

Burke's Sympathy for Taste

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"A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." —Edmund Burke¹

This work begins as an investigation rather than with concrete proof. The investigation is in pursuit of the apparent disappearance of the term imitation. The occlusion of imitation begins—at least so it appears to me—sometime around the beginning of the eighteenth century, although it takes nearly a century for the substantive import of the word to be evacuated.²—I'm interested in understanding what happened to imitation and mimesis. My conviction is that the trope of mimesis remained throughout the eighteenth century the central term around which aesthetic theories of taste and judgment circulated, even though it became increasingly less visible. The present essay formulates how the concept of mimesis figures in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and focuses specifically on how mimesis relates to the social foundations of taste and judgment. My presumption is that one key problem for eighteenth-century writers on aesthetics—as well as morals—was the character and location of the category "society": its origin, effects, influences, and proper regulation. The social (or society) is taken to be pervasive yet elusive in its appearance. As Keith Baker writes of society: "Few words can have been more generously invoked in the course of the eighteenth century; none seem now more difficult for the historian to pin down. Yet, by the same token, none was more central to the philosophy of the Enlightenment."³ I'll argue that the young Burke finds in the phenomenon of our ideas of beauty and the sublime an especially apt place to configure the pervasive, elusive appearance of society.⁴ My thesis is the following: Burke construes the possibility not only of the social coming to appearance but more importantly of the social constituting itself according to an underlying dynamic of mimesis. I will therefore attempt to show what I take to be the ubiquity of mimesis in Burke's formulations of beauty and taste, as well as its social character.

INTRODUCING TASTE

"Only in society is the beautiful of empirical interest." (Kant)

"All pleasure is social." (Horkheimer and Adorno)

I examine Burke's *Enquiry* in order to consider how the term *sympathy* comes to displace and thereby extend what mimesis previously had achieved as mere imitation. My hope is that from a reconstruction of what I take to be Burke's characterization of the thoroughly social nature of mimesis—as well as with what I will show to be the social, mimetic nature of ambition—we will then be in a position to imagine how mimesis extends throughout the realms of beauty and the sublime to what might be called the dialectic of taste, perhaps the most important of the "dialectics of the Enlightenment."

I hope to remain within the spirit, if not the letter, of Burke's own understanding of our mental activities and hence perhaps of what he took to set the boundaries of his *Enquiry*: "The mind of man has naturally a far greater alacrity and satisfaction in tracing resemblances than in searching for differences; because by making resemblances we produce *new images*, we unite, we create, we enlarge our stock; but in making distinctions

we offer no food at all to the imagination" (*Enquiry*, 18). I hope to trace—which is to say with Burke: to make—a resemblance between imitation and society, in short, to draw together the principle of *likeness* in imitation and that of *kinship* in society. Note that Burke conflates "tracing" and "making" in the passage above. A more modern reader expects Burke to distinguish the two, as if "tracing" could only be a kind of reproduction and "making" distinct from it by being more like one of the terms he employs as an elaboration of making: creating. Burke confounds the modern reader by rendering tracing and making equivalent, at least in regard to resemblance. Note that it is not making per se that functions as the differentiating term since the *making* of distinctions is that which he contrasts with our activities in regard to resemblances.

Perhaps there is a lesson to be gleaned from Burke's conflation of tracing and making in regard to the ambiguity of mimesis: mimesis as *tracing* means mere reproduction, literally going over and returning to what already exists, whereas mimesis as *making* implies the expansion of what we already are through the production of new resemblances. And yet even the term "new resemblance" is itself fraught with an entanglement in what already exists, for the very assertion of resemblance necessarily refers back to something else, as Burke himself observes: resemblance designates the relation of an imitation to its "original" (*Enquiry*, 17).⁵ New therefore—and this is obvious—is by definition relative, and we might add: especially so when it qualifies the term resemblance.

It is noteworthy how thoroughly appropriate it is that Burke's own remarks on resemblance (and on "making distinctions") are themselves in imitation of someone else's: "Mr. Locke very justly and finely observes of wit, that it is chiefly conversant in tracing resemblances; he remarks at the same time, that the business of judgment is rather in finding differences" (*Enquiry*, 17).⁶ And indeed this distinction between tracing resemblances and finding differences provides the unacknowledged basis for the central distinction in the *Enquiry*: that between beauty and the sublime. As we shall see, beauty is formulated as the product of the resemblance between our sensuous selves and something—or someone—else, while the sublime is the name for that event when the unceasing, inevitable succession of resemblances, which Hume might call the association of ideas, comes to an end. Beauty, for Burke, is the name we accord the pleasure that we take in certain resemblances—or, we might say, a certain kind of resemblance, since he asserts that all resemblance is pleasurable.

