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Agalmatophilic Pygmalions: Burke and Winckelmann on the Beautiful and the Sublime

Abstract:

There is a good chance that “each critic becomes a Pygmalion” (as Leo Curran put it) when they bring the work of art to life in their narcissistic (and almost amorous) attention, unfolding its meaning so that they should be able to write their own interpretation. The starting point of the present text is the perfection of sculptural forms, and the author discusses “traditional” aesthetic concepts: the beautiful and the sublime along with the difference and interplay of the two qualities, bearing in mind their variations and relations. The framework is provided by the occurrence of these two in the discourses on the self and taste in the eighteenth-century while the focus is on subjective criticism concerning the beautiful versus the sublime in the artistic and sensual experience of statues. Within the given framework, the author is planning to force Edmund Burke, stiffened by the experience of the sublime, and Winckelmann, softened by the sight of the Greek statues, into a dialogue on individual taste.

Keywords:

self, sublime, beautiful, sexes, statues, Burke, Winckelmann

I

Studying the performativity of reading, Roger Chartier, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Stephen D. Cox (among others), have paid particular attention to the *self-making* of reading in the eighteenth-century. Although reading still took place largely as a communal event in salons, there was a growing demand for receptive intimacy, which allowed the readers and writers to create their own contextualized selves, so that it could develop as an individual “significant self,” displaying the process of self-formation in interpretation.¹ Spacks (as a female interpreter) speaks of individual intellectual activity as the discovery of “the authentic self,” while Cox posits it as a space of genuine self-knowledge of “the true self” that “cannot be conceptualized simply by reference to innate dispositions; all the vagaries of its sensibility must be taken into account.”²

In Western Europe, the eighteenth-century (the neoclassical period), is usually labelled “the century of taste, that is of the theory of taste,” when “the focus of theorizing about experience of the kind under discussion shifted from the objective notions of beauty to the subjective notion of the taste,” as George Dickie claims.³ On the other hand, due to the subjective feature of taste, its notions were rather elusive and ephemeral. In the context of the progressive, constantly changing era, the discourses of the concept reflected on “the two temporal poles – intense immediacy and long process” that characterized individual consciousness and way of thinking.⁴ The theoretical and philosophical approaches to art were permeated – sometimes forced into apparent detours, dislocated, or even shattered – by the palpable power of the senses. The oscillating between the subjective and the objective with continual reference to the transitory and the permanent had made the question of taste central in human self-fashioning.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), being one of the great critics of the normative concept of taste in the century, advocated subjectivization through the liberation of individual emotions and the emancipation of the use of the senses.

1) Spacks quoted in Cox, “*Stranger Within*,” 12.

2) Spacks, *Privacy*, 3; and Cox, “*Stranger Within*,” 25. See also Baker and Leclair, “Introduction,” 1–24.

3) Dickie, *Century of Taste*, 3. Italics are mine.

4) Hogle, *Temporality of Taste*, 2.

Winckelmann rejected the dry, scholarly analysis of art provided by the learned, as he longed for the sensual experience of the works in the original sense of *aesthesis* (cf. aesthetics), and he advocated the importance of primary experience. He also advises that the *connoisseur*, the art lover endowed with natural “skill and talent,” should go to Rome where he would find the best of the classical artworks.⁵ There, the aesthete should look at them directly and, thus, experience beauty itself – “come and see (*Hier ecip es: gehe hin und sieh*),” he utters the calling.⁶ Only in Rome can a man become a *connoisseur*, a savant of beauty, because “the occurrence of artistic beauty elsewhere is only sporadic, while the relevant sense can only be perfected and refined in Rome, and here it can develop in the right direction.”⁷ The individual taste of the *connoisseur* was more limited than the dominant (neoclassical) taste of the period, which relied on the general knowledge of culture and permeated social intercourse, while seeking pleasure in other areas of life, in addition to the enjoyment of (artistic) forms. At the same time, the Winckelmannian friendly good advice was later taken as an educational guideline that worked against its primary emancipatory force – moving towards normativity, it had become a phrase and a slogan in the century. In the above quoted writing, Winckelmann also articulates his homoerotic approach when he says that the art of the Greeks can only be fully appreciated by those who are not only receptive to the beauty of the female sex, but also moved by the beauty of men. Thus, those who are imbued with homoeroticism have an advantage in the conception of Greek beauty:

As, moreover, human beauty is to be condensed into a general concept for the purpose of knowledge, I have observed that those who have eyes

5) Winckelmann, “Von der Fähigkeit,” 189. Translation is mine. The writing was originally a long letter to his friend Baron von Berg and the referred sentence goes in German: “Also kann die wahre und völlige Kenntnis des Schönen in der Kunst nicht anders, als durch Betrachtung der Urbilder selbst, und vornehmlich in Rom erlangt werden, und eine Reise nach Italien ist denjenigen zu wünschen, die mit Fähigkeit zur Kenntnis des Schönen von der Natur begabt sind und hinlänglichen Unterricht in derselben erlangt haben.” Unfortunately, rather a few of Winckelmann’s writings are available in English – apart from David Irwin’s edited collection (*Writings on Art*) and the translation of Winckelmann’s main work, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (The History of Ancient Art)*.

6) Ibid., 207. Translation is mine.

