

ON SLOPES:

DANGER, DISGUISE, AND THE FADING OUTLINES OF WAR

GYÖRGY FOGARASI

Sloping hillsides have come to be perceived as sites or visual aids of reflection and tranquility, or even as idyllic emblems of safety and peace. Ever since the 18th-century emergence of the English landscape gardens (of William Kent, Lancelot “Capability” Brown, and Humphrey Repton), which were modeled after the pleasing views of the Italian peninsula, the mere word “slope” in itself has been associated with greenery (mostly lawn), with clumps of trees here and there on the hilltops, a winding rivulet in-between, the green grass dotted with deer or sheep, and most certainly veils of clouds floating above in the sunny sky, always bright and blue. “Improvements”, as they were called, often involved the transformation of chasms into smoothly ascending and descending hills to produce a calm vision by removing all traces of rupture or danger. Humphrey Repton, who was the romantic era professional in the realm of “landscape gardening” (a phrase he himself invented), provided “before” and “after” views of the proposed transformations, in his “Red Books”, the brochures he prepared to convince future customers to finance the improvement. One of those illustrations, prepared for the transformation of the chasm in front of The Fort near Bristol into an uninterrupted view of slopes, provides an apt example.¹ But there are plenty of more recent instances to suggest that the longing for slopes is with us even today: like that famous image of the Napa valley vineyard, to the North of San Francisco, which in 2001 became the “Bliss” default desktop image of Windows XP (held by some to be the most-viewed image in recent world history), or like the fabulous geography of the children’s series *Teletubbies* right from the preceding years, on show between 1997 and 2001. One wonders how many of Microsoft’s creative staff members had been young parents back then.

But, just as the effects of the sloping surfaces of the English landscape gardens can best be estimated against the backdrop of chasms, ravines, and precipices, in a similar way, these more recent images of tranquility themselves have their counterparts in more threatening pictures. When it comes to 2001 imagery, hardly anything can compete with the New York scene of 9/11, its horrendous images of falling (of debris, of humans, and

¹ Humphrey Repton, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: Printed by T. Bensley, 1805), 8, see also subsequent plates, without pagination.

finally of the collapsing towers). Erect as they were, abruptly rising toward the sky, the towers might have always awakened the fantasy of falling: our falling from their top, their falling on our heads, or our common falling into instant erosion. In some ways, they were the metropolitan equivalents of the romantic precipice that served as an object of admiration from below, a vantage point for panoramic view from the top, and most certainly, an emblem of danger from both perspectives. Today, the Manhattan memorial of 9/11, "Reflecting Absence" (by Michael Arad and Peter Walker) retains much of that imagery, both in its shape (being the partial negative of the collapsed Twin Towers), and with its waterfalls, constantly pouring downwards on the walls into what seems like an unfathomable abyss of mourning.

One of the gravest lessons of 9/11, however, has been the recognition that the end does not necessarily arrive where one would expect it come (on far away foreign fields, or on the frontlines of military confrontations), and that we are perhaps the most endangered when, without any sense of danger, we are pushed to the brink of an *invisible* precipice. When danger is coupled with disguise, it attains the pleasing form of the slope. Unlike precipices (such as the chalk-cliffs on the island of Rügen made legendary in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings from 1818), slopes have no outlines: there is no brink, no verge, no edge or rim to alert us of an imminent fall. Therefore, much is at stake when one investigates the diverse romantic *senses* of danger from the very perspective of whether danger does or does not evoke a *sense* of danger.

Taking my cue, on the one hand, from Paul de Man's warning that our separation or detachment from the dangers of romanticism is not to be taken for granted, and, on the other hand, from Martin Heidegger's claim that what is most uncanny about danger is its ability to disguise itself, I would now like to go after various conceptual and figural renderings of danger, primarily in the writings of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, and will try to trace the ways in which romantic notions of danger have informed the modern visions and legal framings of war ("international humanitarian law"). If romanticism has anything dangerous about it (of which I am not at all sure), it also sets us the task of inheriting several senses of danger itself, especially if among those senses there may be one, according to which danger might surreptitiously escape notice, wherefore no actual "sense of danger" will signal its imminence to us. Of special interest will be Burke's short but intricate commentary on slopes, within his discussion of the beautiful. As I will try to show, Burke faces the possibility of a self-disguising threat, one which escapes notice, which cannot be confronted and evaded, and which thus appears to pose a greater threat than the all-too-familiar and easily noticeable ravines or precipices of sublimity. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the successive Hague and Geneva Conventions followed the guidelines of Kant's aesthetic and political theory in trying to delimit the theatrical and figural dimensions of

combat (camouflage) and thereby to encapsulate war in a containable temporal and spatial format (wartime and warzone). The Burkean intimation, however, that such delimitations are, at the least, highly problematic might evoke a concern over the very conceptuality of the international documents along which modern wars are to be conducted.