What then for Burke distinguishes the particular pleasure of beauty from the general pleasure of resemblance? Though Burke is not as consistent or explicit as one might hope in this matter, it nonetheless seems we might surmise that beauty results from the enhancing of resemblance. If tracing resemblances is the natural operation of our mental activity, perhaps even unbeknownst to us, then beauty is the active—indeed, for Burke, overactive—*assertion* of resemblance: a making premised upon a prior tracing. For Burke, beauty is then both the passive perception of resemblance as well as the active positing of it. Beauty is thereby also the enhancement and doubling of the simple pleasure accompanying all resemblance.

Beauty is in this way akin to the movement of taste, as Burke explains: "There is in all men a sufficient remembrance of the original natural causes of pleasure, to enable them to bring all things offered to their senses to that standard, and to regulate their

feelings and opinions by it" (*Enquiry*, 16). Burke's concern here is not only to distinguish "natural relish" from acquired taste but more importantly to assert that the former is the basis and provides the standard for all subsequent judgments of taste, regardless of how far removed from natural relish those later judgments appear to be. The continuity from natural relish to acquired taste is akin to that between tracing and making resemblances.⁷

There is also continuity from Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* to Burke's account of the origin of aesthetic ideas. Where Hutcheson multiplies the faculties of the *subject*, Burke instead shows the complications and complexities of the *objects* present to the senses and hence to the complexities of the senses themselves. As we shall shortly see, this turn away from the Hutchesonian subject toward the object will have striking consequences for Burke's subsequent return to the faculties of the subject. Consider then Burke's assessment of the difference between the sense of sight and that of taste:

It must be observed too, that the pleasures of the sight are not near so complicated, and confused, and altered by unnatural habits and associations, as the pleasures of the Taste are; because the pleasures of the sight more commonly acquiesce in themselves; and are not so often altered by considerations which are independent of the sight itself. But things do not spontaneously present themselves to the palate as they do to the sight ... they often form the palate by degrees, and by force of these associations. (*Enquiry*, 15)

Burke goes on to designate taste "that most ambiguous of the senses," while having earlier remarked that the *faculty* of taste takes its name from the sense of taste because of the agreement among all people in calling "vinegar sour, honey sweet, and aloes bitter" (*Enquiry*, 14). We might thus conclude that the *faculty* of taste originates in the commonality of designating certain things we have literally tasted as well as in the very susceptibility to complication and corruption of this most ambiguous sense.

Burke—in contrast to Hutcheson—might therefore be seen to want to focus his analysis on the point of intersection between object and sense, except that the intersection itself is complicated by the history of the sense involved, not to mention the history of the subject who brings to perception past associations along with anticipations of the future. In the following passage Burke extends the temporal character of the senses in general to the historical character of subjectivity by evoking the relation between sense and judgment: "In the morning of our days, when the senses are unworn and tender, when the whole man is awake in every part, and the gloss of novelty fresh upon all the objects that surround us, how lively at that time are our sensations, but how false and inaccurate the judgments we form of things" (*Enquiry*, 25). Though Burke neglects to draw the corollary conclusion—that worn and calloused sense is more likely to lead to true and accurate judgment, perhaps because obviously false—he nonetheless attests here to the complementarity and interdependence of sense and judgment. In his "Introduction of Taste" Burke further attests to this complementarity by adopting the assumption of a continuity between the primary pleasures of sense and the secondary pleasures of imagination (that is, judgment).⁸ The pleasures of the imagination are the echo and

enhancement of sensuous pleasure made possible only if sensuousness does not press too closely and thereby overwhelm—which, by contrast, describes the origin of our "ideas" of the sublime.

Our judgment models itself on sense; it produces its pleasures by likening its pleasures to those of sense, and so, too, by likening its dynamic to that of sense. It follows, then, that acquired taste does not come to be acquired from the objects in which it learns to take pleasure but is, rather, a product of a faculty of imitation and reflection; that is, we learn from sense *how* to have pleasure. If this seems obvious, let me attempt to make it less so: the lesson of sense is not that some sensations are pleasurable and others not; rather, sense shows us that pleasure depends upon sensation being a *likeness* of nature rather than a mere continuation of it. Or, still more abstractly expressed, and from the point of view of pleasure: pleasure teaches that its continuation depends equally upon the continuity as well as disjunction between original and imitation. In short, and formulated retrospectively, judgment stands to sense as sense stands to nature. Both relations are instances of mimesis; indeed, for Burke, we might assert that the exemplary, original instance of mimesis occurs in—and as—sense. Moreover, Burke's achievement consists in successfully wedding Aristotle's view of mimesis with an empiricist orientation toward impressions and ideas. Sensation thereby becomes for Burke the internal likeness of nature. At the base of this schema Burke supposes a generous fecundity: nature provides a rich source for sensation, while sensation in turn offers a wealth of possible pleasure to imagination and judgment. These mimetic reproductions are exponential—possibilities multiply with each fold of nature, the first into sense and the next into judgment.