7) Ibid., 193. Translation is mine.

only for the beauties of the female sex, and are little or not at all moved by the beauties of our sex, do not possess the feeling of artistic beauty easily, like the natives, generally and vividly enough. They will perceive the art of the Greeks inadequately, for its greatest beauties are those of our sex and not of the other.⁸

Winckelmann, who aestheticizes homosexuality, also points out that the eighteenth-century is a century of great incompleteness if we want to study the writings of the women *connoisseur* on art theory.⁹ While the beauty of the female body is (mostly) admired, the question of the female spirit is mostly a subject of mockery. Yet, in wealthy families, women are cultured, travel, run salons, write reviews, biographies and novels, translate, but their own critical voices are barely heard. Returning to the question of taste in this sidebar, my study explores the notion of the sublime and the beautiful in eighteenth-century English and German debates about taste, focusing on its sex-specific elements. Starting with Edmund Burke's influential dichotomy, the history of ideas in the philosophy of art is traced through Winckelmann's observations to Kant and Hegel – with detours of varying degrees, especially in the context of the similar and yet so different sexual-aesthetic features of the conceptualizations of taste.

II

In eighteenth-century English theoretical writings, leaving behind French influence, the combined understanding of *sensus communis* (common sense), empiricist taste, and manners opened up new perspectives in strict accordance with John Locke's empiricist philosophy. John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was the work that "placed the whole question of perception, and of the mind's sensibility to what it perceives, at the heart of eighteenth-century attempts to determine the nature of the self."¹⁰ Drawing on the varied experiences of the individual, Locke radically ques-

8) Ibid., 178. Translation is mine.

9) Ibid.

10) Cox, "Stranger Within," 13.

tioned the constancy of identity, of the personal self; as he says, “*self* is not determined by identity or diversity of substance, which it cannot be sure of, but only by identity of consciousness.”¹¹ With the Lockean rejection of innate and universally held ideas, we can arrive for example, at Berkeley’s excessively self-centered, solipsistic philosophy (cf. *solus ipse*, “I alone”), or moving in the opposite direction, at the common-sense philosophers who questioned the empirical approach. The Scottish, so-called Common Sense School – Thomas Reid, Adam Ferguson, and James Beattie – sought to strike a balance between the actual existence of the self and its uncertain experience, while others (David Hume and Lord Shaftesbury), focused on empathy and moral sense as a means of connecting individuals. Broadening somewhat the horizon of the thinking man of the century and approaching the thought of Edmund Burke, those philosophers emphasized the role sentiments, moral sense, and sensibility played alongside reason in the civilized, enlightened social existence of the natural man.¹² Accordingly, the recognition of the powerful, and the experience of the sublime (the great) emerged as if it were inscribed in the context of consensual and conceptual endeavors. The sublime is a personal experience that dislocates the self by its impact and it represents a “rupture” in the chain of everyday and previously familiar experiences: with its novelty, the sublime “was considered simultaneously to dramatize and ‘absorb’ the self.”¹³ On the one hand, the overwhelming power of the experience paralyses the individual, but on the other hand it prompts the viewers to experience their limits and even to transcend them by the movement of sensations evoked by theecipee.

The philosophical implications of the above process were discussed in details by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgement* at the end of the century, while the sublime experience was thematized in British theoretical texts from the beginning of the eighteenth-century and in French as early as in the second half of the seventeenth. Nicolas Boileau’s classicist translation of Longinus, a manual of rhetoric entitled *Treatise on the Sublime*, launched a long and meandering discourse on the sublime, focusing

11) Locke, *Human Understanding*, 310–11. Italics in the original. This concept is dealt with further in Christopher Fox’s *Locke and the Scribblers*.

12) In addition to the influence of John Locke, Burke’s writings reflect the vocabulary of contemporary Scottish moral philosophers such as David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid. See O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate*.

13) Cox, “*Stranger Within*,” 7.

primarily on literary works. In accordance with the neoclassical dominance of order and reason and with the boldness to question everything, series of English essays, debates, and discussions from the 1710s onwards dissected the aesthetic quality of the sublime, going beyond the analyses of literary pieces. John Dennis, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, and Mark Akenside saw in nature an expression of divine grandeur, and referred to the sublime by the words “the great,” “sublimity,” “the magnificent,” and “the majestic.” In *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison devoted several essays to the subject, where he mainly explored the influence of the natural sublime on the imagination – although he did not draw a sharp line between the beautiful, the extraordinary and the sublime: “Everything that is *new* or *uncommon* raises a pleasure in the imagination, because it fills the soul with an agreeable surprise, gratifies its curiosity, and gives it an idea of which it was not before possessed.”¹⁴ In examining the interaction of divine and human thought, Lord Shaftesbury and Addison, for example, emphasized the creative power of imagination in the experience of the sublime. But while the sublime in nature, as Addison writes, is provided by “delight in the apprehension of what is great or unlimited”; sublime poetry (for instance, John Milton’s passionate lines), has a powerful effect on our emotions and brings us closer to the understanding of our own minds: “If we consider, therefore, the nature of this pleasure [cf. reading Milton], we shall find that it does not arise so properly from the description of what is terrible, as from the reflection we make on our selves at the time of reading it.”¹⁵

The eighteenth-century readings of the sublime are about the sensory experience of the world, and thus inevitably discuss the interconnectedness of imagination, understanding, self-knowledge, or even morality and power. Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), written in his early twenties, can be considered rather a youthful treatise on the nature of power than a work of art-philosophy, but in the period it was undoubtedly the most influential work on the sharp distinction between the sublime and the beau-

14) Quoted in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 62–63. Italics in the original.

