A Strange Kind of Sadness

There is a Steve McQueen, Jackie Gleason, Tuesday Weld movie called Soldier in the Rain that I watch whenever it comes on the TV late show. I have seen it at least half a dozen times. The first time I saw it, I cried at the end. The next time I saw it I began crying just before the end. Now I choke up when it starts and cry more or less steadily through the whole thing. My husband and son find this exasperating. “Why are you going to watch that if it is just going to make you unhappy?” they ask. What they do not understand is that very few things bring me greater pleasure than watching this movie, crying all the way through. Or perhaps my son does understand when he disdainfully concludes, “You’re crazy!”

In “The Concept of Artistic Expression,” John Hospers puts the puzzle I want to discuss in the following way:

... If “The music expresses sadness” means “I am disposed to feel sad when I hear it,” why should I ever wish to hear it? Sad experiences, such as suffering personal bereavement or keen disappointment, are not the kind of thing we wish to repeat or prolong. Yet sad music does not affect us in this way; it may bring relief, pleasure, even happiness. Strange kind of sadness that brings pleasure.¹

What I hope to do here is to shed some light on this “strange kind of sadness.”

Basically it is strange because it seems unreal. If it were real sadness we would not want it repeated, indeed we would try to avoid it and prevent the occurrences of occasions which we thought would evoke it. Certainly we would not go out of our way to bring about those occasions, as I do when I organize my schedule in order to be able to watch Soldier in the Rain. Sadness is not the sort of thing we think of as enjoyable. We do not, at least normally describe the times we feel sad as “fun” times. Yet I enjoy the movie and am even tempted to say that watching it is “great fun.” Moral people do not want others to feel sad, yet I recommend the film to my friends. When I do so am I being immoral?

I have argued elsewhere² that it is wrong to classify watching sad movies, listening to sad music, reading sad poems, etc. as “aesthetic pains,” as opposed to “aesthetic pleasures.” Such pains do exist; for example, hearing choirs sing off key or looking at Keene paintings of big-eyed children and their big-eyed dogs are painful. Really painful. They are not fun or enjoyable. They are not things we want more of or things we recommend to our friends. However, watching Soldier in the Rain is not like these, and hence should be classified with aesthetic pleasures. But is there, then, something strange about aesthetic pleasure?

I sit in front of the television set weeping. My family infers from my behavior that I must be sad. Yet other aspects of my behavior (I rearrange my schedule so that I can watch the movie, tell friends what a good time they will have watching it, etc.) imply that I do not find it painful. From this view we cannot just conclude that there is something incoherent about aesthetic pleasure, for some instances of feeling pleasure in the presence of aesthetic objects do not seem strange at all. If we see someone at a concert smiling and clapping and shouting, “More, more!” we do not incorrectly infer that they are “in pleasure.” That is, we do not always get into trouble when we make inferences from behavior in aesthetic situations to judgments about pleasure or pain. Our inferences seem to go awry only in those cases where we use what are typically

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negative emotion terms to describe the objects to which our attention is directed: “sad,” “pathetic,” “terrifying,” “horrible,” “agonizing,” “tragic,” “rending,” “overwhelming,” “draining,” etc.

It is not just “sadness” that causes trouble. We read “terrifying” ghost stories without doing the one sure thing that would bring the horror to an end. We depress ourselves with fictional accounts of the pitfalls of human relationships as if daily experiences did not provide us with ample examples of them.

Could it be that aesthetic pleasure is real pleasure but that the pain we attribute to some occurrences of it is not real pain? Is it that pleasure-behavior exhibited in connection with certain aesthetic objects implies real pleasure but that pain-behavior exhibited in connection with certain aesthetic objects does not imply real pain? If so, why?

We might feel inclined to explain the “unreality” of pain in apparently painful experiences by pointing to the way we deal with children who cry when Bambi is read to them or have nightmares after going to a horror movie. “Don’t cry—it is just a book.” “Don’t worry, those things do not happen in real life, only in movies.” The incidents are not real, so there is no call for real pity or fear. But this is an explanation which is childishy simplistic. In the first place, this explanation of the strangeness of sadness or fear would apply equally and undesirably to happy, buoyant, uplifting aesthetic experiences. “Do not smile—it is just a book,” is absurd. We don’t want to explain the strangeness of sadness in such a way that unproblematic pleasures become strange too.

Secondly, and more importantly, the “do not cry, it is just a story” response simply is not appropriate to many adult aesthetic experiences. We would not say it to someone reading Anna Karenina, for example. And certainly it is a mistake or question-begging to claim that, “These things do not happen in real life.” Someone might reasonably insist that it is precisely because such things really do happen that he or she is so sad. Indeed, the more one thinks about it, the more thoughtless it appears even to say such things to children. As we shall see later, the fact that Anna Karenina, like Bambi, is “just a story” is part of the solution, but a small part. The solution and the problem itself are far more complicated.

There is a practical reason for determining whether the sadness we feel in connection with works of art is the same as that felt in ordinary experience. Recent studies of crying indicate that the chemical composition of the tears we shed in emotional reactions differs significantly from that of tears secreted all the time to keep our eyes moist. But the laboratory experiments designed to study this involve showing movies, e.g., The Champ and Brian’s Song, to subjects. If people who cry watching these movies are not really sad, then these studies are misdesigned!