The alternative to mimetic reproduction would be mechanical repetition. For Burke, the understanding is of course capable of inaugurating just such repetition based both on the experience of sensuous repetitions as well as on the imagination's repetition of sense:

Whenever we repeat any idea frequently, the mind by a sort of mechanism repeats it long after the first cause has ceased to operate. [...] After a long succession of noises, as the fall of waters, or the bearing of forge hammers, the hammers beat and the water roars in the imagination long after the first sounds have ceased to affect it; and they die away at last by gradations which are scarcely perceptible. (*Enquiry*, 73)

What might therefore be called the imagination's natural tendency to repeat, as well as to have its repetitions decay, is disturbed in the case of the "madman":

This is the reason of an appearance very frequent in madmen; that 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. (*Enquiry*, 74)

The disturbance of the madman occurs in the reversal of what ought to be the natural progress of the decay and weakening of repetition. Burke's restriction—via his diagnosis of madness—of any possible strengthening of repetition meets a kindred limitation in his insistence regarding the common origin and undifferentiated nature of pleasure: "This agreement of mankind is not confined to the Taste solely. The principle of pleasure derived from sight is the same in all. Light is more pleasing than darkness" (*Enquiry*, 15). Sensuous pleasure's common origin is complemented by the common origin in imitation of the pleasure of the faculty of taste, which is to say, the pleasure of judgment and imagination:

A man to whom sculpture is new, sees a barber's block, or some ordinary piece of statuary; he is immediately struck and pleased, because he sees something like an human figure; and entirely taken up with this likeness, he does not at all attend to its defects. No person, I believe, at the first time of seeing a piece of imitation ever did. (*Enquiry*, 18-19)

The imagination's initial encounter with any imitation inevitably fails to find it defective. Our preliminary judgments, then, like all initial sensations, are incapable of nuance and ambiguity but especially unable to be in any state other than wholly suffused by their object, judgment is "taken up" with likeness in the same manner that sensation is seemingly inseparable from the object that occasions it: "Light is more pleasing than darkness" (*Enquiry*, 15). To perceive a defective likeness involves retreating from the very character of likeness, a retreat from the imagination's object. This retreat by the *imagination* is, however, also an advance elsewhere, specifically an advance of *judgment*, which we have witnessed Burke characterize as the faculty of finding differences and making distinctions which "offer[s] no food at all to the imagination."

It is helpful here to recall that what Burke considers to be only so-called differences in taste are wholly the product of accident, for they depend upon "experience and observation." Our essential, true, and correct taste would remain uncorrupted by experience; the continuity from object to sensation, from stature to sense, would be undisturbed. Put differently: sense would exist as a perfect likeness of nature. But here we rub against the logical fallacy undergirding the whole of Burke's sensationist aesthetics. And as we shall see, it is the very inconsequentiality of that fallacy which gives the strongest indication of the persistence of imitation in Burke's aesthetics. Burke's fallacy is most striking in the passage discussing the impossibility of the imagination attending to any defect in an initial encounter with an imitation. The fallacy lies in Burke's characterization of the immediate, unmixed nature of the perception of likeness. This cannot be the case unless one likewise imagines that likenesses present themselves as such to perception. But even this fantasy would fail to overcome what might be called the fallacy of pure likeness: regardless how pure a likeness one imagines, it could never be pure enough to exclude reference to some "original." In short, likeness requires differentiation.

As the senses are the original likeness (of nature) only insofar as they differentiate themselves from nature, the continuation of differentiation proceeds next within the very *operations* of sense. As we saw in the case of the most "ambiguous" sense, taste, it unfolds

as an attempt to be adequate to its object. That is, for Burke, the palate requires elaboration—in contrast to sight—because "things do not spontaneously present themselves" to it. The senses are then in still another sense "the great originals of all our ideas" because not only do they passively receive impressions but, perhaps more importantly, actively mimic the dynamic character of nature. Taste is a sense requiring temporal development because it imitates—as an ability—the temporal dimension of the objects presented to it. The *sense* of taste provides an exemplary model for the *faculty* of taste insofar as the former is the sense that most actively likens itself to the object it purportedly only passively registers.

For Burke, taste in general is an active, mimetic approximation of an object, just as the sound emitted by any of us in response to a tasty dish is an approximation of what the food itself might say, if only it could speak. In this case our judgment—but so too our pleasure—is most apt when it likens itself to what we *imagine* the sensation to be. If we construe the relation between sense and imagination according to the activity of differentiation alone, we might assert that the differentiation that takes place within the *sense* of taste is what warrants the very ground of imagination as a faculty originating by way of its differentiation *from* sense. It follows that the contents of the imagination — likenesses—are themselves premised upon this differentiation from purported originals. At the core of every assertion of likeness is therefore a curious dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. Likeness posits a differentiation from an original, which, in turn, warrants an invitation to return—but this time via the imagination—to an *imagined* original.

