HEAVING AND SWELLING:
AESTHETICS, THE BODY, AND EROTIC LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF
LESSING

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ABSTRACT

DERRICK RAY MILLER: Heaving and Swelling: Aesthetics, the Body, and Erotic Literature in the Age of Lessing
(Under the direction of Jonathan Hess)

In this dissertation, I explore how signs affect the body in German neoclassicism. This period constructs a particular body (the voluptuary’s body) that derives primarily sensual—as opposed to cognitive—pleasure from the signs of art. Erotic literature with its sensual appeal, then, becomes a special case of art, one that manifests this relationship between signs and the body the most clearly.

By focusing on erotic literature as a paradigmatic rather than a marginal case of literature, I am able to reconsider our current understanding of German neoclassicism. Erotic literature exceeds the aesthetic and semiotic principles that scholars have come to expect to circumscribe the literature of this period. Erotic literature moves beyond such categories as vividness, veracity, and verisimilitude to achieve an aesthetic pleasure of virtuality. Its arousing signs produce voluptuous sensations and transformations in the reader’s body in addition to transmitting knowledge and manipulating affect. And as they strike—or stroke—the body, these signs appear less transparent than sticky. They do not recede before the ideas they signify, as they should do. Rather, they stick around; they remain in the foreground of the reader’s consciousness, insistently calling attention to their own materiality rather than sublimating into spirit.
I track this motion through Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s critical texts *Rettungen des Horaz* and his *Laokoon* essay; Christoph Martin Wieland’s major fictional works from the mid-1760s, the *Comische Erzählungen*, *Don Sylvio*, and *Geschichte des Agathon*; and Gustav Schilling’s novel *Die Denkwürdigkeiten des Herrn von H*. And as I show, these texts attempt to harness—that is, both exploit and contain—this unruly relationship between literature and the body for political and pedagogical projects.
To my parents and sister
who have always been proud of me.

I have always been proud of you too.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction:
Venus in Verse

Bodies react to beautiful bodies. This principle grounds what I shall call a bodily aesthetics, an aesthetics which is erotic and which operated within discourses on art in German neoclassicism: The signs of art, whether the signs of painting or the signs of poetry, ultimately present beautiful bodies to the perceiver’s intuition, and the perceiver’s body registers their effect. The perceiver’s body heaves and swells when faced with these beautiful bodies, or—in the language of the texts that I shall examine—the perceiver’s body wallt. The perceiver experiences Wallungen: flushing, palpitations, gasping, erections, and the heaving and swelling of blood in the arteries and of air in the lungs. Wallungen not only mark the perception of beautiful bodies in art but also constitute—at least in part—the pleasure of such beauty. In the Age of Lessing, Wallungen were proper artistic effects. Connoisseurs expected them and artists sought to create them—they were looking to find Venus when they read verse.

Bodily Aesthetics and the Voluptuary’s Body

Expressed in the most general terms possible, I am investigating how signs impact the body in the Age of Lessing. But what language was available in this period that could express the interface of sign and body? In Lessing’s lifetime the aesthetics of German rationalism provided that language. As I argue in this section, German rationalism
constructed a specific type of body that was especially receptive to signs: the voluptuary’s body.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s productive years coincide with the period in which German rationalist aesthetics is an operative paradigm, and this period is appropriately called the Age of Lessing as Lessing’s essay *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766) is the central expression of this aesthetics. The years between Lessing’s coming to maturity in the mid-eighteenth century and his death in 1781 span the early history of the term “aesthetics” from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s coinage of the term in 1750 until Immanuel Kant’s rejection of this particular use of the term. For Terry Eagleton, “[a]esthetics is born as a discourse of the body,” and “comes at times to merge into the idea of bodily experience as such.”

Here, he is referring to the publication of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750), which gives aesthetics its name and inaugurates it as a science of the body insofar as it is a science of sensation and perception rather than logic and reason. Aesthetics, then, concerns itself not, as one might later expect, with the opposition art and nature, but rather with the oppositions material and immaterial, things and thoughts, sensations and ideas, creaturely life and the recesses of the mind. Aesthetics conceives of the body in analogous terms as the mind. The body produces its own sensate knowledge according to its own, though inferior, logic. Aesthetics is thus bodily in so far as it investigates how the body experiences the world it inhabits. Beauty is privileged in this system as a sort of objective bodily perfection as opposed to a rational perfection—an object can be

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2 Eagleton 13.
beautiful rather than true. Beauty is understood, so to speak, with the body (through the
objective senses of sight and hearing) rather than with the mind (through the
understanding).

However, in 1781 with Kant’s rejection of Baumgarten’s philosophical
investigation of the beautiful, aesthetics undergoes a profound restriction as a science of
bodily experience. In a footnote to the “transzendental Ästhetik” in the *Kritik der reinen
Vernunft*, Kant writes:

> Die Deutschen sind die einzige, welche sich jetzt des Worts Ästhetik
> bedienen, um dadurch das zu bezeichnen, was andre Kritik des
> Geschmacks heißen. Es liegt hier eine verfehlte Hoffnung zum Grunde,
> die der vortreffliche Analyst Baumgarten faßte, die kritische Beurtheilung
> des Schönen unter Vernunftprincipien zu bringen und die Regeln
derselben zur Wissenschaft zu erheben. Allein diese Bemühung ist
> vergeblich. Denn gedachte Regeln oder Kriterien sind ihren Quellen nach
> bloß empirisch und können also niemals zu Gesetzen a priori dienen,
> wonach sich unser Geschmacksurtheil richten müßte; vielmehr macht das
> letztere den eigentlichen Probirstein der Richtigkeit der ersteren aus. Um
deswollen ist es ratsam, diese Benennung wiederum eingehen zu lassen
> und sie derjenigen Lehre aufzubehalten, die wahre Wissenschaft ist,
wodurch man auch der Sprache und dem Sinne der Alten näher treten
> würde, bei denen die Eintheilung der Erkenntniß […] sehr berühmt war.³

Kant retains the term aesthetics to refer to perception, but perception only in so far as it is
divorced from its contingency on any individual body and any individual sensation.

