Perverse Romanticism

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Until this point, I have shown the extent to which function became the gold standard of biological knowledge. I have also indicated that this standard was under enormous pressure by virtue of the fact that one could not ascertain function without the “perversity” of nonfunctioning organs. The scientific separation of sexual pleasure from reproductive function did not help. Biology sought to exile the perverse from the domain of knowledge; nonetheless, that exile betrayed indebtedness to the perverse for its knowledge. Such a vexed relation to the perverse explains how scientists could extol function yet recognize the limits of thinking about biological organisms in terms of function. Read under the aegis of function, the body becomes reduced to parts and not wholes, and one loses a holistic sense of how the organism interacts with its environment.

As scientists began to insist upon function as the criterion for biological knowledge, they defined life itself in terms of purposiveness to counter the limitations of limiting the body to function: otherwise will becomes reduced to blind instinct. Scientists of the period needed Kantian purposiveness because it enabled them to do away with final causes and thus limit their work to the empirical. Moreover, Robert Richards has shown the extent to which Romantic bi-
ologists found Kantian purposiveness helpful: “The biologist judges an organism to be purposiveness according to a specific plan of which he can become aware—even if he cannot determinatively claim the plan was indeed the cause of the organism” (71). At the same time, as life became understood in terms of purposiveness, aesthetics consolidated itself around a resistance to function and to self-interest. Because purpose, function, and self-interest threatened to reduce art to determinism, mere bodily appetite, or mere subjectivity, aesthetics not only positioned itself against function, but also insisted that aesthetic apprehension was central to freedom and liberation: after all, how could one approach the condition of freedom if one were enslaved by purpose? Yet, in much the same way scientists were beholden to the perverse despite their wariness of it, aestheticians needed purpose despite their declared resistance to it or aesthetics would lose its educative function, its capacity for Bildung, aesthetic education.

The inability of aesthetics to actualize an ideal self prompts Marc Redfield to label it a “phantom formation”: one that needs an educative function even when it denounces function. Like scientists, aestheticians turned to purposiveness because it enabled the art critic to judge a painting as purposive, without then having to specify “the plan or rules by which beauty has been produced” (R. Richards 71). As the Romantic cult of genius made it necessary to declare one’s flouting of the rules, purposiveness became all the more useful because it offered an account of origin without having to specify it. At the simplest level, the discourses of aesthetics and science could meet because medicine was one of a few career alternatives for educated men. To wit, Winckelmann, Kant, Percy Shelley, and Keats all studied medicine, and Coleridge had long-standing interests in both aesthetics and medicine.

Here I argue that insofar as aesthetic purposiveness suspends function, it is an important form of perversity. In a larger view, this chapter asks why a distrust of interest, purpose, and function can be so valued within aesthetics—marking aesthetics off from other more worldly and interested forms of apprehension—and so anathemized within sexuality. Although rarely seen as such, aesthetics, in other words, has often been another name for perversion—given its usual distrust of function, interest, and purpose—and as such it provides a useful lens for thinking about and revaluing sexuality without function or reproduction. Rather than being simply unnatural, sex without regard to function can lead to freedom: as Kant and Schiller argue, it is only by casting aside purpose that one can approach the condition of freedom. Under the aegis of love, sex can resist purpose, seeking instead the form of purposive mutuality.
Part of the reason why aestheticians take aesthetics and sexuality to be incommensurate discourses is that sexuality seems antithetical to Bildung. Where sexuality is conventionally aligned with reproduction, aesthetics is to stand outside the immediate demands of purpose while nonetheless leading to Bildung. Hegel argued that “art has the capacity and the function of mitigating the fierceness of the desires” and by this he meant “eliminating brutality and taming and educating the impulses, desires, and passions” (53). Instead of thinking about sexuality and aesthetics necessarily in terms of difference and conflict, the Romantics thought that both could lead to Bildung as long as sexuality was not necessarily reduced to reproduction and as long as something like aesthetic purposelessness kept purpose at bay while allowing aesthetics to educate. To varying degrees, Coleridge, Longinus, Burke, Winckelmann, and Payne Knight wed aesthetics and sexuality by reorienting them both toward purposiveness, which is to say, perversity. They could do so in part because Longinus, Payne-Knight, and Winckelmann demonstrated sexuality, even a perverse sexuality, to be a cornerstone of aesthetic education, at least in Ancient Greek thought. Indeed, the discovery of the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompei cemented connections between a neoclassical aesthetics, the obscene, and a sodomitic culture.³

As names for the absence of function, perversion and aesthetics share a mutual distrust of function, but this distrust does not do away with the need to have a function. The perverse aesthetics of Romanticism has two distinguishing features that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, Romantic writers declare their hostility to purpose, and figure Romantic artworks as organic living organisms that have purposiveness. Biology literally informs art. On the other hand, they align themselves with perversity and purposiveness precisely to liberate human sexuality from reproduction and aesthetics from the nitty-gritty demands of purpose. Hence, in various ways, Kant, Coleridge, Burke, Longinus, Winckelmann, and Payne Knight link aesthetic apprehension with freedom, connect purposiveness/perversity to liberation and yet, in so doing, grant even sexual perversity a purpose. The scientific separation of sexual pleasure from function meant that sexuality could take the form of purposive mutuality instead of being about what Sade dismissed as the “dull business of population” (201). That purposiveness in Sade’s case was for the express purpose of celebrating the anarchy of waste and in the process doing away with such cherished notions as motherhood. By separating sexuality from reproduction, and, by thinking about sexuality as having the form of purposiveness, one could thereby evaluate whether the forms that liberation took actually achieved liberation,
and for whom. In a larger view, perversion facilitates the overturning of the standard view that links aesthetics to waste or uselessness and understands that waste to be a “secondary supplement to the utility value of a product” (Zizek 247). It is, rather, the use that is a “secondary’ profit of a useless object whose production cost a lot of energy in order to serve as a fitness indicator” (ibid.). From the standpoint of evolution, then, waste functions as a form of purposiveness.

The solution was to endow aesthetics with a purposiveness with purpose. “Purposiveness with purpose” amounts to a perverse take on Kant who defined beauty as “purposiveness without purpose.” Although none of the Romantics ascribed to “purposiveness without purpose,” Kant’s original formulation does matter because it is about the link between the problem of reading nature as having ends—Is sex for reproduction? Is reproduction its end? If other ends are achieved, are they the ends it was meant for?—and an aesthetic that sees the ends of art as occurring only when one treats art as without purpose. Aesthetic apprehension sees objects without reference to their actual ends. But aesthetic apprehension has a purpose for Kant, regardless of how it apprehends objects: it shows us how to look at the world as ethically meaningful without making the philosophically untenable claim that any transcendent force created that meaning. Kant replaces purpose with the concept of the objective purposiveness of nature. In like manner, one may split sex from its function, engage in it without intended end, and that engagement will take on an ethical or political significance. And in like manner, one may think that the ends of art may only be achieved if one treats art as without end and these issues come together when the art directs itself toward the discussion of sex.

But this purposive aesthetics had an even more insistent purpose. Romantic writers turned perversely toward an insistent sexuality within their aesthetics, creating an eroticized aesthetics that sought to blur the lines separating poet and audience through a common nervous physiology. Shelley thus imagined another “with a frame whose nerves . . . vibrate with the vibrations of our own” (Essay “On Love” Reiman and Fraistat 2002 504): the echo between “vibrate” and “vibration” seeks to enact such intersubjectivity while allowing for difference. In placing so much emphasis on what might be considered sordid sensuality, the Romantics perverted aesthetics by bringing aesthetics dangerously close to the feckless, fleeting, and passive pleasures of the body, what Kant considered mere sensation or agreeableness, not aesthetic judgment, and what the philosopher Jerrold Levinson labels improper pleasure (13–16). They gave
pride of place to the sexual in their aesthetics in order to engage and move readers by appealing to common desires, feelings, and affects because such emotions make action possible. My emphasis on perversity expands our sense of Romantic aesthetics by acknowledging the swoon of pleasure in Romantic art, one that is deliberately at odds with the rational force of a stance. By perverse, I also mean to capture the reasons why so much of Blake’s, Byron’s, and Percy Shelley’s erotic imagery resists reproduction, why they link sex with purposeless love instead of reproduction.

Of course, this aesthetic strategy had great risk. Shelley and Byron had to retract some of their more risqué remarks; Blake’s *Four Zoas* manuscript bears the traces of censorship. Nonetheless, they realized that even improper aesthetic pleasure need not automatically entail selfishness, mere physicality, and ephemerality because it could enhance love. Turning away from the necessary selfishness of marriage, Shelley uses sibling incest to embody disinterest, a strategy that undermines the idea that sexual desire is necessarily about use and interest. More important, sexual desire without reproduction was not necessarily feckless insofar as it united couples in a bond of mutual purposiveness. If the comparison of aesthetic pleasure to sexual pleasure risks ephemerality and mere bodily sensation, it gains potential physiological impact upon the body, the bite of materiality. By reminding audiences that aesthetics originates in a sensate body, a body that is often denied within aesthetics, Romantic writers not only revalued the physical, but also asked how aesthetics could cut itself off from its very source of strength in the name of disinterest. Through incarnation, fantastical or actual, historical signification acquires the status of inarticulate but palpable self-evidence. Insofar as bodily sensation resists the neat schematics of sex, gender, and desire, the body could be pressed into the service of liberty. Finally, if the swoon of pleasure could purge the body of custom, it could also move aesthetics away from outright purpose and toward purposiveness, a maneuver that would allow aesthetics to reconcile its educational role—*Bildung*—with its mandate to further liberty. When sex enhanced love, moreover, it did lead to the form of purposiveness in mutuality or aesthetic disinterest.

The examples of Romanticism’s perverse aesthetics are legion. Even Wordsworth turned to the physiological pleasures of poetry as a panacea to the “savage torpor” caused by industrialism, insisting that the “vital juices” circulate in poetry and prose alike (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” 249, 254). “We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure,” mused the poet (258), and his choice of “propagate” linked that pleasure to sexual pleasure. Pleasure propagates sym-
pathy, and the figure of sexual intercourse works to make pleasure productive.\textsuperscript{6} Nonetheless, his admission that readers sought “outrageous stimulation” (249) hinted that pleasure could be masturbatory. Keats published “La Belle Dame” under the pseudonym of Caviare, parading his sensuous excesses and in the process redefining chastity in terms of “kisses four.”

Keats was hardly the only Romantic poet glutting his passions: Rosa Mathilda—a.k.a. Charlotte Dacre—responded to a craze for DellaCruscan poetry by raising the temperature on passionate metaphors. She would go on in Zofloya to not only insist that women had intense sexual desires, but also show how desire would not obey any dictates of race. In “The Mother,” Charlotte Smith acknowledges that motherhood often went hand in hand with illegitimacy and praises the compassion that led to the creation of the Foundling Hospital (104).\textsuperscript{7} Nicknamed the “English Sappho,” Mary Robinson in Sappho and Phaon dramatized the rapture and fecklessness of heterosexual passion, settling instead for poesy’s ability to “calm the miseries of man” (Sonnet Introductory 157). She thus just says no to the obligatory epithalamion that should conclude sonnet sequences. And then there is Blake, for whom sexual pleasure was a key component of his “aesthetics of deliberate engagement” (McGann SV). Nor should we forget Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris, or Hunt’s “Story of Rimini,” or Burns’s erotic lyrics. Through the swoon of erotic energy, many of these writers hoped to move readers to a state of engagement.

