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James Barry's illustrations of *Paradise Lost* : the debt to Burke

Timothy O. McLoughlin*

What prompted Ireland's greatest historical painter James Barry (1741-1806) to think of illustrating Milton's *Paradise Lost* ? The short answer is Edmund Burke, but that is to leave unsaid a complex personal and intellectual relationship embedded in their Irish background. The two quickly became firm friends after their first meeting in Dublin in 1763. Barry, just twenty-two, had arrived from Cork in Munster, in 1760, to study at the Dublin Society Drawing School and Burke, aged thirty-four, was Secretary to William Hamilton, First Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant in Dublin. Burke was anxious at the time about the Whiteboy disturbances going on in Munster and was trying to persuade the Administration to handle the problem with caution.¹ He had Catholic relations in Munster who kept him informed. Like Barry his family was split along the religious divide: his father was a Protestant and his mother a Catholic. Whereas Burke was brought up a Protestant, Barry kept to the Catholic religion of his mother. Although Burke had long learned to rise above the kind of sectarianism that bedevilled Irish history and politics, he was well aware of the hurt and injustice done to Irish Catholics in general, and to his family in Munster in particular. Barry had arrived up in Dublin from a religious, political and social context Burke was very familiar with. Barry was already a keen admirer of Burke's *Enquiry* and within a year Burke had his brother Richard accompany the young Barry to London. Burke became mentor and patron, sponsoring Barry's years in Italy, encouraging, criticising, admonishing him in a stream of letters that he and other members of the Burke family wrote to Barry while he was on the continent.² The close

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1 Rural disturbances by Catholic craftsmen, labourers and cottiers: for a detailed analysis of Burke's concerns, see Michel Fuchs, *Edmund Burke, Ireland, and the fashioning of self* (Oxford, 1996), pp.275-80.

2 Burke advised Barry in "quite specific terms" to focus on drawing and to study anatomy. Burke's house at Beaconsfield had been purchased along with the art collection there, and at the time of his wife's death in 1812, the collection included paintings by Titian, da Vinci, Poussin and Reynolds. Burke claimed however not to be a good judge of pictures (Elizabeth R. Lambert, *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield* (London, 2003), p 56)

friendship was sometimes strained in this period and then cooled during the 1770s with Barry's irascible temper suspicious of Burke supposedly interfering in his work, but the intellectual ties are evident throughout their lives.³

Barry's homage to Milton

At the end of his time in Italy in 1770, Barry wrote to Burke that he was sending five crates of art and sculpture casts back to London. In the smallest of the packages was a rolled-up canvas of his painting "The Temptation of Adam". For all the debate about this work displayed in the Royal Academy exhibition of 1772 — the Herculean Adam, the nudity of the figures — the picture marks the beginning of Barry's fascination with Milton and particularly *Paradise Lost*. This was to culminate in his project in the 1790s, never completed, to provide eighteen illustrations of Milton's poem. Paintings, etchings or drawings for twelve of these survive, done for the most part between 1792 and 1795. Milton was an ongoing presence in Barry's works. The huge canvas that concludes his series "The Progress of Civilization" on the walls of the Adelphi Room of the Royal Society of Arts in London is entitled "Elysium and Tartarus or the State of Final Retribution". It measures 42ft 11 ins by 11ft 10ins. Elysium is populated by philosophers, scholars, legislators, writers and artists: near the centre of the background Milton sits between Shakespeare and Homer. The bottom right-hand third of the painting is given to Tartarus, reminiscent as Pressly suggests of Milton's Hell where "No light but rather darkness visible/ Serv'd only to discover sights of woe".⁴ Milton appears tellingly in two other of Barry's paintings. Barry was so stirred by the American colonists' resistance to North's government in 1776 and the erosion of civil liberties in England that he produced "The Phoenix, or the Resurrection of Freedom". In the right foreground Britannia lies dead on a bier mourned by Barry's champions of liberty, including Milton. In the distance across the river stands the temple of Liberty amidst fields populated by people working, dancing, playing music. Liberty, wrote Barry in the margin, had left England, "in chains and despondency", and taken flight to "a new people of manners simple and untainted".⁵ The other work featuring Milton dates from Barry's last years: it is an etching "Milton dictating to Ellwood the Quaker" (c.1804-5). We know that Thomas Ellwood was not in fact Milton's amanuensis, but one of those who used to read to Milton. Barry foregrounds Milton's Quaker friend and relegates one of Milton's daughters to the back of the scene so as to highlight Milton's Non-conformist

³ On the deteriorating friendship and the final reconciliation, see William L. Pressly, *The Life and Art of James Barry* (London, 1981), p.76.

