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Ennobling Love and Erotic Elevation: A Response to Six Readings of *Ars Erotica*

Das Unbeschreibliche, hier ist's getan
Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.

[The indescribable, here it is done
The eternal feminine draws us upward and on.]- Goethe[1]

I. Introduction: Somaesthetics as an Uplifting Approach to Erotic Love

The famous "eternal feminine" of my epigraph comes from the very last lines of *Faust, Part Two*. Uttered by the Mystic Chorus as Faust makes his heavenly ascent, miraculously freed from his bond to Mephistopheles and redeemed from damnation, these lines evoke the elevating power of love. Crucial to his redemptive ascent is the loving forgiveness Faust receives from Gretchen, the innocent maiden whom Faust passionately desired, seduced, and impregnated, thus leading her to kill both her mother and her newborn child and be sentenced to execution. Gretchen's lovingly penitent soul successfully pleads to the Virgin Mary ("Glorious Mother") to save the damned Faust. At Mary's instruction, Gretchen soars to the higher realm of Heaven in order to bring

1) Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie zweiter Teil,* last updated May 14, 2012, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2230/pg2230.html.

Faust further upwards, since he is drawn by love even in heaven as on earth. This divinely spiritual elevation through feminine attraction provides a poetically transcendent parallel to the carnal physiology of phallic erection that we crudely describe in erotic vernacular as "getting it up" through desire (and which Faust must have earlier experienced to impregnate Gretchen). The very word "erect" implies elevation, and its adjectival meaning as "upright" includes positive moral connotation.

Sharing this ambiguity between the carnal and the spiritual, the earthy and the transcendent, erotic love displays a tension that is both problematic and productive. Philosophy generally focuses on the problematic rather than highlighting the value of this blurring of physical desire and spiritual love. *Ars erotica*, as I understand it in my eponymous book, embraces this ambiguity in ways that can serve human flourishing by appreciating physical erotic desire (which is always more than merely physical) both for its intrinsic satisfactions and for its instrumental energy in inspiring us upward to goals and pleasures associated with higher cultural and spiritual levels of experience.[2]

This inspiring uplift from physical to spiritual desire finds its generative *locus classicus* in Plato's ladder of love as expounded in the *Symposium*, a dialogue devoted to *eros* but also to beauty, while expressing their intrinsic connection, where beauty is defined as the object of erotic desire. Here Plato explains how one increasingly cultivates oneself aesthetically, cognitively, ethically, and spiritually by engaging with ever higher beautiful objects of desire, an ascent in beauty that is also an ascent in virtue and pleasure. The necessary first step on this erotic ladder of cultivation is the desiring love for a beautiful body (which, in Plato's pederastic model, is a beautiful boy's body). The highest level of beauty is that of the ideal, heavenly Form of Beauty itself, whose vague reflection in the boy's body is what makes that body beautiful and inflames the desire of the lover for that particular body. That particularized desiring appreciation of beauty (which we should recognize is somaesthetic not only in being directed toward the body of the beloved but also in being experienced by the lover in strongly motivating, energizing somaesthetic terms) spurs the lover increasingly higher to appreciate and desire the beauty of souls and of virtuous activities, laws, and customs, of beautiful ideas and theories, of wisdom, and finally to a lovingly blissful vision of the ideal Form of Beauty.

In various guises and cultures, the theme of elevating, ennobling love is a recurrent *topos* in the premodern erotic theory my book traces. Freed from Plato's problematic dualistic denigration of the body as prison of the soul and from the modern aesthetic prejudice of disinterestedness, *Ars Erotica* recaptures the valuable core of ennobling desire by showing how a new somaesthetic approach to sex could channel the power of *eros* to cultivate qualities of courtesy, grace, skill, self-mastery, and sensitivity to the feelings of others, thus evoking a richer, more positive vision of sex education than we have today.

Contemporary sexual theory is dominantly negative in character. With Freud we have the negativity of unhappy repression through the dialectic he describes in *Civilization and its Discontents*.[3] The desire for sexual pleasure brings people together to create family life, which in turn creates society, but the violent unruliness of sexual desire conversely threatens to disrupt family and social life. Hence social peace and stability require repressing sexual desire and pleasure, despite the dissatisfaction caused by this negation. In critiquing Freud's repressive hypothesis, Foucault offers a more convincingly subtle mechanism of control through biopolitics and its *scientia sexualis*.[4] This involves a scientifically endorsed power-knowledge network of discourse about sex that identifies one's sexual identity, proclivities, and desires in order to control individuals by classifying them

2) Richard Shusterman, *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

3) Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989).

4) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage 1980).

in terms of sexual behavior norms. By determining what desires and behaviors are out of bounds and need to be denied, discouraged, or outlawed, such norms serve heteronormativity. Individuals whose desires fall outside the norms suffer the unhappiness of outsiders or pariahs, and feel pressure to conform. Insiders are troubled by pressure to self-monitor to stay inside the accepted bounds. Such norms work as internal controls to police and constrain sexual identity, thus negating sexual freedom rather than directing it to the pursuit of pleasure.

We could identify contemporary medicine as a related negative approach concerned with the health of individuals engaging in varieties of sexual behavior and of the progeny that results from such behavior. Although health is a positive value, the medical aims are dominantly focused on negativities: how to avoid or abort unwanted pregnancies, how to elude or remedy sexually transmitted diseases, discomforts, injuries, or addictions. Such negativity does not do justice to the positivity and benefits of erotic love. I therefore sought a more positive approach to sex by exploring the field of *ars erotica* and highlighting its aesthetic dimensions that involve also ethical, cognitive, and spiritual values. To do so, I focused on the *ars erotica* of seven premodern cultures that significantly shaped our contemporary world: Greco-Roman, Biblical (Old Testament and Christian Traditions), Chinese, Indian, Islamic, Japanese, and Medieval and Renaissance European culture.