I.

Debates about romanticism's relation to war in general and to the World Wars of the 20th century in particular often took the form of wars fought over romanticism itself as a period in history, a tendency in art and literature, or a critical heritage controversial enough to generate heated discussions. But beside wars over romanticism (or over the romantics, for that matter, as pacifist conservatives or crude revolutionaries, to be admired or denounced, incriminated or rehabilitated endlessly), one should not forget the wars fought over certain "romanticists" and their own controversial legacies, the intricate ways in which their wartime or interwar actions interfered with their interpretive efforts to grasp the romantic tradition and its perception of large-scale violence. Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man are two of the most discussed emblems of this complication.

In his paper "Wordsworth and Hölderlin", delivered in 1966 as the inaugural lecture for the chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Zürich, de Man expands on how the difficulties implied in the study of romanticism, so famously dramatized in Arthur O. Lovejoy's 1924 essay "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms", have shaped comparative literature itself. Concerned primarily with the question of historical separation or detachment, de Man posits an autobiographical relationship between the romantics and the romanticists in terms of a relation between an act and its interpretation.

In the case of romanticism it is a matter of the interpretation of a phenomenon that we can only consider from the temporal perspective of a period of time that we have ourselves experienced. The proximity of the event on the historical plane is such that we are not yet able to view it in the form of a clarified and purified memory, such as Greece presents itself to us. We carry it within ourselves as the experience of an *act* in which, up to a certain point, we ourselves have participated. Perhaps this obtains for every attempt at understanding the past, but it nonetheless remains the case that with romanticism we are not separated from the past by that layer of forgetfulness and that temporal opacity that could awaken in us the illusion of detachment. To interpret romanticism means quite literally to interpret the past as such, *our* past precisely to the extent that we are beings who want to be defined and, as such, interpreted in relation to a totality of experiences that slip into the past.²

² Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 49–50.

Romanticism not only appears as “a period of time that we have ourselves experienced”, but also as “an *act* in which, up to a certain point, we ourselves have participated”. Romanticism is seen as “*our*past”, with the implication that to the extent it is *ours* it has *not* passed away completely, and remains with us, haunting us, for years or even centuries to come. Our proximity and even complicity do not allow for any distant perspective and obstruct the formation of any “clarified and purified” picture. And even though romanticism might just exemplify a historical relationship implicit perhaps in all interpretive attempts to come to terms with the past, regardless of which period one investigates, romanticism, de Man argues, is also a moment that proves to be unique in its ruthlessness to divest us from even “the illusion of detachment”. All the more so, since the act we are supposed to interpret is itself an act of interpretation. In a dense and enlightening commentary on this passage, in his book *Titanic Light* (a volume that takes its title from the closing paragraph of de Man’s essay), Ortwin de Graef formulates the underlying specularly as follows: “Romanticism is itself a *mise en abyme* of our relation to Romanticism. [...] Yet this *mise en abyme* opens a fracture in the system: [...] the interpretation of the act is the act we must interpret.”³ Highlighting the uncanny repetition implied in “Romanticism’s interpretation of its own formidable origin as act and our interpretation of Romanticism as our own active origin” (*Titanic Light* 117), de Graef also points to another important aspect of de Man’s rendering of romanticism, namely, its status as a “formidable origin” or a moment of danger. Danger is in fact the leitmotif of de Man’s commentary on Hölderlin in the aforementioned essay. It refers to the ambivalence of Hölderlin’s Titanism, of romantic heroism, the “dangerous and destructive act” of rebellion (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 57), and ultimately (in the context of another essay from the preceding year on “The Image of Rousseau in the Poetry of Hölderlin”), it conveys a hint to the Promethean act of technological revolt (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 35–37). The notion of an “excess of power” which is both “the ultimate greatness” and “the greatest ultimate danger” (RR 35), as well as the related fear of “cutting ourselves off from the source”, which is tantamount to the “forgetting of the source” (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 39), has close resemblance to, and is in some ways even a reformulation of, the Heideggerian notion of *Seinsvergessenheit* and related formulas concerning the status of poetry, language, art, *techné*, and technology.