⁴ *Paradise Lost*, i. 63-4; Pressly, *Life and Art of Barry*, p. 113.

⁵ Pressly, *Life and Art of Barry*, p. 77.

sympathies and his commitment to toleration and liberty. As Pressly notes, Barry saw in the neglect and poverty of the last years of his life a reflection of what Milton went through as a result of his dedication to such principles. The Earl of Buchan, Barry's patron, told Barry he coveted this picture because it depicted "A great man in circumstances similar to your own".⁶

Earlier illustrators

The notion of the artist as dissenter, pitting his creative gifts against a recalcitrant society, is found also in Barry's etching "Tasso in Prison crowned by Urania" (c1780). Barry is a kind of bridge in this respect between Milton and Blake. That a painter should join the great poets as a bardic, epic voice can be traced in England to Jonathan Richardson and back to Dryden who argued that painters should be readers of the great epics of Homer, Virgil, Spenser and Milton. A painter, said Richardson in his *Essay on the Theory of Painting* (1715), "must have the talents requisite to a good poet" and "be furnished with a vast stock of poetical, as well as historical learning".⁷ *Paradise Lost* provided an obvious challenge, what Johnson called, "a full display of the united force of study and genius".⁸ As Reynolds told his Academy students in 1770, "Grandeur" in painting could only be achieved, "by a variety of knowledge" and an imagination warmed by "the best productions of ancient and modern poetry".⁹ Poetry had the power not just to inspire painting, but to suggest the way to epic stature.

By the time Barry came to work on his illustrations in the early 1790s he was still Professor of Painting at the Academy and numbered among his friends his one-time student Blake as well as Fuseli, who was to succeed him as Professor. Both friends would also be drawn to Milton. All three had something of a tradition to work with, if they wanted.¹⁰ Notable were the illustrations for Tonson's 1688 edition of *Paradise Lost*, which set the trend of providing one illustration for each of the twelve books. That is what Louis Cheron did for Tonson's 1720 edition, and Francis Hayman for Newton's 1749 two volume edition of the poem. Not surprisingly earlier eighteenth-century artists repeatedly favoured the same scene from certain books, for instance the moment where Satan confronts Sin and Death at the gates of Hell in Book II, and the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in

⁶ Earl of Buchan to Barry, 19 April 1805, *Works of James Barry*, ed. Edward Fryer, 2 vols. (London, 1809), i.296, cited in Pressly, *Life and art of Barry*, p. 196.

⁷ Cited by Stephen Raynie, "Francis Hayman reading *Paradise Lost* in the 1740s", *Studies in English Literature*, June, 2004, 546.

⁸ "John Milton", *Samuel Johnson: Lives of the English Poets, a Selection*, ed. John Wain (London, 1975), p.100.

⁹ Discourse III, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses*, ed. Pat Rogers (London, 1992), p.112.

¹⁰ Marcia Pointon lists thirteen different illustrated editions between 1688 and 1802 (*Milton and English Art* (Manchester, 1970), pp. 268-69).

Book XII. Tonson's 1688 edition had both scenes, as did his 1720 edition and Newton's 1749 edition. Hogarth had also produced a painting of "Satan, Sin, and Death".

Barry chose not to follow that tradition. For one, he did not design his series to accompany the text, nor were his pictures to be a kind of Hogarthian progress through *Paradise Lost*, as Hayman had done.¹¹ Second, he shows little interest in what so attracted many illustrators before him, and even more so in the nineteenth century, the setting, the Garden of Eden. In previous illustrations, especially by Hayman, Adam and Eve are surrounded by a paradisaical landscape that takes up most of the frame. The figures are set in a profuse landscape of trees, flowers, water, animals and sky. Barry does include vegetation in the background in "The Temptation of Adam" and "Discovery of Adam and Eve", but relatively few of his chosen scenes call for this. The emphasis is on the dramatic posture of the figures.