Three reasons motivated this concentration on the distant past. First, like Foucault, I had the "curiosity" to learn something unfamiliar that might help me see things differently "through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign."[5] Beyond this personal *askesis*, I was curious whether contemporary intellectuals could think differently about sex by looking at it through the very different lenses of the past that created the history of our present: whether the study of those distant cultures could help "free thought from what it silently thinks, and enable it to think differently." Although it is impossible simply to return to their past erotic practices, studying them is cognitively emancipatory in breaking our narrow preoccupation with the present by uncovering different ideas and practices that could be applied to critique, explain, or even improve current sexual thought. Second, most of those premodern cultures seem to have aesthetically richer, more positive forms of *ars erotica* that are better integrated to the ethics of the art of living than we find in contemporary sexual theory.

A third reason is today's increasing attention to the vast and horrible plague of predatory sexual behavior. Highly justified and long overdue, this attention has made eroticism an explosively toxic topic, so that any positive discussion about the aesthetics or beauty of lovemaking today might be seen as insensitive beautification of hideous behavior, a micro-aggression against the many victims of sexual abuse and those rightly empathetic with them. The distant past seemed more suitable for a balanced critical analysis of *ars erotica* than the very vexed, messy, and angry state of play of erotic experience today. However, as I (not surprisingly) discovered through this symposium, even discussion of erotic ideas that are geographically, temporally, and culturally remote can sometimes arouse moral outrage so vehement as to pervert the reader's understanding of my views.

II. India: Elitism, Misogyny, and Misreading

Grateful as I am to all the six contributors that Eli Kramer invited to this symposium on *Ars Erotica*, I must begin by noting some of these distortions in the paper focused on India.

Its author (understandably upset by the sexism that pervades traditional Indian sexual attitudes) writes, "A positive pragmatist attitude of Shusterman allows him to turn a blind eye not only to the elitist character of Indian *ars erotica*, but also to the patriarchal and nicely dressed misogynist agenda of the *Kamasutra* narrator." In fact, my book emphasizes the wealth and privilege of its paradigm practitioner: "a wealthy, tasteful, urbanite

5) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage 1985), 8, 9. The subsequent quotation in this paragraph is also from page 9.

dandy … [whose] daily activities focus on aesthetic pursuits, with no mention of any work or family duties but with great attention to the arts and attractive women, and to beautifying his own appearance" (AE, 222). I also explicitly assert that the "preference for male superiority in unequal unions [in genital size] reflects the power of patriarchal culture, [while] it conversely evokes woman's greater sexual capacities that make patriarchy a useful strategy for mitigating male performance anxieties. Such anxieties provide a major motivation for *ars erotica* in India and elsewhere" (AE, 228).

As alleged evidence of my blind eye and indifference to brutal misogyny, the author alludes to my "tak[ing] for granted a remark on deflowering an eight-year-old girl trained to become a king's prostitute (AE, 215)." Appalled to read this, I consulted my book and saw how horridly it had been distorted. In explaining how elite, state-supported sex workers were prized "for their artistic talents, … [which] were carefully honed by the state," my text cited the *Arthashastra*'s instruction: "'From the age of eight years, a prostitute shall hold musical performance before the king,' as part of her state-financed artistic training." No child-abuse of deflowering was ever mentioned or implied.[6] To suggest that I am blind or indifferent to the sexism and misogyny of Indian sexual culture and that I "forget that the sex performance inevitably involves gender-and-power struggle" is to ignore what I do in fact write. In describing the *Kamasutra*'s account of violent styles in lovemaking (with reciprocal biting, scratching, and smacking, and where women are urged to strike "twice as hard"), I elaborate:

> The lovers' battle of bites, blows, and nail marks evoke broad social and metaphysical themes: lovemaking's union involves a passionate struggle between the sexes where the coupling partners strive to assert their own individual personality and preferences by leaving their marks on the other. However intense its union, erotic coupling paradoxically underlines the impossibility of total fusion and the conflictual nature of this most basic and necessary mode of human merging that creates the further unity of a child born from such union. This model of creation through harmony in conflictual tension purveys a still broader metaphysical vision of a universe constituted by such *discordia concors* that includes violence and opposition, destruction with creation, as part of its cosmic order. Śiva, the originator of Indian *ars erotica*, divinely embodies such *discordia concors*: the potently procreative erotic ascetic is likewise the famous god of destruction, composing together with Brahma (the creator) and Vishnu (the preserver) the great Hindu trinity or Trimurti. This aesthetic and metaphysical understanding of India's violent consensual love-play is not without real risks. Even willing, well-intentioned couples may go too far. Moreover, it should never obscure or excuse the horrible uses of violence in nonconsensual sex and domestic abuse that plague many patriarchal societies, including India's. (AE, 234)

The symposium paper on India misreads the book's treatment of *ars erotica* as part of my well-known campaign for the legitimation of popular art, advanced thirty years ago with my paper "Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art."[7] That campaign has already long been won through the work of many critics and scholars, so in the last twenty years I turned to other projects, notably somaesthetics. I make no attempt to present Indian *ars erotica* as a popular art that was widely practiced by all classes of society. In fact, the book

6) Indeed, the *Arthashastra* prescribed punishments against those who had sex with underage prostitutes in training, even if it was with the girl's consent (though, in that case, the punishment was lighter). See Rudrapatna Shamasastry, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, (Mysore: Mysore Publishing, 1961), 176–77.