15) Addison, *The Spectator*; quoted in Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*, 67–8. In my related paper, I examined the interpretations of John Milton’s sublimity (of words) in the eighteenth-century discourse, but here and now I focus on the physical and sexual aspects of the sublime. See Antal, “Transgressing the Boundaries of Reason.”

tiful. Its premise is that of “an uncompromising empiricist– that is, sensualist,”¹⁶ where the perception of the grandeur of the sublime (the great) provides not only an intellectual challenge to the mind, but also physical pain to the body. In the philosophical framework of *Philosophical Enquiry* (and in his choice of title), Burke draws heavily on Locke’s observation, namely that there are “simple ideas which convey themselves into the mind, by all the ways of sensation and reflection, (*viz. pleasure or delight, and its opposite, pain or uneasiness*).”¹⁷ Locke regards the elements of our thinking – the objects of our perception and the operations of our mind – as ideas, the source of which is experience.¹⁸ Burke’s treatise has many references to Locke, for example in “Introduction” he writes about imagination that it is “incapable of producing anything absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses.”¹⁹ But for Burke, imagination – in addition to “mediat[ing] between and join[ing] the inner self with the external world”²⁰ – opens the way to new and different interpretations of experience. A similar approach is taken in the discussion of taste and gustation (tasting): individual taste is based on normative foundations, as the palatable pleasures of the taste is “the same in all, high and low, learned and unlearned,” but later the individuals collect their own store of experience and their own sensibility would explain differences in taste, while the development of *critical taste* is (still) based on knowledge (*PE*, 68 and 70–72). Burke, with encyclopedic precision (and with little success), attempts to list our passions and their modes of action. He admits that he is on shaky ground since there is no established critical discourse to present the problems of taste he raises, and he can only hope that “even his errors [may be] subservients to the cause of truth” (*PE*, 100).²¹

Burke, following Locke, takes the simple ideas of pleasure and pain as a common starting point, and defines the former as the effect of the beautiful and the latter as the

16) Gasché, “...And the Beautiful?,” 24.

17) Locke, *Human Understanding*, 129. Italics in the original.

18) *Ibid.*, 109–10.

19) Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 68. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *PE*.

20) Engell, *Creative Imagination*, 71.

21) He provides several valuable insights, for example, his discussion of empathy and imitation is fascinating, while in his discussion of love he states that, beyond sexual attraction and the pleasure of procreation, “the *beauty of the sex*” is the trigger. See *PE*, 89. Italics in the original.

effect of the sublime. In the simplified two-sided system, beauty and the sublime are evoked by various sensations, objects, living beings, and bodies, which due to the two modes of action, evoke either pleasure or pain. In fact, Burke's two-parted scheme of sensory and bodily responses to external stimuli displays a five-part system; he speaks of (positive) pleasure vs. (positive) pain, in-between indifference, the removal of pain gives relief – relative or negative pleasure (i.e., *delight*), and the diminution of pleasure induces grief labelled as relative or negative pain (*PE*, 80–85). In the detailed presentation of the two primary ideas, examples are provided partly by natural phenomena and living bodies, and partly by works of art and literature. Burke also joins the contemporary debate on the hierarchy of various artworks, emphasizing the influence of painting, sculpture is barely mentioned, while the art of words is considered the most outstanding. The sublimity of the imagination is praised in poetry, in agreement with the admirers of Longinus and with Addison's initiated cult of Milton.

The beautiful evokes a pleasant feeling of pleasure, while the sublime has a more powerful, painful effect:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*, that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (*PE*, 86)

The famous definition, in addition to anticipating the rise of Gothic literature (and the novel of terror), stresses that the reception of the sublime is the acting out of the passion of the mind. Although Burke even refers to death, the “king of terrors,” as the source of the sublime, it is important to keep “a certain distance” from the experience: only from a safe distance – or from the Kantian shelter – is danger a delight.²² In his *Enquiry*, in Part II, he looks at the sources of the astonishment of the sublime: from the physical and poetic obscurity, through questions of divine and worldly power, to the grandeur of architecture, while also touching on the pain caused by the infinite,

22) Ibid. Compare Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 91: “But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime.”

by repetition and intense colors, strong sounds and tastes; and also on the horror of deprivation (emptiness, darkness, loneliness, silence). Here, the individual appears only as a suffering subject, paralyzed by the magnitude of the outside force, and “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it” (*PE*, 101). We do not read about statues, but in the experience of the sublime we all become for a brief moment startled, frozen figures of astonishment.

We find gendered observations on the human body in the parts of the treatise discussing beauty. Burke starts from the sublime and posits beauty in relation to it, and then the final section is again about the sublime – for Winckelmann, the movement of thought is the opposite: the German aesthete starts from beauty and returns to it with a slight detour. For Burke, beauty, as opposed to the horror and pain of the sublime, is lovable; he says, “by beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (*PE*, 128). Here Burke opens a parenthesis to separate the desire (or lust) that arises at the sight of a woman’s body from the feeling of love that fills the mind at the sight of a beautiful woman since less beautiful women are also desired by heterosexual men. He discusses that proportion clearly does not produce beauty in vegetables, animals, or humans: a body with correct proportions is not necessarily beautiful (*PE*, 133).²³ The ideas of fitness and utility cannot be a cause of beauty, because then “men would be much more lovely than women; and strength and agility would be considered as the only beauties” (*PE*, 141). On the contrary, far from being perfect, women (generally) are beautiful because they are naturally more sensitive, blush modestly, lisp, and totter; sometimes they feign weakness and even sickness: “beauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty,” says Burke (*PE*, 144). Then, it is not surprising that the virtues to be loved are the beautiful feminine, “softer virtues” of “easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality”; while “fortitude, justice, wisdom” are the venerable – sublime, (i.e., great) – masculine virtues (*PE*, 145).²⁴

Beyond the masculine versus feminine connotations, Burke also writes about the relaxing and pleasurable effects of beauty, as opposed to the bodily painful,

23) For instance, “the neck, say they, in beautiful bodies should measure with the calf of the leg; it should likewise be twice the circumference of the wrist.” *Ibid.*

24) Later, he speaks of “domestic virtues” in the context of pity (*PE*, 185).