In his 1936 essay on “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”, which de Man as a fellow at Harvard translated into English in 1959, Heidegger binds poetry or language not

³ Ortwin de Graef, *Titanic Light: Paul de Man’s Post-Romanticism, 1960–1969* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 119.

simply to danger, but to danger as such, naming it "the peril of perils" (*die Gefahr aller Gefahren*), because "it creates the very possibility of danger" (*sie allererst die Möglichkeit einer Gefahr schafft*), namely the possibility of danger as "the possibility of a loss of Being" (*die Möglichkeit des Seinsverlustes*).⁴ But, as Heidegger goes on to emphasize, language also contains "a permanent threat" (*eine fortwährende Gefahr*) to its own existence, which has to do with its figural potential, and the consequent possibility of our getting lost in "deceptive appearances" (*Schein*).⁵ For, by taking what is simple as insignificant, we risk to lose sight of the figural potentials of simplicity in favor of more suggestive elements that might, in the end, prove to be utterly irrelevant. Insofar as language is a field of figural deceit, it is a threat not only to potential victims of misunderstanding but to its own expressive efficiency, and ultimately to its own existence as language.

More than a decade later, when Heidegger returns to the question of danger (this time in the context of technics) both in the Bremen lecture series of 1949 *Insight Into That Which Is* (*Einblick in das Was Ist*) and their offspring essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (*Die Frage nach der Technik*, 1953), he associates "danger" (*Gefahr*) with the essence of technology, the all-pervasive work of massive "placing" or "positioning" (*Ge-stell*), and even defines it as the essence of *Ge-stell*, which amounts to danger being nothing less than the essence of the essence of technics.⁶ Even more importantly, however, Heidegger points to the self-disguising aspect of danger: "Positioning [*Das Ge-stell*] essences as the danger. But does the danger already exist *as* the danger? No. Perils and distresses immeasurably press upon humans everywhere at every hour. But the danger, namely being itself in the self-endangering truth of its essence, remains veiled and disguised. This disguising is what is most dangerous about the danger [*Diese Verstellung ist das Gefährlichste der Gefahr*]" (*Bremen 64*, translation slightly modified; *Bremer 68*). If danger can at all be quantified, measured, comparatively estimated, and thus judged less or more dangerous, its potential to disguise itself might certainly add to its scale. For Heidegger, that potential constitutes the most dangerous aspect of danger. In this slightly paranoid vision, real danger begins where we lose sight of it. In the context of

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," trans. Paul de Man, in *The Paul de Man Notebooks*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 174; Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1981), 36–7.

⁵ Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," 174; "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," 37.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 38; Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 54.

modern technology, what Heidegger calls “danger as such” (die *Gefähr*) or, as in the next quotation, “supreme danger” (*höchste Gefahr*), is linked to the turning of any single object (*Gegenstand*) into mere standing-stock (*Bestand*), including man himself, who unawares pictures himself “orderer” or “lord of the earth” at the moment of uttermost self-subordination:

Yet when destining [*das Geschick*] reigns in the mode of positioning [*des Ge-stells*], it is the supreme danger [*die höchste Gefahr*]. This danger attests itself to us in two ways. As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object [*Gegenstand*], but does so, rather, exclusively as standing-reserve [*Bestand*], and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer [*Besteller*] of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall [*am äußersten Rand des Absturzes*]; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve. Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth.⁷

Beyond the antithesis of what “stands by” as *Be-stand* and what “stands across in opposition” as *Gegen-stand*, the passage offers another contrastive pair in the image of man fashioning himself as “lord of the earth” and the image of his imminent fall from the “outermost brink of the precipice”. Heidegger’s image of the precipice has, at first glimpse, nothing special about it. This image has been conjured up countless times in narratives of historical crisis and imminent war. What is curious about it is the very fact that it is evoked this time as an image utterly invisible. What he describes here is a specific danger of falling, one that is in fact *unlike* any precipice, for it lacks any recognizable border one could call a “brink” (*Rand*), and that is precisely what makes it all the more dangerous. A precipice is all too easy to recognize and thus to evade precisely because it has a brink. A brink presupposes a break in the surface. That break produces the visual effect of a line, even though no actual line exists out there. This line, in turn, will form the brink of the precipice and will outline danger for us. But to stand on the brink of a precipice in the Heideggerian sense is to be standing there unawares, without perceiving danger for what it is, and thus, without the slightest sense of danger. It appears to be something more “simple”, insignificant, unimportant, and negligible. In terms of land formations, it is more like a slope. It is like the slope mentioned by Wordsworth, for instance, in the little

⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland, 1977), 26–7, translation slightly modified; Martin Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 27–8.

poem quoted by de Man in the essay "Wordsworth and Hölderlin" (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 51–53) about the life and death of the Winander boy, whose sudden fall is all the more abrupt and shocking, for it is surrounded by the description of the "beauteous" spot where he was born. This beauty is established by the commerce between this boy and his "responsive" owls, an exchange that takes place in a tranquil and peaceful setting, a vale of slopes, even though not totally undisturbed, with the remote sounds of "mountain torrents" causing a "mild surprise" every now and then. But as de Man convincingly shows, a seemingly peaceful habitat or habit may secretly foreshadow, or even bring, the demise of the one who might feel safe and easy in it. A precipice may masquerade as a mere slope, or perhaps even worse, a slope might just be a slope and as such prove even more dangerous than a precipice could ever hope to be.

II.

Such complications concerning danger and disguise are in fact deeply embedded in the tradition of aesthetic and political theory that informs the modern day thinking about war. The romantic cult of ravines, chasms, or abysses has been the paradigm for much of the postromantic discourse on danger. Immanuel Kant's aesthetics and political philosophy has played a major role in this development. In an oft-cited passage of "The Analytics of the Sublime" (in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 1790), Kant pictures the warrior as a figure of all-time respect in every culture, for being able to remain composed even in the midst of danger, where physical safety (otherwise a prime criterion for any calmness and thus for sublime experience) is diminished or utterly lacking, and where only moral invulnerability can thus be of any help.⁸ In contrast to the spectator of natural extremities, who is positioned at a safe distance from what he is viewing, the warrior is set right in the midst of life-threatening forces. But beyond this difference in the positioning of the spectator and the warrior, there is hardly any significant difference in the gruesome setting itself, for the dangers of war and the dangers of nature are represented here as being both clearly noticeable. As such, both can be demarcated and thus potentially avoided, at least in theory. Even if one is within a danger zone, and thus feels unsafe, the very sense of danger (the feeling of fear or even terror), indicates that a safety mechanism is still at work, and danger can still be subject to some level of calculation and engineering. The pure absence of a sense of danger might on the other hand be a moment when real danger (self-disguising threat) sets in. Within the Kantian description of the

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146; Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Werkausgabe, vol. 10 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 187.

dynamically sublime, war does not seem to bring with itself this complication. It is conceived in terms of natural phenomena (volcano, earthquake, storm etc.),⁹ either as a specific site on the globe or a specific time slot in history. Just as warzone is delineated from hinterland or neutral areas, wartime is to be demarcated from peacetime through performative speech acts of a declaration of war or a peace treaty. Both these demarcations seem to be taken for granted in Kant's description.

By cataloguing a whole array of despicable ruses that threaten the "mutual confidence" of the adversaries and consequently their trust in a future lasting peace, the essay "On Perpetual Peace" (*Zum ewigen Frieden*, 1795–96) seems considerably more sensitive to the difficulties of any such demarcation. For Kant, such instances of treachery "would include the employment of *assassins (percussores)*, or *poisoners (venefici)*, *breach of agreements*, *the instigation of treason (perduellio)* within the enemy state, etc."¹⁰ But even there, the momentary confusion caused by the acknowledgment of such means is quickly overcome by an immediate act of prohibition. Kant does not seem to bother too much about why practices of poisoning, espionage, betrayal and other perfidious acts have permeated wars from immemorable times. He does not seem to make any attempt to account for their occurrence, let alone their persistently recurrent nature. As we all know, this gesture of exclusion has since been codified in what is called "international humanitarian law." The prohibition on poisons, for example, was first included in the second Hague Convention of 1899 (to be reaffirmed in 1907), in Article 23, which mentions the use of poisons or poisonous weapons at the beginning of a list of illegitimate means of combat, directly preceding another list that includes acts committed "treacherously."¹¹ In fact, one only needs to begin reading this same document to come across an even more remarkable effort of legal demarcation, for right at the beginning of Section I, Article 1 "On the qualifications of belligerents" attempts to delineate the circle of warriors by giving us a group of criteria by which entering the hostilities remains legitimate. The wearing of distinctive emblems (if not uniforms) or the open carrying of arms both point to the requirement of clarity concerning one's intention to engage. Such criteria are meant to ensure that the dangers of war are "recognizable at a distance". The

⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 144; *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 185.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace," in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Siegbert Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96; "Zum ewigen Frieden," in *Schriften zur Naturphilosophie*, Werkausgabe vol. 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 199.

¹¹ For further reference and explanation, see the database of the International Committee of the Red Cross, especially rule 72 on the prohibition of poisons, accessed August 19, 2022, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule72.

partizan activities during World War II made the conceivers of the 1949 Geneva Conventions include these same criteria in Article 13 of the first convention about war on land. Or, to bring one last example, near the end of the aforementioned Hague convention, Article 57 speaks of the role of neutral states in the internment of belligerent forces requiring that such gestures be made “at a distance from the theatre of war”.

In between Kant and the Hague Conference, Carl von Clausewitz’s classical treatise *On War (Vom Kriege, 1832–34)* makes it clear that the “theatre” of war should have clear boundaries.

By “theater of operations” we mean, strictly speaking, a sector of the total war area which has protected boundaries and so a certain degree of independence. This protection may consist in fortifications or great natural barriers, or even in a substantial distance between it and the rest of the war area. A sector of this kind is not just a part of the whole, but a subordinate entity in itself... [*Kriegstheater: Eigentlich denkt man sich darunter einen solchen Teil des ganzen Kriegsraumes, der gedeckte Seiten und dadurch eine gewisse Selbständigkeit hat. Diese Deckung kann in Festungen liegen, in großen Hindernissen der Gegend, auch in einer beträchtlichen Entfernung von dem übrigen Kriegsraum. – Ein solcher Teil ist kein bloßes Stück des Ganzen, sondern selbst ein kleines Ganze...*]¹²

Since such a theatre is not simply a part of the whole but also a whole in itself (and, to that extent, a miniaturized version of the war it is part of), it does not seem utterly illegitimate to read this description not only as Clausewitz’s vision of specific theatres of operation in a limited sense but also as his picture of war itself as a delineated or self-contained scene. And as far as war itself is something he so famously described as a “realm of uncertainty” (troped by his even more famous “fog” of war),¹³ we are supposed to imagine this fog as an entity with clear-cut boundaries. All of which comes down to the conclusion that wars might be foggy all right, but there should be no uncertainty about when or where that fog falls or raises. For Clausewitz, one can always ascertain oneself about the outlines of uncertainty. To rephrase a phrase Jan Mieszkowski offered with reference to the Clausewitzian image of the fog as a figure for uncertainty, one could say that, for Clausewitz, “the fog of the uncertainty of war”¹⁴ never in fact turns into a fog of uncertainty *about* war. Since war has discernible outlines, the obscurity of war couldn’t be clearer. There is nothing foggy about its boundaries. Fog is contained in a theatre which itself remains brightly lit.

¹² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 280; Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (München: Cormoran, 2000), 276.

¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 101, 140; *Vom Kriege*, 64, 109.

¹⁴ Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 20.

III.

But is war a realm? Things become more complicated when fog itself becomes foggy. Something like that happens in Edmund Burke's commentary on the smoothness and gradual variation of slopes, within his discussion of the beautiful, in Part 3 of his *Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/59) – a work that, for most historians of aesthetics, seems to lack the sophistication of Kant's transcendental discourse. As any reader of Burke may well remember, his treatment polarizes and even phallogocentrically "engenders" the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful. This produces a familiar series of hierarchically conceived binarisms that have become so fashionable during the romantic era, with masculine ideas of pain, danger, terror, power, vastness, obscurity, uncertainty, or ruggedness subsumed under the sublime, and in contrast, the feminized notions of pleasure, safety, love, weakness, smallness, clarity, certainty, or smoothness composing the beautiful. From the perspective of danger (a prime constituent of sublime passion), everything revolves around how danger is actually perceived. Burke investigates the triggers of fear and terror and offers the above list of features or physical marks that are the ultimate sources of such emotions. Anything terrible, powerful, vast, obscure, uncertain, or rugged (to mention but a few of the marks he discusses) is able to produce the most intense passion the mind is capable of, that of terror, and can, in turn, be ameliorated into an object of sublime delight, on condition of its spatial or temporal distance from the perceiving subject. A closer look, however, shows considerable complications in this otherwise neat manual of how to turn danger into enjoyment. His examples are just too abundant to serve the purposes of any simplified conceptual matrix.