The complexity can be brought out by showing how the problem winds through a variety of aesthetic theories. It is not often, nor even usually, the central problem that these theories set out to deal with. Furthermore, though interesting in its own right, trying to account for this “strange kind of sadness” is philosophically important in at least two ways. Broadly it shows the way in which aesthetics and philosophy of mind interrelate. More specifically, it shows something important about theories of art and the aesthetic. As Nelson Goodman says in connection with a different problem, “Answers to [specific and peripheral questions of aesthetics] do not amount to an aesthetic theory or even the beginning of one. But failure to answer them can well be the end of one; and their exploration points the way to more basic problems...” To the extent that theories of art, of the aesthetic, are adequate, they will provide or suggest ways of dealing with this puzzle. One need not insist that there is something which all reactions to works of art or aesthetic objects have in common. Nonetheless that “feeling sad” is attributed to some of our reactions to such things cannot be denied; hence theories which purport to explain them will have to explain, or explain away, such predications.

We shall, then, begin by looking at three aesthetic theorists, Aristotle, Edmund Burke, and Edward Bullough and, correspondingly, at their ways of accounting for the “strange kind of sadness.” A fourth account, not bound to a particular aesthetic
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theory as such but providing a distinct method of explaining the phenomenon will then be discussed. Finally, building upon elements from these views which seem correct, I shall present my own solution.

For Aristotle, understanding the nature of tragedy, as of everything else, requires understanding its function (as well as its maker, form, and material). The function of tragedy is to provide a unique kind of enjoyment. When we understand tragedy we will know what its proper or peculiar pleasure is, as well as knowing how it manages to produce this pleasure—and why tragedy does it better than anything else.

The proper function of tragedy is "to arouse the emotions of pity and fear in such a way as to effect that special purging of and relief (catharsis) of pity and fear . . .". Given the importance of the concept of catharsis and in particular of the catharsis of pity and fear both in the Poetics itself and in the whole history of aesthetics, it is disappointing that Aristotle has so little to say about the natures of catharsis, pity, and fear themselves. His definitions of the latter are simply (far too simply) put: "Pity is what we feel at a misfortune that is out of proportion to the faults of a man; and Fear is what we feel when misfortune comes upon one like ourselves."5

Rather Aristotle concentrates on the way pity and fear are aroused and worked out. In the Poetics, in discussing the purgative nature of music, he suggests that different individuals feel these emotions to different degrees:

For feelings such as pity and fear, or, again enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see enthralled by the use of mystic melodies, which bring healing and purification to the soul. Those who are influenced by pity or fear and every emotional nature have a like experience, others in their degree are stirred by something which specially affects them, and all are in a manner purified and their souls lightened and delighted. The melodies of purification likewise give an innocent pleasure to mankind.6

He adds that vulgar people are purged by vulgar music, higher by higher.

It must have occurred to Aristotle, though he does not present it explicitly as a problem, that the feeling of pity or fear is not in itself pleasant. If all tragedy did were to arouse these emotions, it would not provide us with pleasure at all. The pleasure, of course, depends upon the relief that the drama provides. Buy why seek out tragedies? Why intentionally arouse oneself unpleasant emotions just to purge them? Clearly there is more to going to see a tragedy than there is to hitting one's head against a concrete wall—done just because it feels so good to stop.

According to Lane Cooper, the answer is given in Bywater's exegesis of the Politics.

In Greek physiology and pathology, catharsis is a very general term for a physical clearance or discharge, the removal by art or an effort of nature of some bodily product, which, if allowed to remain, would cause discomfort or harm. The catharsis of the soul as described in Politics of Aristotle is a similar process in reference to certain emotions—the tacit assumption being apparently that the emotions in question are analogous to those peccant humors in the body which, according to the ancient humoral theory of medicine, have to be expelled from the system by the appropriate catharsis. With some adaptation of the statements and hints in Politics 8.7., as thus interpreted, it is not difficult to recover the outlines at any rate of the Aristotelian theory of the cathartic effect of tragedy: Pity and fear are elements in human nature, and in some men they are present in a disquieting degree. With these latter the tragic excitement is a necessity; but it is also in a certain sense good for all. It serves as a sort of medicine, producing a catharsis to lighten and relieve the soul of accumulated emotion within it; and as the relief is wanted, there is always a harmless pleasure attending the process of relief.7

What is important for us to notice here is that Aristotle finds nothing unreal or strange about the emotions aroused. How is it that people enjoy such apparently painful things as suicide, self-mutilation, exile, etc.? They do not. The enjoyment comes in working out the pity and fear aroused by these things. Though the self-mutilation, for example, is unreal in the sense of being an imitation of such action, Aristotle in no way intimates that the emotions aroused are unreal or merely imitative. Indeed, the relief and purgation depends upon their being real.

Whatever the correct explanation of the "strange kind of sadness," we must be able to answer two questions:

1. Are we enjoying ourselves while we experience the work of art in question?
2. Once the work is over (or our attention is no longer directed to it) do we stop feeling the emotions aroused? Aristotle must answer "no" to the first, "yes" to the second.

Specifically, while we are feeling the fear and pity aroused by Oedipus, are we having a good time? The view that the fear and pity are real—on a par with that felt in the presence of a real fire or starving infant—necessitates a negative answer. But this seems to fly in the face of experience. "Did you enjoy Oedipus last night?" Must one answer, "Yes, but not until it was over?"