Rather than avoiding the taint of the sensory and pleasurable, then, Romantic writers and artists sought to exploit a sexualized aesthetic as a “privileged point of contact between the supersensible and the sensory worlds” (Redfield viii). On the one hand, the tangibility of sex is especially therapeutic to aesthetics, given that aesthetics celebrates nothing less ineffable than human potentiality. On the other hand, Shelley, Blake, and Byron turned to affect and even sexual affect because it “threatens belief frameworks and the forms of self-assurance on which they rely and which they also sustain” (Altieri 44).\textsuperscript{8} To wit, Percy Shelley decided to write about the Cenci family for the “deep and breathless interest” it awakened (HM 2176), and he made Laon and Cythna incestuous lovers, explicitly to “startle the reader from the trance of ordinary life” (Preface 2:106). Shelley continues, “It was my object to break through the crust of those outworn opinions on which established institutions depend. I have appealed therefore to the most universal of all feelings, and have endeavoured to strengthen the moral sense by forbidding it to waste its energies in seeking to avoid actions which are only crimes of compassion” (ibid.). Shelley turns to affect because only it can
break through the crust that has become synonymous with the lives of his readers. And the breaking through of this crust is necessary before change becomes possible.

Moments of erotic ecstasy also invite the reader’s identification with the text, and such identification becomes a potential solvent for identity, a solvent that enables our identifications to set the stage for “eliciting our own passionate investments and clarifying paths they might take beyond the work of art” (Altieri 24). Identity must be dissolved so that desire can become a true agent for change. Byron emphasizes the mutability of passion in Don Juan precisely to promote philosophical skepticism about marriage and courtship, not to mention the heterosexual family. Hazlitt shows how the voraciousness of erotic desire dissolves identity in his Liber Amoris, a dissolution emblematized in his smashing of the statue of Napoleon. Hazlitt thereby has no choice but to move beyond a Napoleonic idea of masculinity. Moreover, as with Juan and Haidee, Manfred and Astarte, or Laon and Cythna, these moments of erotic ecstasy can show us what genuine intersubjectivity should look like, a relationship that is based on mutual consent and mutual caring. Because this mutuality allows each party to play the roles of subject and object of desire, this complex dynamic shift in subject position not only enables consideration of what genuine consent looks like, but also enables lovers to limit the role that hierarchy plays in erotic relations.

I do not mean to deny the underside of Romantic eroticism: the sadistic strain in mostly French authors Mario Praz so ably documented decades ago. His was a selective view, and he underestimated the role of irony. The British Romantics were well aware of the price of that sadism and, for example, sought to confine that tyranny onto Oriental despots like Sardanapalus or Othman or, in the case of Hazlitt, real despots like Napoleon.

If the Romantics were invested in a perverse aesthetics in the sense that they were interested in aesthetics and sexuality as Kantian means to apprehension, and deeply invested in the ability of sexual pleasure to invite rapture, they added insult to injury when their aesthetics glorified a sexuality without reproduction. David Hume was in part to blame for their distrust of reason. He famously remarked in his Treatise on Human Nature that reason was “utterly impotent” and that it had “no influence on our passions” (509). If reason could not motivate, then an aesthetics stressing reason could offer nothing to engage audiences; disinterest, moreover, might invite disengagement. It perhaps becomes easier to swallow the idea that the Romantics tended to celebrate sexuality without reproduction when we recall that none of the big six, not even sober Wordsworth,
represent poster boys of normative middle-class sexuality.\textsuperscript{10} Kant separated sexuality from reproduction when aesthetic judgments were at issue: even though flowers were known to be the reproductive organs of plants, one could apprehend them as “free natural beauties” as long as one “pays no attention to this natural purpose when he judges the flower by taste” (Pluhar 229).\textsuperscript{11}

The philosopher Alphonse Lingis can help us unpack the importance of sexual ecstasy without reproduction as a figure for mutuality. Sexual desire cannot have as its teleology reproduction because the act of copulation puts an end to it, and such desire exists both in young children and the old who cannot reproduce (20). Sexual desire, by contrast, does not “desire to terminate itself; it is itself voluptuous, it wishes to intensify itself, to be” (20). The end of the libido is “paradoxically the other’s presence no longer teleological” (22). This suspension of teleology brings us close to Kant’s purposiveness without purpose, a paradox that mandates that I further unpack the relevance of Kant to my argument.

Kant, of course, did think pleasure was central to aesthetics because it was impervious to the determining force of concepts and because its necessary subjectivity demanded communication in a form of universal assent. Pleasure and feeling are the “determining ground of the aesthetic judgment” (Schaper 371) and the judgment of taste, “connected with the feeling of a pleasure . . . at the same time declares [it] to be valid for everyone” (Pluhar 221). However, he sought to confine aesthetic pleasure to the harmonious balance of the imagination, judgment, and reason, and limited the apprehension of that pleasure to contemplation of the form of beauty as if that form had a conscious intent behind it: works of nature could only be apprehended aesthetically or judged teleologically. Kant argues, “The very consciousness of a merely formal purposiveness in the play of the subject’s cognitive powers, accompanying a presentation by which an object is given, is that pleasure” (Pluhar 223). And that harmonious balance could only be achieved to the extent that aesthetic pleasure itself was disinterested, that it did not offer any personal satisfactions. More to the point, in order for beauty to compel universal assent, it had to go beyond the mere agreeableness of empirical sensation. Hence, Kant defined beauty in terms of a purposiveness without purpose.\textsuperscript{12}

But what was the ontology of such pleasure, especially within a context of British empiricism? Not only could Kant take advantage of the German language to ward off sensuousness—in German, \textit{Sinnlichkeit} and \textit{Lust} tar both sex-
ual gratification and lower-order sensuousness/pleasure with one brush—but he, from the vantage of the British Romantics who actually read him, threatened to abstract pleasure so much so that it would become empirically unrecognizable. In his critique of teleological judgment, Kant nonetheless allows a very remote analogy between generation and purpose, not for the sake of “knowing nature or its original cause, but rather for ‘the same practical power of reason in us’ by which he previously analogized the purposiveness of nature” (Shell 239). “Although relative purposiveness points hypothetically to natural purposes, it does not justify any absolute teleological judgment,” Kant adds (Pluhar 369). As long as the analogy of living organisms to art was for heuristic purposes, such as opening an avenue for scientific investigation, and not for any actual transcendental claims, generation could analogize purposiveness.

Kant recognized at least a heuristic benefit to thinking about aesthetic purposiveness in terms of generation. To the extent that the British Romantics worried about what they viewed as Kant’s dangerous abstractions and his resistance to sensuousness, they sought to harness yet modify his generative purposiveness. I suggest that the British Romantics both envisioned sexuality in terms of a Kantian purposiveness without purpose, for the scientific and political reasons I have outlined in the previous three chapters, yet purposely sought to counter the potential disengagement of an overly abstract aesthetics through an eroticized aesthetics, one that sought to harness the ability of desire to effect change without necessarily predetermining the forms of that change. By separating sexual pleasure from reproduction, sexuality could become a figure for equality, making it purposiveness with purpose. Where Kant thought purposiveness enabled either a means of scientific investigation that could remain scientific so long as transcendent claims were limited to the immanent structure of nature, or a means of apprehending aesthetic forms as if they had been willed, Romantics such as Coleridge and Shelley turned to a purposiveness with purpose to credit art with palpable effects without predetermining the form of those effects in advance. The fact that reproduction frustrates all forms of mechanism and technicity (Krell 12), moreover, made it a powerful ally in reinforcing organicist ways of thinking about the world.

In the Romantic period, the discourses of aesthetics and sexuality were not so far apart in that discussions of love, often a euphemism for sex, regularly upheld the ideal of disinterested love. That is, a kind of aesthetic disinterest is what defined true love. To the extent historians of sexuality have spent so much of
their energies on the meanings of sexual acts throughout history, love has been neglected. With the neglect of love comes the neglect of sexual disinterest, or a purposive mode of apprehending eroticism. Hence, David Hume thought that love of beauty mediated between lust and benevolence insofar as one felt momentarily kind to one’s object of lust (Treatise 443). Even the Bon Ton Magazine gave at least lip service to the ideal of disinterest. Although skeptical of claims of disinterested love, it nonetheless defined love as that which subsists after enjoyment or what it called “sordid interest.” “There is a love, which seems a contradiction to the power of interest: and that is, when some raw, silly novice takes a passion for an object very much disproportioned to him; but neither does this deserve the name of genuine love. It only supposes a more than ordinary eclipse of reason; a blind rage” (11). Although this statement would seem to deny the very possibility of disinterested love, the magazine returns to the idea of disinterest when it must teach readers how to recognize love over lust. “The test of both is enjoyment. If love subsists unabated after it, the love was real; if not, it was only lust” (11). Without lust, it is impossible to know either love or disinterest. To abject lust is thus to abject the possibility of knowing love. The misogynistic Marquis de Sade railed against marriage laws that made women the sexual property of a particular man: as the upholding of an individual private interest over the interests of all men in all women, marriage was an infringement of male liberty (319). Unlike most social contract theorists, Sade paid heed to the sexual contract that underwrote the social contract. He did so, however, on behalf of male libertinism rather than female liberation.

The bottom line is that Romanticism’s perversity has much to teach us about aesthetics and erotics: their perverse interest in the purposive role of sexual pleasure, their need to engage audiences, and their fear that rationality could be an abstracted form of disengagement can help reopen such questions as why sexual pleasure must be antithetical to aesthetic pleasure and whether it is possible to think of sexual pleasure as disinterested pleasure. In much the same way as Isobel Armstrong chides close reading because it does not go close enough to the affective elements of a literary text, aestheticians often downplay the role of sensuality in aesthetic discourse because they wrongly assume that such sensuality can only lead to selfishness. Kant’s theory of beauty suggests otherwise. The perversity of Romantic aesthetics thus reminds us of the repressed ground of much aesthetic thinking: erotic pleasure, a pleasure that can neither be subsumed by rhetoric nor by reproduction.
Coleridge’s Kant

This chapter begins with Coleridge’s relatively unknown contributions to J. H. Green’s lectures on aesthetics because they shed light upon Romanticism’s perverse aesthetics, reminding us that physiology, sexuality, and aesthetics are far from opposing discourses. Green was a professor of anatomy at the Royal Academy from 1825 until 1852. Several features of this essay are especially relevant. For one, it begins and ends in physiology and anatomy, suggesting that the body need not be exiled from aesthetics. In point of fact, Coleridge demands that anatomists apprehend body parts aesthetically and uses the anatomist’s aesthetic apprehension of body parts to illustrate what an artist should do. Coleridge writes, “The anatomist himself really seeks for an Idea—not to learn what this or that Limb—Hand for instance—is—but to learn what a Hand is—as he seeks beauty for the sake of scientific truth, so will the Artist seek scientific Truth” (Shorter Works 2:1311). Coleridge weds science and aesthetics so that he can bracket the determining force of purpose because the idea of the hand must transcend any particular hands. The idea of hands performs an analogous function to Kant’s idea of purpose, purposiveness, as it attempts to neutralize the determining force of purpose, as does the idea of beauty for truth.