There is good reason to suspect that Burke's idea of the sublime influenced this alternative approach. The freedom to choose the moments of high drama he wanted, rather than to have to select one scene from each book, allowed him room to explore the sublime effects the poem suggested to him. The point is apparent in his overall plan: one illustration from Bk I, four from Bk II, five from Bk IV, two from Bk V, one each from Bks VI, VII, IX, X, XI and XII.¹² Among these are scenes which by the 1790s were expected and had been tackled before, "Satan, Sin and Death", "Eve tempting Adam", and "The Expulsion from Paradise". But the decided weighting on Bks II and IV, the half of his project, reflects Barry's preoccupation with two major themes of Milton's epic, Satan's brazen defiance and the vulnerability of Adam and Eve's innocence. The attention to Satan reflects Barry's desire to capture this sublime masculine figure as no artists had done before him. Just as Burke had separated the "masculine sublime" from the "feminine beautiful", so Barry would work at his own rendering of that sublime in his illustrations.¹³

Barry's illustrations

The characteristics of Barry's treatment are seen for instance in "Satan and his Legions hurling Defiance toward the Vault of Heaven" (c1792-95) from Bk. I and in "Satan, Sin and Death" from Bk. II. Burke's

¹¹ The usual procedure, from Jacob Tonson's 1688 edition onwards, was to provide one illustration for each of the twelve books.

¹² Pressly has assembled evidence from various sources to reconstruct the full list of illustrations; for this and the genesis of Barry's scheme see Pressly, *Life and Art of Barry*, pp. 151-54.

¹³ Judith F. Hodgson, "Satan Humanised : 18th Century Illustrators of *Paradise Lost*", *Eighteenth-Century Life*, I (1974), 44.

sublime is evident in these “vivid presentations of terror and power”.¹⁴ In the first example, “Satan and his Legions hurling Defiance toward the Vault of Heaven”, which starts the series, Barry conflates two moments in Bk I. From the first where Satan exhorts his troops (531-49) he takes much of the visual detail of his illustration:

Then straight commands that, at the warlike sound
Of trumpets loud and clarions, be upreared
His mighty standard. That proud honour claimed
Azazel as his right, a Cherub tall,
Who forthwith from the glittering staff unfurled
The imperial ensign, which, full high advanced,
Shone like a meteor streaming to the wind...

When the trumpets blow, “the universal host upsent/ A shout that tore Hell’s concave, and beyond...” Then:

A forest huge of spears, and thronging helms
Appeared, and serried shields in thick array
Of depth immeasurable.

The second passage (663-69) provides the texture of Barry’s illustration:

He spake; and, to confirm his words, out flew
Millions of flaming swords, drawn from the thighs
Of mighty Cherubim; the sudden blaze
Far round illumined Hell. Highly they raged
Against the Highest, and fierce with grasped arms
Clashed on their sounding shields the din of war,
Hurling defiance toward the vault of Heaven...

Barry adapts this famous scene, appropriated notably by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections*, in at least one significant way. This is to do with light. Barry’s angels wave, not “flaming swords”, but the spears of the earlier passage, more like Roman legionaries; the light is not a “sudden blaze” from the swords, but comes from the fires of Hell below to the left. Milton had earlier described the place Satan stands above “the lake with liquid fire” (i.229) as “this mournful gloom” (i.244). Indeed earlier still we were told, Hell, “as one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames/ No light, but rather darkness visible/ Served only to discover sights of woe” (i.62-65). Barry makes a bold departure from this imagery; he uses the light from the flames to emphasise the classical heroic physique of Satan, so striking in its full frontal stance, with “uplifted spear”

¹⁴ Headnote, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, x vols., ed. Paul Langford, vol.i. *The Early Writings*, eds. T.O.McLoughlin and J.T.Boulton (Oxford, 1997), p.187.

(i.347) and his shield raised in challenge. He stands head and shoulders above the surrounding angels, his flaming hair sweeping back and on his head a crown — “He, above the rest/ In shape and gesture proudly eminent,/ Stood like a tower” (i.589-91). Barry brings to Satan that vigour of Michaelangelo’s nude figures, which Reynolds called “energy of character and extraordinary heat and vehemence”.¹⁵

A second point is to do with the sheer scale of Satan in Hell. Milton repeatedly remarks on his huge size — like a Leviathan “which God of all his works/ Created hugest that swim the ocean stream” (i.201-2), “stretched out [on the lake of Hell] huge in length” (i.209). In Milton he carries a shield “massy, large, and round... Hung on his shoulders like the moon” (i.285-87). Satan’s spear in Milton is “equal with the tallest pine/Hewn on Norwegian hills to be the mast/ Of some great ammiral” (i.292-94). But, as if appreciating the reader’s difficulty in visualising the scale of this Brobdignagian figure, he tells us Satan held this massive spear as if it were “but a wand” (i.294). This problem of size is more acute for the visual artist. Milton, like Swift later, conveyed scale by comparisons, by epic similes. That is not available to Barry. So he elects to have the viewer see Satan from below and at fairly close quarters. Our eye moves upwards, invited to follow the lines and curves thrusting to the top of the picture. This invitation in itself has a touch of admiration. No room here for Milton’s repeated moral caveats: no sign here of Satan or his angels as standing with “their glory withered” (i.612).