An alternative solution to this puzzle is the "roller coaster" theory of aesthetic emotion. Here there is a sense in which it seems quite reasonable to say that one actually enjoys being afraid. The pleasant exhilaration one feels while riding a roller coaster could not exist without the sense of danger involved. If someone said, "Suppose you could ride a roller coaster and everything would be the same except that the fear would not be there—would not that be better?" we would not know what to make of the question. There are many experiences where the risk involved makes the experience genuinely fearsome, where the removal of the fear would not only not improve it but would spoil the fun: for the more adventurous, race car driving or sky diving; for the less adventurous of us, watching a horror movie or meeting someone on the sly. This, of course, is consistent with Aristotle's view that different people have different emotional thresholds. There may be some element of this in watching Oedipus, and we shall return to it later. For now it must be pointed out that there is a disanalogy with pity. That is, there does not appear to be anything analogous to exhilaration, no way to fill in the blank, "I put up with the pity, because I heard to feel ____________, which is positively pleasant."

Aristotle's affirmative answer to the second question, "Once the work is over, do we stop feeling the emotions involved?" also raises problems. "Catharsis" certainly implies that we rid ourselves of the feelings. But is it really the case that when the curtain falls we no longer feel pity for the blinded Oedipus walking off into exile, or more generally, stop feeling pity and/or fear for the fate of people who often through weakness or a flaw in their character find themselves in their own individual and private kind of exile? Surely the answer to this, contra Aristotle, is "no."

Aristotle then would explain the fact that I watch Soldier in the Rain as often as possible by saying that I derive psychological relief and purgation from it, and that this is an earmark of the aesthetic experience of at least tragedy and music. Another, more recently influential, school of aesthetics makes a quite different claim: to the extent that one's experience is fearful or pitting it is not aesthetic at all. If fear or pity or sadness is really aroused by a movie, for example, then the film is not being responded to as an aesthetic object. So-called "distance theories" of aesthetic experience have as a central doctrine the claim that an earmark of aesthetic experiences is that, when having them, people do not respond to objects or events in the ways in which they ordinarily respond to them. If I cry while watching Soldier in the Rain, I am responding as I would typically respond to such events if they were real. If one responds in ordinary or typical ways, one is not responding aesthetically. Thus if I cry, I am not responding aesthetically to the film.

Examples provided by Edward Bullough and Ortega y Gasset illustrate this view. Bullough says that persons attending Othello who engage in practical activities are not viewing the play aesthetically.

[T]he expert and the professional critic make a bad audience, since their expertise and critical professionalism are practical activities, involving their concrete personality and constantly endangering their Distance.8

More relevant for our purposes is his example of a jealous husband attending Othello.

[He] will do anything but appreciate the play. In reality, the concordance will merely render him acutely conscious of his own jealousy; by a sudden reversal of perspective he will no longer see Othello apparently betrayed by Desdemona, but himself in an analogous situation with his own wife. This reversal of perspective is the consequence of the loss of Distance.9

Actual arousal of jealousy, then, interferes with aesthetic experience and there is no
reason to think that Bullough would view the actual arousal of fear and pity any differently.

Likewise Ortega believes that real feelings of emotion are unaesthetic. He asks us to consider a group of people gathered at the bedside of a dying man: the man's wife, a doctor, a newspaperman, and an artist. Only the artist has a truly aesthetic experience. The others are prevented from having one because their practical, everyday concerns interfere. In particular, the emotional involvement of the wife precludes her aesthetic involvement. The appeal of distance theories is related to the general appeal of theories which insist upon distinguishing the form from the content of works of art. There is always a danger that irrelevant and distracting elements will interfere with one's aesthetic judgment. However, the reductio ad absurdum of this version of these theories is discoverable in Bullough's remark about "concrete personality." The demand that we put our concrete personality to one side before taking up an aesthetic stance is surely one it is difficult to meet. Speaking of a fog at sea he says,

[D]istance is produced ... by putting the phenomena, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends—in short, by looking at it 'objectively'; as it has often been called, by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the 'objective' features of the experience, and by interpreting even our 'subjective' affections not as modes of our being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon.

Bullough's description makes aesthetic experience sound schizophrenic. He is right to stress the objective features of the phenomenon (as I shall argue below) but wrong to claim that these are necessarily blotted out by a feeling of real emotion. As Aristotle suggests, feelings of fear and pity are concomitant with noticing objective features of, for example, plot development. As George Dickie argues, the jealous husband at Othello does not pay the wrong kind of attention to the play; he does not pay any kind of attention to it.

Distance theories do not answer the question of whether the sadness we feel when watching Soldier in the Rain is unreal or in some other way strange. They beg the question.

Distance theorists have their roots in certain eighteenth-century empirical theories of taste. They can, in particular, be viewed as descendants of Edmund Burke, though Burke's theory has, I believe, far more to recommend itself. It has been neglected, perhaps because it is couched in an arcane introspective psychology, concentrating on and striving for, as does much of eighteenth-century empirical philosophy, a science of the passions. The aesthetic can be divorced from much of the psychological, however, and has a great deal of common sense and appeal. It is, I believe, useful as a foundation for the solution to the problem at hand.

Burke uses ordinary pleasure and pain as the basis of our judgments of taste. Like all judgments, aesthetic judgments are based in the senses; and the fact that all human beings have similar senses provides Burke with grounds for believing in the objectivity of aesthetic value.