7) Richard Shusterman, "Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31, no. 3 (July 1991): 203–13, https://academic.oup.com/bjaesthetics/article/31/3/213/173150.

makes it very clear that much of the population could not properly practice traditional *ars erotica* because that required not only leisure for learning and perfecting through practice a wide variety of artistic skills, but also a high enough level of economic power to secure the needed elements of stylish lovemaking (including attractive accoutrements and attractive partners). Yet this troubled contributor rhetorically asks about my account of erotic arts: "But, have they ever been *really* popular among people in cultures that produced the most famous texts on the art of lovemaking? And, were they accessible to people, regardless their class, gender and economic position? Richard Shusterman argues for a positive answer to these questions."[8]

III. *Ars Erotica* as a Practical, if not Popular, Art

In contrast to this misreading, Max Ryynänen correctly recognizes that my book is critically aware that the classic theories of *ars erotica* were primarily written by and for privileged males and were products of patriarchal cultures in which sexism and misogyny were rife.[9] Realizing that I worked only from theoretical or literary texts about erotic matters rather than from the historical record of actual facts of practice, he understands how these theories reflect (and serve) power relations of class and wealth (the two categories not always homologous in the cultures I consider). As a connoisseur and advocate of pop culture, Max would like to know "the way ordinary (i.e., not very educated nor privileged) people have known things and shared knowledge about sexual practices. These might be less documented, but for sure people have always helped each other and shared 'tricks' for the bedroom, and even philosophized about these issues vernacularly." I appreciate Max's curiosity. I too would like to know to what extent illiterate and poorer members of society managed to stylize their lovemaking and in what ways they aesthetically stylized it and transmitted their erotic taste and knowledge. Did they try to imitate the practices of the elite (which they may have witnessed to some degree during their service to the wealthy), or did they develop their own distinctive popular erotic style–through preference rather than necessity?

Alas, such fascinating questions go beyond the scope of my book, which is a philosophical study of erotic theory through theoretical and literary texts, not a history of *ars erotica* as actually practiced in history. That study of actual practice would require the work of an expert historian (or indeed a multilingual team of such experts) consulting the actual historical record of laws, court cases, written testimonies, and material evidence from archaeological findings, and so forth. I imagine that there must have been some exchange of erotic knowledge between different levels of society, even if the communication was not explicitly verbal and pedagogical in nature. When masters (or mistresses) made love to their servants or slaves, there must have been some communication of erotic knowledge (however repellent its conditions of transmission); and the learning may have been reciprocal. If we include sex workers (such as prostitutes or courtesans) as part of the laboring class who

8) This false claim seeks support by noting that I found in the *Kamasutra* "an impulse toward democratic diversity" while omitting my immediately subsequent words of qualification "albeit greatly constrained by India's dominant patriarchy and cast system" (AE, 218). That constrained diversity included acceptance of homosexual relations and oral sex, elsewhere rejected. The troubled author likewise misreads my text by ignoring that I describe the Upanishads *not* as "austere" but simply as "more austere" than the early Vedas I discuss, which indeed come before the Upanishads, the latter being often described as Vedanta (i.e., the end of Vedas) because they are the latest of the Vedic texts.

9) As someone with a thorough knowledge of my work on popular art, Max may be aware of an earlier text of mine that, recognizing that works like the *Kamasutra* were not meant for the common people, raised the question of whether *ars erotica* could *become* a popular art in a society where education, wealth, and leisure (so key to *ars erotica*) could be the privilege of the people at large rather than being confined to a narrow elite. See Richard Shusterman, "Ars erotica – eine populäre Kunst?," in *Die Schönheiten Des Populären*, ed. Kaspar Maase (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2008), 251–68.

constitute "the people," then *ars erotica* was not totally foreign to popular culture, because sex workers must have acquired substantial knowledge of *ars erotica* that they could transmit to members of higher classes and to lovers of their own social rank. One of Aretino's humorously bawdy dialogues even "portrays in saucy detail how the successful courtesan 'Nanna teaches her daughter, Pippa, the whore's trade'" (AE, 385).

One point in Max's affable text requires correction. He writes: "In response to the question of the counterpart of an art work [for *ars erotica*, Shusterman] suggests a long lovemaking session with dinner (AE, 5)." I instead maintained that there is no clear answer to the question, because there are a number of possible counterparts. Here is the passage from the book.

> What, for example, would be the counterpart of an artwork in *ars erotica*? Could it be an isolated coital coupling; a long session of lovemaking with multiple coital episodes; a whole night of courtship and consummation perhaps starting with drinks and dinner, a concert, and extended foreplay and then finishing with a conjugal bath and breakfast? Could an erotic artwork be construed even in terms of an entire love affair that could extend over weeks or longer? (AE, 5)

Besides a concern for exploring the relation of *ars erotica* to lowbrow culture, the other key theme I discern in Max's breezily informal and wide-ranging commentary is an emphasis on the practical. More significant than his directing us to texts instructing how to exercise the pubococcygeal muscles to control ejaculation is his defining *ars erotica* as a practical art in the sense of *artes vulgares* and in contrast to the traditional seven liberal arts (*artes liberales*). I certainly emphasize that *ars erotica* is much concerned with practical knowledge, but I would not like to compartmentalize it as exclusively practical in a way that opposes it to the traditional liberal arts because *ars erotica* involves in crucial ways some of those liberal arts. Even in its concrete practice it often includes music (a liberal art from the *quadrivium*) and rhetoric (a liberal art from the *trivium*). Like somaesthetics, *ars erotic*a seems to be a transdisciplinary field of theory and practice.