Small animals should be beautiful, but Burke tells us that some snakes and other species can still be poisonous: "There are many animals, who though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror. As serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds."¹⁵ The difficulty posed by poison is that danger in this case does not have any generalizable outward expression such as hugeness, but remains hidden, as it were, in the relatively small size of the animal, be it a snake, a spider, or some kind semi-animal life form like a mushroom, or even a plant. When a specific animal is identified as poisonous and becomes the object of terror, this is due not so much to the operation of any self-sufficient rule concerning its size, but to the associative consideration of an additional amalgam of features such as form, color, motion, sound etc., none of which can be selected as a single or decisive criterion in the

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (1958; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 57.

assessment of threat. Poison, in this perspective, is the synonym of a weapon perfectly camouflaged.

Also, there is nothing to fear of weak animals or persons, until Burke brings the example of women who tend to feign weakness in order to trick their partners or masters, that is, in order to deceive or manipulate them, to trap them, or even perhaps to attack them from ambush. They “learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness.” Burke reminds us that, when doing so, women do not necessarily play the cold-blooded game of a spy, who is in full rational command of her sensual charm, but are more likely to just act according to their defensive instincts, acting out social roles by the laws of mimicry: “In all this, they are guided by nature” (*ibid.*). The danger described here, therefore, does not derive from any amount of willful manipulation. It is something more spontaneous, and is, as such, way beyond the realm of the human. Burke accounts for it by the umbrella term “nature”.

In another passage, this time connected not so much to the bodily *behavior* but to the bodily *shape* of the female sex, Burke argues that smoothness and gradual change might also enhance our perception of beauty. While sublime scenes are associated with rough, rugged and suddenly changing surfaces, beauty is evoked by objects that are smooth or polished, objects that have no sharp angles or edges, and whose surfaces can therefore change imperceptibly, unnoticed both by the visual and the tactile organ. While “any ruggedness, any sudden projection, any sharp angle is in the highest degree contrary to that idea [of beauty]” (*Enquiry* 114), what Burke calls “gradual variation” is beautiful because the change is hardly noticeable. So even though such changes take place in front of our eyes, their visibility is limited. Beautiful bodies “vary their direction every moment, and they change under the eye by a deviation continually carrying on, but for whose beginning or end you will find it difficult to ascertain a point” (*Enquiry* 114–115). Burke does not only point out how difficult it is to tell where such deviation begins and where it ends; he also suggests that we might even be unable to see it happening, precisely because the change is perpetual. Bringing the example of the “perpetually changing” shape of a dove, he claims that “you are presented with no sudden protuberance through the whole, and yet the whole is continually changing” (*Enquiry* 115). And that is where the eroticized figure of the female body appears in analogy with, but also as an even more capturing version of, the sight of a dove:

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. Is not

this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? (*Enquiry* 115)

My focus here is not so much the obvious operation of the male gaze and its phantasmatic dream of a sexually objectified female body, but the general structure of surfaces, regardless of whether they belong to males or females, humans, animals, other life forms, or even, as we shall shortly see, to partially inanimate entities such as geographic formations. Continual change is here described as a “deceitful maze” captivating the eye and forcing it to “slide giddily”, as if on a slippery slope, without the slightest chance to foresee and control its own movement.

All this seems important to note, since in the case of gradual variation no actual concealing is done. Neither doves, nor women partake here in any (even instinctual or unaware) practice of simulation or camouflage, and yet the result is still deceit, due merely to the physiological limitations of the optical or tactile (and certainly all other) forms of perception. From a modernist perspective, Burke might also be seen to anticipate the question of speed or scale, and to showcase what Walter Benjamin would later call the “optical [or tactile] unconscious”. When Burke mentions sloping landscapes whose “gradual ascents and declivities” relax those travelling in a coach by a “gentle oscillatory motion” of rising and falling, he clearly brings an example which leaves no room for intention or instinct or any other form of motivation on the part of the particular geographic formations. Slopes can in no way be motivated to deceive us, and yet that is precisely what they seem to be “doing”.