Pleasure and pain are the primary motivating forces in human actions. They are primitive, indefinable epistemic states. Both are positive, i.e., pain cannot be explained as an absence of pleasure or vice versa. Concerts of music, finely-shaped and brightly colored things, fragrant roses, delicate wine, and sweetmeats, Burke insists, are pleasant without there having been any pain preceding the experiencing of them. Likewise violent blows, bitter potions, and grating sounds are painful even when they have not been preceded by feelings of pleasure.

Nonetheless, one is forced to admit that the removal of pain is pleasureable, and the removal of pleasure, painful. Think of how pleased we are when the dentist stops drilling or how disappointed we are when the party is over. But the states accompanying the removal of positive pleasure and positive pain are not themselves positive and must be distinguished from them. Thus Burke calls the removal of positive pleasure relative pain and the removal of positive pain relative pleasure. Relative pleasure figures more prominently in Burke's aesthetic (for the obvious reason that aesthetic experiences are typically on the pleasant end of
the continuum), and he gives it the special name, “delight.”

Burke is fully and explicitly aware of what I have been calling the problem of the “strange kind of sadness.” He does not, however, think it all that strange, at least in the sense of being atypical. Indeed he believes it to be a common, if not everyday, kind of experience. Quoting Homer:

Still in short intervals of pleasing woe,
Regardless of the friendly dues I owe,
I to the glorious dead, for ever dear,
Indulge the tribute of a grateful tear.

But though common, we must explain how woe can be pleasing and something in which we occasionally indulge ourselves.

The person who grieves, suffers his passion to grow upon him; he indulges it, he loves it: but this never happens in the case of actual pain, which no man ever willingly endured for any considerable time.14

“Pleasing woe” is not a positive pleasure, for its existence depends upon the existence of something painful, even though it is not itself positively painful—else why would we indulge in it? Relative pleasure or delight is produced when positive pain is removed, and in removal lies the explanation.

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.15

Under certain circumstances, what is ordinarily painful can be delightful. One of Burke’s examples is a storm at sea. Here what is involved is actual physical distance. We can take pleasure in the storm only if we are not actually endangered by it. One and the same object, a storm or a fire, can be both an object of positive pain and of delight. In the former case we say that the object is dangerous or fearful, in the latter case we say that it is sublime. The artistic treatment of fearful situations provides the appropriate modification or distancing as well.

It is a common observation, that objects which in reality would shock, are in tragical, and such like representations, the source of a very high species of pleasure.16

Two main sorts of ideas give rise to pleasure and pain: those having to do with self-preservation and those relating to society. Burke believes that all of our passions are calculated to meet the ends of one or the other of these. Typically the ideas of the former are tied to pain, the latter to pleasure. Danger is associated with our attempts to survive, love with our relations with other people.17 This provides Burke with the means separating off the sublime and the beautiful. Sublime objects are those which typically evoke fear, beautiful objects are those which typically evoke love.

It is necessary to pause here to call attention to a serious problem for Burke. He is much better when discussing the sublime than he is when discussing the beautiful. As we have seen, terror becomes delight when dangerous objects do not actually endanger us and then “dangerous” is replaced by “sublime.” Thus when “terror” becomes “delight,” “terrible” becomes “sublime.” There is no such neat substitution in the case of “beauty.” Instead we find in Burke perhaps the most blatant example of a circular definition in all philosophy.

By beauty I mean that quality or those qualities by which they cause love.18

On the very same page he says that love is . . . that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful.19

Fortunately for our purposes we can ignore this circle.

We are, Burke believes, naturally pleased by imitation (here he is, of course, in agreement with Aristotle) and imitation is one way of removing or distancing danger. But we are not to think of imitation or removal as the primary cause of pleasure.

Choose a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting, and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts . . . 20
It is not the fact that an object is an imitation that accounts for sublimity (or beauty) but qualities in the object imitated itself. And Burke gives many examples of the qualities found in sublime and beautiful objects. Sublime objects are typically infinite, powerful, vast, rugged, negligent, angular, obscure, dark, silent, solitary, gloomy, solid, massive, and difficult. Beautiful objects are typically small, smooth, polished, light, delicate, bright, but not glaring. Anything capable of producing fear can be sublime; and whatever produces positive pleasure of love is capable of being found beautiful.

The heart of Burke’s explanation is then as follows. When pain is removed a kind of pleasure, delight, results. It is different from positive pleasure but is nonetheless pleasure. One and the same object can upon contemplation cause both terror and delight. The object remains the same; what differs is the context of contemplation. Remove the pain from the context and what is left is delightful.

A more recent attempt to explain the strange kind of sadness is built upon a belief expressed in my son’s dismissal of my reaction to Soldier in the Rain as “crazy.” This belief is shared, in a more sophisticated form, by Colin Radford. People, at least some of them, feel concern for other people. Accounts of suffering can and do move us. But if later we find out that such an account was false, that no one in fact suffered in that way, we feel we have been duped. Why, Radford asks, do we not feel duped (and angry and foolish on account of it) with respect to artistic accounts of suffering? Artistic accounts of the agonies of real persons raise no problem. But what about accounts of fictional people?