Max's focus on the practical includes the suggestion (perhaps ironic?) that flaws in Foucault's sexual theorizing about China derive from his limits of sexual practice, more specifically that Foucault "failed to realize that he might have needed to take some tantra classes to understand what preventing ejaculation (and training unknown muscles to be able to do it) could do for orgasms."[10]

IV. Poetry, Visualization, and Gender in Chinese *Qi* Erotics

Ellen Zhang's instructive essay on the somaesthetics of Chinese *qi* erotics confirms with her specialist expertise my critique of Foucault's account of Chinese *ars erotica* and my emphasis on the crucial health and medical dimensions of China's traditional approach to sex, along with its significant ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Zhang makes an excellent point about "the aestheticization of sexual activities via the use of euphemized metaphors with regard to the Chinese *ars erotica*, including the description of genital organs" (such as "jade gate" and "jade stalk") and sexual postures (such as "fishes touching" or "dragon twisting"). I would like to elaborate the point by suggesting that this "poetic representation of eroticism" enhances not only the verbal aesthetics of sex but also its imaginative intensity in the actual experience of the sexual act. Language's power to affect the

10) To correct a possible misunderstanding that may arise from Max's text, I do not criticize Foucault for thinking that the Chinese worked *against* pleasure, but rather for ignoring the essential medical dimension and aims of health in their *ars erotica*, and further for identifying sexual pleasure essentially with orgasm while China's economy of pleasure highlighted abstaining from orgasm in order to enjoy the pleasure (and power) of repeatedly approaching and then controlling the coming of orgasm's climax.

imagination can add an aura of experienced imaginative beauty to somatic actions which would be experienced far less aesthetically when perceived simply in terms of cold, anatomical details. Imaginatively perceiving their genitals as beautiful works of jade rather than fleshy organs (that are also involved in excretion) intensifies the partners' experiential appreciation of the beauty of their union in real time while they make love, not only their pleasure in the verbal description or reminiscence of it.[11]

Imaginative visualization is a topic worth elaborating more generally in Chinese eroticism. To respond to Zhang's "hope that Shusterman could say more on sexual representations in the light of the gender issue," let me add some brief remarks on visualization and women in the Daoist erotic tradition. My chapter on China underlined the exploitative vampirish ways that men could absorb, through intercourse, young women's sexual energy to magnify their own energies so as to remain vigorously healthy, youthful, or even immortal, although I did mention that women (who were anyway endowed with superior sexual power) could conversely rejuvenate themselves by sexually absorbing men's energy. In that context I noted how the legendary Queen Mother of the West was said to be "fond of intercourse with young boys" (AE, 169). Zhang mentions how "female Daoists of 18th and 19th centuries rejected the practice of 'nurturing the *yang* at the expense of the *yin*' by shifting sex practice to what is called *nudan* 女丹 (an inner alchemy specially designed for women) with its focus on gender-specific practices of breath meditation and visualization for the purpose of longevity and immortality."

Rather than such solo practices from those later centuries, it seems more appropriate here to note some interesting manifestations of female gender power vis-à-vis men in the classical Tang period, when "Daoist priestesses emerged as a gendered religio-social group with its own distinct identity … [and] … in turn significantly influenced the reshaping of gender relations."[12] Daoist Highest Clarity masters had already created an idea of divine marriage "which entailed beautiful goddesses descending from heaven to have encounters with selected men. The goddesses composed poems to express their affections toward these men, offered to marry them, revealed to them sacred texts, instructed them in various Daoist practices, and finally took them by the hand to ascend to heaven."[13] These goddesses clearly had the superior role in such encounters, and mystical visualization was how Daoist practitioners could initiate a connection with them.

> Visualizing a specific goddess, the practitioner imagined various kinds of intimate contact with her… . In all these divine marriages and visualizations, the goddesses overpowered male Daoists with their sexual attraction, religious knowledge, and divine force, thereby also presenting a conceptual change in gender relations and power structure in the religious tradition.[14]

During the Tang dynasty, "about twenty-eight royal princesses became ordained Daoist priestesses, along with numerous other royal women and palace ladies," creating a trend of highly educated Daoist priestesses actively influential "in both religious life and social affairs" as well as in literature, where both their love poetry and their

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11) In contrast, conceiving the sexual act and organs with negative imagery has been used as a method of killing desire by destroying the aesthetic appeal of lovemaking. Consider the recommendation of Marcus Aurelius to think of "sex … [as] the rubbing together of pieces of gut, followed by the spasmodic secretion of a little bit of slime." I cite the passage (*Meditations*, Book 6, section 13) as rendered in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault,* trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 185. The English translation by Maxwell Staniforth is more neutral, but still unpoetically uninviting: "copulation is friction of the members and an ejaculatory discharge," in Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1964), 92.

12) Jinhua Jia, *Gender, Power, and Talent: The Journey of Daoist Priestesses in Tang China*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 12.

13) Ibid., 9.

14) Ibid., 9–10.

affairs with "priests or literati-officials were openly celebrated."[15] Thus, "the popular cult of erotic goddesses was extended to include Daoist priestesses, who were regarded as 'female immortals' or 'semi-goddesses,'… and they were portrayed as passionate lovers, often taking the initiative in courtship."[16]

I am grateful that Zhang's remarks have given me an opportunity to highlight this historical manifestation of Chinese female gender power in sexual relations with men, which complements my emphasis on China's recognition of women's superior sexual powers and the Daoist valorization of the female principle. I was worried, in writing the book, that highlighting such female gender power might look like an effort to whitewash the dominant patriarchal and sexist thrust of Chinese erotic theory in its Confucian and Daoist expression. I remain sadly aware of how tempting it is for careless or inimical readers to accuse my book of disregarding the sexism of the premodern erotic theories I studied, when my efforts instead were to rescue some of their theoretical insights while exposing problems deriving from their framing patriarchal ideologies and dominant binary gender hierarchies. My brief discussion of Chinese Buddhism focused on Guanyin who, as Zhang confirms, provides a fascinating case of gender-bending through multiple identities (male and female), evocatively emblematic of the Buddhist principle of non-duality. Similarly, my book's chapter on Japan sought to undermine the simple gender binaries with its discussion of *nanshoku*, but the point could have been further developed through more extensive discussion of the handsome boy actors in Kabuki culture, including the *onnagata* or "female impersonators," who despite their male sex came to embody "ideal femininity."[17]