Coleridge’s explicit revision of Kant’s purposiveness without purpose takes place in the poet’s remarks on fitness: “This fitness to the total subject must not appear as the product of a Design . . . the conclusion is that Design must exist in the equivalence of the result, virtual Design without the Sense of Design” (2:1314). Put another way, Coleridge recognizes that, under the aegis of function, sexuality is reduced to instrumentality and animal instinct. Fitness must not appear as the product of design because this will let the “product . . . then be contemplated as a machine or tool” (2:1314). It must also not appear as designed because “the Will will not appear in its own form, but in the form of the Understanding” (2:1314). Here we must recall Kant’s insistence that the beautiful cannot be understood in terms of concepts because concepts are determining. Like purposiveness without purpose, “virtual design without the Sense of Design” is a way of bracketing intent, replacing it with the category of intentionality. Although Kant did place key importance on the perception of beauty because that is what had to be articulated in terms that would compel universal assent, Coleridge seems to devalue the perception of design, preferring instead to collapse result with design. The end result is still that objects are to be per-
ceived as if their results were designed, leaving any actual design out of the equation. Coleridge aligns himself with Kant's need to have the beautiful compel universal assent when he insists that the “Objective Beautiful . . . ha[s] . . . not a fitness to another Object; but a fitness to the Subject, i.e., the Mind” (2:1313). The object of beauty must not merely be the object of utilitarian ends; moreover, this emphasis on the mind is also Kantian in that the subject who apprehends it is more important than the object of beauty. When Coleridge captures this in the term “Felicity and the power of felicitous production is Artistic Genius” (2:1314), he recalls Kant’s definition of genius as “the talent that gives rules to art” (cited in Orsini 164). Like Kant, who locates purposiveness in the apprehending mind that understands form as if it were willed and who understands genius as that which allows the aesthetic faculty to determine for itself the rules, Coleridge insists that felicity is the purposive prerogative of artistic genius.

Second, by linking aesthetics to man’s need to seek sympathy for himself in others, Coleridge makes human sociability and sexuality the origin of aesthetics. Coleridge’s language merits sustained consideration on this point:

But it is characteristic of Man to seek when matured to a certain grade of cultivation, i.e., humanization, to perfect himself—and as far as he has succeeded, to seek a sympathy for himself in others of his fellow men. He seeks for something out of himself as in the former instance—but what he seeks, is a reflex of his own inward—he seeks a subject (a soul we say) similarly constituted & affected with his own individual Subject or Soul—and this sympathy must be sought for therefore for that which constitutes the perfection or ultimate end, of his animal frame—as the latter consisted in an harmonious balance of Organs & Organic Powers, so must this consist in a harmony and Balance of his mental powers & faculties.—But to excite this sympathy, he must produce a something which shall represent this balance. Consequently, here too he produces <an external> but an IDEAL product—i.e., a product which has no other purpose but that of representing the Ideas & exciting a similar ideal state in the minds of others sufficiently advanced &c. (2:1310)

Despite the overwhelming homosociality of Coleridge’s sympathy—the poet depicts intersubjectivity as between men—Coleridge firmly places the origin of aesthetics in what he would later call man’s gregarious instinct, or instinct to sociability. That instinct is loosely based on the sexual instinct. Coleridge writes that the gregarious instinct “began as his sexual instincts,” but he made clear
that the gregarious instinct was not determined by the sexual (2:1394). It is the very need to excite sympathy in another person that leads to the creation of an ideal product, one that has no purpose other than to represent the ideas and to excite a similar state of harmonious balance in others. Just as the “as if” of Kant’s purposiveness permits the universal apprehension of form as willed, Coleridge’s “no other purpose” limits the determining force of purpose by insisting upon the ideal of exciting sympathy in another so that “the living balance of all the faculties which constitute the human mind” can be achieved (2:1311) without specifying what that sympathy or balance is ultimately to achieve. “No other purpose” furthermore allows the ideal to limit the contagion of the real.

My key point here, however, is that Coleridge explains how the sexual and the aesthetic have a common origin in the need of man to find something outside himself, an outside that must be beyond both instinct and purpose to be outside the self. Coleridge, we recall, deplored Malthus’s reduction of human sexuality to appetite, precisely because that made human sexuality animalistic and denied both free will and the spiritual dimensions of sexuality (P. Edwards 158). Such a common origin further suggests that aesthetics and sexuality are compatible insofar as both seek “the perfection or ultimate end, of his animal frame—as the latter consisted in an harmonious balance of Organs and Organic powers, so must this consist in harmony and Balance of his mental powers & faculties” (2:1310). Kant, of course, would have rejected thinking about perfection in terms of aesthetic judgment because perfection can be a determining concept (Pluhar 228). Above all, where Kant worries about apprehension and limits teleology to the teleological judgment, Coleridge worries about the harmonious effects of the aesthetic while tempering crude purpose. He thus aligns aesthetics and life, all the while insisting that sexuality and aesthetics mature beyond instinct (crude reproductive purpose) into the form of organic perfection.

Third, insofar as Coleridge defines beauty in terms of a harmonious balance between “all the faculties with constitute the human mind” (2:1311), faculties including “the Organs and the Organic powers” (2:1310), the imagination, and the passions, sensuality is necessarily part and parcel of aesthetic discourse. Here Coleridge is perhaps indebted to Longinus, who insisted that vehement and inspired passion was one of the few true sources of the sublime. Kant, too, valued balance of rational faculties, but his need to separate thought from matter—for Kant, Gedanke/thought is equal to emptiness (Shell 377–78)—kept him from including sex, except by way of a very distant analogy, and one that only held up so long as it enabled apprehension. Coleridge’s anatomic aesthet-
ics equates life and spontaneity and thus becomes a helpful guide to understanding how sexuality and aesthetics could be considered allies in Romanticism. Not only do sexuality and aesthetics have a common origin in man’s sociability, but also the beautiful must perversely leave behind questions of design, purpose, or else art remains instinctual and degenerates into a mere tool. Yet this resistance to purpose paradoxically has the purpose of “exciting the ideal state” in the minds of others. Now that Coleridge has suggested the common basis of sexuality and aesthetics, I turn to Longinus because he analogized sublime transport in terms of Sapphic orgasm.

Longinus and the Sapphic Sublime

If the Romantics needed to authorize their perverse turn to overt sensuality in their aesthetics, they had to look no further than Longinus, who quotes Sappho’s famous fragment 31, on love in *On the Sublime*. This popular treatise inaugurated the fad for the sublime in the eighteenth century. Describing the burning love that Sappho has for another woman, fragment 31 is sexually explicit while suspending reproductive function. While Longinus means to praise Sappho for her “skill in selecting the outstanding details and making a unity of them” (14), he is captivated by her ability to capture what all “lovers experience” (15). Sappho tries to capture the state of having been moved by one's desire, and it is this possibility for affect and desire to change the person that both Longinus and the Romantics found so compelling in an eroticized aesthetics. As Sappho knows only too well, the rapture of erotic pleasure takes the self outside of cognition, and breaks it into fragments that must be unified. But that rapture can only work so long as purpose and rhetorical persuasion are suspended: the mere whiff of rhetoric has the capacity to shut down transport. Longinus also could not have chosen a better example for sublime transport, in that such transport invades and takes over the self, rendering it a feminized and passive version of itself, only later to be actively reunified. Longinus speaks of sublime transport as a kind of “amazement and wonder [that] exert invincible power and force and get the better of every hearer” (2). However, because in Greek thinking passivity was thought to invite all kinds of illnesses, it was crucial to enact that unification. The feminization that sublime transport brings thus must be arrested by rhetorical purpose and return the subject to the liberation of self-mastery.

Despite Longinus’s insistence on elevated subject matter and elevated diction, Sappho’s fragment is also a description of sexual orgasm and, as such, sex-
ual pleasure perversely supplements aesthetic transport. Perversity is on four grounds: one, noble diction is put to use to describe orgasm, and, two, this orgasm is generated by desire of a woman for a woman. Third, as Susan Lanser reminds us, since trope is itself “drawn from the Greek tropein, to turn, the trope is a perversion, a breaking of rules, a seduction of language from its proper course” (23). All this perversity reminds us of how purpose undermines and threatens liberty. By limiting desire to reproduction, one loses the capacity to think about the aesthetics of desire, how the forms desire takes can enhance self-mastery and freedom. So, too, does it remind us of the costs of that liberty: self-restraint and the need for rhetoric to contain sublime transport. Fourth, to the extent that Sappho reasserts mastery over her feminized body, active and passive are no longer securely gendered.

The first charge of perversity is somewhat mitigated by Longinus’s later claim that expression can cancel out vulgarity. Although Herodotus is on the verge of vulgarity when he describes Cleomenes cutting his own flesh into little pieces with a knife, Longinus claims that “these phrases come within an inch of being vulgar, but they are so expressive that they avoid vulgarity” (37). This begs the question of how expressiveness cancels out vulgarity. Of course, Longinus does say that “it is wrong to descend, in a sublime passage, to the filthy and contemptible, unless we are absolutely compelled to do so. . . . We ought to imitate nature, who, in creating man, did not set our private parts or excretions of our body in the face, but concealed them as well as she could” (50). One could argue that he is compelled to invoke Sappho.

The second charge is less easy to duck. Longinus wants to endow the sublime with powers beyond rhetoric: whereas persuasion is subject to rational control, “sublimity, on the other hand, produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind” (2). As Longinus imagines it, the sublime effects a corporeal revolution, one embodied in the effects of orgasm that Sappho inimitably describes. Hence, his treatise on the sublime ends with a promissory note for one on emotion, a topic that promises once again to embody language. Felt on the pulses, language acquires the capacity to move and engage readers. The third charge—that tropes are themselves a perversion of language—renders the sublime a perversion of language, taking readers out of ordinary rhetoric. That this perversion can effeminize the audience for the sublime forces Longinus at times to choose rhetoric over and at the expense of his beloved sublime because only rhetoric can arrest that transport and remasculinize the sublime subject since transport as the loss of control is feminizing and renders one
passive. Finally, notwithstanding Greek culture’s longstanding connection of passivity with feminization, Longinus’s use of Sappho in the end troubles gender insofar as it makes sublime feminization necessary for the assertion of masculinity or mastery. He thus renders the sublime as the Lacanian phallus, the feminization that makes masculinity possible even as Sappho’s control undercuts any essential connection between masculinity and mastery.