Barry’s obvious admiration for the splendid presence of Satan, irrespective of the evil designs of the “false dissembler” (iii. 681), is nowhere more evident than in “Satan, Sin and Death” The picture captures that moment in Satan’s journey when at the gates of Hell, visible in the background, he confronts Death and they are about to fight. This is forestalled by “the snaky Sorceress”, Sin, who halts Satan with the news that Death is their child — “such joy thou took’st/ With me in secret that my womb conceived” (ii.765-66). The passage poses a number of problems for the illustrator. Milton’s language, as Burke observed, appeals deliberately to the reader’s imagination, not the visual sense. Barry does include Milton’s visual signs — her serpentine lower body, the key about her waist, but in Milton she defies visual description. She is “a formidable *Shape*”, she “*seemed* woman to the waist”, her hounds would creep into her womb, where they “barked and howled/ Within *unseen*”. (ii.649-59) This opaqueness is all the more present in Milton’s description of Death who is almost impenetrable to the visual sense: “that shape had none/ Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb” (ii. 667-68).

¹⁵ Discourse V, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses*, pp.141-42.

Barry tackles the problem by intensity of space, line and light. We see Satan now from the back, almost the reverse of the earlier picture, his muscular physique reminiscent of Michael Angelo's figures, his spear and shield again raised aloft. The blazing light on his back and his hair echo Milton: Satan "like a comet burned/ That fires the length of Ophiuchus huge/ In the Arctic sky, and from his horrid hair/ Shakes pestilence and war" (ii.708-11). His presence is enhanced by the furious reaction of the other two figures, Sin and Death, as well as by the "Hell-hounds...with wide Cerberean mouths full loud" (ii.655). Their faces are fixed on Satan. Barry freezes this moment of screaming confrontation.

The bulky figures seem very close to the viewer, the strong angular lines and the concentrated space give a frightening energy which is heightened by the way Barry contrasts the blazing light coming from the right onto Satan's back, onto Sin's breast and lighting up in their hair; the effect is all the more striking for the dark recesses of the gates of Hell deeper in the picture. "He further heightens the tension," says Wark, "by modelling the figures with exaggerated light and shadow, accentuating the way their bulk fills and even overflows the limited space".¹⁶

Barry's experience as a printmaker helped him bring a particular kind of intensity to these illustrations. Pressly notes that these pictures — and most are drawings or engravings — benefit from, "the rapidly drawn lines [that] energise the surface, heightening the dramatic mood. At the same time they create abstract patterns of light and dark". The medium, engraving in particular, facilitates that major tension in Milton's poem, light and darkness, good and evil. The powerful aesthetic of fluent, economic lines in drawings of Grecian simplicity and suggestiveness is seen in the heads of Adam and Eve and of the two angels in "The Detection of Satan by Ithuriel", as also in "The Expulsion from Paradise". In addition, Barry's decision to confine the drama to just a few figures adds to the intensity of feeling. The paring down to the minimum of line and characters strengthens the mood.

Burke on painting in the *Enquiry* and Barry's response

Barry's rendering of sublime moments in Milton is a response to Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, the treatise he so much admired.¹⁷ Much has been written about Barry's use of Burke's concept of the sublime, of his choice of subjects and techniques to effect the sublime in the *Paradise Lost* illustrations as well as in other pictures. Behrendt makes the understandable

¹⁶ Robert R.Wark, *The Revolution in Eighteenth-Century Art: the British Pictures 1740-1840* (San Marino, 1971), p.80.

¹⁷ Barry is said to have shown Burke a transcript he made of Burke's book (Pressly, *Life and Art of Barry*, p.206, n.15).