Let me attempt to evoke this dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, and especially the role of the imagination in Burke's account of taste, by describing what I designate the logic of perfume.⁹ Perfume can provoke an aesthetic experience only insofar as it activates our sense, as well as faculty, of taste.¹⁰ For a sensationist account like Burke's, our first approach to perfume—or perhaps it's more accurate to say: perfume's approach to us—occurs straightforwardly enough as a scent, something we smell and that has appended to it a simple pleasure or pain. In order for the presumably pleasurable smell of some scent to work as perfume it must somehow involve the imagination. In order for some scent to succeed as perfume the pleasure in it must be "taken up" by the imagination, delivered to, or grasped by it as an opportunity for further pleasure, though now as pleasure produced by the imagination rather than sense. Hence the discontinuity of experience occurs in the shift from sense to imagination, while the *continuity* of experience is twofold: the pleasure of the imagination remains *pleasure* regardless of its locus or origin; imagination's pleasure occurs by *likening* itself to the pleasure of sense. That is, imagination, if you will, *imagines* itself continuous with sense. It is therefore no accident—and this is most apparent in the logic of perfume—that imagination ignites itself by returning to sense: the imagination produces pleasure by reproducing sense. In other words, the imagination invites us to return to sense, even if it is only a return to the idea of sense. I want to designate as mimesis this return of ours, via the imagination, to sense. We reproduce sense in imagination but also—mimetically—we mere creatures with taste produce ourselves as persons *of* taste.

Though sense is the origin of all our ideas, rather than consider it an abundant source, we might instead describe it—precisely because our ideas are distinct from sense—as somehow inadequate for us. For Burke, however, this very inadequacy presents

an opportunity for the making of a commonality by the *faculty* of taste. Before I cite what is perhaps the most infamous passage in the whole of Burke's treatment of beauty, let us recall that Burke's conception of beauty is that it is entirely mechanical. In the section titled "The real cause of Beauty" he writes: "Beauty is a thing much too affecting not to depend upon some positive qualities, ... [B]eauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses" (*Enquiry*, 112). Three pages later, in the section "Gradual Variation," he rapturously writes,

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. (Enquiry, 115)

The profound insensibility of this passage troubles me. I take the swell being "insensible" to be more than a rhetorical flourish; instead, I find it a literal description of something being inaccessible to sense. But why might Burke, who is the most adamant defender of the notion that beauty is an entirely sensational phenomenon, here describe his premier case of beauty—a woman, or at least select body parts of a woman—in terms of insensibility? Beauty's insensibility produces an opportunity for an experience—of beauty—generated by the thorough inadequacy and failure of sense.

II. AMBITION

"It is by imitation far more than by precept that we learn every thing."
(Burke, *Enquiry*, 49)

We continue where Burke, in effect, ends, at least where he concludes Part One of his *Enquiry*: with a consideration of what he terms *ambition*.¹¹ We should recall that, for Burke, all our passions may be ranged under either of two heads: that of self-preservation (where the sublime might take place) and that of society (according to which beauty takes place).¹² The three principal versions of social passion occur as sympathy, imitation, and ambition. These are what he calls the "three principal links" in the great chain of society.¹³ And sympathy is, according to him, our first and most extensive link, or passion, toward others. He defines sympathy as "a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected" (*Enquiry*, 44). Burke credits sympathy rather than imitation for the success of what he nonetheless designates the *imitative* arts: "It is by this principle [of sympathy] chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself" (*Enquiry*, 44). There is at least one interesting elision here: Burke writes of artworks transfusing *their* passions, indeed "from one breast to another." The artwork is itself a thing with passion, or better: a thing of passion, and as such, capable of sympathy, hence capable of

substitution. That is, the artwork might be a kind of social cipher, a place where another social subject might substitute herself and thereby be affected as the work itself might have been. But so, too, is the artwork, as a sympathetic thing, capable of substituting itself for a social subject; in this latter case the artwork takes the place of the social subject and is affected as she might have been. Furthermore, substitution makes things fungible: how else explain Burke's recognition of sympathy's ability to graft a "delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself"? If we consider in tandem sympathy's capacity for substitution along with this ability to transform by way of grafting, we might conclude that sympathy is not only a capacity for disavowal but so, too, for affirmation. Substitutability entails the power to disown what one is as well as the power to affirm that one might instead be something else, just as the capacity to graft delight on death, for example, entails the ability to detach certain associations from death while affixing some others that might also be considered their contraries.