Transcendental aesthetics investigates the pre-conditions necessary to any particular
sensation in any particular body. The analysis or “purification” of the aesthetic
forecloses the possibility of a bodily aesthetics that is erotic as it jettisons the beautiful
with the empirically contingent. Kant’s subsequent elaboration of transcendental
aesthetics and, then in 1790, his analysis of the beautiful in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in

³ KGS 4, 30.
which beauty is no longer the predicate of any object but is rather a subjective judgment that requires universal assent, have thus been traditionally understood as a turn away from the body.⁴

According to Kant’s footnote, while others practice a critique of taste, Germans practice aesthetics, their critique of taste gone awry. Aesthetics as a critique of taste is the hopeless German attempt to discern the rational principles governing beautiful bodies which Kant sees as its peculiar inheritance from Baumgarten. Although it might thus seem that Kant would have never allowed any sort of erotic investigation into bodily beauty, he participated in it with his earlier, popular Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (1764) which has been called a personals ad describing Kant’s ideal mate.⁵ In this text, as the title indicates through the word observation, Kant

⁴ Eagleson writes that “[t]he body cannot be figured or represented within the frame of Kantian aesthetics.” (21). The Kantian turn away from the body is, however, no simple removal of the body. As many scholars have shown, the body is not simply rendered irrelevant. For example, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the Kantian rejection of the body is much more an attempt to distance aesthetics and the taste of the philosopher from the vulgar bodily habits of laborers and peasants and the corrupt bodily habits of the aristocracy. The turn away from the body, which might appear to be an abstract philosophical move, is actually “a denied social relationship.” See Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste trans. Richard Nice. (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1984) 491. And Jonathan Hess argues that the turn away from the body occurs only to enable the articulation of new organic metaphor of the body politic in the place of a mechanical definition of the body politic. See Reconstituting the Body Politic: Enlightenment, Public Culture and the Invention of Aesthetic Autonomy (Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1999) 249ff.

understands the study as emphatically empirical with no claim to the *a priori* grounding of *Vernunftprincipien*. Kant’s taste for this or that sort of bodily beauty that falls beyond the *a priori* pre-conditions of experience. And by 1790 when Kant publishes *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and provides a transcendental grounding for a critique of taste, he shifts the site of the subject’s encounter with beauty away from both the object and away from the subject’s body to its very subjectivity or subjective state: “Alle Beziehung der Vorstellungen, selbst die der Empfindungen, aber kann objektiv sein […]; nur nicht die auf das Gefühl der Lust und Unlust, wodurch gar nichts im Objekte bezeichnet wird, sondern in der das Subjekt, wie es durch die Vorstellung affiziert wird, sich selbst fühlt.”

But lest this feeling of affect appear too physical, the subject may now *fühlt sich selbst*, but it certainly doesn’t touch itself. What were the *Wallungen* of beauty, the bodily source of beauty and its pleasurable bodily effect has been demoted to the merely agreeable: “Angenehm ist das, was den Sinnen in der Empfindung gefällt.”

Kant defines the erotic possibilities for the aesthетician out of aesthetics. Henceforth, it is the agreeable, not the beautiful, that registers pleasure visibly, distinctly and significantly on the body. Hence, German aesthetics after Kant is notoriously and emphatically

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6 KW 115.
7 KW 117.
8 KW 119.
unerotic—disinterest keeps the aesthetician’s body in check. Friedrich Nietzsche parodies the results when he surveys aesthetics as it had preceded him and quips: „Wenn freilich unsre Aesthetiker nicht müde werden, zu Gunsten Kant’s in die Wagschale zu werfen, dass man unter dem Zauber der Schönheit sogar gewandlose weibliche Statuen ‘ohne Interesse’ anschauen könne, so darf man wohl ein wenig auf ihre Unkosten lachen [...].“ But prior to Kant, aesthetics did not preclude eroticism, and the perceiver could be interested in beauty. The pleasure of beauty could be experienced erotically on the aesthetician’s body.

If, as Terry Eagleton has it, aesthetics from Baumgarten to Kant—or aesthetics in the Age of Lessing—can best be understood as a philosophical investigation of the body, then what sort of body does it discover? I argue that it discovers a body that inhabits the semantic space in which sensual takes on a double meaning and connotes both sensitive (as in “sensation” or “of the senses”) and voluptuous, the point at which sensuousness ambivalently connotes both perception and eroticism. To return again to the language of this period, the aesthetic body is the Wollüstling’s body when it perceives and appreciates beautiful bodies in art. The voluptuary’s body is the site where perception and pleasure converge on the body, the site where beauty becomes desirable or interesting. The Wollüstling’s body is the site of Wallungen.

In order to trace the outlines of this body, I turn to the definitions of Lust and Wollust in Johann Heinrich Zedler’s Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller

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9 NW 365.
Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* is the largest lexicon of the eighteenth century and follows in the German rationalist tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, the same tradition in which German neoclassicism follows. It was published in 68 volumes from 1732 to 1754, and the entries for *Lust* and *Wollust* were published in 1738 and 1748 respectively. Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon*, thus, describes the philosophical landscape in which aesthetics was born and it defines the concepts *Lust* and *Wollust* and, hence, the *Wollüstling*’s body as they were available to aesthetics in its naissance. It provides the context for all the works that I shall examine.

Perception takes on qualities other than cognitive on the *Wollüstling*’s body. Perception is felt there as insistent sensation. The entry for *Lust* opens with a tautology that suggests that sensation exists beyond cognition: “Die Lust gehöret unter diejenigen Dinge, die sich wohl deutlich empfinden, aber nicht verständig erklären lassen, eben deswegen, weil sie eine angenehme Empfindung ist.”

Sensation cannot be explained, because it is sensation—and a pleasurable sensation even less so. Understanding, concepts, language, and explanations (*verständig erklären*) stand in opposition to sensation and pleasure (*angenehme Empfindung*). The course of these definitions move perception via sensation and pleasure away from the understanding and to the “Kützelung

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10 Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* can be most easily accessed at this website which is sponsored by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: [http://www.zedler-lexikon.de](http://www.zedler-lexikon.de). However, I will include standard bibliographic citations for all future references to this work.

der äusserlichen Sinnen” or simply the “Kützelung der Sinnen.” Wallungen take the form of this tickle.