V. Greek Eroticism and the Austere Philosophical Habitus

The same pluralistic, gender-sensitive, pleasure-appreciative somaesthetic approach characterizes my study of Greek sexuality, which Matthew Sharpe expertly compares to Foucault's. Sharpe's essay cogently articulates how my account is richer than Foucault's in two ways: by bringing out more fully the dimensions of beauty and sexual (as well as other sensual and sensory) pleasures in the aesthetics of Greek eroticism; and by highlighting the important function of women (in a variety of gender roles) in those pleasures. While recognizing, like Foucault, the central role of austerity in Greek erotic theory, my study also attends to the polymorphic, pleasure-seeking, beauty-loving, artistic-related expressions of Greek erotic thought and practice. Sharpe's argument is so impressively researched and cogently articulated that I find nothing in it to question or supplement. However, because his excellent essay surely merits a response of more than praise and gratitude, I offer some speculative remarks on why Foucault's account of the Greek's aesthetics of existence is so austerely unaesthetic and his account of sex in *The Use of Pleasure* is (in Sharpe's words) so "anerotic or 'unsexy'" and unappreciative of pleasure.

Consider three possible reasons for this austerity. The first is a feature of Foucault's personal style, though hardly idiosyncratic to him. Foucault's style of expression in his books (which were carefully composed and critically revised scholarly writing) was always far more austere and judicious than his expressive style in interviews. The latter was typically more unrestrained, provocatively playful (sometimes interrupted by jokes or laughter), and sexually explicit (as for example in his discussion of contemporary gay sexual practices, including

15) Ibid., 12, 15–16.

16) Ibid., 16–17.

17) Maki Isaka Morinaga, "The Gender of Onnagata as the Imitating of the Imitated: Its Historicity, Performativity, and Involvement in the Circulation of Femininity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 245–84. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/28013: quote from page 246. In terms of gender pluralism, we should also recall the significant presence of eunuchs in some premodern cultures, including China's.

fist fucking, in his interview entitled "Le gai savoir," which he asked not to be published and was only published in full after his death).[18] Part of the charm and value of the face-to-face interview is its generating more direct, immediate responses to questions, which typically results in less guarded and more outspoken replies, as the interviewee cannot chose the question to be answered or evade or postpone his answer without losing face.

A second reason for Foucault's austere treatment of the Greeks could be his historical subject matter and context of research. He was essentially a novice in the scholarly study of ancient thought when he plunged into it to try to think differently "through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign." An important influence in his study was Pierre Hadot, the renowned historian of ancient philosophy whose work Foucault so much admired that he recruited him to be his colleague at the Collège de France. Foucault's research into ancient Greco-Roman sexuality and its eventual transformation and replacement by Christian sexual attitudes was closely linked to his interest in Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life in which one took distinctive, critical care of oneself (*epimelia heatou*) as an ethical project for better, more virtuous living. For Foucault this meant stylizing oneself into a distinctive subject, one that was worthy of admiration through its striking "aesthetics of existence." It would be perfectly natural and reasonable for Foucault's treatment of ancient Greek philosophy and sexuality to respect the scholarly views and academic sensibilities of Hadot (his mentor in this field), even when diverging from some aspects of Hadot's vision of the philosophical life.

For Foucault and Hadot, as for me, this ancient idea, though long neglected, still had value for philosophical living today. In my book *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life,* I articulated my pragmatist vision of such a life by examining some contemporary philosophical exemplars (including Foucault).[19] For Foucault, as for me, one's care with respect to sexual behavior formed part of that self-stylization in one's art of living, of realizing or reshaping one's identity through one's relation to sex. The question of how erotic experience could figure positively in philosophy as an art of living was what motivated my research in *Ars Erotica*. Indeed, the idea of philosophy as a critical, reflective art of living aimed at meliorative self-cultivation is what generated the whole pragmatist project of somaesthetics that aims to heighten somatic consciousness so that we can better appreciate and manage the perceptions and actions of our somatic subjectivities, and thus better realize our connections to the world (natural and social) that shapes us. In contrast, Hadot's understanding of the philosophical way of life, with its hallmark focus on spiritual exercises and ascetic restraint, showed little interest or sympathy for the somatic and the aesthetic. In fact, Hadot explicitly criticized Foucault's vision of the philosophical life as "care of the self" and as "aesthetics of existence," for being "too aesthetic," for courting "a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style."[20] Given Hadot's ascetic approach to the body and sexuality in his account of the philosophical life (one deeply influenced by Plato and Plotinus),[21] it is understandable that Foucault's account of Greek sexuality would be more austere than sexy, more concerned with ascetic control than aesthetic and sensual pleasures.

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18) Michel Foucault, "The Gay Science," trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 385–403. https://doi.org/10.1086/659351. On its circuitous path to publication, see David Halperin, "Michel Foucault, Jean Le Bitoux and the Gay Science Lost and Found: An Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 371–80, https://doi.org/10.1086/659349.

19) Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

20) See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 211. Instead, Hadot insisted on spiritual exercises that took the ascetic aim of spiritually "separating oneself from the body, its passions, and its desires [in a way that] purifies the soul from all these superfluous additions" (ibid.103). Hadot explicitly distances the ancient Greek philosophical life from Christian asceticism, however the general ascetic orientation of his account of the philosophical life (i.e., desire-conquering and pleasure-denying) is evident and well recognized.

21) According to his biographer Porphyry, "Plotinus … seemed ashamed of being in the body." Porphyry, "On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books," in *Ennead, Volume 1: Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus. Ennead 1,* trans. Arthur H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 3.