Although this characterization of the dynamic of sympathy according to the flexibility of associations may well put us in mind of the predominant epistemological theory among eighteenth-century British philosophers—the so-called associationist theory of mind—I want to suggest that Burke has a still more radical theory of association.¹⁴ His associationism originates within our overwhelmingly social passion of sympathy; any Burkean associationist theory of mental activity would be derivative upon it. In short, what we associate with first and foremost is one another. Mental associations are a subspecies of social ones. And as we are about to learn in regard to imitation, it is our "natural constitution" not only to be drawn toward what others *feel*, but so too to draw ourselves toward what they do, to repeat their actions--via imitation—as a means of enhancing the affinity we already feel, whereby sympathy encourages us to find occasions when we might feel our affinities still more strongly. Imitation is, in other words, an elaboration of sympathy:¹⁵

For as sympathy makes us take a concern in whatever men feel, so this affection prompts us to copy whatever they do; and consequently we have a pleasure in imitating, and in whatever belongs to imitation merely as it is such, without any intervention of the reasoning faculty, but solely from our natural constitution ... (*Enquiry*, 49)

Burke here is obviously echoing Aristotle's declaration in the *Poetics* that we are by nature animals who imitate and hence take pleasure in imitation. But what Burke appends to this tenet of Aristotelianism is the qualification that imitation is a natural, *social*, and constitutive part of what we are. Burke's amendment to Aristotle nonetheless has striking consequences for an understanding of imitation even though Burke merely repeats the familiar claim that the pleasure of imitation is derived from the "power of imitation" rather than any quality of the object imitated. Since Burke takes the power of imitation to be a version of the power of sympathy, imitation must be understood not only as the capacity for substitution but also as the enactment, enhancement, and extension of our affinity to, and "affection" for, one another. For Burke, therefore, the pleasure of imitation is the pleasure of society, specifically, the pleasure we take in feeling a kinship and closeness to others.

This claim may not appear all that provocative if the only imitations we have in mind are the imitative actions of one individual with regard to another, for the link between subjects—and hence the social character of imitation—is in this case clear. But if we include, as I think we must especially in regard to Burke, all manner of imitations—all products of the so-called imitative arts: poetry, fiction, sculpture, architecture, painting, music, and so forth—then the provocative nature of the claim is apparent. For it now amounts to the following: the pleasure we take in artworks is but a species of the pleasure we take in society. Artworks then, by extension, provide an opportunity to feel social, or one might say: to feel the social, where *social* means *sympathy*.¹⁶

I therefore propose that mimesis functions for Burke as the principle of reproductive kinship. While sympathy is the term that describes our affinity or kinship *as well as* the means for feeling that kinship, imitation is the means by which we create opportunities to have that feeling. Imitation is thus the active production—or reproduction—of kinship. And insofar as imitation takes sympathy as its model, imitation is itself not only a mimetic dynamic but a mimetic product, in this case, a mimetic product of sympathy. What I want to suggest is that Burke's doctrine of the social passion of imitation is technically not a doctrine separate from that of sympathy; imitation is, rather, an elaboration of the mimetic nature of sympathy. Hence, it is no accident that what I am calling his elaboration of sympathy is placed by Burke himself under the heading of "imitation" (*Enquiry*, 44). There is an instructive parallel to be shown here between, on the one hand, Burke's account of beauty and, on the other, what I claim is his implicitly mimetic account of the relation between sympathy and imitation, which I prefer to describe as the inherently mimetic character of sympathy. It is by way of this parallel that we shall arrive finally at ambition—the third of the passions, or principal links, in the great chain of society.

Unfortunately, Burke's doctrine of the origin of our idea of beauty is too readily ridiculed and dismissed by twentieth-century readers. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* of 1790 Mary Wollstonecraft already took him to task for his definition of beauty.¹⁷ The specifics of his notion of beauty easily lend themselves to such dismissal when Burke insists, as we saw, that one of the most beautiful objects is a woman's neck, or when he includes roundness, softness, smoothness, smallness, and of course, weakness, among the principal characteristics of beauty. We must look beyond the supposed sexism of Burke's doctrine in order to understand how from the position of a sensationist such characterizations of beauty become, if not acceptable, at least understandable. Recall that for Burke the appropriate response to beauty is a kind of melting and near-drooling:

The head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides. All this is accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor. (*Enquiry*, 149)