Although the definition of Lust moves perception away from cognition and transfers it to the senses—or very roughly from the mind to the body—it does not deliver perception to a mindless body. The Wollüstück’s body is not just any body. The sensations of the Wollüstück’s body are not the sensations of the Leib, nor are they physicalisch or animalisch. (See Figures 1 and 2 on page 11.) Just as Lust is divided into Leibeslust and Seelenlust, so is Wollust divided into physicalische Wollust and moralische Wollust. Leibeslust and physicalische Wollust contain the pleasurable sensations that humans can experience in so far as they are animals. Eating, drinking, and exercise appear in these categories. But these same activities appear again in the latter categories; however, there they are inflected by reason. The Wollüstück’s body is not the Leib or the animal’s body even in its most insistently creaturely moments such as eating, drinking, and sleeping. Even in these moments they are then submitted to the criteria true or false and reasonable or unreasonable. When a Wollüstück pets a cat, he and the cat enjoy the act of petting differently. They both enjoy the resulting tickle of the senses, but only the Wollüstück can ask whether this pleasure is reasonable. This

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12 Zedler 18:1245 and 58 (1748):1423.

13 Zedler 18:1245 and 58:1422.

14 Neither these figures nor my discussion of them map every relationship between the various aspects of Lust and Wollust that Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon presents. They map only the relationship of those aspects that are relevant to bodily aesthetics. The anatomies of Lust and Wollust mirror one another, because Wollust is presented in a general as well as a strict sense. (Wollust in general is only Lust. What was Wollust in relation to Lust becomes Wollust in a strict sense in relation to Wollust in general. Henceforth I will refer to Wollust in a strict sense simply as Wollust.)
question distinguishes Leibeslust from Seelenlust and physicalische Wollust from moralische Wollust. The Wollüstling must ask whether a particular pleasure is a means towards nature’s ends or whether it has become a diversion and an end in its own right. The Wollüstling enjoys eating not because it sustains his body but for its own sake, and so he becomes a glutton. The Wollüstling runs the danger of becoming a Weichling if he enjoys petting the cat too much. All of the Wollüstling’s sensations are submitted to this criterion, or they at least entail the possibility of being submitted to this criterion; they are simultaneously bodily and moral.

FIGURE 1:

The Anatomy of Lust

Lust

Seelenlust  Leibeslust

wahre Seelenlust  falsche Seelenlust

Geldgeiz  Ehrgeiz  Wollust
Lust and Wollust are felt on the Wollüstling’s body and they transform his character: they result in—amongst many other things—gullibility, frivolousness, timidity, wastefulness, idleness, and indecisiveness. Wollust transforms society as well. When it is allowed to take root, it leaves its traces on ruler and ruled alike. It spoils spouses for one another and parents for their children. Wollust seduces them all and leads them to its excesses.\textsuperscript{\small15} As Lust and Wollust relate perception, sensation, and pleasure on the Wollüstling’s body, they locate that body in the natural, social, and moral order. They also position the Wollüstling’s body in relation to the signs of art.

\textsuperscript{\small15} Zedler 58:1427-1435.
Art first enters the discussion of Lust by way of examples. As Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon defines Lust as the result of the satisfaction of a desire, it argues against Wolff who conceives of Lust as the result of the apprehension of perfection. In order to prove its point, Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon cites two examples of art from Wolff:

Er will dieses [daß demnach die Lust nichts anders ist, als ein Anschauen der Vollkommenheit] mit verschiedenen Exempeln erläutern, z.E. wenn ich ein Gemäldes sehe, das der Sache, die es vorstellen soll, ähnlich sey, und betrachte seine Aehnlichkeit, so hätte ich Lust daran. Gleicher Gestalt wenn ein Baumeister ein Gebäude betrachtet, das nach den Regeln der Baukunst aufgeführt sey, so erkenne er daraus seine Vollkommenheit [...].

Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon counters by remarking that, no, the architect is pleased when he sees a well-executed building not because the perfection of the building pleases him but rather because his desire that the building would come out well is satisfied. The example of the painting is not addressed. Presumably, the artist would feel pleasure for the same reason as the architect. This argument might explain the architect’s and the artist’s pleasure, but it does not explain the pleasure that any other perceiver might have. Only further into the lexicon does art play a more crucial role and affect the perceiver’s body (artist and non-artist alike). Art appears again immediately after the entries for wollüstige Küsse and wollüstige Tänze under the entry for Wollust.

Wollust is much more interesting than Lust—or at least Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon devotes eight times as many columns to it than it does to Lust. Wollust, like Lust, is isolated in an improper form according to its distracting, misdirected structure:

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16 Zedler 18:1245.

17 Zedler 18:1244.
Wollust’s equivalent to the falsche Seelenlust is the pursuit of Scheingüter. This new nomenclature opens up the space for art. The Schein of Scheingüter connotes the falsehood of those goods, their appearing or seeming good rather than being good, but it also evokes aesthetic illusion. Indeed, art (here as music) is named explicitly in this concept:

Dieser Concept, den wir hier angeführt, und darinnen das eigentliche Wesen der Wollust gesetzt, ist auch dem Gebrauche dieses Worts ganz gemäß. Denn wenn wir sehen, daß ein Mensch gerne was gutes ist, und trinckt, und also eine angenehme Empfindung des Geschmacks haben will; er hört gerne eine schöne Music, und will dadurch seine Ohren kützeln: er sieht nach veränderlichen und schönen Sachen; kan nicht wohl grosse Kälte oder Hitze leiden u.s.w. so nennt man ihn einen wollüstigen Menschen.  

The Wollüstling is drawn to art just as he is drawn to good wine and warm beds, but art plays an even more explicit and an even more integral role in Wollust. The connoisseur, as it will turn out, is a voluptuary.