eyebrow-frowning, teeth-grinding, and muscle-twitching effects of the sublime. In a plastic and erotic description, beauty – sweetness, softness and smoothness – is enjoyed as a decadent pleasure, in which “the head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides” (PE, 177). In contrast, the perception of the sublime provokes a shudder, calls for action and requires concentration. Obscure, dark-colored or even vast objects stress the eyes, strong smells strain the nose, while rough surfaces are unpleasant to the hand and loud noises are painful to the ear. Whereas, beautiful objects are graceful, delicate and soft; they are small, smooth on the surface, and pleasantly bright and clear in color, while the English “diminishing *-ling*” enhances the charming beauty of the language (cf. *darling*) (PE, 147).²⁵

Burke elevates the opposition on a pedestal and exalts it: “The sublime ... always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter [beauty] on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us” (PE, 147). Quoting the famous passage that sums up the great *versus* the beautiful traits:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to [be] solid, and even massive. (PE, 157)

Following the line of thought further – instead of the angularity of the (sublime) zigzag – I will draw the S-curve of feminine beauty, which the painter William Hogarth also considered the ideal line of the beautiful female body (PE, 149). Burke’s description is

25) In Ancient Greek, *-ion* is the diminutive suffix of kindness and affection, writes Burke. Interestingly, the diminutive *-ling* is also used to denote even pejorative (feminine) weakness in such words as princeling, weakling, underling (also hireling and foundling).

more sensuous, and this passage is the pulsating epicenter of the treatise, or even the opening (sublime) vortex with a threat of its engulfment:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. (PE, 149)²⁶

Burke here objectifies the beauty of the female body, making it timeless – or even momentary – beauty a *statuesque standard*. More precisely, he magnifies the detail of the decapitated female body; we are reading about the beauty of a *torso*. Ian Balfour draws attention to the poetic of the detail, as Burke oscillates between the beautiful and the sublime: as a male interpreter, he becomes absorbed in the detail of female beauty, and then masters the spectacle in his own sublime rhetoric.²⁷ In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, the sculptures appear in one specific place: in the question of grace, where Burke evokes the indefinable “*je ne sais quoi*” in his search for the beauty of the marble sculptures, highlighting their posture. Referring to general opinion and taste, he writes that the beauty of sculptures – be it *Venus de Medicis* or *Antinous Belvedere* – that are considered “to be graceful in an high degree ... will be obvious to any observer” (PE, 153).

III

In Winckelmann’s works, the beauty of the undulating body parts is also presented – in the praise of the muscularity of *Torso Belvedere*, also referred to as *Torso of Hercules* (see photos 1 and 2):

26) How ironic that the image of the woman’s undulating bosom is introduced by the beauty of a dove’s swelling craw.

27) Balfour, “Torso,” 331.

The artist may admire in the outlines of this body the perpetual flowing of one form into another, and the undulating lines which rise and fall like waves, and become swallowed up in one another. He will find that no copyist can be sure of correctness, since the undulating movement which he thinks he is following turns imperceptibly away, and leads both the hand and eye astray by taking another direction.²⁸

The obscure waves of the muscles might be seen as an example of the Burkean sublime, but it describes not the raging sea; it is the flow of beauty dreamed in stone. There is very little else to see or admire on the truncated statue, for the figure of the hero sits just “abused and mutilated to the utmost, and without head, arms, or legs” (WA, 136). Winckelmann completes the fragmentary sculpture with episodes from the life of the Greek mythical hero, imagining those strong shoulders holding the sky, or the magnificent bulging chest thrusting against the monsters. The stump of his thighs is complemented by the fantasy of the series of adventures on which Hercules was carried by his nimble legs, while his strong hips show the solidity of his character. The beholder describes the sight as “a sublime beauty (*die hohen Schönheiten*),” and speaks of the sculpture’s back as an edifice in religious awe: “When I looked at this body from behind, I was as raptured as one who, having admired the magnificent portico of a church, is led up to the heights, where the vault, which he has not been able to look over, holds him in renewed astonishment.”²⁹ The hero’s head is missing, but the fragment is imbued with his spirit – “in the stillness of the body, the great soul of the man is revealed.”³⁰ In his conclusion on *Torso*, Winckelmann maniacally laments over the fragmentary quality of this “excellent and noble form (*vorzügliche und edle Form*),” this work of art; and in his amorous fervor, he evokes Psyche’s longing for Cupid.³¹

28) Winckelmann, *Writings on Art*, 137. Hereafter abbreviated as WA using in-text parenthetical citations. Similarly to Burke and Hogarth, Winckelmann sees the ever-changing, gently undulating line as the “elliptical (*elliptisch*)” line of beauty. See Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften*, 152: “Die Linie, die das Schöne beschreibet, ist elliptisch.”

29) Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften*, 171. Translation is mine.

30) *Ibid.*, 172.

31) *Ibid.*, 173. The Psyche-Cupid allusion is apt since in the mythical story, the (female) soul could only

Torso of Hercules becomes the culmination of Winckelmann's aesthetics of taste: the imagined essence of beauty (beautiful in its details), has turned out to be the embodiment of the ideal itself – poetically and almost philosophically. In his interpretation of the ideal, by using a by-pass road, he moves towards the Kantian and Hegelian aesthetics, while his art history is dominated by sensual descriptions of Greek sculptures. The recipient cannot and does not want to keep distance from the work being analyzed; the thought processes that are disparate in theoretical writings are blurred and the qualities that are separated are commingled. Winckelmann tries to place his appreciation of Greek sculpture in a historical framework: he speaks of a rise, looking backwards from the Greek ideal, that is from the time of its blooming, and declines to follow the peak. The date of the creation of each work in no way fits with the epochalization built around the ideal, while the age of Greek freedom is posited as a golden age in (t)his utopia. Winckelmann, the art historian of these back-and-forth, “what-could-have-been” speculations, was also liberated by the classical revelation (nakedness and coming out), of the Greeks in his own work. In his provoking monograph, Alex Potts sees in the author's sense of history and in his position on the question of historicity “a current of skepticism and ironic self-awareness” of the Enlightenment, and thus explains the incoherence of the author's writings with “the tension between ahistorical and historicizing” shifts in his tone.³² Potts also happily quotes the conclusion of the *magnum opus*, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, where having experienced the passing of the golden age of art, Winckelmann laments over his departing beloved, who never returns.³³

In his art history, going backwards and forwards, Winckelmann speaks of four stylistic periods: the initial “archaic” style in the presentation of ancient coins, the classical “high” and “the beautiful,” and finally the late Hellenistic “imitative” style.³⁴

experience (her) love in darkness, and when she wanted to know what love meant, she lost him, and only in death could she regain happiness.