Longinus’s sublime whirlwind sheds key light onto Blake’s engraving of Dante’s *Inferno*, “The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini (‘The Whirlwind of Lovers’).” Together, Blake and Longinus illustrate the power of the erotic sublime. Dante describes the whirlwind in the following stanza: “La bufera infernal, che mai non resta, /mena li spiriti con la sua rapina:/voltando e percotendo li molesta” (*Inferno* 5:32–34). Unlike Dante, who takes considerable pains to remind us that the winds of passion are infernal, rooting up, molesting (*molestia*), and raping (*rapina*) those who let reason serve desire (*Inferno* 5:32–33), Blake transforms this whirlwind into a positive rapturous force, one that threatens to swallow the viewer into its path as it crosses from the top left to the bottom right of the page. Blake taught himself Italian before attempting to illustrate Dante. Not only do Dante’s insistent end-stopped lines and disciplined *terza rima* arrest this rapture (note as well the caesuric pressure of his double negative: the wind that never [*mai*] not [*non*] rests), but also his syntax reverses subject and object so that the wind (*la bufera infernal*) is the only agent of this stanza. The purported subjects have been reduced to possessive pronouns that bear the mark of the subject in that they must grammatically agree with the subject who is possessed. But if possessed, they are therefore not true acting subjects (*la sua rapina, li molesta*). Hence, Dante disfigures the subjects grammatically and syntactically.

Blake clues us in to his radical revision of Dante by picturing in the sun two lovers engaged in passionate sexual embrace. In contrast to Dante’s formal control, Blake depicts the whirlwind in such a way that it moves beyond the page: the portion of the whirlwind that encapsulates Francesca is somehow connected to the rest of the wind, but that connection must be imagined by the viewer. Moreover, the whiteness in the whirlwind insinuates no end even as it links it to the divine light. Where the dark engraved lines elsewhere insist upon the borders of the plate, the whiteness within the whirlwind encourages the viewer’s eye to wander into the margins. The fact that this sun resembles a halo, moreover, transforms the pagan Virgil into the iconography of Christ. Such a transformation reminds us of Christ’s links to Blake’s Luvah or lust, and this eroti-
cism is, for Blake, the path to fourfold vision precisely because it can break down the viewer’s predetermined frames. Thus, Blake supplements the holy halo with eroticism, a substitution that belittles Christian distrust of the flesh. In harsher terms, Blake hopes to rape his reader of his or her subjectivity because it is only by giving up that subjectivity that one can see the need for, much less attain, higher vision. Blake’s whirlwind of lust is later iconographically repeated in his sketch of the circles of stairs that lead to paradise (see Klonsky, plate 93, 117). In much the same way as Longinus wants the sublime to transport its audience because that transport finesses many of the boundaries established by culture, Blake both argues for the value of passionate rapture and literally embodies it. But this rapture has its costs: the shattering of the self.

Blake helps us to delve more deeply into the costs and benefits of Longinus’s investment in Sappho’s descriptions of orgasm. Here’s Sappho’s fragment, the one quoted by Longinus:

But in silence my tongue is broken, a fine
fire at once runs under my skin,
with my eyes I see not one thing, my ears
buzz,
Cold sweat covers me, trembling
Seizes my whole body, I am more moist than grass;
I seem to be little short of dying. . . .
But all must be ventured. . . .

Although many translators of Sappho have rendered chloros as green, Jane Snyder reminds us that, in early Greek, chloros means liquid or moist (33). The fact that the singer describes herself as dying, itself a Greek metaphor for orgasm (Snyder 33), further supports the distinct possibility that she is referring to her vaginal secretions (Snyder 33). In any case, trembling carnality wrests, momentarily, control over the mind’s ability to apprehend the body in terms of a unified subject, and fragmentation and momentary passivity of the self are the necessary price to be paid for sublime and sexual transport.

Orgasm thus is an especially powerful if dangerous supplement to sublime transport insofar as the experience of it is not beholden to tropes. While Longinus insists that certain tropes like apostrophe and metaphor and hyperbole are, in the right orator’s mouth, the source of the sublime, he also recognizes that tropes once perceived as tropes threaten to puncture transport into mere persuasion. Even worse, once tropes become perceived as tropes, the audience is on
its guard and mere persuasion becomes difficult. Noting the outrageousness of hyperbole, Longinus admits that, “As I keep saying, acts and emotions which approach ecstasy provide a justification for, and an antidote to, any linguistic audacity” (45). Here, in much the same way that orgasm instantiates the transport the sublime may or may not provide because it is dependent upon tropes, acts and emotions rescue the trope from itself: they justify and provide the antidote to the trope. We see more of Longinus’s ambivalence to tropes in his treatment of metaphor. Longinus’s metaphorical examples are insistently tethered to the body through anatomy. The body is a “tabernacle,” the neck an “isthmus,” and the heart, “a knot of veins” (38). As Neil Hertz observes, “It would seem that the moment itself that fascinates Longinus, [is] the point where the near-fatal stress of passion can be thought of as turning into—as indistinguishable from—the energy that is constituting the poem” (5). Hertz makes clear that such transport renders Longinus and Sappho equal partners in the creation of the sublime. Yet, if tropes are both the antidote and the poison, this explains why Longinus seeks a transport not contingent upon tropes and why he weds metaphor to anatomy in much the same way as Sappho’s line, “fire at once runs under my skin,” blends metaphor and physiology, fusing them into one. The fact that Longinus is so attuned to the anatomy behind metaphor suggests his awareness of the carnality of Sappho’s body and how that carnality resists yet demands mastery.

Longinus’s ambivalence toward tropes is further developed in his treatment of the battle of the Gods in Homer’s Iliad when Homer describes the seemingly human fear of the Gods. Longinus comments, “But terrifying as all this is, it is blasphemous and indecent unless it is interpreted allegorically; in relating the gods’s wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, imprisonments, and manifold misfortunes, Homer, as it seems to me, has done his best to make the men of the Trojan war gods, and the gods men” (11). The power of tropes to transport is deliberately undone by Longinus, who not only counters Homer’s metaphors with allegory, but also takes the reader outside of Homer’s frame of reference when he addresses the reader through the figure of apostrophe: “Do you see how the earth is torn from its foundations?” he asks. If Longinus initially sides with sublime transport over rhetoric because rhetoric is sublimity interruptus, he in this moment recognizes the need for rhetorical purpose over purposive transport because it prevents indecency, the literal rendering of gods in terms of human beings. Apostrophe and allegory must arrest Homer’s sublime transport, lest gods degenerate into men. As long as men become like gods, transport does not
But Sappho’s orgasm offers a supplement within a supplement insofar as lesbian desire replaces penile penetration. For all the brilliance of Hertz’s Freudian interpretation of Longinus as having through tropes attempted to domesticate Oedipal conflicts, Hertz misses the boat. I will note that he is not alone: Jane Snyder shows how many twentieth-century readers, even some respected classicists, have interpreted this song as “a wedding song written for performance at the nuptial ceremonies of the groom” (29) and, in the rush to heterosexualize Sappho, have missed or deliberately overlooked Sappho’s apostrophe, her turn from the unidentified man to the female “you.” By turning perversely to female pleasure, Sappho blithely infers the penis as the lack, while the vagina embodies presence even via synecdoche. In light of the “extraordinary phallicism” of Ancient Greek culture (Halperin OHY 102), Sappho’s refusal of the penis as telos to some extent liberates the sexuality of women. Seeing orgasm as pleasure rather than as an end allows sex to take on Bildung: sex thus becomes part of an aesthetics of the self, one whose self-mastery is necessary for freedom. Because women are in fact capable of self-mastery, discipline can no longer be securely gendered as masculine.

Yet it is crucial to note that even pleasure itself is not the point. Michel Foucault informs us that Galen insisted pleasure must be taken as nothing more than the by-product of the act, it must not become the reason for the act, or else the body might become addicted to its pleasures (Care of the Self 139). By emphasizing the speaker’s awareness of her own body, Sappho stresses the reestablishment of mastery that must take place during desire. Writes Snyder, “Despite the role played by the woman whom the speaker observes, the song focuses on self-reflective perception; the speaker observes not so much an external object as her own self” (29). The focus is on the active perceiver: the I who sees the eye that is blind. Moreover, the fragment ends with an invitation to mastery; notwithstanding her proximity to death, “all must be ventured.”

Absent in the translation is Sappho’s careful rhetorical balance, the metrical and alliterative symmetry between the phrases, alla pan tolmaton, epei kai peneta. The alla (but) announces the turn to mastery/courage/daring even as the pan gathers together Sappho’s fragments, while the syntactical balance and equal number of stresses in each phrase enacts the very mastery she invokes. Though not writing about Sappho, Foucault provides another potentially helpful Sapphic gloss in his The Care of the Self: “The medicine of the chresis aphrodision did not aim to delimit
the pathological forms of sexual behaviour: rather, it uncovered, at the root of sexual acts, an element of passivity that was also a source of illness” (142). It is for this reason that Longinus emphasizes Sappho’s having made a unity of details, and not the bodily parts that are splayed across her page. Sappho’s enjambment encourages Longinus’s unification. Furthermore, in her use of *chloros*, Sappho can be read as refuting the ancient Greek notion that women’s bodies were porous, wet, and [therefore] unable to control their own boundaries (Wilson 84). In spite of the wetness of her body, Sappho does not lose sight of her perceiving mind. By focusing upon her skill in making a unity of details (14), Longinus credits Sappho—and, by extension, women—with the power to control their porous bodies.

This perverse turn in Sappho allows Longinus to unify sublime aesthetics and sexuality, notwithstanding the potential of the private parts to “spoil the beauty of the creature as a whole” (50). Of course, not only are Sappho’s private parts decorously couched in metaphor and synecdoche, but the meter regularizes and knits together the various fragments. Sapphic sexuality initially has no ostensible function outside of pleasure. Instead of a phallic pleasure that excessively privileges one part, Sappho disperses pleasure throughout her body, thereby underscoring the limits of phallicism (Wilson 85). However, as her *alla* but makes clear, it is not so much the pleasure than the self-mastery or unification that is at issue. If sexuality embodies sublime transport leaving pleasure as a by-product of self-mastery, it also helps to model a reintegration of the self into a larger whole outside itself. Unlike the persuasive designs of rhetoric, sublime transport fosters an aesthetics of the self whereby identity has become a style of self-actualization, a means of unification of the fragments of the body into a coherent whole. Just as sublime transport has no palpable designs on the subject, no obvious purpose other than the goal of rebuilding of the subject, the sublime trope is purged of rhetoricty, rendered void of obvious purpose outside of self-mastery. Because aesthetic self-mastery is paradoxically necessary for freedom, the determining force of purpose is moved closer to purposiveness, but only as long as phallicism can be rejected.