The additional space that Zedler’s Universal-Lexicon devotes to Wollust allows space for its dissection into six specific kinds of Wollust. Amongst these specific kinds of Wollust art is constitutive of one sort, the curious sort:

[…] die curiöse Wollust, welche darinnen bestehet, daß man nach solchen Dingen eine Begierde hat, welche in Ansehung des Verstandes das Gemüth belustigen, aber zur Untersuchung der Wahrheit nicht beytragen. Ein solcher Wollüstiger hat z.E. sein einziges Vergnügen an Romanen, Comödien, Opern und andern ingeniøsen Schriften, und ist ihm sehr verdrüßlich, wenn er was ernsthafftes und tiefsinniges lesen, oder über eine Sache meditiren soll. Da sagt man: es ist ein sehr curieuser Mann, er leset alle Zeitungen, bekümmert sich um die Neuigkeiten, und wenn etwas von curiøsen Sachen gedruckt wird, darinnen sonderlich eine angenehme lustige Schreibart ist, das muß er haben. Man bleibt nicht allein bey den Schriften; sondern fällt auch auf andere curiøse Sachen mit seiner Wollust, als auf Naturalien-Kammern, Münz-Cabineten, Schildereyen,

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18 Zedler 58:1424-1425.
The *curiöse Wollust* might seem to be un-bodily or as a return to the mind, as it might seem more cerebral or more closely aligned with the understanding. But it is still bodily in so far as it satisfies the senses (primarily but not only the “inner sense”) and is grouped with the more obviously bodily Wollüste like the *delicate Wollust* and the *baccische Wollust*. The *curiöse Wollust* is still a tickle of the senses. In fact, its thwarting of the properly cognitive is what defines this *Wollust* as it directs reading back to *sinnliche Vergnügung*, the *äusserlich* and beauty. The *curiöse Wollust* specifically positions the perceiver’s body in relation to the signs of art and beauty. Novels, comedies, operas, and ingenious works tickle the senses. They cause pleasurable sensations on the body that can distract from the truth and intended purposes of those signs.

The aesthetic body is the *Wollüstling*’s body, specifically the curious voluptuary’s body in so far as it is a body that responds to the signs of art, a body that is impacted by and transformed by art. But the aesthetic body is also more than the curious voluptuary’s body; it is also the venereal voluptuary’s body (*venerische Wollust*). It is the venereal voluptuary’s body in so far as it desires another beautiful body. The first principle of bodily or erotic aesthetics is that bodies react to beautiful bodies, and the challenge of bodily aesthetics is to find these bodies in the signs of art. The curious voluptuary seeks

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19 Zedler 58:1427.
verse. The venereal voluptuary seeks Venus. And the voluptuary who is both curious and venereal seeks Venus in verse. Erotic literature in the Age of Lessing, then, is an aesthetic experiment (an experiment in bodily aesthetics) that manipulates the perceiver’s aesthetic body by mediating between it and Venus’s body. Erotic literature transforms the perceiver’s body into a *Wolluststummelplatz*.

**The Paphian Presence**

Erotic verse in the Age of Lessing conjures the illusion of Venus’s body, or in a closer approximation of the language of the period, the paphian presence. (I take this phrase from a review that I discuss below. The adjective paphian is derived from the mediterranean island of Paphos, the birthplace of Venus, and is thus synonymous with erotic or venereal.) Through the paphian presence erotic literature appears to mediate between two bodies, and thus participates in bodily aesthetics. Previous scholarship on aesthetics and the Age of Lessing has examined how literature conjures illusory presences, but the erotic has fallen outside of its purview. These accounts are not able to adequately explain the bodily component of aesthetics; they can tell us about illusory presence but not about the paphian presence and its influence on the aesthetic body. But before I turn to these accounts, I shall first examine examples of the paphian presence in action that lie at the heart of this period.

In his review of Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Comische Erzählungen* (1765) for the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, Thomas Abbt, professor of philosophy and mathematics in Berlin, invokes bodily aesthetics to evaluate the quality of Wieland’s

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20 According to Zedler’s *Univeral-Lexicon* the *Wolluststummelplatz* is another word for the clitoris.

21 See my extended discussions of Fried, Wellbery, and von Mücke below.
verse. His expectations accord perfectly with principles that Lessing is articulating at the very same moment in his Laocoon essay. Their agreement should be no surprise since they, together with C. Friedrich Nicolai and Moses Mendelssohn, were simultaneously collaborating on the literary-critical periodical *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* which was intended to inform the taste of the reading public at large.

The crux of Abbt’s review hinges upon a mimetic relationship that he establishes between Venus and verse: the formal qualities of the beauty of the human body are like the formal qualities of the beauty of poetry, and the effect that the beautiful human body has on the perceiver is the same as that of beautiful poetry. He cleverly turns the author’s own words against him by quoting a formula for beauty directly from the *Comische Erzählungen* in order to show that Wieland’s verse is not consistently beautiful:

> Der Verfasser steht wirklich, wie ich glaube, in Gnade bey den Musen, denn sie geben ihm oft so glückliche Zeilen ein, daß man ihn darum beneiden möchte. Warum buhlt er denn mit der Schwatzhaftigkeit? Warum untersucht er nicht bey einer ganzen Erzählung, „Ob alle Theile fein / Symmetrisch in einander passen, / Durch gute Nachbarschaft einander Reize leyhn, / Schön an sich selbst, im Ganzen schöner seyn?“

Abbt takes these lines from Wieland’s retelling of the arguably most famous (or infamous) contemplation of beauty and judgment of taste in Western literature, the judgment of Paris. Abbt has cited the standard of beauty by which this renowned connoisseur evaluates the nude bodies of Juno, Minerva, and Venus. (According to the myth, he chooses Venus who promises him Helen in return as a favor. This decision, of course, eventually leads to the Trojan War.) By substituting Paris’s criteria for bodily

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22 Thomas Abbt, rev. of *Comische Erzählungen* by Christoph Martin Wieland. *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 1 (1765) 219.
beauty for his own criteria for poetic beauty he allows no distinction between the beauty of the goddesses and the beauty of poetry.