One way to settle the problem is to say that we do not really feel grief for Anna Karenina or Madame Bovary or Mercutio. After all, if one is really moved, one cannot also eat chocolates and say, “How marvelous!” But Radford believes, chocolates notwithstanding, that we really are moved by these characters—or at least by accounts of them.

What is worrying is that we are moved by the death of Mercutio and we weep while knowing that no one has really died, that no young man has been cut off in the flower of his youth. Radford discusses, and dismisses, several possible solutions. Do we forget that the people are not real? No—we are not unaware, for example, that we are watching a play. Is it just a brute fact that we are so moved? Even if it is, this does not explain why such cases differ from those in which the knowledge that “it didn’t really happen” erases our grief. Are we moved by the knowledge that such happenings are possible or probable? If so, it is an actual phenomena that moves us, and the unreality does not enter in the same way. We weep for Anna Karenina, not for someone like her. Nor does maintaining that there are simply two kinds of being moved, real-life and fictional, and that only the real-life kind requires the existence of the protagonist, do anything other than beg the question.

Radford believes that he is forced to conclude that

... our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very ‘natural’ to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in an inconsistency and so incoherence.

We are, simply, acting irrationally when we weep for fictional characters. It is like trying to edge a tennis ball over the net by gesturing from the back line. We sometimes do crazy things.

In a responding paper, Michael Weston argues that Radford is led to a mistaken conclusion because he “ignores the fact that our responses to characters in fiction are responses to works of art.” There is a problem, he thinks, only if Radford shows that the existence of an object is a necessary condition of our being moved by it. But, Weston asks, why isn’t the fact that we are moved by fiction evidence that that isn’t a necessary condition?

For me to be saddened at Mercutio’s death, I no more have to believe or half believe that someone is really dying on the stage than I have to believe or half believe that Renaissance Verona has been transported to the theatre in order to watch the play at all... Clearly there are similarities between the way we respond to fictional and real events, between, say, our sadness at Mercutio’s death and our sadness at the death of a friend. But this does nothing to show that one of these feelings is somehow incoherent. That sadness can take such objects is a fact about the kind of consistency our language of
feelings and art has, not a fact about the inconsistency of our behavior.\footnote{58}

The similarities and differences in feeling can be traced to similarities and differences in the objects of those feelings.

What interests Weston primarily is how we are moved, and his explanation shows similarities to Burke’s. At least sometimes, he argues, our responses to works of art involve a certain conception of life—not particular events, but Life, e.g., to the fact that people are the sorts of creatures they are. Art provides a distance that makes reflection on these conceptions more likely than it is when we are reacting to demands placed upon us by real, particular events. That we can be moved by un- or non-naturalistic works of art shows that we are not (necessarily) moved by Anna Karenina and the conception of life accompanying it. We are moved by “the significance we see in the work as a whole.”\footnote{26} The realization that Anna is not real does not affect our grief because Anna is not the object of our emotion. In discussing The Duchess of Malfi Weston says,

The identity of the death of a fictional character is given not by a temporal, spatial, and physical co-ordinates, but by the co-ordinates of the text. Our response to death is part, then, of our response to the thematic structure of the play, and hence to the conception of life expressed by it. We are moved, if you like, by the thought that men can be placed in situations in which the pursuit of what they perceive to be good brings destruction on both themselves and the ones they love, and that nevertheless this can be faced with a dignity which does not betray the nature of those relationships for which they perish: that a man may, in fact, lose “everything and nothing.”\footnote{27}

It may well be objected here that we have switched problems; that we have equivocated on two features of some aesthetic experiences:

1. We (apparently) enjoy (apparently) sad things such as tragedies.
2. We are (apparently) sad about things that (apparently) do not exist.

We started talking about 1 and have now come to talk about 2. It may be true that both features point to something strange about certain aesthetic experiences. But a thing can have several strange properties without those properties necessarily being related.

However, I believe there is a connection between the two problems. If being moved by something unreal is incoherent and irrational, then it should not surprise us that there are other features of this irrational experience that elude a rational account. But if a good argument can be given (as Weston attempts) that feature 2 does not provide us with a reason for concluding that these experiences are irrational, then we have to look elsewhere for an explanation of the strangeness suggested by 1. Further, in giving an argument, Weston uses feature 1 to explain feature 2. What are we sad about—a conception of life—is real, and the fact that works of art allow and cause us to reflect on these conceptions accounts ultimately for why they are enjoyable. I shall return to this soon.

By way of review, and at the same time looking forward to a solution, let us ask ourselves what are the various answers I might now give to my family if they were to ask, “Do you really feel sad when you watch Soldier in the Rain?”

1. “No, not really.” (My sadness is not real.)
2. “Yes, but it is a strange kind of sadness, not really the same as everyday, ordinary, nonaesthetic sadness.”
3. “Yes, but I feel glad at the same time.”
4. “Yes, but I know it is crazy.”
5. “Yes, but it seems strange to me because I know it is inappropriate.”
6. “Yes, but I’ll get over it.”

As it stands is a nonanswer, for it does not really provide either a “yes” or “no” to the question. 1 is apparently the answer Burke would give, 6 Aristotle’s, 3 Weston’s, 5 Bullough’s, and 4 Radford’s. What I hope to show is that the correct answer is found in a combination of 1, 3, and 6.