32) Potts, *Flesh*, 22–23.

33) *Ibid.*, 48–49; and Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst*, 413–14. Similarly, see above the conclusion on *Torso Belvedere*.

34) Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst*, 213–43; the chapter titled *Von dem Wachstume und dem Falle der griechischen Kunst, in welcher vier Zeiten und vier Stile können gesetzt werden*. The sculptures of Pheidias, Polykleitos, Skopas, Alkamenes, and Myron are “sublime,” while those of Praxiteles, Lysippus, and Apelles

In the ideal period of Greek art, he writes of “the high” (*hoher Stil*) and “the beautiful style” (*eciper Stil*), where the high, or the great – the sublime – is not in opposition to the beautiful, but rather an *ad extremum* version of it, “the most beautiful imaginable, the ideal of the ideal.”³⁵ Thus, the high/sublime and the beautiful can be found in a single sculpture, as we read in the presentation of the analyzed male figures. Elsewhere, he tries to distinguish between the two styles, and some statues differ in terms of grace (*Grazie*): the sublime has an ethereal, invisible grace (see *Niobe*), while the beautiful is sensual (see *Laocoon*). To the quasi-opposites, Alex Potts adds that the sublime is loftily heroic and masculine, while the beautiful is pleasurable and erotically hedonistic.³⁶ Peter Brandes argues that the differentiation of the sublime and the beautiful are rather a figure of speech, a rhetorical trope, and that Winckelmann’s art history is an allegorized history of ideas; quoting Winckelmann: “since art ... could not continue to go forward [advance], it had to go backward [decline].”³⁷ The ideal provides the climax and the absolute middle – or more precisely, the classical *mesotes*, the mediating *Mitte*, lying in the middle between the two peaks of the sublime and the beautiful. The intermediate, central, and mediating role of the beautiful in (art) philosophy will be the theme about which Kant, Schiller, and Hegel would really have a lot to say.³⁸

In his *Critique of Judgement*, the Kantian ideal of beauty is an object of disinterested pleasure, without concept or purpose – and without sex. Although Kant in his pre-critical (and also Burkean) *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* speaks of feminine beauty and masculine sublimity, the differentiation disap-

are “beautiful.”

35) Balfour, “Torso,” 333.

36) Compare Potts, *Flesh*, 7–8.

37) Quoted in Brandes, “Beauty as the Middle,” 151–52. See Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst*, 231: “Es mußte also die Kunst, [in welcher, wie in allen Wirkungen der Natur, kein fester Punkt zu denken ist], da sie nicht weiter hinausging, zurückgehen.”

38) See for instance Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 38: “Thereby the sensuous aspect of a work of art, in comparison with the immediate existence of things in nature, is elevated to a pure appearance, and the work of art stands *in the middle* between immediate sensuousness and ideal thought.” Compare in German: “Deshalb ist das Sinnliche im Kunstwerk im Vergleich mit dem unmittelbaren Dasein der Naturdinge zum bloßen *Schein* erhoben, und das Kunstwerk steht in der *Mitte* zwischen der unmittelbaren Sinnlichkeit und dem ideellen Gedanken.” (Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, 60). Italics in the original.

pears in his systematic philosophy of art. In the middle of the *Critique of Judgement*, there is the section titled “Analytic of the Sublime” that describes the dynamic sublimity of nature and its effect on the mind – still with a Burkean twang. In Kant’s concept of the sublime, the imagination of the observer is strained, then his mind (reason) overcomes, and the act, like in a dramatic play, cathartically ends with the realization of human greatness (morality).³⁹ Winckelmann and Burke do not discuss the moral call of the sublime though both attribute great power to it; Winckelmann also attributes power to the beautiful, and he believes that the beautiful operates by sensory impulses, while the sublime by intellectual impressions. For Kant, the question of free – unfixed – beauty appears only to be thematized in the judgement of taste and then to be strictly enclosed in the notion of the ideal. In the seventeenth paragraph of *Critique of Judgement*, “On the Ideal of Beauty,” Kant, as a transcendental idealist, convinces us “by the cognitive power of subjective universality” how “*the aesthetic normal idea (die ästhetische Normalidee)*” of the beautiful men (*der schöne Mann*) – his archetype – is formed in the mind.⁴⁰ With a Platonic wink, he concludes that “only this [man], among all objects in the world, admits, therefore, of an ideal of *beauty*, just as humanity in his person, as intelligence, alone admits of the ideal of *perfection*.”⁴¹ As examples, he refers to two classical Greek sculptures, Polyclethus’ *Doryphorus/Spear-Bearer* (male) and Myron’s *Cow* (female) though we cannot be happy about this rather strange juxtaposition of gender inequality. Kant may have been influenced by Winckelmann (and Burke on the sublime), while for the normative taste of the time, his assumptions and obviously his own critical system provide the framework of his art philosophy. The general human is in harmony with the ideal of the beautiful man, and in this we need see neither repression nor homoeroticism. Kant does not analyze beautiful works of art; at the sublime, we find natural and architectural allusions, and in his “architectonic vision,” the mind sees the *fragmen-*

39) See the long concluding remark at the end of “Analytic of the Sublime,” where the final definition is given as “the *sublime* is what pleases immediately through its resistance to the interest of the senses,” that is, “it is an object (of nature) the *representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas*.” Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 97–98. Italics in the original.