Hence Longinus must suggest that sublime transport stands outside of rhetoric, and he insistently localizes it within the body of Sappho, in her “mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin” (15). Furthermore, he introduces Sappho by remarking that “every topic naturally includes certain elements which are inherent in its raw material” (14), and praising her for “draw[ing] on real life at every point” (14), thereby not only substituting the body for language, but
also grounding metonymy in the body. And he sums up Sappho’s excellence by remarking “lovers experience all this,” making her nonphallocentric experience of love stand for all lovers’ experience. If the rhetorical purpose behind transport is too clear, then transport risks complete fecklessness even as it defies liberty because it is determined by purpose. And hence he can appreciate the powers of visualization (phantasia) (20–24), a kind of rhetoric that does not seem to be rhetoric insofar as it becomes internalized in the mind of the audience. With that internalization, phantasia exceeds rhetoric and “enslaves the hearer as well as persuades” him (23).

What orgasm lends to the sublime is the power of embodiment to resist the limitations of tropes. Orgasm shows us what transport must look and feel like. What the rhetorical sublime lends to sexual orgasm is the obligation to rebuild the self into a coherent style of mastery, an obligation that Longinus reminds us of at the start of his treatise when he laments Caecilius’s failure to teach his audience “how to develop our nature to some degree of greatness” (1). And Longinus hopes his work will become “useful to public men” (1). Foucault suggests why sexuality would acquire such a central place in the Greek aesthetics of the self: “The care of the self . . . is a privilege duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence” (47). Through Longinus, Sapphic sexuality therefore offers its own kind of Bildung. Only by suppressing the rhetorical intent behind sublime transport can Longinus render this gift/duty. From a Kantian perspective, this suppression is what perverts rhetoric into a kind of purposiveness without purpose, what imparts to rhetoric the power of sublime transport.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Longinus ends his treatise by dwelling upon the evils of slavery to one’s desires. “I wonder,” he muses, “whether what destroys great minds is not the peace of the world, but the unlimited war which lays hold on our desires, and all the passions which beset and ravage our modern life” (52). Longinus continues, “One might describe all slavery, even the most justified, as a cage for the soul, a universal prison” (52). By rendering slavery into metaphor (unlimited war, cage), Longinus has of course given us a way to free ourselves from it, and by extension the tyranny of desire. His rhetorical phrasing, “one might describe,” further alerts us to the coming of a trope, to its potential fictiveness. Indeed, he has trained us to be so alert by enumerating the various figures (24–30) that “generate sublimity” (24). In much the same way as one is merely enslaved to sexual pleasure if one does not allow self-mastery to follow the state of passivity, the feminizing powers of Longinus’s
sublime can only bring health if the immediacy of transport leads to a deliberate unification, the task of a suppressed rhetoric. This is the lesson of Sappho. After all, Longinus insists that “she only seems to have lost . . . her mind and body, hearing and tongue, eyes and skin . . . and to be looking for them as though they were external to her” (15). And this is what enables Longinus finally to appreciate the control one has over rhetoric, that perverse trope always already within the sublime that prevents enslavement.

Winckelmann’s Perverse Aesthetics: From Physical Beauty to Aesthetic Apprehension

In a chapter on perverse aesthetics, Winckelmann would certainly number among the usual suspects. In fact, he is one of its poster boys. Despite his Continental origins, his influence in England was enormous. Henry Fuseli translated his Reflections into English in 1765, and this was reprinted in 1767 (Heyer and Norton 1). Hume, Blake, and Shelley read him carefully. As Winckelmann makes clear in his early Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture, proper understanding of ancient Greek eroticism is central to his aesthetics because the Greek body beautiful was an allegory for an aesthetics of the self that understood the mind’s role in the creation of beauty. That is, rather than assuming the reproductive ends of physical beauty, Winckelmann initially casts aside crude purpose for intellectual apprehension. Understood properly and allegorically, physical beauty is the means through which we can understand intellectual beauty. Thus, this early work begins with the nude Greek male body and culminates in a treatment of allegory. As Plato and Socrates had to ascend the ladder of beauty in the Symposium, so Winckelmann invites his readers along a similar ascent. Because physical beauty can only become intellectual through the allegoric apprehension of it, allegory unites both sensation and reflection, and in the process pits a kind of purposiveness (intellectual beauty) against crude purpose (mere physical beauty).

Winckelmann begins his Reflections by treating natural beauty, and by this he means largely the natural beauty of Ancient Greek men. Describing the handsome young men in the gymnasia, performing exercises in the nude (11), as well as the “strong and manly contours” these “exercises gave the bodies of the Greeks” (7), one senses that it is the philosopher’s own blood that briskly flows, not the swift Indian’s he describes (7). The rapture of pleasure allows the work of art and the connoisseur to meld. Yet Winckelmann ends this treatise with a
discussion of allegory precisely because, as he learned from Plato and Socrates, one can only get to intellectual beauty by first understanding the significance of physical beauty.\textsuperscript{25} One must learn to “paint allegorically” because “painting goes beyond the things of the senses” (61). To borrow from my discussion of Sappho’s role in Longinus, it is less the physical beauty that matters than the reasons behind that physical beauty: the Greek aesthetic sense of the sexualized self, which legitimates physical sensuousness. That sensuousness, after all, is what invites viewers to ponder its larger aesthetic significances.

Hence, I note that Plato and Socrates appear three times in the opening section on natural beauty: once when Winckelmann highlights the fact that an “ancient interpreter of Plato teaches us” that beautiful images come from the mind alone (7), again when it is Socrates who teaches others “to enrich his art” by watching the naked handsome men in the Gymnasia (11), and yet again when Winckelmann alludes to how “Plato’s Dialogues . . . portray to us the noble souls of these youths” in the Gymnasia (13).\textsuperscript{26} Even Winckelmann’s placement of the first Platonic reference is significant: he alludes to the mind’s apprehension of beauty before he indulges in his descriptions of that beauty. Although the sensuousness of his descriptions may later suggest otherwise, Winckelmann’s cart is not before his horse, a point underscored by the fact that the Laocoön here allegorizes “the perfect rules of art” (5). Immediately following Winckelmann’s beautiful descriptions of Greek men in the Reflections, he explains carefully what this says about the Greeks. “Everything that was instilled and taught from birth to adulthood about the culture of their bodies and the preservation, development, and refinement of this culture through nature and art was done to enhance the natural beauty of the ancient Greeks” (11), writes Winckelmann. The Greeks lived in a climate that made possible to live out ideal beauty in their physical bodies, but their style of living—their aesthetics—made it possible for physical bodies to remain commensurate with the ideal.

Physical beauty, thus, is an allegory for the Greek aesthetics of self, an aesthetics that embraces the homoeroticism of Ancient Greek culture so long as the self-mastery that is the end goal of that aesthetic is continuously upheld. For this reason, Winckelmann describes their regimen: infants without swaddling clothes,\textsuperscript{27} exercise, diet, avoidance of any abuse of the body, learning to draw so one better appreciates beauty, the use of clothing to show off that body, naked appearances before state authorities to ward off any signs of fat, beauty contests, games and festivals as incentives for exercise, and training in how to create beautiful babies (7–11). Yet it is not until the final section of this work entitled
allegory that we are prepared to apprehend the allegory within Winckelmann’s text, the allegory that imitates the perfection of the Ancient Greeks even as it reminds his readers of how difficult it will be for modern culture to imitate the Greeks successfully. His contemporary audience, after all, has to contend with such physically disfiguring diseases as smallpox and the English malady, nervous diseases (11), not to mention “the emaciated tensions and depressions of our bodies” (19), illnesses Winckelmann would have encountered while he studied to become a doctor.

Having grasped the aesthetics of Winckelmann’s Reflections, readers are better positioned to understand Winckelmann’s somewhat confusing statement on Greek imitation, that “in the masterpieces of Greek Art, connoisseurs and imitators find not only nature at its most beautiful but also something beyond nature, namely certain ideal forms of beauty” (7). How can imitation be simultaneously natural and beyond nature? Yet this double-faced perception is precisely what allegory demands, a constant dance between the other speeches within it. Winckelmann thus understands mimesis allegorically, as being caught between Greek sensuous bodies and the perfection they embody, and between that perfection and a more intellectual ideal, one that apprehends physical perfection as part of the Greek aesthetics of the self. I might add, what wider otherness could allegory straddle than the one between sexed bodies and their apprehension?

In the final analysis, since Greek beauty is precisely what Wincklemann thinks is good taste, it is the reader’s responsibility to bridge through allegory the divide between Ancient Greece and Enlightenment Dresden, as well as the divide between sensuous and ideal beauty. He underscores that “sensual beauty provided the artist with all that nature could give; ideal beauty provided him with sublimity—from the one he took the human element, from the other the divine” (17). Indeed, Wincklemann’s first paragraph refers to seeds and the fact that Minerva chose Greece because it would be “productive of genius” (3). The reader must now actively and appropriately cultivate those seeds. Winckelmann provides the example of Nicomachus’s judging of Zeuxis’s Helena, an example that hints at the multifaceted vision necessary to understand beauty. “Behold her with my eyes,” Winckelmann quotes, a command that takes us into the body and into language. This is precisely what he demands that readers do with an allegorical understanding of Greek eroticism: one that both swoons and reflects on that swooning. The enormous success of Wincklemann’s Reflections meant that few in the Enlightenment would have a choice but to do precisely
that.\textsuperscript{28} By allegorizing Greek sexuality, Winckelmann at once abstracts the delectable Greek body into an aesthetic regime and yet makes that body felt so that it can matter. In Winckelmann, then, desire unhooks itself from reproduction so that purposiveness can reorient physical delectation into an aesthetics of the self.

Burke’s Learned Voluptuary

Burke also, if unwittingly, recognizes the value of perverse desire. Immediately after Burke links the sublime in his \textit{Philosophical Inquiry on the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful} to pain and terror, he announces, “Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than the pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body, could enjoy” (1:7).\textsuperscript{29} Like Longinus, once the issue becomes the effect of the sublime, eroticism and the sensate body take center stage. Having declared the impossibility of all doubt, however, Burke goes on in the next three sections to dwell on “the passions of generation” as if the modifier “learned” had not sufficiently rationalized his voluptuary. “Those which belong to generation have their origin in gratifications and pleasure; the pleasure most directly belonging to this purpose is of a lively character, rapturous and violent, and confessedly the highest pleasure of sense” (1:8). Although Burke wants to separate aesthetic and sexual pleasure because aesthetic pleasure might take on the sordid sensuality of the body, the danger is that this separation will cut aesthetic pleasure off from empirical sensation, the very ground of his aesthetics. For this reason, Burke turns to the figure of the “learned voluptuary” simultaneously to ground his aesthetics in the sensations of pleasure and to distance his aesthetics from the body. He nonetheless describes the sublime in terms of tumescence (Paulson 69), because his need to distance the sublime from any actual experience of horror threatens to leave his aesthetics hanging in mid air.