Beauty is thus a quality in objects that offers virtually no resistance to us as sensuous beings: "All bodies that are pleasant to the touch, are so by the slightness of the resistance

they make" (*Enquiry*, 120). And yet, beauty is a quality in objects that also works to break down whatever resistances and soften whatever boundaries already exist within us—and so, too, some of the boundaries between us and the world. The importance of such characteristics of beauty as roundness and smoothness is that they describe a minimal level of perception, a perception of only enough resistance to have the perceiving subject barely register that she is perceiving something after all. This bare registry of stimulation is a kind of mimesis: another way to describe my near inability to distinguish between myself as a perceptual system and the object perceived is to assert that there is a profound *likeness* between that object and myself such that I cannot clearly identify the boundary between it and me. For Burke, the object I find beautiful is one whose characteristics feel continuous with me as a perceptual system, Smoothness, for example, is an occasion to feel the world as though it were an extension of my ability to perceive it. Another way to describe these extensions of my perception is to say, following our definition of mimesis, that beauty is the reproduction of my kinship with things. Beauty, then, like imitation, is not only the feeling of kinship but the active reproduction of it.

Now, finally, to ambition and its place in Burke's schema of our passions. He opens his very short section titled "Ambition" with the following qualification:

Although imitation is one of the great instruments used by providence in bringing our nature toward its perfection, yet if men gave themselves up to imitation entirely, and each followed the other, and so on in an eternal circle, it is easy to see that there never could be any improvement amongst them. (*Enquiry*, 50)

It is according to the term *ambition* that Burke seemingly registers his resistance to the ubiquity of mimesis, that is, to pervasive sympathy and imitation. And yet, though ambition is a natural response, a kind of *dissatisfaction* with imitation—planted in us by God (*Enquiry*, 50)—ambition is nonetheless fueled by mimesis.¹⁸ Consider Burke's remark that ambition "has been so strong as to make very miserable men take comfort that they were supreme in misery; and certain it is, that where we cannot distinguish ourselves by something excellent, we begin to take a complacency in some singular infirmities, follies, or defects of one kind or another" (*Enquiry*, 50). Though we seek distinction, we resort to idiosyncrasy if we fail to distinguish ourselves by "something excellent." To seek distinction via excellence is to make oneself an object worthy of sympathy, to make oneself a model for mimesis. And to seek distinction along this route is wholly compatible with Burke's doctrine of sympathy: here we make ourselves an object rather than a subject of mimesis. To take the seemingly contrary route toward distinction is—for whatever reason—to fail to offer oneself to others as a possible model but nonetheless to take oneself as, and make oneself into, the sole model for imitation. Mimesis does not simply disappear in the case of idiosyncrasy but, rather, becomes a viciously self-enclosed dynamic. The ambitious, idiosyncratic self numerically reproduces itself: it both feeds off and nourishes itself. Although ambition expresses itself here as dissatisfaction with imitation, it is nevertheless a dissatisfaction only with the conventional, social form of imitation as a mode of sympathy: it is thus a kind of sympathy only for oneself; a kinship with oneself alone and yet a sympathy nonetheless

desiring still more affinity to itself. Rather than understand ambition as anti-social—recall that Burke thinks it: one of our three social passions—one should understand ambition, instead, as a mimesis enclosed within the boundaries and aspirations of what might be called the society of the self. Ambition, delight, and a properly circumscribed beauty all share the need of an object against, or toward, which we distinguish ourselves.¹⁹

Since beauty, like ambition, requires some object or *resistance*, Burke's account of taste turns finally on the centrality of touch. (We witnessed how vision's seeming immediacy disqualified it as a touchstone upon which to structure taste.) And yet, because touch begins in the inability to penetrate a surface, it becomes Burke's prototype for the reflection that constitutes the faculty of taste. Touch is the model sense for taste—what could be at once more tactile *and* intimate than the faculty that deals with what touches the tongue?—because it depends more than any other sense on the resistances and boundaries that occasion it. But not all surfaces are mere obstacles to touch. Some surfaces are the occasion for taste insofar as they elicit a response somewhere beyond touch, namely by the imagination.

We might consider Burke's example of a so-called difference in taste arising in regard to the degree of smoothness of a polished surface in order to discern the place in his aesthetics where, despite himself, his sensationism parts company with his theory of taste. Burke would have it that taste is inseparable from sensation, hence the great agreement among us all in, say, our pleasurable response to light or in calling "vinegar sour, honey sweet" and so forth. What Burke identifies as the origin of what he supposes is only an apparent difference in taste is in effect an account of taste that can no longer depend on a presumed commonality of sensation. That we might disagree about the degree of smoothness of some surface or disagree as to which surface is in fact smoothest is not simply the result of some failure of sensation, nor likewise the success of a refined ability to sense; rather, it reflects sensation's having been already transformed by imagination. Imagination, we might say, comes theoretically to exist in the pores of sensation. By this metaphorical image we might appreciate the extent to which the success of imagination is best understood in terms of its apparent inseparability from sense. Any one of our judgments of taste seems to us not only true but an *accurate* likeness of what we judge; for this reason, Burke can defend this insistence by taste that it is rooted in sensation more than imagination. And yet, the very measure of success for taste is the illusion of sense perpetrated by imagination. This might then also be described as the success of mimesis. Mimetically formulated, the imagination is the faculty of reproducing sense as a means of coming to have a kinship with it. There are two aspects of taste that reveal the mimetic success of imagination: the first is the insistence by taste that its judgments are sensations rather than imaginative conjurings of sense; the second is what I previously discussed under the logic of perfume as the invitation by imagination to return to sense.