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mistake of presuming that Barry chose to illustrate episodes that Burke “had himself identified as ‘sublime’”.¹⁸ In fact Satan meeting Sin and Death at the gates of Hell is the only incident which they both addressed. Pressly argues that Barry “consciously followed Burke’s dictums for the sublime” in his “*Philoctetes*” (1770) and “*Job reproved by his friends*” (1777), thus taking a position against what he thought the prevailing rather precious sensibility in England that did not want pictures that dwelt upon “any circumstance of distress”.¹⁹

But to appreciate the way Barry appropriated Burke’s sublime into his paintings, it seems important to look first at what Burke says about painting and the sublime. As Burke is very specific on painting at several points in the *Enquiry*, we can be sure that Barry would have noticed this aspect of argument.²⁰ The references to painting occur mainly in the section on the sublime and then that on words. Burke begins by making little distinction between the powers of poetry and painting to affect us. “Sympathy”, he says, is one of the foundation stones of the sublime: “It is by this principle 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”.²¹ Painting shares also in Burke’s second principle, imitation, “one of the strongest links of society”, the principle by which “we learn... not only more effectually, but more pleasantly”. Imitation is the particular strength of painting, but it raises the question as to whether the power of a picture comes from “the skill of the imitator merely” or some cause akin to sympathy with the object painted. Paintings of still-life tend to be the result of the first. Burke’s remarks on sympathy would have interested Barry :

But when the object of a poem or picture is such as we should run to see if real, let it affect us with what odd sort of sense it will, we may rely upon it that the power of the poem or picture is more owing to the nature of the thing itself than to the mere effect of imitation, or to a consideration of the skill of the imitator however excellent.²²

But from here on Burke backtracks. A few pages later he argues that the kind of imitation offered by a painting, and he calls this “clearness”, cannot affect our passions as strongly as the “obscurity” of language in poetry:

¹⁸ Behrendt, *The Moment of Explosion*, p.103.

¹⁹ Pressly, *Life and Art of Barry*, pp.23-25.

²⁰ Fuchs notes that Burke had debated his ideas on painting and poetry in the Club when a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and had there favoured painting (Fuchs, *Edmund Burke*, p 154).

²¹ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.221.

²² *Philosophical Enquiry*, pp.224-25.

It is one thing to make an idea clear, and another to make it affecting to the imagination. If I make a drawing of a palace, or a temple, or a landscape, I present a very clear idea of those objects; but then... my picture can at most affect only as the palace, temple, or landscape would have affected in the reality. On the other hand, the most lively and spirited verbal description I can give raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea* of such objects; but then it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting.

Words, he concludes, are the best means of “conveying the *affections* of the mind” from one person to another: “there is a great insufficiency in all other methods of communication”.²³

Burke is well aware, not just that he gives preference to poetry over painting when it comes to affecting our passions, but that his argument runs in the face of respected critics like the Abbe du Bos who had argued the opposite. But to press his point he notes that “among the common sort of people”, who have little understanding of “the best sorts of painting, as well as the best sorts of poetry”, a sermon or a ballad or a story will affect them as no painting ever does. “So that poetry with all its obscurity, has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art”. Burke clinches his case with a passage from *Paradise Lost*. The implication for Barry is that painting cannot generate the kind of sympathy and affections necessary for the sublime as found for example in Milton.

Burke returns to painting in the final section of the *Enquiry* where he analyses how words affect us. Again, painting has to yield to poetry as the more affecting mode. Painting succeeds by “exact description”, the business of poetry “is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves”.²⁴ Language, he argues, has the advantage of being able to represent things like gods, angels, devils, heaven, hell which have no sensory presence in reality; in addition, language has powers of suggestion and allusion that “give a new life and force to the simple object”. These powers of affecting our sympathy are beyond the capacity of painting:

In painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we can never give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words. To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, “the angel of the *Lord*”.

²³ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.232.

²⁴ *Philosophical Enquiry*, pp.316-17.

The same applies, he says, if we imagine a painting of Priam dragged to the foot of the altar and there murdered: such a picture "would undoubtedly be very moving", but could never match the impact of Virgil's description of that moment.²⁵

Burke's arguments on the limited powers of painting must have seemed curious to the young Barry. To insist that painting was not the medium for a strong and affecting image went against the temper of a young man so enthusiastic about becoming an artist. After crossing the Alps in 1766 on his way to Rome he told the Burkes that even a painter as fine as Salvator Rosa had done little justice to the what he had seen: "the wild form of his trees, rocks, &c... are infinitely short of the nobler phrenzy in which nature wantons all over these mountains". He would respond, he says, not in words, but "shall reserve for the colours and canvass the observations I have made".²⁶ Given that *Paradise Lost* was one of Burke's touchstones for the supremacy of poetry over painting, it is interesting that Barry turned to that poem for inspiration in his final years. His series of illustrations has the marks, implicit if not explicit, of a riposte to Burke. Barry's images of Satan visualise an energy and threat never imagined possible by Burke. The point is starkly apparent if we recall Burke's remark, "to represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged". "Satan and his Legions hurling Defiance toward the Vault of Heaven", or "Satan, Sin and Death" is Barry's answer to that.

