the revolutions was because he considered the revolution as a radical incident that destroys everything else and establishing an entirely new order, style of life and constitution.

The paper, in result, reaches the point that Burke differed from the previous thinkers in viewing sublimity mainly in relation to the French Revolution. Sublimity for other thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, have meant progression in relation to the incident in France, whilst in Burke's perception, it is regression and endangers the sum of accomplishments brought about by God, religion and nature. The risk of sublimity of the French Revolution and other revolutionary events towards the sublimity of God, order and the natural laws is that

revolutionary radicalism can end the previous genuine sublime and replace it with one originated from/by human beings.

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