My thesis is that the mimetic relation inaugurated by imagination in regard to sense is borrowed from social relations; that is, sympathy or fellow-feeling provides the basis and model for the imagination as a faculty likening itself to sense. Just as sympathy begins in the recognition of difference between self and other (for Smith and Shaftesbury this difference ramifies even within the self)—or what we might call the limitations of the individual—imagination originates in the limits of sense. The key dynamic of mimesis

comes from the fact that such limitations are nonetheless taken to provide a model and impetus for the reproduction of sense. This complex of limitation, reproduction, likeness, and sympathy Burke designates "taste." Mimetic activities—our taste—therefore originate in whatever it is constitutionally that induces us toward, and nevertheless thwarts, our fellow-feeling.

Burke's achievement then—in a book whose title announces a search for origins—is to have described individual and social reproduction as at once both original and imitative. My contention is that this achievement is best understood as a mimetic one. Mimesis means here that reproduction produces originality, just as ambition, although specifically an anti-mimetic impulse, nonetheless proceeds by imagining a different form and object of imitation. So, too, in the example of acquired taste, no matter how distant, and perhaps even opposite it is to natural relish, it remains in an emphatic relation to its apparently unmediated origin. Mimesis is Burke's overarching dynamic for describing not only the relations among and within human beings, but so too for theorizing how to meliorate the historical and political impasse between authority and originality.

NOTES

1. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 63; hereafter cited as *Enquiry*.

2. See the dissertation by Martin Gammon, *Kant and the Decline of Classical Mimesis* (Univ. of California at Berkeley, 1997), for a thorough survey of the history of the term.

3. Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wygee Velema (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 95-120.

4. For the eighteenth century, "beauty" appears to have been hardly more stable than "society." See Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain; The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), viii. Jones's hook seeks to respond to a call made by Ronald Paulson that "a narrative of the Beautiful . . . seems to me, a corrective long-due" (*Hogarth, Vol.111: Art and Politics, 1750-1764* [Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1993], xvij) as well as a need noted by Frances Ferguson for more attention to be paid to the beautiful; see her *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 44-5. Ferguson complained as early as 1981 of an overly hasty "rush to the sublime" (68) by critics in her "The Sublime of Edmund Burke, or the Bathos of Experience," *Glyph* 8(1981): 62-78. I note the title of a recent volume which nonetheless elides beauty altogether, edited by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bulla, *The Sublime: A Reader in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

5. A potentially profitable place to reflect on the relation of Burke's aesthetics to his political writings and political life might well be from within his initial thoughts in the *Enquiry* with regard to the relation between original and imitation. I would suggest that in these early thoughts Burke is already incipiently concerned with the question of how society appropriately reproduces itself, though the *Enquiry's* focus—as we shall see—is on how reproduction first occurs in sense, imagination, and taste. A recent book that succeeds in discussing the connections between Burke's aesthetics and politics is Stephen White's *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1994). However, as White acknowledges, to discuss the political implications of Burke's aesthetics is also to be confronted with its gendered character: "One of the distinct dangers courted in any attempt to unearth some wisdom in Burke's aesthetics is that of becoming entangled with the oppressive account of gender he endorses throughout his writings" (6-7). White is taken to task for such an entanglement by Linda Zerrilli in "No Thrust, No Swell, No Subject? A Critical Response to Stephen K. White," *Political Theory* 22 (1994), 323-28. For an interesting argument as to how the *Enquiry* might be subversive of the very gendered roles it presents, see Amanda Cilroy, "The Discourse of Beauty and

the Construction of Subjectivity in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*." *Liverpool Studies in Language and Discourse* I (1993): 45-70.

6. To thicken still further the line of originals and imitations we should recall that Joseph Addison had addressed Locke's distinction between wit and judgment in *Spectator*, no. 62; see Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, *Selections from The Tatler and The Spectator*, ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1982), 344-49,

7. Peter Melvin formulates this same relation in regard to Burke's conception of politics: "The secret of an enduring civil society is that the natural and artificial, reality and imitation, are so combined as to avoid intense public concern with one or the other" ("Burke on Theatricality and Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 [1975]: 447-68; quoted at 46 I).