Beyond the specific academic context of the Hadot connection, a third possible explanation for Foucault's more austere treatment of Greek sexuality relates to the broader disciplinary context of philosophy and the writing of its history. For whatever reason (and the long abiding influence of Christian religious thought is surely one factor), philosophies that emphasized idealism and spirituality (while disregarding or disrespecting somatic pleasures) have long dominated philosophical attention. Even today when few philosophers maintain idealist metaphysics or advocate disembodied spirituality, the austere idealist or dualist philosophers of the past still get far more attention than earthy materialist philosophies. In contemporary philosophy seminars, conferences, and publications, we hear little of pleasure-advocating materialists like Diderot or La Mettrie or even of sensual dualists like Montaigne, whose essays offer a powerful picture of a philosophical art of living that took issue with the dominant Platonic *topos* that the life of philosophy is simply learning how to die by separating the soul from its somatic desires and pleasures.

Very few ancient philosophers seem to have advocated sensuous pleasures as part of philosophy's art of living. Besides the outrageous examples of Diogenes the Cynic and his followers, Aristippus (Socrates' disciple and founder of the Cyrenaic School) is perhaps the only significant ancient philosopher to defend and practice an art of living rich in sensual and sexual enjoyment. He obviously took the somatic pleasures of food and drink quite seriously, and justified them philosophically, offering a more nuanced notion of mastering desires than simply repressing them. For Aristippus, the virtue of moderation in critical care of the self is not the denial of pleasure but rather its effective management of use. Criticized for enjoying the sexual favors of the famous courtesan Laïs, Aristippus replied: "I have Laïs, not she me; and it is not abstinence from pleasures that is best, but mastery over them without ever being worsted." Such mastery involved knowing how to enjoy one's pleasures without becoming dependent upon them. "One day, as he entered the house of a courtesan, one of the lads with him blushed, whereupon he remarked, 'It is not going in that is dangerous, but being unable to go out'." This masterful management of pleasures also meant being able to forego them at will. Thus, when Dionysius, ruler of Syracuse, "gave [Aristippus] his choice of three courtesans, he carried off all three, saying, 'Paris paid dearly for giving the preference to one out of three.' And when he had brought them as far as the porch, he let them go. To such lengths did he go both in choosing and in disdaining" pleasures.[22]

There is another aspect to the disciplinary constraint of philosophy: a focus on philosophical texts in contrast to a more generous attention to the broad range of literature relating to eroticism, which in Greco-Roman culture includes a rich trove of poetry, drama, and mythological tales. Such literature, in Foucault's study, does not receive the detailed interpretive analysis that it deserves. Introducing it would have added more of the sexy, female, and aesthetic dimensions that Sharpe finds lacking in Foucault. This implicit disciplinary constraint of philosophy, which tends to go unnoticed because it belongs to the philosopher's habitus (even when doing history) is surely reasonable, given Foucault's interests. It remains a limitation nonetheless, such that Foucault's project might be better described as a history of the philosophy of sexuality rather than the history of sexuality simpliciter. I here confess that despite the care (and pleasure) I took to include more of this non-philosophical literature, my *Ars Erotica* still has a clear philosophical bias and its history is of erotic theory rather than of actual erotic practice.

22) Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 197, 199, 203–205. Foucault cites the first of these quotations; see Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure,* 70. But he occludes the context of Aristippus's defense of his frequenting courtesans.

VI. *Ars Erotica* and *Ars Vivendi*

The idea that we philosophers have an implicit, justifiable bias to construe things from a philosophical standpoint, and more particularly from philosophy's dominant orientation, provides a useful way of engaging Marta Faustino's deeply insightful and well-argued paper. Firmly grasping my book's key ethical and spiritual aims – as pursued through the somaesthetic ladder of desiring love for beauty in the quest of renewing contemporary philosophy as an embodied art of living, she deftly introduces a conceptual dyad (*ars erotica*/*ars vivendi*) for aptly comparing the past cultures I studied while also exposing the fundamental question my project faces today. Assessing those cultures in terms of the extent to which the field of *ars erotica* formed part of their *ars vivendi*, we can ask to what extent could the reflective, critical practice of *ars erotica* improve our contemporary art of living? Faustino generously commends my suggestions for this erotic "means of *askesis* and self-cultivation" (that is essentially also other-oriented) as "one of the book's most beautiful contributions to an art of living (and loving) today." Those suggestions emerge from exploring the insights and errors of past cultures, and Faustino compellingly interprets the book's analyses as showing that Asian cultures far more thoroughly integrated *ars erotica* into their *ars vivendi* than did our Western cultures. That indeed is why I took the trouble to study those Asian erotic cultures with far more detail and care than I found in Foucault.

What I find less compelling is Faustino's view that "Western thought has always had a tendency to decouple physical from spiritual beauty, desire from love, unequivocally praising the latter while denigrating the former" and that therefore "Western arts of living are too suspicious of sensual pleasures and too hostile to sexual practices to constitute an *ars erotica* in any comparable way, if by this we mean a set of 'skilled methods or styles of lovemaking that are thereby elevated with the honorific term 'art' '." Here again I detect the implicit bias of the philosopher's habitus: a tacit but persistent conflation of *ars vivendi* with *philosophical ars vivendi*, as if only philosophers had a reflective, meliorative way of life worthy of being recognized as an art of living.[23] If we consider Western arts of living as a whole rather than the dominant model of philosophy's art of living, we could hardly conclude they are too suspicious of sensual pleasures and too hostile to sexual practices for *ars erotica* to find expression. In the wealthy societies of Europe and America, contemporary culture seems more sensual than austere; haute cuisine and high fashion flourish, as do sexual encounters of increasing diversity. Even in ancient times, pleasure-seeking was not alien to Western culture. Think of the typical Athenian symposia (rather than Plato's purified version of it) or of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* that depicts a Rome deeply devoted to erotic pursuits.