40) Ibid., 62–66. Italics in the original. In German: Kant, *Kritik der Ästhetischen Urteilskraft*, 58–59. See also Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 38.

41) Ibid., 64. Italics in the original.

tary detail of the “infinite” ocean and the sublime mountain range framed in human (ap)perception as a stone building.⁴² Here there is no room for either subjective taste or Winckelmannian liberation.

IV

For Winckelmann, in the history of the development of Greek marble sculptures, *Torso Belvedere* is the ideal of “the beautiful man,” the apotheosis of mature masculinity – however ironic this may sound due to the fragmentary quality of the work. In his description of *Torso*, he greatly relies on his impressions, imagination, and (quick) judgement to provide an alternative history of classical art. His other ideals are statues of young men: the figure of *Apollo Belvedere* proclaims “an eternal spring,” while the figure of *Antinous Belvedere* is labelled as “an image of the grace of sweet youth” in Greek antiquity with “the beauty of the flower of life, stamped with pleasing innocence and soft attractions” (WA, 139 and 142). In these sculptures (see photos 3 and 4), Winckelmann presents the general features of the classical style: the beautiful nature, the drapery emphasizing “the noble contour” and the nakedness – “the great and manly contour” and “the sublimity of thoughts” give the artworks their ideal beauty (WA, 62 and 68). In the aesthetic descriptions of the Greek marble statues, the strong contours are of particular importance: the muscles of the body are firm, there is not a single fold of skin, not a single excess of swelling. In the body cult of the ancient world, the Greek youths’ bodies were toned and the sculptor, when depicting the gods, imitated natural beauty, putting it on a pedestal. “Sensual beauty furnished the [artist] with all that nature could give; ideal beauty with the awful and sublime; from that he took the Human, from this the Divine,” says Winckelmann (WA, 66). Similarly, in the ideal face, the features are smooth, the lips may be slightly parted, but there are no dimples; in the contours of the profile, “the brow and nose of gods and goddesses [give] almost a straight line” (WA, 65). The sculptures of the male figures are “graceful” in the sense of *Grazie*

42) de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, 126–27. About the human limitation of the natural sublime in Kant see also Richir, “L’expérience du sublime.”

because “whatever reasonably pleases in things and actions is gracious”⁴³ – it is a Winckelmannian (quasi-Kantian) version of the Burkean beauty. To counterbalance the hardness of stone, the figures are airy and light, and their nakedness is sometimes accentuated only by a thin garment.

The posture of the Greek sculptures, the *contrapposto*, also expresses their main characteristic – that is, “noble simplicity and sedate grandeur (*eine edle Einfalt und eine stille Grösse*)” (WA, 72–73).⁴⁴ Emotions may be somewhat pervasive and visible, but the soul is silent, the spirit reigns supreme. All this is done naked, indeed; the bodies of the male figures are barely covered, or rather revealed, by the light drapery. In admiring the ethereal beauty of *Apollo Belvedere*, the eye glides over the marble surface, “neither blood-vessels nor sinews heat and stir this body, but a heavenly essence, diffusing itself like a gentle stream, seems to fill the whole contour of the figure” (WA, 139). The god’s gaze is somber and majestic, but in his pride, he restrains his emotions; he has just defeated the mythical monster Python. The observer himself “take[s] a lofty position,” as if he were walking through a Greek shrine dedicated to Apollo, placing his rapt essay as a wreath at the feet of the statue (WA, 140). This is one of Winckelmann’s brilliant Pygmalionesque moments, *Apollo* is his Galatea, and his loving words bring the marble statue to life. His other beloved sculpture, *Antinous Belvedere* (also known as *Hermes*), rivals the Venus statues in beauty: Antinous’ masculine charm evokes an erotic response from the viewer, and Winckelmann’s impressions are akin to observations of a woman in love. In the spirit of “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” the young beauty’s face is emotionless, confident, calm, and undisturbed; and the statue is a figure of introspective narcissism. Together, the admired sublime female figures and the beloved magnificent male figures show the author’s homoerotic normativity: the oppositions of the beautiful

43) Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Greeks*, 273. The first English translator of Winckelmann’s writings, the painter Henry Fusseli published a selection of the German author’s works in 1764. See also in Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften*, 157: “Die Grazie ist das vernünftig gefällige.”

44) See in German, *Kleine Schriften*, 43. The famous German formula can be translated as “noble simplicity and calm/quiet grandeur,” but Fusseli introduced the adjective “sedate.” In his word choice, he moved away from the still/silent meaning and referred to the paralyzing, Burkean effect of the great (sublime). Moreover, Fusseli’s bisexuality was an open secret, so it is a particularly interesting addendum that he took it upon himself to promote the German aesthete in English – bringing his thought somewhat closer to the English discourse. Compare Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Greeks*, 34.

and the sublime, and the masculine and the feminine, are not simply reversed in a mirror-like, chiasmic equilibrium.