An anomaly in Burke's theory

Barry's illustrations effectively point up a flaw in Burke's theory which had already been brushed aside by Reynolds in comments about Michael Angelo in his *Discourses*. Michael Angelo, whom Barry was determined to emulate, was to painting what Milton was to poetry. In language ironically reminiscent of Burke, Reynolds told his students that Michael Angelo showed that painting could produce the equal of Homer: "The effect of the capital works of Michael Angelo perfectly corresponds to what Bouchardon said he felt from reading Homer". The reason is, said Reynolds,

The sublime in Painting, as in Poetry, so overpowers, and takes such a possession of the whole mind, that no room is left for attention to minute criticism. The little elegancies of art in the presence of these great ideas thus greatly expressed, lose all their value, and are, for the instant at least, felt to be unworthy of our notice.²⁷

²⁵ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 318; Virgil, *Aeneid* ii.502.

²⁶ Barry to the Burkes, 24 September 1766, *Works* i. 58-9.

²⁷ *Discourses* V and XV, *Discourses*, pp.142, 329-30.

This puts paid to Burke's arguments about clarity in painting. Reynolds's point is borne out in Barry's "Satan, Sin and Death" which addressed that same moment in Milton that Burke discusses. Burke used the passage - *Paradise Lost*, ii.666-73 - to illustrate how obscurity of language achieves the sublime. Ironically he uses metaphors from painting to describe Milton's picture of Death: "it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring he has furnished the portrait of the king of terrors".

Is there not then an anomaly in Burke's theory about painting and clarity? Clarity, he says, be it of sight or understanding, makes the terror and fear of the sublime impossible: "To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary".²⁸ The *Enquiry* is, as Fuchs points out, a rational probing of why and how this and other aesthetic experiences work as they do.²⁹ Burke's theory of the sublime is summed up in this passage:

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 conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner 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.³⁰

The stress on terror is notably pertinent to Barry's depiction of Satan. As are Burke's remarks on astonishment. If we bear in mind the way Barry fills the frame with the figures of Satan, Sin and Death, the confluence of Burke's theory and Barry's practice is particularly striking:

In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, or by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.³¹

But, says Burke, "when we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes".³² However, what this implies is that, if we cannot "accustom our eyes to it", the apprehension remains. This is the anomaly, and it is a crucial point, as Reynolds had argued. Fuchs takes it a step farther. He notes that Burke here admits that hearing, and even more so sight, "with all its confusions, best convey the sublime". In the context of painting, this suggests that the faculty of sight is more open to the sublime than the other senses. Fuchs concludes :

²⁸ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.231.

²⁹ Fuchs, *Edmund Burke*, pp.182-83.

³⁰ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.216.

³¹ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.230.

³² *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.231.

The sublime implies heterogeneity between the perceived and the perceiver, a certain distance between them which is at the same time an awareness of man's notorious weakness when confronted with sublime objects.³³

There can be no doubt that for Barry, as for Reynolds, paintings could be "sublime objects". In which case, *pace* Burke's preference for poetry over painting, great painters should aim at precisely the sublime effects Burke wrote about.

One implication of Fuchs's point is that the viewer looks not just in awe, but feels belittled and perhaps terrified by the sublime object. Barry's "Satan, Sin and Death" has just such an effect. In terms of Burke's sublime, Barry so dramatises the scene as to take possession "of the whole mind". Burke says of Milton's passage, "all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree". Barry achieves these effects by Burkean principles of light and dark, of obscurity, of dramatic tension that leaves the outcome "uncertain", and of terrible conflict — Death facing Satan toe to toe. Barry keeps the shape of Death as obscure as possible, swathing him in an all enveloping cloak, whose folds swirl with action and threat. He also shows only half Death's figure. For Milton's "What seemed his head" Barry produces a large and startling skull, making a terrifying visual feature out of what Milton keeps obscure. As Pressly notes, Barry reverted back to traditional images of Death as a skeleton wrapped in a winding sheet that here resembles a monk's cowl. He also transfers the crown from Death's head in Milton to Satan's to reinforce the image of Satan's supremacy.³⁴ Barry captures the essence of Milton's passage — "fierce" and "terrible" — in this dramatic visual confrontation. A subtle irony is that Barry gives Satan the sublime light Milton and Burke had associated with God and in so doing makes him all the more frightening a threat.³⁵ The etching is awesome and terrifying.