However tongue in cheek Abbt’s substitution of Paris’s criteria for his own might appear, he insists on its validity. He equates the beauty of Juno, Minerva, and Venus with the beauty of the *Comische Erzählungen* a second time, and this time he emphasizes the similar effect that beauty has on Paris, the one who through his senses perceives a beautiful body before him, and Wieland, the one who perceives beautiful poetry through his senses but imagines a beautiful body:

[Der Verfasser] bleibt in der Erzählung vom Urtheil des Paris frostig bis auf den Augenblick, wo Paris die Göttinn von Paphos entkleidet sieht: aber plötzlich fühlt er so gut als Paris selbst *Praesens numen*, seine Verse wallen wie das Blut in den Adern nach einem sanften Händedruck.23

They both feel the numinous presence of the goddess of erotic attraction whether they intuit her through their eyes or through their ears and imagination. Feeling the paphian presence constitutes the aesthetic experience for both Paris and Wieland. The beauty of Venus is the same as the beauty of verse. And this beauty makes their blood swell. Although Abbt does not say outright that Wieland’s blood swells—he only says that Wieland’s verse swells like blood—he suggests it. The narrative requires Paris’s blood to swell into an erection at the sight of Venus. (They have sex.) And Wieland, as Abbt says, feels Venus’s presence as strongly as (*so gut als*) Paris. What Abbt suggests Johann Georg Zimmermann, the doctor, author, and long-time friend of Wieland, confesses; his own blood swelled into an erection. In response to a letter that is now lost, Wieland

23 Abbt 219.
writes to him on June 27, 1765, “Ich höre nicht gern daß sie [die Erzählungen] so gar einem vieljährigen Ehmann und einem so weisen Mann […] Erektionen machen.”

We find Wallungen not only in a clever review from this period but also in one of the period’s most influential programmatic texts. In Lessing’s Laocoon essay heaving and swelling characterizes the perceiver’s bodily response to beautiful bodies represented in poetry. Lessing refers to this bodily aesthetics when he criticizes Ariosto’s poetry: “Was nutzt alle diese Gelehramkeit und Einsicht uns Lesern, die wir eine schöne Frau zu sehen glauben wollen, die wir etwas von der sanften Wallung des Geblüts dabei empfinden wollen, die den wirklichen Anblick der Schönheit begleitet?” Lessing could not be clearer. The heaving and swelling of the blood accompanies the perception of erotic beauty; moreover, to feel these palpitations is what the perceiver wants (empfinden wollen) out of such an encounter. As I shall show, Lessing goes on to assign the corporeality of the perceiver a central role in his aesthetics.

Perhaps, it could be objected that in the passage I cite that the Wallung des Geblüts is not really physical at all—that it is merely a conventional expression for an affective state that does not necessarily register itself directly on the body. To that I would respond that in another moment in the Laokoon essay, heaving is expressly the visibly detectable motion of a body. Lessing says of Ovid’s poetic description of Lesbia: “Ihr Busen bezaubert, weniger weil Milch und Helfenbein und Äpfel uns seine Weiße und niedliche Figur vorbilden, als vielmehr weil wir ihn sanft und nieder wallen sehen,

24 WB 3:345.

25 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998) 152. (Chapter XX)
wie die Wellen am äußersten Rande des Ufers, wen ein spielender Zephir die See bestreitet […] .”

The imagined heaving and swelling of Lesbia’s breasts induce a similar heaving and swelling in the perceiver—notice the repetitive language *sanften Wallung* and *sanft wallen*. Within the aesthetics of German rationalism, erotic beauty foregrounds the perceiver’s body, because its pleasure is induced in this body, occurs on and, is felt in this body.

The extent to which the body’s potential for aesthetic pleasure has been overlooked in the Age of Lessing—specifically in the aesthetic writings of Lessing—and, thus, the extent to which my dissertation constitutes a contribution to our understanding of the aesthetics of German neoclassicism becomes evident when we look at the seminal study of Lessing’s aesthetics of the past quarter century. In his 1984 book, *Lessing’s Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* David Wellbery characterizes Lessing’s *Laokoon* essay as paradigmatic of German Enlightenment aesthetics. My dissertation accepts and relies on—though not without question as will soon become clear—Wellbery’s argument, so I recapitulate it here and in the next section.

Wellbery finds a “metasemiotic” of Enlightenment aesthetics underlying and determining such disparate and crucial artistic concerns as the commonality of the arts, heirarchies of genre, thematic content, and stylistic preferences. Those questions of art are revealed to be second-order concerns that are governed by the primary dictates of semiotics. The nature of the sign in Enlightenment discourses—that is specifically

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26 Lessing 157. (Chapter XXI)

Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalist tradition to which Baumgarten, Meier, Mendelssohn and Lessing are counted—sets the parameters of the discipline of aesthetics. And it is Lessing’s *Laokoon* essay that is taken as the exemplary expression of this dynamic.

Wellbery argues that the aesthetics of the German Enlightenment are predicated on its semiotics which, in turn, are predicated on a rationalist model of the soul. According to this model, “[a]ll mental activity, all representation, is essentially specular,” and perception itself is a subclass of representation. The soul is a camera obscura and each of the five sense is an aperture in the exterior wall through which sensate knowledge of the world enters the soul. The interior wall on to which information is projected is the intuition, and the image is a sensate idea. Sensate knowledge is one mode of access to the world and truth, but not the only one. The soul is not a blank slate but is endowed with rational powers as well as senses; truth can be attained through rationality as well. By allowing for rational truth, the German rationalists, Leibniz and Wolff on to Baumgarten and Lessing differ from British empiricists who allow only for sensate knowledge. By admitting the validity of sensate knowledge as well, the German rationalists avoid the skepticism of the senses and the strict rationalism of Descartes. Wellbery’s historicized semiotic aesthetics hinges upon one crucial assumption: the “intuitionist doctrine of the sign.” This doctrine supposes that ideas as the currency in which the intuition traffics are essentially pre-linguistic; ideas, whether sensate or rational, are representations of the soul that bear a direct relationship to the world outside the soul and are not linguistically contingent. Language does not stand in a necessary

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28 Wellbery 11.

29 Wellbery 38.
relationship to ideas but is rather a system of signs that allows humans to communicate
preexisting ideas. The dichotomy signifier / signified translates as sign / idea in which
the signified / idea is not just yet another signifier. Within this framework of the
rationalist model of the soul and the intuitionist doctrine of the sign, Wellbery identifies
aesthetics as the science charged with the investigation of perception and its resultant
sensate ideas and their communication between intuitions via signs. The “commanding
tenet” of aesthetics, then, is “the principle of transparency” which “determines all the
questions raised within the discipline, the entire field of inquiry:”

Its normative force consists in the demand that the linguistic level of the
poetic text, that is, the level of the signifiers, not emerge into the
foreground of consciousness, that the cognition which the poetic text
transmits not remain a symbolic cognition, but rather be actualized as
intuition, as the experienced presence-to-mind of the represented object.
For representational aesthetic theory, the poetic text is a transparent text
the reading of which induces that subjective absorption in the represented
world – that experience of quasi-seeing – which the age called aesthetic
illusion. Poetic language is diaphonous; it presents its objects to intuition.