I would also resist the claim that Western thought has univocally denigrated physical beauty and regarded it as decoupled from the spiritual, because I regard Western thought as including far more than its influential philosophical tradition. Consider the love of physical beauty expressed by poets, ancient and modern, and portrayed by artists (who are also thinkers in other media than words). My book describes many cases of Western culture's appreciation of bodily beauty, even in the poetry of monks. Courtly love prized good looks, albeit less than valued eloquence and virtue. Even philosophers were often not loath to praise physical beauty.

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23) Indeed, one might detect a further conflation of narrowly identifying philosophy as a way of life with the life advocated by austere philosophers. Aristippus was a philosopher who rejected austerity with respect to sensual pleasures, though he trained himself also to master them or do without them without denigrating them. Does this lack of austerity disqualify him as a philosopher? Hadot is surely right that the abidingly influential philosophical schools advocated a philosophical life that was austere rather than welcoming of sensual pleasures, but this does not preclude that there could be more pleasure-friendly versions of philosophical life. If philosophy, as an intellectual response to the conditions of life, evolves as life conditions change, then the idea of philosophy as a way of life can also evolve. An aim I share with Foucault is developing a more somatically friendly and aesthetic appreciative notion of philosophical living.

Peter Abelard, certainly a serious thinker worthy of the title "philosopher," admired Heloise for her looks as well as her learning. Montaigne, who prized bodily beauty as "a great recommendation" and "prime means of conciliation" between people, insisted "I cannot say often enough how much I consider beauty a powerful and advantageous quality… . We have no quality that surpasses it in credit. It holds the first place in human relations."[24] Even Socrates passionately admired physical beauty, while Plato's ladder of love, though aimed at moving beyond physical beauty does not seek to denigrate it because such bodily beauty nonetheless reflects the ideal Form of Beauty itself. Renaissance Neoplatonists shared an appreciation of the beauty that pervades God's physical creation. Moreover, Western thought often connected between physical and moral virtue. Stoics like Zeno and Cleanthes held "that a man's character could be known from his looks" and described "visible beauty … as the bloom or flower of virtue" (AE, 65).[25] Even Christian advocates of virginity sometimes insisted on its value in beautifying the body as well as the soul (AE, 132).

Faustino, however, makes a very good point in highlighting that philosophy's traditions of privileging spiritual over physical beauty and of disregarding sensual pleasure provided fertile ground for the invention of philosophical aesthetics as a new discourse of beauty, in which beauty was divorced from its conceptual connection with love but instead defined in terms of disinterested, dispassionate (yet pleasurable) appreciation of form. Faustino's point helps explain (rather than refute) my speculative hypothesis concerning the rise of aesthetics. Reacting to the rise of materialism, libertinism, and the sensual appreciation of beauty in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the austere, anti-sensual philosophical tradition sought to create, through the concept of aesthetics, a more purified discourse of beauty that would be free of the traditional ladder that linked physical and spiritual beauty through beauty's inherent connection to the passion of love.[26] Maintaining that elevating link is important, I argue, because once the erotic is excluded from the field of beauty, physical love is consigned to the ugliness of mere lust and pornography. Aesthetic philosophy's pursuit of spiritual transcendence, by rejecting beauty's connection to bodily love, ultimately corrupts more than it purifies our art of living. Rather than elevating men into angels, it lowers them to the level of beasts.

VII. Sexual Self-Styling and Sociopolitical Context

I now turn to Crispin Sartwell, distinguished author of *The Art of Living* and of *Six Names of Beauty*, whose contribution to this symposium appreciates my aesthetic hypothesis and demonstrates more generally a profound understanding of the book's essential aims and methods. He grasps its pragmatic logic of critiquing the oppressions endemic to the erotic cultures I discuss, without letting that critique prevent us from understanding the functioning and values of those cultures so that we can see what useful insights we might extract from them. Those insights sometimes emerge from problems discovered through a careful critique of those cultures' *ars erotica*, but such critique requires initially taking those cultures on their own terms, while not forgetting or

24) Michel Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 484, 810.

25) Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 2, trans. Robert D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 235, 279.

26) Not only hedonists and libertines but even the eighteenth-century conservative Edmund Burke still maintained the close connected of beauty with sensual pleasure and the passion of love, including its sexual experience through "the society of sex." Affirming that beauty is the object of the "passion which we call love," which often takes as its object "the beauty of the sex" (appreciated through the beloved's "personal beauty"), Burke claims that love's sexual pleasure is "the highest pleasure of sense." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (London: Penguin, 1998), 87, 89, 97. For more on Burke's physiological theory of beauty and the sublime, see Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and Burke's Sublime," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, no. 4, (October 2005): 323–41, https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayi047.

excusing the injustice of those terms. This interpretive stance finds pithy expression in the Talmudic motto of "respect and suspect."[27] Crispin cogently argues that "there cannot be an aesthetics of the body in isolation" because we need to consider the body's social and physical environment, and then wonders "whether [I] would have any reservations about taking somaesthetics in that direction." My response is that somaesthetics has always been moving in that direction.

The soma was introduced to express the idea of a living, sentient, purposeful body that is significantly shaped (through experience, habits, and opportunities for action) by the physical and social space it inhabits. Moreover, the aims of somaesthetics were also defined in terms of that embeddedness in an environment that is physical, social, and cultural. Consider this description of somaesthetics:

> As an ameliorative discipline of both theory and practice, it aims to enrich not only our abstract, discursive knowledge of the body, but also our lived somatic experience and performance, seeking to enhance the meaning, understanding, efficacy, and beauty of our movements and of the environments to which our movements contribute and from which they also draw their energies and significance. Somaesthetics therefore involves a wide range of knowledge forms and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it. Recognizing that body, mind, and culture are deeply co-dependent, somaesthetics comprises an interdisciplinary research program to integrate their study.[28]

Rather than a retreat into the subjective experience of the isolated body alone, somaesthetics insists that truly somaesthetic "body consciousness is always more than consciousness of one's own body alone." As I elaborate and insist (italics in my original text), "*A pure feeling of one's body alone is an abstraction. One cannot really feel oneself somatically without also feeling something of the external world*. If I lie down, close my eyes, and carefully attend to scanning my body itself, I will also feel the way it makes contact with the floor."[29] I very much appreciate Crispin's point that even one's personal erotic experiences "can only be understood as they emerge from and into the representations which embody the system of sexual possibilities articulated in public space, in the public language, in a political-economic situation, and which try to tell us what we can possibly be or do, or what we must transgress against to be free."