Sex therefore plays an important if unappreciated role in Burke’s rhetoric of sensation.\textsuperscript{30} I will show how sex in Burke provides an important basis for reflection in his empiricism, even when he contemplates the significance of erotic loss, and the extent to which both his sublime and beautiful aesthetics are beholden to this reflection on sex. Moreover, does reflection or sensation make the aesthetic truly aesthetic? Although Burke does his best to empty out plea-
sure, even noting that “pleasure, when it has run its career, sets us down very nearly where it found us” (1:3), the problem is that sexual pleasure is one of the two basic kinds of passions that human beings can experience—the other being those of society more generally (1:8)—and that sexual passion is really the underlying cause for man’s quest for beauty. Moreover, the beautiful has its origins in “the social instincts directed towards the generation of the species” (Potts 115). As long as generation remains the origin of the beautiful, aesthetics cannot escape the orbit of brute instinct.

This humble origin thus creates a need to distinguish between vulgar desire (purpose) and aesthetic beauty (purposiveness), but the problem again is that aesthetic beauty may have no empirical origins. To the extent Burke attempts to ground his aesthetics in our sensations of pain and pleasure, the body is the only ground of his aesthetics. Burke writes, “The passion which belongs to generation, merely as such, is lust only” (1:10). Unlike beasts, man, however, “who is a creature adapted to a greater variety and intricacy of relation, connects with the general passion the idea of some social qualities, which direct and heighten the appetite which he has in common with all other animals; and as he is not designed like them to live at large, it is fit that he should have something to create a preference, and fix his choice; and this in general should be some sensible quality; as no other can so quickly, so powerfully, or so surely produce its effect” (1:10). On the one hand, “something” directs men’s passions: the invocation of design suggests that it is God. Burke defers, however, from naming it. His circumlocution “it is fit” begs the question of who or what makes it fit. On the other hand, the real danger is that the “idea of social qualities” may not have the effect that raw undeniable sensation has, because it is a reflection that is once removed from a sensation. Note how once again effect on the body leads the focus back to lust. In the end, Burke admits that beauty is a “mixed passion,” one that partakes of both lust and ideas: the former provides the effect, the latter the key criterion that distinguishes the vulgar from the aesthetic. Because humans’ control over lust is what distinguishes them from beasts, the stakes of the suppression of lust are high indeed. At the same time if reproductive purpose is quashed entirely, the door is opened to sexual perversion.

Burke thus opens up a perverse gap between the lusty drive toward generation—what he calls “a great purpose” (1.9)—and the purposive idea of beauty—in man, an “idea of some social qualities” (1.10). “To what end,” Burke confesses, “this was designed, I am unable to discover” (1.10). The social quality of beauty opens up a gap between purpose and beauty that he hopes to foreclose
by having beauty direct the passions between “women and men” (1:10). “Some-
things” and “it” are the symptoms of this gap as they are words that defer refer-
entiality. But what happens if men become objects of aesthetic beauty? What
happens if the idea of beauty no longer corresponds to a heterosexual narrative?

Burke writes, “If beauty in our own species was annexed to use, men would
be much more lovely than women . . . to call strength by the name of beauty . . .
is an abuse of words” (3:6). If beauty weren’t perverse or annexed to use, men
would become objects of beauty for other men. In theory, the fact that Burke
stipulates beauty and lust to be wholly different (3.1) prevents beauty from lead-
ing to sexual desire or, in this case, homoeroticism. The problem is that, although
Burke begins his discussion of beauty by separating love from desire or lust he
winds up conflating the two, admitting that desire may sometimes operate
along with it [love] (3:1). “We shall have a strong desire for a woman of no re-
markable beauty; whilst the greatest beauty in men, or in other animals, though
it causes love, yet excites nothing at all of desire” (3.1), Burke initially writes. To
prevent misinterpretation, Burke is careful to define love as “that satisfaction
which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful” (3:1) and lust
as “an energy of mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects”
(3.1). Although his punctuation and sections attempt to keep apart love and de-
sire, aesthetics and sexuality, the fact that desire operates together with love
means that desire will not abide by his philosophical categories. His choice of
“satisfaction” collapses lust and love because satisfaction reminds us of the
body’s needs. Love further shades into lust when Burke admits that “it is to this
latter (desire) that we must attribute those violent and tempestuous passions,
and the consequent emotions of the body, which attend what is called love in
some of its ordinary acceptations” (3.1). As ordinarily understood, love is lust.
Indeed, by the time he treats the “physical causes of love,” the distinction be-
tween love and desire has completely evaporated in the “softened, relaxed, en-
ervated, dissolved, and melted away” body (3:19). Although separating beauty
from use in humankind would seem to allow it to remain aesthetic, the danger
is that it will have no real connection to the sensate body. Hence, the mere con-
templation of purposiveness leads Burke back to purpose.

Perhaps Raimonda Modiano has put it best: “The best description of Burke’s
concept of love is to call it preferential lust. Unlike the brutes who are satisfied
with any mates as long as they are available, men become attached to women
through the mediation of the Beautiful which enables a preferential fixation on
the objects of desire” (198). Indeed, in the place of lust, man has sexual “prefer-
ences”—“it is fit that he should have something to create a preference”—(1:10) and the gap between a preference and an instinct, otherwise known as free will or mind, is what allows for such a perverse turn. Too bad Burke has to admit that beasts have “preferences” too in that they stick to their own species (1:10). All is again well when Burke can distinguish between the preferences of beasts and the preferences of men: theirs do not “arise from any sense of beauty which they find in their species” (1:10). Because beauty is what allows men to form a particular attachment—it makes them monogamous and makes their desire purposive as opposed to crudely purposeful—it is crucial to Burke that men’s preferences be different from those of beasts. The fact that he has to use the same word “preference” as well as admit that men are motivated by both lust and love hints that sexual perversion in human beings is inevitable whether it manifests itself in the lack of monogamy or in homoeroticism. Despite the stench of bestial purpose, Burke cannot forsake it completely. In his earlier work, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, Burke had described the mind of man as a perverse organ because it is “too active and restless a Principle ever to settle on the true Point of Quiet. It discovers every day some craving Want in a Body, which really wants but little” (13). The mind thus invents more wants than it actually has, a perversion of nature that may express itself in desire.

That Burke elsewhere tries to cultivate manly chivalry and to direct this manly chivalry toward sympathy for royalty further suggests that perversity could be a real potential problem should custom lose its hold over gender. Of course, as Mary Wollstonecraft recognized, the turn toward chivalric manhood is simultaneously a turn to sentimentalized foppery, a turn that unmans the man even in the name of manhood. The very gap that is the gift of culture—the social marks a turning away from raw lust—is the same gap that opens the door to perversion. Wollstonecraft denounced Burke for his fostering of “equivocal beings,” and in 1780, when Burke rose in the House of Commons to protest the pilloring of two sodomites, he based his argument for clemency upon the fact that sodomy, though “detestable,” was a crime “of the most equivocal nature and the most difficult to prove” (cited in Kramnick 84). The slide from equivocal sex to equivocal language moves equivocation from ontology to epistemology. Although Burke’s point is that because we cannot know if the charge of sodomy is accurate, accused sodomites deserve mercy, his displacement of equivocation onto language and away from sex papers over ontological confusions in the meanings of sex itself.

When Burke considers the ethical implications of his aesthetics, the costs of
reflection go even higher. Rather than saving aesthetics from carnality, reflection threatens to be itself perverse insofar as it contradicts natural feeling. Burke notes, “men often act right from their feelings, who afterwards reason but ill on them from principle: but it is impossible to avoid an attempt at such reasoning, and equally impossible to prevent its having some influence on our practice, surely it is worth taking some pains to have it just, and founded on the basis of sure experience” (1:19). Reason is here figured as a perversion from justice insofar as it relies upon principles that may be untethered to feeling. Feeling becomes a more ethical basis for action because principle may be ungrounded in anything other than reason, a tenuous form of grounding. By this logic, therefore, even sexual feelings are more reliable as a basis for action than reason. This perhaps explains why Burke has such a hard time letting go of them.

Having considered the role of sex in beauty, let us return to consider the relation of sex to the sublime. Burke’s confession that sexual sensation is the highest pleasure would seem to define aesthetic pleasure as an impoverished relation to sex. Aware of this possible false hierarchy, Burke not only argues that pain and loss are more powerful than pleasure, but also that we must always turn away from the plentitude of erotic sensation to contemplating its loss. “The loss of so great an enjoyment scarce amounts to an uneasiness; and, except at particular times, I do not think it affects us at all,” Burke protests (1:8). The loss of sex yields no affect, yet Burke’s parabasis—I do not think it affects us—is telling. He might not think it, but that does not stop him from saying that he doesn’t feel it. One might also wonder what the “particular times” are that prove the exception.

Complicating the issue even further, Burke goes on to describe the complaints of the forsaken lover: “When men have suffered their imaginations to be long affected with any idea, it so wholly engrosses them as to shut out by degrees almost every other, and to break down every partition of the mind that would confine it” (1:8). It is the loss of sex that allows Burke to distinguish between the positive pain (empiricism/sensation) and imaginary pain (representation/the sublime). Despite the “extraordinary emotions” of love, there is no “positive pain” involved, a fact that is to the detriment of love since pain is, as Burke must insistently remind us, more powerful than pleasure. “Only in brutes is the “sensation from want . . . very troublesome” (1:9). In the end, however, Burke must admit that despite the fact that the emotions of love lack “any connexion with positive pain” (1:8), the passion of love is capable of producing very extraordinary effects” (1:8), an admission that invests sexuality with an effectiveness not confined to mere sensation even as it collapses love and want.
That Burke insists that the loss of sex is not really a loss is further undercut by the fact that the normal state of man is indifference (1:3). “The mind returns to its usual state of indifference,” Burke announces (1:3). If pleasure is a weak form of stimulus, and, if the loss of that pleasure isn’t really a loss, what will provoke man out of his natural indifference?

Notwithstanding its essential imaginary and therefore questionable empirical status, the loss of sex to those not guided by reason enacts a virtually sublime “breakdown of partitions” caused by the violence of love, and Burke’s treatment of sex as absence spills into another section. This collapse between the loss of sex and the sublime is further strengthened by the fact that both experiences rely upon a similar negation of sensation: where the sublime is a form of delight, a sensation of the idea of pain and danger “without being actually in those circumstances” (1:18), the loss of sexual pleasure is not a real pain, but is based on the idea of pain. Peter de Bolla captures some of the significance of this when he claims that “sex functions as a negative example of the kind of transport the sublime wishes to effect” (36–37). But sex is much more than a negation of sublime transport in that it grants sublime transport by way of analogy to sex the ontology and authenticity of bodily experience.