If Wellbery were to speak for Abbt, he would call the numinous presence of Venus
Wieland’s absorption in the represented world. Aesthetic illusion is presenting Venus
directly to his intuition. The swelling verse is not emerging into the foreground of his
consciousness. Venus is not remaining a symbolic cognition but is rather being
actualized as a sensate idea to the intuition. Wieland quasi-sees Venus before him. But

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30 Wellbery’s conception of Enlightenment semiotics is indebted to Michel Foucault’s
earlier work. Compare Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human

31 Wellbery 72.
the sensate idea as Wellbery describes it is conspicuously unsensual. Wieland’s swelling blood does not emerge to the foreground of Wellbery’s discourse.

Wellbery draws his concept of absorptive illusion from Michael Fried who identifies a preoccupation with absorption in French painting and art criticism of the 1750s through the 1780s. Despite his caveats that his findings apply only to indigenous French art and not to international developments in neoclassicism, absorption becomes a key concept for understanding German aesthetics and literature of the same period. The power of the concept of absorption for Fried—an “ontological preoccupation” that transcends traditional divisions in art history and unites otherwise discrepant histories of style, subject matter, individual artists, genres, and periodization—becomes its appeal for German literary scholars like Wellbery.\(^3\) Art that seeks an absorptive illusion attempts to deny “one primitive condition of the art of painting—that its objects necessarily imply the presence before them of a beholder.”\(^3\) To achieve this end, absorptive art employs a range of techniques from displaying figures who merely seem to ignore the beholder, e.g., figures who are absorbed in their activities, in rapt attention, or—even in extreme cases—asleep, to increasingly active interventions such as figures who gaze past the beholder, heavy-handed moral sentimentalism, and techniques that close off the depicted world from the viewer. Typical for all these possibilities are figures on the canvas who are oblivious to anything other than the focus of their concentration, including ultimately the beholder whose presence is thus “counteracted” and “obliviated in or by the painting


\(^{33}\) Fried 4.
itself.” Absorptive illusion establishes what Fried calls “the supreme fiction of the beholder’s nonexistence.” Absorptive illusion aims for the “de-theatricalization of the relationship between painting and beholding;” it is the means by which “the beholder is removed from in front of the painting just as surely as if his presence there were negated or neutralized, indeed just as surely as if he did not exist.” This de-theatricalization is necessary because of an epistemological crisis. Fried observes a deep suspicion of theatricality, which is the acknowledgment of the beholder, self-referentiality, and self-consciousness of artifice that overrides other artistic concerns in the collection of work that he examines. The opacity of the artwork renders it epistemologically dubious and must be “redeemed” by naiveté and transparency which serve to guarantee the artwork’s truth. Absorption proves to be the most efficacious way for the painter to “reach the beholder’s soul by way of his eyes.” Absorption establishes direct communication between souls that appears to bypass or disavow the mediation of signs, and it is this movement that Wellbery elevates to the first-order principle of Enlightenment aesthetics.

What Fried calls the “psycho-physical condition” and the “existential reverie” of the beholder absorbed in a painting becomes for Wellbery the condition of readers engulfed in the aesthetic illusion of literature. Whereas the beholder might imagine

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34 Fried 67.
35 Fried 108.
36 Fried 130-131.
37 Fried 132.
38 Fried 92.
39 Fried 130.
himself or herself walking into a landscape painting, readers imagine themselves walking into the diegetic world of a book. Readers become absorbed in a hallucinogenic illusion of presence, immediacy, and truth engendered by signs that are “diaphonous,” transparent, and self-effacing.  But for neither Fried nor Wellbery does absorption ever quite equal feeling the paphian presence, or the praeens numen as Abbt describes it. The examples of the paphian presence from Abbt and Wieland reveal that absorption can be as much a question of pleasure, sensation and desire as it is of truth and reason. It can be erotic at least as much as it can be epistemological.

The numinous presence of Venus lies outside the boundaries of Fried’s model of absorption. The paphian presence asserts itself on the body as well as on the imagination and the understanding; it emphasizes the physical aspect of the pyscho-physical condition. Although Fried calls absorption a psycho-physical condition, he leaves the physical aspect of absorption without comment—this hyphenate is his only acknowledgement of the beholder’s body and its state. For Fried, absorption is far more existential reverie than physical condition if only by nature of what he does not say. Wellbery’s treatment of absorptive illusion is, however, more insistently and more problematically non-physical as we shall see in the next section.

The Beautiful and the Disgusting

Wellbery’s reading has become canonical because of its power to synthesize a large number of aesthetic texts and assimilate them into a broad cultural context of “progressive semiosis” which, among other things, encodes an overarching

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40 Wellbery 72.
Enlightenment mistrust of materiality and the body. The intuitionist doctrine of the sign and the principle of transparency derive from the “interaction of pragmatic and theological impulses that is so characteristic of Enlightenment thinking;” the world is essentially communicative and reliable as it is the book of nature whose author is God. The world is composed of natural signs that express its perfections. However, human language—although originating with natural signs—is, for the most part, a system of arbitrary signs necessitated by the limited nature of human cognitive capacities. Language as an arbitrary sign lifts humanity up out of nature, instituting civilization by allowing humans to abstract their sense impressions and manipulate and communicate them more easily, but it also introduces error into the system. The surface of the sign, its materiality—as opposed to the ideational content behind the sign—saves sign-users mental labor, allowing them to bypass the intuition’s reactivation of each and every sensate idea. Humans in their finite capacities can cognize faster if they substitute signs for ideas. Symbolic cognition is more subtle and wieldy than intuitive cognition. Despite its advantages—even its necessity—the material, arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is potentially misleading as it lacks the necessity of the natural sign. More attention can be paid to the sign than the idea. Signs can mislead, because they follow their own logic diverting the one who would use them from the truth of the ideas they are meant to represent. Wellbery speculates that the task of Enlightenment aesthetics is to establish

41 Wellbery 41.

42 Wellbery 26.

43 Wellbery 28.

44 Wellbery 38-40, 99.
poetry as a “substitute” for the “lost word of revelation.” 45 The sign is a “dual intermediary:” “synchronously” it mediates between intuitions, and “diachronically” it mediates between the origin and the end of culture. 46 The materiality of the sign is characterized by its “self-assertiveness” and “flagrancy” which “impede,” “impose” themselves onto, and “resist” the spirit; materiality “contaminates” the aesthetic experience with “some of the heaviness and coarseness of things themselves.” 47 It poses the sign-user with the “threat of mortification.” 48 Aesthetics steps into this system to help humanity progress beyond this imperfect state of affairs; aesthetics is to help humanity reclaim necessity for its signs and rescue it from the dangers posed by the sign’s materiality. To do this, the surface of the signs of art must sublimate (in the chemical sense of the word) into the spirit of the imagination.