Aesthetics : the political dimension

Barry's illustrations of *Paradise Lost* are evidence enough that Burke's *Enquiry* introduced Barry to an aesthetic theory that explained the workings of epic grandeur which had interested him from his earliest days in Cork and Dublin. It may well have galvanised him to achieve in art the sublime effects that Burke said were possible only in literature. But the relation between Burke and Barry had another dimension. If we consider Barry's Irish background and his fierce denunciation of Britain's presence in

³³ Fuchs, *Edmund Burke*, p.186.

³⁴ William L. Pressly, *James Barry: the Artist as Hero* (London, 1983), p.109.

³⁵ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.249 and *Paradise Lost* iii.380.

Ireland, there is reason to consider his Satan, not to mention the other illustrations, an implicit comment on issues as close to him as Milton.

The more fundamental sympathies between them about Ireland, its history and its people, are hinted at if we juxtapose the painting Barry brought with him to Dublin and a passage in Burke's *Tracts relating to Popery Laws*. Barry's canvas which he exhibited in Dublin in 1763 was entitled, "Baptism of the King of Cashel by St. Patrick" (1763). At the time of their first meeting Burke was drafting his *Tracts*, a work focussed on the inequity and injustice of religious and political discrimination in Ireland. Given its sensitive nature and Burke's post in the Administration, it is not surprising he never finished or published it. What he attacked at one point was the biased and abusive way English historians had denigrated the Irish. He wrote with some anger, "There is an interior History of Ireland, the genuine voice of its records and monuments, which speaks a very different language from these histories". Rebellions in Ireland, he said, arose, "not from just and mild government, but from the most unparalleled oppression".³⁶ Barry's painting was exactly the kind of "genuine voice" Burke had in mind.³⁷

This painting also draws attention to the links between aesthetics and politics. By the 1760s St. Patrick had come to be seen, notably through the work of Charles O'Connor, as the father of Ireland's self-respect and learning, subsequently destroyed by the English. In O'Connor's view Henry II's invasion in 1172 signalled the start of a conquest that showed no respect for native traditions, whereas Patrick fostered "the Genius of the Nation".³⁸ As Burke and Barry both complained in different arenas, that "Genius" had more recently been prejudiced by the Penal laws against Catholics. Aesthetics as well as history made plain this injustice to humanity, in particular the abrogation of civil liberties. Burke starts his "Introduction on Taste" in the *Enquiry* with the premise that "the standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures".³⁹ His entire theory rests on that universal principle, and he enlarges on it in his discussion on sympathy. Even though the arguments in the *Enquiry*, notably on the sublime, and

³⁶ "Tracts relating to Popery Laws", *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ix. 479; for further discussion on this see T.O. McLoughlin, *Contesting Ireland: Irish Voices against England in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1999), pp.109-110.

³⁷ Barry based the painting on a passage in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa an Eirinn* (c.1634), trans. 1726 as *The General History of Ireland*; for an analysis of this painting and Barry's later version of the same scene, see Tom Dunne, "Painting and Patriotism", *James Barry, 1741-1806, The Great Historical Painter*, ed. Tom Dunne (Kinsale, 2005), 122,132-34.

³⁸ Charles O'Connor, *Dissertations on the Ancient History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1753), p. 152; for further analysis of O'Connor's argument, see McLoughlin, *Contesting Ireland*, p.152.