As I have already indicated, I believe that Burke’s theory of the sublime sheds a great deal of light on our puzzle. However, his discussion, as we have seen, is in terms of fear; it transfers to sadness with difficulty. If adequate, we would hope to be able to use Burke’s theory not only to account for the
horror we feel when reading horror stories, but also the depression we feel when reading Anna Karenina, the tears we shed when watching Soldier in the Rain, the distress we feel when seeing Guernica, the grief we feel when listening to the Brahms's German Requiem, the pity we feel when seeing Daumier's Third Class Carriage, the anxiety we feel when seeing Munch's The Scream, the guilt we feel when seeing Apocalypse Now, etc.

Burke, it will be recalled, says that things which ordinarily cause fear cause delight when we are sufficiently distanced from them to feel removed from immediate danger. But it seems incorrect to say that things which ordinarily cause one to feel sad can, with sufficient distance, make one feel delightful, or some other appropriate relative pleasure. The trouble with Burke's theory of sublimity is that it cannot be generalized so as to account for the range of pains or apparent pains that we want to be able to account for.

It makes perfectly good sense to say, of a burning building, "If I were in that building, I'd be afraid, but standing over here across the street I feel delight." Suppose, though, that I see a child struck by a truck. One would not say, "If I were the mother of that child I'd feel sad, but since I'm not I can enjoy the spectacle." No matter what example of something sad under ordinary circumstances is chosen, the switch that goes through smoothly from fear to delight does not have a parallel in sadness. Under appropriate circumstances Burke can answer, "No," to the question, "Do you really feel fear when you watch a burning building?" But a negative answer to "Do you really feel sad?" is not provided for. Something more is required to make his theory generalizable.

Theorists such as Edward Bullough and Ortega y Gasset seem to have thought that what was generalizable was the notion of distance. They were, I believe, correct about this. But their application of the concept is such that their characterization of aesthetic experience is incorrect. According to their view, someone who watches a film and weeps is doing something inappropriate. Weeping can be taken as a sign that one is paying too much attention to the content and not enough to the form. But, as indicated above, I think it is not inappropriate nor a sign of aesthetic inattention to weep, feel terror, guilt, etc. Nonetheless, the concept of distance is one which I wish to salvage from both Burke and the psychical distance theorists.

I have argued that Burke's theory is not sufficiently generalizable. Ideally we could find a way to use distance to cover sadness, and other unpleasant emotions, as well as fear. Fear becomes delight when we are distanced, when the danger of pain is removed. But sadness is not similarly removed. Nonetheless in some instances it is controlled and I wish to suggest that in place of "distance" we try to understand what goes on in terms of "control."

A horror story is fun to read only when we are in control of the situation in which we read it. Why don't we get the same pleasure when we read the same book alone in a creaky house late at night during a thunderstorm? An admittedly irrational fear of birds prevents me from watching or reading, let alone enjoying, The Birds. In both of these cases, failure to control the situation precludes the possibility of pleasure. Often recognition that what we are reading, watching, hearing, etc. is "unreal" is enough to assure us that we are "in control"—though, as in the two examples above, unreality is not always enough. Nor are we only able to feel in control if we believe the object of our attention is unreal. We do not enjoy a roller coaster which is "out of control," but only one which we believe will stay on the track and stop at the appointed time and place. Avid roller coaster fans are never completely unafraid, indeed, as pointed out above, the feelings of exhilaration sought come only if some element of risk is involved. But a risk that we believe we can handle. People who refuse to ride roller coasters are precisely those who believe they are unable (mentally or physically) to handle the ride. Sky divers must believe that they are in greater control than I would be in order for them to engage repeatedly in their sport. The reason that we feel duped (and not aesthetically pleased) in the situation described by Radford—we learn that what has just made us very sad did not really happen—is that
we believe we were not in control of something when we should have been. We may believe that learning what it is like to go through a divorce would be an enriching experience which would make us grow as human beings. We go to see a film about it instead of actually initiating divorce proceedings because we are unwilling to give up control—and fear that in the latter case control might elude us very quickly.

Thus control allows us not only to see what is correct about distance theories but also to see what is correct in Aristotle, Radford, and Weston as well. In controlled surroundings, tragedy permits us to purge ourselves of bottled-up feelings. Indeed we seek out tragedies (and other art works) in the belief that a controlled experience will excite, enrich, purge, and/or sensitize us in certain ways, and we take genuine pleasure in this experience. The unreality of the situation is sometimes important to an understanding of it as Radford shows us. But contra-Radford it is not irrationality that follows. Rather a kind of rationalized control is required for certain aesthetic experiences. When irrationality actually does enter (my inability to watch The Birds even though I know it is "just a movie") aesthetic experience becomes impossible.

It is difficult to analyze precisely the important and relevant features of control. It is admittedly just as nontechnical a term as "distance." In the rather loose formulation, "x controls y," several different sorts of things are candidates for "x" and "y," for instance, I control myself, Hitchcock controls the build-up of suspense. Though they involve quite different kinds of action, both are meaningful and involved in aesthetic experience. I believe they may be related; for example, Hitchcock creates a situation in which I am (or am not) able to control myself. Responsibility for control (or the lack of it) may be to Hitchcock's credit or my discredit. An artist's control of himself or herself may even be criticized. Monet is reported to have disparaged himself for carrying his analysis of seeing to his wife's deathbed.