But it would seem that, as Wellbery reads it, the analogous denial of the sign-user’s body is inherent to the project to sublimate the body of the sign (its material surface). This is the point at which my reading diverges from Wellbery’s. He writes: “Lessing is adamant in his insistence that the imaginative field of illusionary objects is the true locus of aesthetic experience. An experience which abides on the level of sensation, by contrast, is not aesthetic at all. Examples abound.” 49 But the examples that Wellbery lists are examples of abjection, horror, and ugliness. He lists snakes and

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45 Wellbery 83-84.

46 Wellbery 40.

47 Wellbery 118.

48 Wellbery 119.

49 Wellbery 106.
Philoctetes’s cries and leaves out beauty and the erotic. He then states that “[u]gliness is inadmissable in plastic arts because it necessarily asserts itself on the level of sensation […],” and he thereby elides beauty out of the discussion of sensation and the aesthetic.\(^{50}\)

To prove that the aesthetic response cannot be a bodily response, he shows that the abject and the ugly cause undesirable bodily responses in the perceiver. But the \textit{Wallungen} that Abbt and Lessing invoke make us suspect that there is a class of assertive sensation that does not invalidate the aesthetic experience and that aesthetic illusion can assert itself on the body. Abbt’s review suggests that the following statement by Wellbery can be revised:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{[\ldots] the receptive attitude of the subject is oriented toward the reactualization of the artistic representation, the experience of the illusionary presence of the represented object, and the activation of an intense emotional response to that object. [\ldots]} \\
&\text{[\ldots] And the aesthetic pleasure [\ldots] derive[s] [\ldots] from the stimulation and energizing of the subject's representational and emotional capacities.}^{51}\end{align*}
\]

I would revise it to read: The receptive attitude of the subject is oriented toward the reactualization of the artistic representation, the experience of the illusionary presence of the represented object, and the activation of an intense emotional response \textit{as well as an intense physical response to the beauty of} that object; aesthetic pleasure derives from the stimulation and energizing of the subject’s representational and emotional \textit{and physical} capacities. Of course, neither Abbt alone nor two examples from Lessing’s Laocoon essay suffice to justify my proposed revision of Wellbery’s model. However, in my dissertation as a whole I seek to show how eroticism and aesthetics, or the bodily

\(^{50}\) Wellbery 106-107.

\(^{51}\) Wellbery 45.
response to bodily beauty represented in art, are actually at work in a number of texts across the Age of Lessing and how they are the topic of considerable interest in this period.

Such a revision is not a rejection of Wellbery’s argument; it does not contradict his basic framework, rather it augments it. The rationalist model of the soul that he elaborates already contained the possibility for such an assertive sensation. The soul as an essentially representing entity perceived bodily sensations as a subclass of representation (namely as indistinct representations). Sensation and representation were not opposed to one another.

Wellbery’s emphasis on the disgusting reveals an implicit Kantian bias or anachronism that at times directs his reading. Several scholars have considered the body in the aesthetics of the Age of Lessing (specifically in the Laocoon essay) such as Carol Jacobs, Dorothea von Mücke, and Susan Gustafson, and these scholars, like Wellbery, have all traced the body through the thread of the disgusting in the essay rather than the beautiful. But the thread of the disgusting and the body it traces leads back to Jacques Derrida’s essay “Economimesis” and his reading of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Some of the most significant recent work on aesthetics in the Age of Lessing has thus taken Kantian aesthetics as its point of departure. The key to understanding the body and aesthetics in the Age of Lessing has thus been how the body as in the example of disgust disrupts signification in a Kantian framework. This critical situation is a bit ironic given

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that Derrida’s essay begins with a long epigraph taken from The Truth in Painting that should serve as a caveat to overextending his analysis:

> Once inserted into another network, the ‘same’ philosopheme is no longer the same, and besides it never had an identity external to its functioning. Simultaneously ‘unique and original’ philosophemes, if there are any, as soon as they enter into articulated composition with inherited philosophemes, are affected by that composition over the whole of their surface and under every angle.\(^{53}\)

What disgusts Kant, then, does not necessarily disgust Lessing—or more precisely—what disgust is for Kant is not necessarily what disgust is for Lessing.

For Derrida, the disgusting is “the origin of pure taste” in the Third Critique or “the transcendental of the transcendental” aesthetic.\(^{54}\) Derrida locates an opposition between two sorts of bodies, specifically between two sorts of mouths in Kantian aesthetics. These two mouths allow him to pun on the double meaning of “taste” as that what the tongue does and that what the connoisseur exercises. The body as the mouth is the os of logos (Latin mouth, plural ora, root of orifice); it is the root of all the analogies in the Third Critique, so all analogies fall back onto it and its double meaning. The two ora are the mouth of hetero-affection that “lick[s] our chops,” or “smack[s] our lips,” or “whet[s] our palate” and the mouth of auto-affection with which we “chat with ourselves.”\(^{55}\) The latter is aligned with the creative artist and the logos and is that which produces the signs of art that circulate freely in the system of economimesis. The former is the mouth that tastes food and that vomits at the disgusting; it is the mouth that


\(^{54}\) Derrida 16, 22.

\(^{55}\) Derrida 14.
“involves an empirical sensibility, includes a kernel of incommunicable sensation.”

What this mouth produces is not circulatable (sensations instead of signs). Derrida sums up the relationship between these two mouths or bodies as follows:

in the exemplary orality, it is a question of singing and hearing, of unconsummated voice or ideal consummation, of a heightened or interiorized sensibility; in the second case that of a consuming orality which as such, as an interested taste or as actual tasting, can have nothing to do with pure taste. […] Would not disgust, by turning itself back against actual tasting, also be the origin of pure taste…?