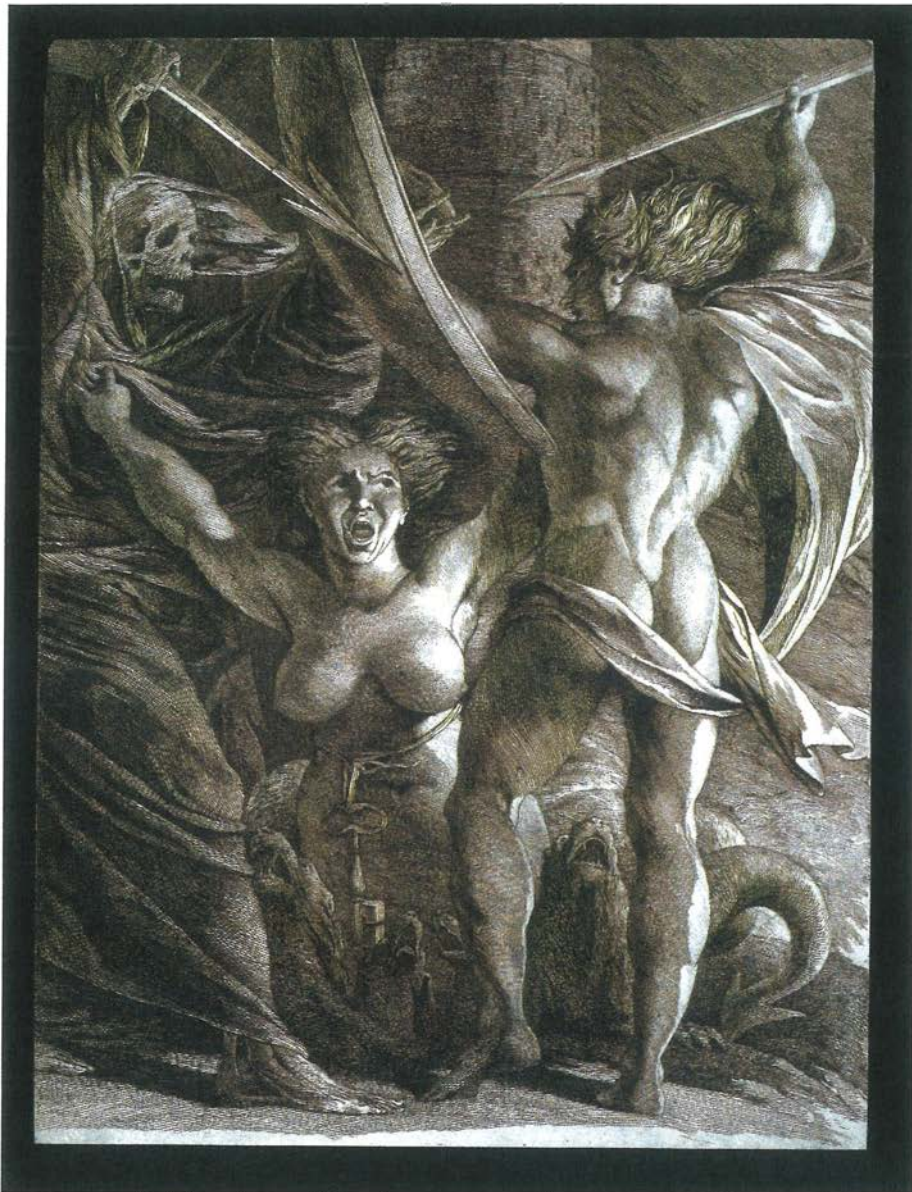
³⁹ *Philosophical Enquiry*, p.196.

particularly on power, as Fuchs has shown, are complicated and limited by class considerations, Burke's principle of sympathy echoes throughout his political writings and much of Barry's work. It is by sympathy, Burke had said, that we first, enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put in the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected.

The implied inverse is that there is something unnatural, if not inhuman not to feel sympathy for our fellow men, especially in their distress, since sympathy is one of the principal links "in the great chain of society".⁴⁰ What so irked Burke and Barry was the absence of sympathy in England's policies towards the Irish Catholics and towards America. Government acted with no respect for justice, equity or liberty: "Tell me," Burke asked parliament, "what one character of liberty the Americans have, and what one brand of slavery they are free from, if they are bound in their property and industry by all the restraints you can imagine on commerce, and at the same time are made pack-horses of every tax you choose to impose".⁴¹ What Burke and Barry argued against in their different ways was oppression, be it in Ireland, or America, or slavery. At the heart of the problem was the abuse of power. If power was authoritarian and unrestrained, there could be no liberty. That was a central issue in Milton, and it was Burke who sparked Barry's curiosity as to how the aesthetics of that awesome problem could be captured in painting. James Barry's celebrated half-length portrait of Edmund Burke (c1771) shows Burke side on, his head turned slightly towards the viewer. He is in his study at a table, thoughtful, pen in hand. The muted colours, warm browns, ochres and pinks, corroborate the mood of intimacy and affection. The striking feature of the portrait is the image of Burke as thinker and writer. The personal note for Barry was that here was the person to whom he owed more than his career. Burke had shown him how to think about aesthetics.

⁴⁰ *Philosophical Enquiry*, pp.220-21.

⁴¹ Speech on American Taxation"(1774), *The Portable Burke*, pp.256-57.



Satan, Sin and Death, c. 1792 – 1795, par James Barry (courtesy of V & Images/ Victoria and Albert Museum, London).