(Seeing) haunts my days: it is their joy, their torment. To the point that once by the bier of a woman who had been and still was very dear to me, I caught myself, my eyes fixed on her forehead, in the act of mechanically looking for the sequence of tones, seeking to make my own the gradations of color which death had just settled upon the immobile face. Tones of blue, of yellow, of gray... See to what a pass things had come. The desire was natural enough to reproduce the last likeness of her who was going to leave us forever. But even before the idea occurred to me of fixing the features to which I was so deeply attached, my organism automatically reacted to the stimulus of color. My reflexes led me in spite of myself into an unconscious operation which repeated the daily course of my life. So the beast in his treadmill. Pity me, mon ami.29

Fortunately it is not absolutely necessary that we be exact here in the sense of providing a complete explication or analysis of the term "control." Rather what is important is noticing what it is that we are able to do when we have control that we are unable to do when we do not: we are excused from certain demands generally placed upon us and we are able to react in appropriate aesthetic ways.

When we are what I have loosely called "in control" we can formulate and consider descriptions of objects and actions or events which we do not find ourselves able to formulate or consider when we lack control. We do not always (perhaps even typically) have the time, inclination, or freedom to articulate a wide range of predicates that may be satisfied by things or events. Even if we do articulate them, we do not dwell on them. That is, once we become aware of certain properties or recognize that certain descriptions fit, our attention becomes fixed. Burke's categories of self-preservation and society are undoubtedly too narrow to delineate these properties or descriptions adequately. But they do point to some that are important. Once I have articulated, "This is a fire that will burn me," or, "This is a fire that will burn my child," I am not likely to go on to articulate, let alone dwell upon, color-descriptions of the fire. Perhaps Kant had something like this in mind when he claimed that aesthetic judgment involves the free play of our cognitive powers. In nonaesthetic judgments our cognitive powers are arrested by practical or ethical or scientific concerns.

Knowing our own natures, we can predict what some of the compelling descriptions will be. Knowing how much I fear birds, I do not go to Hitchcock's movie.
Knowing his own nature, my father refuses to climb aboard a roller coaster. Knowing how much his late wife enjoyed Emily Dickinson, a man may refrain from reading “I heard a Fly Buzz when I Died.” Obviously artists play a tremendous role in creating situations in which an audience is free to articulate and contemplate a wide range of descriptions. In doing so, they must apply more or less successfully their understanding of human nature.

But which of the descriptions we formulate are aesthetic descriptions? Burke’s theory of the sublime enables us to understand how delight increases as fear diminishes. Generalized, we can say that control permits us to attend to properties which provide us with aesthetic delight. But we must have a way of distinguishing aesthetic delight from delight in general. The delight we (may) feel riding a roller coaster is not (usually) aesthetic. A necessary condition for aesthetic delight as for delight in general is that it must result from our attending to certain features of a situation, features to which we would be unable to attend or to which it would be inappropriate to attend if we (or others) were genuinely endangered. But if we are to understand aesthetic delight we must restrict these features in some way. Burke concentrates (as do Bullough and Ortega) on certain formal properties, e.g., magnitude, darkness, force, quantity. It is obvious why Burke chose these—they can also arouse fear. But we have seen that Burke’s theory must be generalized if it is to help us, so his list of properties will not be sufficient.

Still Burke’s list is a start and is correct insofar as it focuses upon formal properties. According to him some formal properties naturally excite our senses. When this excitement is accompanied by practical considerations (e.g., getting out of the burning building) we cannot, overall, enjoy the sensuous excitement that we feel.

Which formal properties are picked out as aesthetic will depend upon the aesthetic theory that one adopts, as well as the sorts of things that one (and probably people generally) find pleasing. Some aesthetic theories will draw the line at formal properties, i.e., will admit no other properties as relevant to aesthetic attention. Such theories can account for the overall pleasure we feel as sensual pleasure of various sorts. David Hume, for example, in answering our question (in his words, “What is it then which . . . raises a pleasure from the bottom of uneasiness . . . to a pleasure which still retains all the features and outward symptoms of distress and sorrow?”) says that the sentiment of beauty is aroused by “eloquence.” “[T]he uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind; but the whole movement of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight, which the eloquence raises in us.” However, many aesthetic theorists, and I think most critics, believe that it is more than sounds, style, shapes, colors, and so forth that are objects of aesthetic value—that content counts for at least as much as form. Weston, for example, assumes that some properties excite our imaginations, and thus that what can be called abstract intellectual properties must be considered as well as formal properties.

According to Weston, in the Duchess of Malfi we are moved by what is a very depressing conception of life. We have throughout been asking ourselves how we can really be depressed and also enjoy the play. Aristotle would answer that we enjoy it because it is good therapy and he would be correct—sometimes. (Soldier in the Rain might best be taken care of in this way.) We do on occasion really feel fear, sadness, guilt, etc., but work it out via the artwork—get it out of our system. This is not, however, the sort of thing Weston is talking about. We are in control—but not to the extent that we believe that in a couple of hours we will feel better. Rather the pleasure comes from conceiving of things, thinking about life. Part of our difficulty here may come from the term “pleasure,” and it is undoubtedly for this reason that Weston prefers “significance.” We feel uplifted, enriched. The fact that we are in control means that we are excused from trying to help the Duchess and may instead think about her situation, just as control allows us to attend to the color of the fire and not worry about getting water to put it out.