I also agree with his further point that "we ought to consider the gender system of a given culture at a given time, for example, as a power-saturated system of aesthetics." As Crispin notes, my book insists on this socio-political embeddedness in many ways, for example in the legal and sociopolitical differences between Athens and Sparta or Athens and Rome; or of the change of sexual options through changed social conditions that mark the development of Indian erotics from the *Kamasutra* to the *Ananga Ranga*. Perhaps the most interesting example of a complex system of power-saturated, erotic gender relations is in the defining text on courtly love whose first and longest of its three books is almost entirely devoted to dialogues structured on gender and class relations. It features eight love-seeking conversations involving men and women of different classes (commoners, nobility, or higher nobility), each dialogue having a man of one class attempting to win

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27) The Hebrew expression is והדשחו והדבכ ("*kabdehu v'hashdehu*," meaning "respect him/it and suspect him/it"); the expression derives from chapter 5 of *Derech Eretz Rabba*, a minor Talmud tractate.

28) Richard Shusterman, "Thinking Through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1–21, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4140215.

29) Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), xi, 70.

the love of a woman of either his own or a higher or lower class. Through these dialogues issues of class and gender privilege clearly emerge. The last, longest, and most intricately interesting dialogue is between a man and woman of the higher nobility, and this dialogue is followed by brief comments on other class and gender options. Love with nuns and harlots is proscribed; love of peasants is deprecated because they are too crude to rise to the level of courtly love, while clerics form the highest gendered class of possible lovers because their aristocracy comes from God.

Recognizing the book's polymorphous sociocultural terrain, Crispin astutely remarks that it is "necessarily as attentive to the cultural, political, and economic differences in the ways the activity of erotic/aesthetic self-fashioning is expressed as with the seeming universal task of self-fashioning." But some readers (perhaps even Crispin) might desire a more synthetic overview of this diversity. Are there not some important sociopolitical commonalities that these different cultures share and that shape the dominant gender-power aesthetics of their eroticism? Let me tentatively suggest four interconnected factors that together weave a powerful sociopolitical framework for erotic expression. These interrelated factors are patriarchy, progeny, possession, and penetration.[30]

Although patriarchy may have evolved for many reasons, it would make far less sense if there were no progeny or no knowledge of paternity as causing progeny. Because knowledge of the seed-giving father's identity was always far less certain than knowing the birth-giving mother, paternity was a significant source of male anxiety closely connected with the anxiety of female infidelity. Patriarchy served as a structure to establish well-defined, stable, socially endorsed, and biologically-grounded paternity for progeny by means of greater control of women through male authority.[31] Paternity was a matter not only of knowledge but also of social and economic power through the patriarchal possession of one's progeny-producing wives or concubines and of one's children (whose labor and obedience the husband and father possessed). Sexually, possession was understood as penetration, because penetration by the male genitals of the female's genitals was required for conception of progeny, unlike the spawning of fish, as Diderot's dreaming D'Alembert laments.[32] We speak of the male as possessing, "having" or "taking" the female by penetrating her body through the vagina or, by extension, through another orifice. But topographically, it makes equal or more sense to say that the male organ is possessed, contained, held, or taken within the female's enveloping flesh. This notion of penetration-possession as active piercing that is necessary for producing progeny essentially promotes the patriarchal principle of heteronormativity and helps shape the masculine notions of potency and erotic action as conquest through stabbing-like violence.

If, in past cultures, the demand for progeny prescribed heteronormativity, which in turn fostered gender binarism, today's new technologies of fertilization refute the claim that producing offspring requires heterosexual coitus and thus weaken the gender binarism that heterosexuality implies. Although premodern cultures included identities beyond gender binarism and had practices that flouted heteronormativity, today's new technologies of reproduction and sexual reassignment surgery could significantly transform what Crispin describes as our complex and changing "taxonomy of sexual roles and their aesthetic presentation in public

30) I introduce this four-factor framework in Richard Shusterman, "Sex, Emancipation, and Aesthetics: *Ars Erotica* and the Cage of Eurocentric Modernity," *Foucault Studies*, no. 31 (December 2021): 44–60, which is my contribution to a prior symposium on *Ars Erotica*. The following paragraphs draw on that prior account.

31) The anthropologist Malinowski alleged that the matrilineal, non-patriarchal Trobriand society of Melanesia were "ignorant of physical fatherhood," that is, they failed to recognize the father's coital act of inserting semen as having a role in conception. "The father is … not a recognized kinsman of the children… Real kinship … exists only through the mother," and the "mother's brother represents the principle of discipline, authority, and executive power within the family." See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 9–10.

32) Denis Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream," in *Rameau's Nephew/D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin, 1966), 175.

space." He is also right to suggest that our "capitalist economic context" tends to encourage such pluralism to reap greater profits. Because we live in a time of complex, bedazzling changes in the options we have to manifest and realize our sexual desires, it seems all the more useful to study the diverse *ars erotica* traditions and learn from their errors as well as their insights. Thinking through these matters in critical dialogue is much better than doing it alone. I therefore thank the gifted contributors to this symposium and its organizer Eli Kramer most sincerely for the attention they have given to my ideas in *Ars Erotica* and for stimulating me to new thinking beyond that book.