Like sexual orgasm, sublime transport overwhelms rational consciousness producing the philosophical blockage that Burke must seek to prevent. For this reason, Burke refers to the mind of the viewer of a sublime tragedy as “erect with expectation” (1:15), even as he makes the point that an actual execution will empty out the theater. By displacing erection onto the mind, Burke can imagine the effectivity of art as having a physiological effect on the body, an effect that places art, reflection, and aesthetics on the same plane as actual experience. Yet, by according the response to the theater as a form of delight, or what he calls elsewhere a negative pleasure, and by insisting that the sublime must be about delight or negative pleasure, Burke preserves the essential experience of the sublime as aesthetic, and insulates the aesthetic from the corruption of the body at the price of cutting the aesthetic off from its source. The negative pleasure that can only be imagined relies upon an idea of sensation rather than sensation itself. Nonetheless, in substituting an idea for a sensation, Burke risks pulling the empirical rug out from under his aesthetics. Such a maneuver is all the more dangerous because, as Burke admits, the “influence of reason in producing our passions is nothing near so extensive as it is commonly believed” (1:13).

But there is another perverse turn in Burke, too, and this takes place when he contemplates the relation of the sublime to usefulness. This perverse turn
reminds Burke that even reproduction has its price. Burke comments, “The horse in the light of a useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft; in every social, useful light, the horse has nothing sublime: but it is thus that we are affected with him, whose neck is clothed with thunder, the glory of whose nostrils is terrible” (2.5). Like the beautiful, the sublime here is antithetical to use: the figure of the horse loses whatever sublime power it might gain from its productive strength. Burke continues, “Whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime: for nothing can act agreeably to us, that does not act in conformity to our will; but to act agreeably to our will, it must be subject to us, and therefore can never be the cause of a grand and commanding conception” (2.5). To underscore the perverse nature of the sublime, Burke announces that it “suspends” all motions of the soul (2:1) and, in so doing, yields only “astonishment” (2:1). By uniting the perverse and the sublime in the figure of an unproductive horse, Burke makes it clear that the aesthetic comes at the cost of utility; moreover, the sublime is precisely that which resists the uses we wish to put it to. Of course, since the figure of the horse has had a longstanding rhetorical function as a figure for the passions, Burke’s sublime horse is also a perverted passion. It is furthermore a passion whose power always threatens “rapine and destruction” (2:5) because it refuses to be “subservient” to any master. Sublime transport is once again figured as a feminizing rape of self-mastery, one that acquires purposiveness to the extent that it is about the elevation of the mind, and one that entails liberty insofar as all forms of subservience, even generation, are rejected.

I risk flogging a dead horse when I insist there is still more perversity. Burke notes that the “nature of the language, framed for the purposes of business rather than those of philosophy, and the nature of my subject, that leads me out of the common track of discourse” (1:5). Aesthetic philosophy is thus framed as a perversion of language insofar as language is framed for business, not philosophy. Hence, if philosophical language turns away from the ordinary business of language, it must itself reject linguistic function and purpose (we call this referentiality) because those stand in the way of philosophical clarity or precision which paradoxically are achieved only through deferral. Sublime blockage in this light then is a form of aesthetic transport without rhetoric, a kind of language for its own sake. It is also very close to the obscurity required in the Burkean sublime. Where Longinus could appropriate sexuality as an aesthetic discourse insofar as Ancient Greek sex was about Bildung, Burke, in sacrificing the business of language, can only turn to declared heterosexuality to anchor his
aesthetics in something other than perversion. Burke comes nearest to Longinus when he insists that aesthetics must exist for no other purpose than a general “elevation of mind” (1:19). Nonetheless, when Burke acknowledges women to be “an animal not of the highest order” (cited in Johnson 29), he brings heterosexuality and bestiality together, and this implies that not only that homosocial relations can be normal, but also that reproduction brings human sexuality under the orbit of crude, even bestial, purpose. In the end, then, if the separation of beauty from use allows Burke to differentiate lust (crude purpose) from love (purposiveness), animals from human beings, and sexual perversion from sexual norms, it threatens to unground Burke’s aesthetics. For this reason, Burke’s attempts at separation always lead to collapse.

Richard Payne Knight and the Priapic Symbol

Where Burke considers the perversity of sexual desire as a form of purposiveness, Richard Payne Knight insists that obscenity obscures the purposiveness of explicit sexual symbolism. Roughly thirty years after Burke’s Inquiry, the Society of Dilletanti sponsored the publication of Knight’s A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus. The president of this society was none other than Sir Joseph Banks, who personally oversaw who got copies of this publication (Rousseau “Priapus” 122). Recipients included Walpole, Gibbon, John Wilkes, and the Prince of Wales (Funnell 58). Knight’s discourse further suggests both the potentially embarrassing indebtedness of Romantic aesthetics to sex, as well as the purposiveness of a libidinal aesthetics. Knight’s aesthetic interest in phallic worship culminates in a longing to return to a classical theory of the symbol, one that truly unified the representative and semantic functions of language insofar as ancient Greece and Egypt refused to see a gap between the sexual and the aesthetic. Whereas his own period imposes “prejudices of artificial decency” upon these wax and stone penises, the ancient theologies of Greece and Egypt turned to the penis as a symbol of the great Creator because it “made them partakers, not only of the felicity of the Deity, but of his great characteristic attribute, that of multiplying his own image” (28–29). Sexual symbols, therefore, confer upon language and art performative powers. Knight further argues that because ancient Greek was a language based upon “imitative representations of ideas” (39) and not “being collected from various sources, and blended together without having any natural connection” (39), ambiguity in language could not then exist. Therefore it is no surprise that Knight’s nostalgia for ancient symbols is based
on the fact that symbols were then “actual emanations of the Divine Power, consubstantial with his own essence” and “treated with more respect and veneration than if they had been merely signs and characters of convention” (50). To encourage this respect, Knight reminds his Christian readers that the cross had its origins in a phallus (53).

As Knight’s deliberate baiting of Christians already suggests, part of what he saw as the purposiveness of the priapic symbol was its ability to free the present from its prejudices and false notions of obscenity. Phalli, thus, are key to present Bildung because they frustrate contemporary purpose. Knight elaborates, “when the mind is led to the contemplation of things beyond its comprehension, all restraints [of sense and perception] vanish: reason then has nothing to oppose to the phantoms of imagination, which acquire terrors from their obscurity, and dictate uncontrolled because unknown” (26). His interpretations, he argues, by contrast, “will perhaps surprise those who have not been accustomed to divest their minds of the prejudices of education and fashion” (30). Nonetheless, “those who consider manners and customs as relative to the natural causes which produced them, rather than to the artificial opinions and prejudices of any particular age or country” (30), will see beyond the crude eroticism of these sculptures. Rightly perceived, these symbols take the viewer outside of his or her present society and force him or her to imagine long-cherished beliefs and customs as merely artificial prejudices.

If his own age could not get beyond the “prejudices of artificial decency” and understand that “there is naturally no impurity or licentiousness in the moderate and regular gratification of any natural appetite; the turpitude consisting wholly in excess or perversion” (28), the aesthetic consequences, in Knight’s view, would be intolerably high. Lost to moral squeamishness was the possibility of ever again reconciling erotic sensuality with aesthetic sensation, the instinctual and passionate foundations of art and theology. At stake in such reconciliation is an end to priestly hierarchy (192), as well as a plea for religious toleration. Knight praises the Greeks for being able to worship whatever Gods were at hand; upon entering a new land, they would worship the local deity (192). Furthermore, since Christianity reformed an already austere Jewish religion by adding even more austerity, Knight’s attention to the eroticism of pagan worship and its legacy within Christianity is an effort to overturn such austerity and to think about how such austerity helped to reinforce the Church’s power. Thus, he highlights the fact that devices on the door to St. Peter’s in Rome rival their lesbian models, that the cross developed out of phallic worship, and that the Eucharist represented the holy kiss of God (183, 184, 186).
swoon of erotic pleasure undermined the austerity and hierarchy of established religions. At the same time, by making clear that current standards of decency were artificial, Knight made it much more difficult to police the borders between nature and perversion. As I will show, when an image of bestiality can be reclaimed as an image of divinity, no sexual act speaks for itself; nothing is necessarily “unnatural” or “abnormal.”

In his later remarks on the sublime in the *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (1806), moreover, Knight implies that, since the work of the sublime is to exalt, the true locus of the sublime is in the erotic: in the “erotic compositions of Sappho, Theocritus, and Otway” . . . the “sexual inclination is exalted into a generous and heroic passion; which when expressed with all the glowing energy and spirit of poetry, becomes truly sublime” (339). Here Knight sought to make the sublime even more physiological than did Burke, and he can do so because it fosters generosity and heroism instead of selfishness. Knight’s beef with Burke was not with his tendency to materialism but, rather, that he got his physiology wrong. Where Burke claimed that terror “stretched the fibres beyond their natural tone,” Knight muses, “No pathologist has . . . discovered or even surmised . . . the stretching power of terror . . . , though the laxative power of terror itself is . . . well known” (381). For Knight, Burke’s notion of the sublime thus was really full of shit. Furthermore, Burke had compromised the passions of the mind by framing philosophical reflection at the expense of eroticism.35

If pleasure felt on the pulses might diminish the hold of the established Church, it had the added virtue of enlisting human sympathies to move the audience to some action. Rather than deny or discount the violence of the passions then as a form of the mind’s energy as he felt Burke did, Knight insists that “the powers of mental feeling are as much powers of the mind, as those of thinking” (*Taste* 343). Knight warns that “those philosophers, who would exalt the one by suppressing the other, attempt to form a model of human perfection from a design of their own; which may, indeed excite our admiration, as a consummate work of art; but will never awaken our sympathies, as a vigorous effusion of nature” (*Taste* 343–44). When aesthetic pleasure is at the expense of erotic pleasure, then, the real danger is that the audience might feel mere admiration, a quality that is relatively powerless to effect change, rather than “the vigorous effusion of nature” that will awaken sympathy from its dormant state. Perhaps Knight’s optimism was fueled by his conviction that even the unimproved organs of sense naturally ascend from a lower stimulus to a higher (*Taste* 105).