Obviously control is not an off or on sort
of phenomenon: on if and only if a work of art is being perceived. I have cited several examples, for example fires, of nonartistic situations which under the right circumstances, viz. control, can be objects of aesthetic delight. Theoretically we could lead an "aesthetic life" in the absence of any works of art. It is easier with them because we can intentionally, deliberately create or seek situations in which our attention to formal or abstract intellectual properties can receive fuller attention, and because the works, when successful, are constructed in such a way that these properties are foregrounded.

Therefore what makes the fear or sadness we feel strange is that it is part of an experience most of which is directed at formal or abstract qualities rather than at practicalities, and it is the practical with which we are typically and appropriately concerned. A distinction between the practical and the impractical is a rough starting point for identifying what is appropriately aesthetic. Suppose I see my son hit by a truck. It would be inappropriate—and of course unlikely—to notice that the flow of traffic could have been choreographed to Mozart's g-minor Symphony. The wife at her dying husband's bedside described by Ortega, probably will not, perhaps should not notice the chromatic values. The demands of the practical are usually heavily upon us. When control allows us to put them to one side we are able to attend to the formal and abstract intellectual qualities. It is wrong to say that crying is pleasant when we read Anna Karenina, though it is true that we feel more than just pain. But there is more also than just pleasure. There would have been no puzzle for us if there were only pleasure. Like roller coasters and fear, it does not make sense to say that we would like Soldier in the Rain or Anna Karenina better if we did not feel any sadness, or that we would like them better if they were repeated without their sad parts. We value the whole of which the parts that are sad are necessary parts. We may really be depressed. But we feel that the experience is overall enriching and pleasant. What is essential is that it go on only because we allow it.

There are cheap aesthetic thrills just as there are cheap thrills in other areas of our lives, i.e., there are aesthetic analogs to roller coasters. We feel silly crying at Love Story because we are aware of being so unsubtly manipulated. We do not feel silly crying over Anna Karenina because the formal qualities and conception of life demanding attention are so much worthy of attention. Soldier in the Rain falls somewhere in between. In all three cases we observe sorts of things that do really happen and when they do really happen we are sad. Just thinking about these sorts of things makes us a little sad. Thinking about them vividly, as we do when we see or read them, makes us feel strongly. The fact that they are not really happening allows us to feel in control. We realize that some actions are inappropriate—calling for an ambulance, looking away, etc., and that some actions which are practically inappropriate have become appropriate—noticing the shadows, the sounds as well as meanings in the cries for help.

Part of what we admire in works of art is the skill of the creator. We enjoy the fact that things have been created which would in the right circumstances force one to act in practical ways. We enjoy being manipulated, when it is our own intention to be so treated. Beyond this we appreciate objects which have formal and abstract qualities which bear attention.

We can now conclude that aesthetic delight results from attending to formal or abstract intellectual properties of objects or situations to which we would be unable to attend if we did not feel in control of those objects or situations. We still do not have enough, for although this explains part of what goes on in aesthetic experience, it does not distinguish watching movies from reading mathematical texts. (Perhaps some will not insist upon such a distinction being made.) A full explanation will further delimit those formal and intellectual properties, and this draws one into more complete theories of art and the aesthetic. Aristotle thought the list for tragedy included six items. My own theory of art identifies as aesthetic those properties to which attention is drawn via traditions of art criticism,
history, and theory. A complete conclusion goes beyond the scope of this discussion.

How then shall I explain myself to my family the next time I watch Soldier in the Rain? Can I admit to sadness without thereby admitting also to insanity? Yes, because I can also insist that the movie gives me a great deal of aesthetic pleasure. I can claim that (appearances perhaps to the contrary) I am sufficiently in control of myself to pay attention to properties which I identify as aesthetic, and that this attention yields delight.

5 Ibid., p. 39.
7 Cooper, op. cit., p. 20.
9 Ibid., p. 373.
11 Bullough, op. cit., p. 370.
13 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, Second Edition, London, 1759, (Yale Facsimile). (Here Burke differs from several eighteenth-century empirical philosophers who believe aesthetic judgments are possible due to the existence of a special sense or faculty.)
14 Ibid., p. 55.
15 Ibid., p. 65.
16 Ibid., p. 71.
17 The blend of delight and pain has social moral consequences. If others’ misfortunes were completely painful to consider we would attempt to avoid consideration of them. But this consideration is essential if we are to act to help others. (Burke, 71–75) We see here a commonality between Burke and Aristotle, namely the belief in the social/moral value of art. Burke also believes that contemplation of the sublime provides us with a kind of exercise—it keeps the mind and body in good tune. The qualities in things that make them sublime actually make the senses work harder and create physical and mental tension. The perception of beautiful objects is more relaxed. Burke, pp. 256–57.
18 Ibid., p. 75.
19 Ibid., p. 73.
20 Ibid., p. 76–77.
22 Ibid., p. 71.
23 Ibid., p. 78.
25 Ibid., p. 84.
26 Ibid., p. 88.
27 Ibid., p. 90.
28 I include a musical example here because some people do report feeling sad (and other emotions) when listening to music. I think, however, that music (especially purely instrumental music) creates special problems that are not covered as neatly by the solution I offer below, as are literary and visual examples. Fuller discussion of this must wait on a subsequent paper.
31 Ibid., p. 191.
32 In Art and Non-Art (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), forthcoming.