8. Burke's source for this distinction is doubtless the influential series of twelve essays written by Addison that first appeared in 1712 in *The Spectator*. Addison formulates the imagination as itself capable of primary and secondary pleasures. The former are the result of visible objects, the latter from the "ideas" of those objects called up by memory. For a discussion of the influence of Addison's essays on the imagination as well as the probable origin of Addison's ideas in Locke, see James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century; The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature: 1700-1789*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1993), 130 ff.

9. So designated in homage to Burke's "logic of Taste" (*Enquiry*, 11). Burke's proposition that taste has a logic is grounded in his assumption that since all taste originates in the senses, it retains the systematicity that inheres in biological functions, regardless of how perverted from that origin any so-called acquired taste might become. However artificial some taste, Burke finds it inevitably not only in reference to an organic, biological taste, but more importantly also linked to a purposive and vital systematicity. I hope to suggest a similar train of associations with my description of the logic of perfume.

10. Although Burke did not yet have the term "aesthetic" at his disposal, of course, we might well take its equivalent to have had the rather broad range of sensuous life in general, just as Friedrich Schiller, for example, condemned Burke's aesthetics as limited solely to the realm of "mere life": "Züm biossen Lebeu macht die Schönheit Burke ..." (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man; In a Series of Letters*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967], 102-103; 15th Letter). A similarly sweeping, though perhaps more judicious assessment is offered by Ernest Tuveson: "Paramount for Burke, as for Locke and for Hobbes, is the sense of biological well-being. Our sense of life and health and energy is both the efficient and the final cause of aesthetic response" (*The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960], 170).

11. Steven Knapp notes that "Burke's striking discussion of ambition ... concludes with the only direct reference to Longinus in the body of the Enquiry" (*Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985] 69).

12. Knapp finds confusing Burke's placement of ambition: "The difficulty arises when we remember that ambition, treated here as a source of the sublime, is expressly classed among the social, not the self-preservative, passions" (70). Knapp proposes solving this difficulty by likening ambition to sympathy and by claiming both as means of resolving the opposition between self and society: "Sympathy, then, provides a point of contact between the opposing passions of society and self-preservation; it subordinates the individuating experience of the sublime to social needs. Ambition enters Burke's argument, rather surprisingly, as a second source of reconciliation, another providential guarantee" (71). Although I concur with the trajectory of Knapp's claim regarding sympathy, I find it baseless.

13. David Solkin recognizes the pervasiveness of imitation as both social and aesthetic phenomenon in the eighteenth century and likewise accords Burke a prominent place in having formulated, following Shaftesbury, a kinship among various kinds of imitation; see Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 220-21.

14. Howard Caygill argues for an overarching providential aspect to Burke's aesthetics by emphasizing the calculated character of his account of the passions: "The passions are 'calculated' to contribute to society and self-preservation: the pleasure in the beautiful excites the sociable passions of sympathy, imitation and ambition, while the pain of the sublime raises the self-preservative passions of pain and danger ... Pleasure expresses the 'bond of sympathy' by which God binds society, and this bond is ensured by a 'proportionate delight'" [*Art of Judgment* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1989], 81).

15. Isaac Kranmick comments on the connection between imitation, sympathy, and beauty: "A basic part of beauty is the repetition of form, the lack of sudden deviation. This is the principle of rhythm, as in the delicate smoothness and swells of the female body. The aesthetic principle has its social counterpart, according to Burke. Sympathy with others, a concern with what others feel, leads to a form of repetition, an imitation of what they do. [...] The imitation of others leads to a repetitious rhythm in life, a smoothness and lack of deviation or abrupt change" (*The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* [New York: Basic Books, 1977], 95).

16. A remark by Raymond Williams, though made in reference to Burke's *Reflections*, is helpful here: "In [Burke's] view, there was nothing in any way accidental about any particular form [of society]; the idea of society was only available to men in the form in which they had inherited it" (*Culture and Society: 1780-1950* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958], 10). If we substitute *experience* for *inherit* and allow a wide meaning to *idea*, then Williams might concur with our construal of artworks—and indeed aesthetic experience—as repositories of whatever it is that constitutes the social.

17. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke: occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), reprinted in *The Vindications*, ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 1997).

18. Thomas Weiskel comments on the relation between ambition and the sublime: "Ambition or the desire for originality—to be 'signalized' in some way—is the desire to escape imitation through a supererogatory identification with the object. The connection to the sublime is clear and significant: the sublime of nature or of text offers an occasion for the mind to establish its superiority or originality" (*The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, 2nd ed. [Baltimore; Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986], 99).

19. In Burke's schema of the necessity of ambition we also find the likeness of Shaftesbury's doctrine of self-converse and (self) criticism; see Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 4th ed. (London, 1727), vol. I, "Soliloquy: or Advice to an Author."