The examples of the classical “high” and “beautiful” styles are the tragic narratives presented in the sculptures of *Niobe* and *Laocoon* (photos 5 and 6), where we see the sublime torture of two characters who have been subjected to unprecedented punishment. Niobe brags about her children, who are slaughtered by the gods while Laocoon, the priest of Troy, insults Poseidon who sends sea serpents to destroy the priest and his sons. Laocoon is silently waging his death throes, his muscles struggling to save his children, but only in the wrinkles of his nose and in his veiled gaze, does the observer see his suffering. We see the moment when, with a sigh, he acknowledges that the venom of the snake biting into his thigh is beginning to paralyze his lower body. *Laocoon* is a representation of the great soul, whose emotions may be as turbulent as the waves of the sea, but the deep is still and silent:

As the bottom of the sea lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface, a great soul lies sedate beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures. It is in the face of Laocoon [that] this soul shines with full lustre, not confined however to the face, amidst the most violent sufferings. Pangs piercing every muscle, every labouring nerve; pangs which we almost feel ourselves ... these however, I say, exert not themselves with violence, either in the face or gesture. (WA, 72)

Peter Brandes in his excellent article on *Laocoon* elaborates on the balancing sense of “noble simplicity, [and] quiet grandeur”; he claims that the formula allegorizes the perfection of Greek sculpture not only as an aestheticization of the soul but also – following Potts – as a rhetorical trope.⁴⁵ The narrative of *Laocoon*, framed and convulsed by the contour of the serpent, presents a suspended moment of oscillation between movement and stillness, between howling and silence, between agonizing pain and ataraxia: the sculpture presents the formula, that is the Greek soul, in all its greatness that even touches the soul of the observer.

45) See Brandes, “Beauty as the Middle”; and Potts, *Flesh*, 108.

The sublime Niobe is about to turn to stone while she is protecting her youngest child; both are petrified as the statue of ideal beauty. They are in a “state of indescribable anguish, their senses horror-struck and benumbed, in which all the mental powers are completely overwhelmed and paralyzed by the near approach of inevitable death” (WA, 125). Winckelmann considers *Laocoon* to be beautiful, a masterpiece of the “beautiful” style, while the statue of *Niobe*, the mythical heroine with an emotionless face, is an example of a pure and austere “high” style. Potts sees in the statue of *Laocoon* the beauty of the “sensuously embodied drama,” while *Niobe* reveals the sublimity of “an abstract disembodied drama.”⁴⁶ The sublime beauty and ethereal grace of *Niobe* rather stimulate the mind of the beholder. As Winckelmann states:

This beauty is like an idea conceived without the aid of the senses, which might be generated in a lofty understanding and in a happy imagination, if it could rise in contemplation near to divine beauty; so great is the unity of form and outline, that it appears to have been produced not with labour, but awakened like a thought, and blown out with a breath. (WA, 132)⁴⁷

The rhetoric of the passage also exhibits the traits of a sublime style, directing the attention of the recipient to the creation of the work. *Niobe* is “beautiful according to the highest conceptions of beauty” (WA, 125), while the female form is not really graceful. Her richly pleated dress wrinkles in the folds, and the billowing garment conceals a mature woman’s body. We can see the naked back of the fleeing girl who hides in her mother’s lap and the swelling bosom of Niobe; the sculpture embodies the idea of motherhood. Winckelmann considers *Niobe* to be ethereal, even though there are forces at work that are pulling the figure down. The mother seems to be dragging

46) Potts, *Flesh*, 83–84. The difference between the two styles can also be seen in the curve of the brows on the two faces: the archaizing “high” (great) Niobe’s brows are strongly linear, while Laocoon’s are already softly rounded “beautiful” brows.

47) See Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst*, 225: “Diese Schönheit ist wie eine nicht durch Hilfe der Sinne empfangene Idee, welche in einem hohen Verstande und in einer glücklichen Einbildung, wenn sie sich anschauend nahe bis zur göttlichen Schönheit erheben könnte, erzeugt würde; in einer so großen Einheit der Form und des Umrisses, daß sie nicht mit Mühe gebildet, sondern wie ein Gedanke erweckt und mit einem Hauche geblasen zu sein scheint.”

her youngest daughter to herself, covering her with her own body and the fabric of her dress in her last movement to save the girl (see photos 7 and 8). In one version of the mythical narrative, only the youngest girl out of the fourteen children survives the massacre, while Niobe having witnessed the death of her children, is turned to stone. In the sculpture, the woman's face is almost petrified, and the artwork presents the pathos of motherhood – of *maternity* and *materiality*.⁴⁸

The Winckelmannian contrast between the “high” and the “beautiful” styles is even stronger if we juxtapose the sculptures of *Antinous Belvedere* and *Athena Farnese* (see photos 9 and 10). At a glance, the two faces are very similar: the noble contours of the classical Greek face are visible in both sculptures. But the female figure, as in the case of *Niobe*, is richly draped, even overdressed, and equipped with the attributes of the goddess: her helmet, the monster garland, and the spear. The goddess's posture is rigid, her face stern and austere, with a strong brow line, and a determined frown. In contrast, the naked beauty of *Antinous* reveals the smoothness of the man's body in his light and relaxed posture; his gaze is serene, his brow is softer. The asexual female figure represents the sublime, the “high” idea of beauty, while the male nude represents the erotic, sensual style. The male body is the ideal subject of Greek art and the object of desire with which the male (or the female) viewer can identify. In ancient Greece, the bodies of young men were admired by the older, and we see the taste of the age in sculptures: the cult of the beautiful male body. Whitney Davis says that the androgynous *Antinous* sculpture, with its “ephebic grace,” is an apotheosis of homosexuality and “queer beauty.”⁴⁹ Winckelmann, on the other hand, represents Platonic homoeroticism in accordance with “the Greek spirit,” whereby through the sight, experience (and enjoyment) of beautiful bodies, one can arrive at the Idea of Beauty. In addition to the Platonic concept of beauty, as Whitney Davis points out, Epicurean and Lucretian doctrines also influenced the German aesthete; the natural Lucretian *clinamen* (inclination), the trope of random changes (and deviation) in development, can be traced in “the swerves” of Winckelmann's thinking, writing, and life episodes.⁵⁰

48) Incidentally, Winckelmann omits the motif of motherhood in his analysis of *Niobe*, and similarly does not thematize the role of Laocoon as a father.

49) Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 27.

50) *Ibid.*, 18–19 and 21. Davis also writes about the “catabolic” interconnection and disconnection of motifs, views, and ideas in Winckelmann's lifework.

To return to the eighteenth-century interpretation of the sexual-aesthetic quality of sculptures, *Athena* is (masculinely) great, *Antinous* is (femininely) beautiful – thus, Winckelmann’s observation of Greek sculptures seems to invert the Burkean dichotomy of the masculine sublime and feminine beauty. Winckelmann’s individual embellishment displaces the Burkean indoctrinated opposition: with Burke, the observer is caught up in the curve of the female neck, the Winckelmannian finds the undulating back of *Torso* or the hips of the male figures beautiful. While Winckelmann’s sublime figures are beautiful in their other(worldly) way, for Burke the experience of the sublime is superhuman, painful, and horrifying. The sublime Greek female figures are devoid of eroticism; Burke’s sublime experience can provide pleasure (cf. *delight*, negative pleasure), which is ultimately true for the recipients of beauty. In Burkean terms, Potts describes how the beholder is “being subjugated and taken over, of being possessed” by the spectacle.⁵¹ Winckelmann’s impulsive sculptural descriptions are narratives of desire, little Pygmalion episodes, or even erotic fantasies since for the Greek, after Plato, “eros is the ladder of the ideal.”⁵² At the same time, every detail of the stone sculptures is openly offered to the aesthetic fetishist who, beyond the absorption in beautiful bodies, contemplates the torments of the suffering figures with an almost sado-masochistic pleasure.

The *connoisseur* is staring at the works, at the cold sublimity of the marble and the perfect bodies – “Beauty is nothing other than the middle/means (*Mittel*) between two extremes,” claims Winckelmann.⁵³ The sculptures, placed in a niche or against a wall, are simple reliefs; instead, the figures must be given space so that the viewer should be able to walk around them. In this way, the work of art has become the focus of the viewer’s attention, then and there everything revolves around it – the sculptural figure and the recipient; just as in real life we desire to get to know the other from different angles. It is true that we rarely have the opportunity for such an open, unveiled, purely aesthetic gaze; it is the erotic gaze of the recipient with the power of the (fe)male gaze. Winckelmann the male lover looks at women (female

51) Potts, *Flesh*, 128.

52) Davis, *Queer Beauty*, 30.

53) Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften*, 148: “Die Schönheit ist nichts anders als das Mittel von zwei extremis.” Translation is mine.

figures), differently; he distances himself from them and his sculptural choices show this. He does not admire the beauty of *Venus*; he praises the hardness of *Niobe* and the coldness of *Athena*. The viewer can be influenced by the Winckelmannian feminine sublime, incorporating his aesthetic observations that do not count for much in the primary sensory experience. Then, going beyond *sensus communis* on taste, the individual *connoisseurs* are likely to react differently – or similarly – when standing in front of the sculptures. They can surely think of Burke’s terrifying sublime, which captures the power of the experience with the overpowering of the individual, but also be mindful of Winckelmann’s insight, namely that “Beauty is in the diversity of the simple.”⁵⁴ On the whole, he speaks of the ideal beholder, who is equally receptive to the multiple, majestic beauties of both sexes: who can appreciate the (masculine or even feminine) beauty of the male body and, in the sculpting of the female form, can grasp the (masculine or feminine) sublime of *free humanity*.

54) Ibid., 152. “Das Schöne besteht in der Mannigfaltigkeit im Einfachen.” Translation is mine.

Éva Antal, Agalmatophilic Pygmalions

Photo 1.
Torso Belvedere (front)



Photo 2.
Torso Belvedere (back)



Photo 3.
Apollo Belvedere (detail)

Photo 4.
Antinous Belvedere (detail)



Éva Antal, Agalmatophilic Pygmalions

Photo 5.
Niobe (copy, detail)

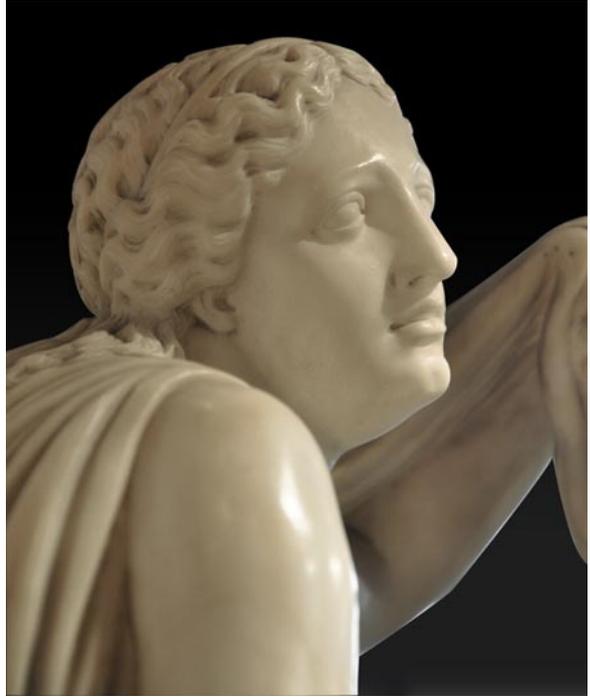


Photo 6.
Laocoon (detail)



Photo 7.
Niobe with her Daughter

Photo 8.
Niobe with her Daughter



Éva Antal, Agalmatophilic Pygmalions

Photo 9.
Athena Farnese



Photo 10.
Antinous Belvedere

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