Moreover, as long as one is talking about a “deceitful maze”, the deception may be limited to playful gaming or a gently seductive *trompe l’oeil*. But just as the erotic deceit performed by the female body may turn out to be that of a ruthless spy, the topic of mere surfaces may also become wildly threatening. We get something of that threat in an earlier passage where Burke discusses the sublime in terms of the ruggedness of surface or the abruptness of change. He claims that abrupt changes in the surface of a landscape make a strong impression. A slope, on the other hand, will never evoke such intensified passions. A steeply rising mountain or a precipice will always surpass a hillside in the intensity of its effects: “A perpendicular has more force in forming the sublime, than an inclined plane; and the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished” (*Enquiry* 72). For Burke, perpendicular surfaces are more threatening than slopes, not only because, as one would suppose, they imply the possibility of falling (our own falling into a precipice or from a steep mountainside, or the falling of rocks, or fellow climbers, on our heads), and not even because they are often

fragmentary ("rugged and broken"), but, according to a more elementary reasoning, because they imply a break in the surface of the horizontal plane. Interestingly, however, that is also why they are often avoidable. The suddenness of the change forms a rim, around which one can evade the danger: "In everything sudden and unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it" (*Enquiry* 83). Suddenness is a self-signaling threat, a formation that sets the safety mechanism into work by evoking our sense of danger. It forms a line or a rim. It demarcates an unsafe territory by marking it through its own very existence. In terms of visibility, the rim of a steeply rising mountain is usually more clearly discernible at a distance, than the rim of a precipice, since it is never the rim itself, which can be seen but that which is beyond, and the image of the rim is formed only retroactively in consequence of our sight of that which lies deep down or up high. And since, in most cases, that which rises in front of us can be seen from afar, while an abyss usually remains invisible until we get relatively close to it, it is the abyss rather than the steep side of a mountain which may get into our way unexpectedly. But even the rim of a precipice is still a rim, and may to that extent function as an alarming visual alert (if only at a short distance). In this regard, although people keep falling into ravines without doubt, it is still the slope (the "inclined plane") which poses the real challenge, for it seems to work even trickier than the ravine, at least in terms of visibility. The transition of horizontal planes into slopes and of slopes into vertical surfaces might very well lack any suddenness, but precisely because the change is gradual, it is also more likely to occur unnoticed, and trick the eye, until slippage or falling begins and the wanderer has to suffer the traumatic consequences of gravity.

To see slopes as conveyors of a feeling of uncanniness and concern, or even of danger, might seem idiosyncratic if not totally unfounded. To see them, moreover, in a historical, rather than purely geographical perspective, as emblems of a certain logic of change might even seem morbid regarding the anything-but-peaceful-or-tranquil transitions history has produced throughout the centuries. But that is precisely what I would wish to risk: a repositioning of the image of the slope as a historical emblem, and as an uncanny emblem at that – and not simply in the sense of its status as a screen memory (the English landscape garden, with its sloping hills, being the result of massive enclosures surrounded with legal sanctions which Marx did not hesitate to call "terrorism"),¹⁶

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the social trauma behind English gardens, see my „Screens of the Picturesque: Aesthetics, Technology, Economy,“ *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 19 (2021): 35–48.

but in its suggestion of a continual change that does not allow for the discernment of clear directions or turning points.

History is often seen as an alternation between states of war and peace. The dramatic shifts between such states are supposed to form lines that outline them, demarcating war from peace, and vice versa. From the perspective of less spectacular changes, however, history seems less dramatic and appears to take place on slopes. Slippage into states of war or totalitarian regimes is all too easy and threatening precisely because such dangers do not have clear borders that would make it easy for any cautious eye to frame them, which is to say, to discern, and thus to prevent, their coming. Put in the terms of landscape aesthetics, they cannot be conceived of as historical precipices (or pitfalls), rather, they should be seen as so many sloping surfaces, slippery slopes, perpetually and gradually in deflection, which makes it difficult to judge at any moment, whether they are ascending or descending (if they are inclined at all), and even more difficult to tell at what point the power of gravity takes over, forcing things into an irreversible slide or a potentially fatal free fall.