This is not to say that Knight believes all sexual descriptions to be exalting. In the works of Bafo, Lord Rochester, and Aretine, the sexual inclination is “de-
graded into sordid sensuality; which, how elegantly soever expressed, can never be exalted: for mere appetite is, in its nature, selfish, through all its gratifying and cannot, therefore, be in any case, sublime” (339). Knight’s insistent caesuras here put a stop to any false exaltation. I should add, however, that Sappho’s sublimity hinges upon Knight’s erasure of her sexual specificity. Glossing Longinus on Sappho, Knight cautions that “it is not being with the particular love of Sappho, that we sympathize, . . . but with the general sentiments of rapturous and enthusiastic affection” (338). Knight turns to generalization to rescue Sappho from “every thing selfishly low or sordid” (338). Nonetheless, Knight did allow that “every display of perverted energy in the mind, may be, in the highest degree, interesting and sublime” (346). Knight’s relatively unapologetic devotion to sensuality has, of course, rendered him a caricature within the history of aesthetics. Coleridge dismissed Knight’s work on taste. He wrote, “Scarcely a page in his book [is] without gross error,” and “the Author of Priapus &c must needs have been ignorant in heart of Virtue & virtuous feelings” (Shearer 71, 75). To be fair to Knight, Coleridge’s dismissal of Knight, though typical, ignores the fact that Knight sought to harness the passionate intensity of eroticism for aesthetics to the end of fostering sympathy. Knight shows the extent to which sex did not have to result in selfishness but could lead to generosity. For Knight, taste is unapologetically a “matter of feeling” (3), and feeling what exalts sex into the aesthetic. Erotic sensuality is especially needed because “reason excites no sympathies; nor awakens any affections; and its effect is always rather to chill than to inflame” (Taste 344). “Sexual desire,” by contrast, exudes “warmth” (86). Although highly critical of Knight, Coleridge initially severs any connection of animal appetites to the sublime, only later to reflect upon how those appetites might in fact trigger a sublime state of mind. Imagining a parched Mariner who unexpectedly hears the sound of trickling water, Coleridge ponders, “What will be the effect of that sound upon his mind while he is yet uncertain whether it gives an assurance of water being within his reach, and after his doubts pass away. The depth of interest with which he hears this sound . . . is a sublime state of mind” (quoted in Shearer 71). Upon reflection, Coleridge acknowledges that Knight does have something to offer, that appetite can lead to aesthetics. For others, Knight’s very linking of sex and taste offers ample evidence of his perverted taste. George S. Rousseau recounts the formation of a “Committee of Taste” in 1805 in London, and it was precisely Knight’s devotion to the sensual that led Joseph Farington to exclude Knight (1988 131). This very need to exile erotic sensuousness from taste nonetheless points to the
potentially insidious power of aesthetic and sexual transport to overwhelm cognition. Knight hoped it would erase contemporary prejudices.

It did not help Knight’s reputation that he not only had a perverted taste for the sexual within his aesthetics, but also that his sexual tastes were seen as perverted. Who else would have dared to imagine Edmund Burke “walk[ing] up St. James’s street without his breeches” so as to ridicule Burke’s connection of astonishment to the sublime (Taste 383)? In his later Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste (1806), Knight went so far as to hint that the very socialization of the sexual instincts in man was a perversion: he equates “the sexual desires of brutes” with being “more strictly natural inclinations, and less changed or modified by the influence of acquired ideas, or social habits” and he declares that their desires are “less liable to be influenced or perverted by mental sympathies” (17–18). He would later insist on the need to “cultivate the pleasures of sense according to a just degree of each sensation” (Shearer 68). If, on the one hand, he made the notion of innate heterosexuality problematic because “the doctrine of innate ideas has been so completely confuted and exploded” (33), he did suggest that “there may be internal stimuli, which, though not innate, grow up constitutionally in the body; and naturally and instinctively dispose the desires of all animals to the opposite sex of their own species” (33). On the other hand, he left the door open to homosexual desire when he noted a separation between sexual aim and sexual object. He claimed that “animal desire or want may exist without any idea of its object, if there be a stimulus to excite it; so that a male, who had arrived at maturity without knowing the existence of a female of his own species, might feel it, . . . without having any determinate notion of what was proper to gratify it” (33–34). Like Burke, Knight thinks that desire is neither innately heterosexual nor homosexual but is perversely open to both. Such perversity enabled aesthetics to place at arm’s length the crude purpose of reproduction, and instead, to purposefully value mutual intimacy, love, as erotic purposiveness.

This need to apprehend eroticism aesthetically and historically is invoked especially in Payne Knight’s descriptions of Egyptian and Ancient Greek statues depicting bestiality. “To the Egyptians, it was . . . an incarnation of the Deity, and the communication of his creative spirit to man” (62). For benefit of his skeptical readers, Knight quotes the authority of no one less than Bishop Warburton, who proclaimed that “from the nature of any action morality cannot arise, nor from its effects” (55). As a gloss to an image of women having sex with a goat, Warburton’s remarks do two things. They separate the action from questions of moral purpose, and they distance effects from morality. Knight thus de-
mands an aesthetic apprehension of the statue, one that actively suspends moral judgments as to action and effect. He continues, “However shocking it may appear to modern manners and opinions, [it] might have been intrinsically meritorious at the time of its celebration” (55). Referring to another statue depicting bestiality in the collection of Mr. Townley, Knight comments that “Fauns and Satyrs . . . represent the emanations of the Creator, incarnate with man, acting as his angels and ministers in the work of universal generation. In copulation with the goat, they represent the reciprocal incarnation of man with the Deity, when incorporated with universal matter: for the Deity, being both male and female, was both active and passive in procreation; first animating man by an emanation from his own essence, and then employing that emanation to reproduce, in conjunction with the common productive powers of Nature, which are no other than his own prolific spirit transfused through matter” (59). Copulation, albeit bestial, symbolizes the reciprocal incarnation of the deity in man and man in deity. With that reciprocity, copulation loses the taint of selfishness.

Knight’s insight that eroticism must be apprehended owes a debt to Kant’s insistence that aesthetic judgment be an act of making the subjective apprehension of beauty available to universal assent. Kant was influenced by Hume, and Knight explicitly records a debt to Hume’s theory that “beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind, which contemplates them” (cited in Knight 16). This insight might help defuse current debates on pornography. I shall allude to them here briefly because they also have something to teach us about aesthetics and erotics. In the above passage on copulation, incarnation is at the same time representation. Knight allows us to argue that nothing is inherently pornographic; pornography must be apprehended by the viewer. By shifting the locus of pornography from the object to the mind of the viewer, one is thus able to take into account the fact that, as Lynn Hunt has argued, pornography began in the eighteenth century as a means of religious and social protest and also deal with Laura Kipnis’s suggestion that even pornography has an aesthetics. Rather than being an object that simply speaks for itself, pornography has aesthetic effects that distance the viewer from any content that is supposedly merely literal and immediate. Kipnis argues, sometimes persuasively, that much pornography is really about the challenging of cultural assumptions of gender. In de Manian terms, pornography has convinced us of its symbolism, but not of its allegorical nature. That ancient cultures continually rework the symbols of other cultures, suggests Knight, makes these symbols necessarily allegorical.

The task of the reader thus is to bring both ways of apprehending pornogra-
phy to bear upon it, along with an ironical sense that both may be wrong. The task is to read it aesthetically, in terms of purposiveness rather than crude purpose. With such an approach, for example, Sade’s revolutionary manifesto that is embedded within his *Philosophy of the Bedroom* no longer seems ancillary to his graphic and sodomitic sexuality. Sade writes, “Men are incapable of obtaining true notions of a being who does not make its influence felt on one of our senses” (304), and this same hostility to abstraction underwrites both Sade’s pornography and his hostility toward monarchy. Moreover, it is man’s immorality—his addiction to “prostitution, incest, rape, and sodomy” (314)—that keeps him in a state of revolutionary unrest, the “necessary insurrection in which the republican must always keep the government of which he is a member” (315). Sade’s folding of clause onto clause performs the insurrection he demands: subjects and objects revolve around the “of.” And with such an approach, Knight can demonstrate that sex is both a creative and destructive power: Knight, for example, reads a medal of Apollo as “a union of the creative and destructive powers of both sexes in one body” (165). Especially because pornography has been legally defined as having no redeeming social value—it is, like aesthetics, useless—sexual stimulation need not necessarily be limited to selfish bodily pleasure since even that pleasure can be purposive. In fact, it can use bodily pleasure (as does Knight) to help delegitimize the church and state.

While Knight took considerable pains to remove images of bestiality from the domain of obscenity, he did not challenge cultural norms concerning sodomy. At least not overtly so. Knight makes clear that the priapic objects he so eagerly catalogues are images not of homoeroticism, but are, rather, of heterosexual intercourse. Indeed, many of them actually bear fruits in their hands, thus announcing their fertility (British Museum 1824 4–71 3, 4). For example, he notes that the “devout wearer” of the priapic symbol wore it to show herself “devoted . . . wholly and solely to procreation, the great end for which she was ordained” (*Discourse* 46). In so doing, however, Knight emphasized that women might think of their sexual objectification as the telos governing their lives, and he depicts them as “grateful to the Creator, for having taken her into his service, and made her a partaker of his most valuable blessings, and employed her as the passive instrument in the exertion of his most beneficial power” (46–47). And although Knight recognizes that many of these objects can be construed as engaging in sodomy—what he refers to as the “gratification of disordered, and unnatural appetites,” as opposed to procreation (76)—because of the arrangement of the figures, he breathes an audible sigh of relief when he can invoke a
“learned Author” who “cleared them from this suspicion, by showing that they only took the most convenient way to get at the Female Organs of Generation” (77). Knight continues, “We may therefore conclude, that instead of representing them in the act of gratifying any disorderly appetites, the artists meant to show their modesty in not indulging their concupiscence, but in doing their duty in the best way adapted to answer the ends proposed by the Creator” (77). It is no mean feat to argue that an explicit depiction of a sexual act is in truth a

depiction of modesty. Of course, that brings heterosexual sex dangerously close to the anus, so much so that one might be prompted to ask if Knight is indulging in a pun on “ends.” In his selection of illustrations, however, Knight may show himself to be more liberated: he shows large-scale nonreproductive images of cunnilingus and ends his tract with a depiction of bestiality (195), a visual ending that suggests Knight may be protesting too much that these images are reproductive rather than sodomitic.
In any case, Buffon had already argued that sex between species is by definition unreproductive. Knight attempts to get around the figure’s half-beast/half-man status by insisting that satyrs and fauns were really images of the divine uniting with the mortal (83). His original collection itself has numerous depictions of Ganymede, the boy who was the recipient of Jupiter’s love (British Museum 1824 4–37 1–3). Even sodomitic intercourse, then, could be about love. Sodomy and aesthetics therefore unite upon a common ground of skepticism about purpose, a skepticism that leads to a kind of purposiveness with purpose. To the extent that even sodomitic images represent the mingling of the human and divine, perversity need not be merely selfish, sordid, or pornographic. Once again sexual perversity achieves the form of purposiveness.

I am suggesting, in their mutual distrust of purpose, that perversion and aesthetics are allies rather than enemies. Because purpose is at odds with liberty and purposelessness is at odds with the need for aesthetics to inspire Bildung, the development of human potentiality, aesthetic writers such as Burke, Winckelmann, and Longinus turn to purposiveness to limit the determining force of purpose while conferring upon aesthetics the power to educate its readers. To see how sexuality and aesthetics meet on the ground of perversion, sex must not be assumed to be selfish, and sex must be connected with purposeless love in the same way that sexual sensation and aesthetic sensation are united in a common nervous body. Perversion thus rescues heteronormativity from animality even as it thereby acquires the aesthetic form of purposiveness. When sex and aesthetics can be about purposiveness, both can escape the tyranny of purpose while resisting complete fecklessness through the cultivation of human potentiality. To end with a perverse twist on one of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: There are few documents of aesthetics that are not simultaneously documents of perversion. And such perversion is for the express purpose of liberation from crude purpose.