The mouth or body, as that which retches and vomits at the disgusting is the site of the unrepresentable, the private and the constraining. The os collapses all distance between representation and object and thus cannot communicate. Disinterested aesthetic pleasure (Lust) is communicable because of its exemplary—or unbodily—orality, whereas interested pleasure (Genuss) remains tied to the body because of its consuming orality.

The disgusting produces sensations, never signs, and it is in this regard that the disgusting has been interesting for Lessing scholars. If Kantian aesthetics has done nothing else other than unleashed countless puns that play on the distinction between the taste of the tongue and the taste of the connoisseur, then my dissertation at least reminds us that there was a time when these puns were impossible, because the distinction did not yet exist. If Kantian aesthetics is a turn away from the body, then we should remember that there was once a body to turn away from, a body that experiences Lust.

The Lust-Wollust system of the Age of Lessing could at least accommodate the absolutely heterogeneous: this was the Leibeslüste and the physicalische Lüste. These

56 Derrida 8.
57 Derrida 16.
pleasures existed beyond signification in so far as they existed before the distinction
moral and immoral or reasonable and unreasonable in the anatomy of pleasures. And the
structure of the definitions of Lust and Wollust staged the incommunicability of these
pleasures: they did not discuss them. What is most significant though is that here it is
not the the purely autoaffective that is opposed to the absolutely heterogeneous but rather
an amalgam of Genuß and Lust. The voluptuary’s pleasure was both bodily and moral;
the voluptuary’s senses were tickled even as the question was raised how these sensations
were arranged in the social-theological-moral order. If sensations and pleasure could not
be not circulated as a sign, they could be shared as a contagion. Wallungen established
resonate vibrations from body to body as, for example, Lesbia’s heaving breasts induced
in Lessing.

Since Derrida, ugliness, the disgusting, and the abjection have taken center stage
in an number of studies on the Laocoon essay. I do not mean to suggest, though, that the
ugly and the abject are not significant for the essay. The work ends with three long
chapters dedicated to it and an obsessive list of examples. But I do contend that the
disgusting in Kant cannot be directly translated into the disgusting in Lessing and that the
disembodiment of beauty cannot be equated with the embodiment of the disgusting in the
Age of Lessing.

In order to show how bodily aesthetics revises current conceptions of the bodily
in the Age of Lessing, I take a quick look at one of the studies that has followed in
Derrida’s wake. Dorothea Von Mücke argues that, according to Lessing’s aesthetics,
representations of the classical, beautiful (female) body function as a screen
covering—distracting—the (male) beholder from his own corporeality which is always
experienced as lack. But in the process of constructing this argument, she overlooks the evidence of interested aesthetic pleasure that the Laocoon essay makes explicit. She poses a rhetorical question: “Does this mean that aesthetic pleasure is to be understood as the self-reflective pleasure of the imagination, the enjoyment of our ability to distance ourselves from the material involvement in the world and the physical limitations of our bodies?” She answers this question in the affirmative. As she argues, physical urges—physicality in general (Derrida’s os)—are the limits of aesthetic experience, the true boundaries of painting and poetry. She arrives at her conclusion by way of negative example; to define the effect of the beautiful body, she examines its opposite, the ugly body. The ugly body in the Laocoon essay, she finds, elicits disgust:

[…] disgust asserts the here and now of our bodily existence and our limited control over our bodily reactions. Like the aesthetic illusion of the beautiful it can make an object of representation real to us, in the sense of *wirklich*. However, disgust is opposed to aesthetic illusion in the sense that it cancels the boundaries between representations and the real […]..

She implies that beauty is less bodily than the ugly and that beauty does not cancel the boundaries between representations and the real. The stakes are high, because canceling these boundaries “confront[s] us with a real that cannot be ideationally apprehended but exists in its undifferentiated, unsemioticized crude materiality,” and thus poses “a fundamental threat to intellectual engagement, the order of civilization, and autonomy.”

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59 Von Mücke 166-167.

60 Von Mücke 167, 179.
Disgust poses this threat by inducing a physical urge in the beholder, the urge to vomit. This urge to vomit, this retching or heaving, however, is not the only heaving in the Laocoon essay as I have shown. Rather than arguing as Mücke does that “[…] aesthetic pleasure and the beautiful are related to a particular screening out of our own concrete bodily existence,” I argue that aesthetic pleasure—at least as far as it is erotic—is grounded in “our own concrete bodily existence” in this period. 61

Not von Mücke’s concrete body but the aesthetic body is the site of aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetic body is excited by an imagined body (the paphian presence), and this excitement is exactly what the perceiver was looking for in the first place. Like von Mücke argues, aesthetics screens out the putrifying ugly body and the bodily reactions that the perception of such bodies entails, but the beautiful classical body that it offers in its place resonates in the perceiver’s body in an analogous fashion. In fact, art creates the screen of the classical beautiful body by establishing a link between the perceiving body and the perceived body. Heaving is this link, and through heaving the concrete body becomes like the classical body. Heaving marks Wieland’s body as it does Paris’s before Venus. Under aesthetic illusion every reader becomes a Paris.

The Gender of the Aesthetic Body

The aesthetic then becomes the realm in which bodies meet (the aesthetic body and the paphian presence) and react to one another. The imagined trans-historical community of erotic bodies that we see in Lessing’s Laocoon essay has, of course, a famous precedent, Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s viewings of classical sculpture and his visions of ancient Greece. The erotic quiver carried across the centuries through art and

61 Von Mücke 167.
captured in Lessing’s quotation above (“Ihr Busen bezaubert […] weil wir ihn sanft und nieder wallen sehen, wie die Wellen am äußersten Rande des Ufers, wen ein spielender Zephir die See bestreitet”) echoes the perhaps most famous description of a beautiful body in all of German aesthetics and literature, Winckelmann’s programmatic description of the Laocoon statue:

Das allgemeine vorzügliche Kennzeichen der griechischen Meisterstücke ist endlich eine edle Einfalt, und eine stille Größe, sowohl in der Stellung als im Ausdrucke. So wie die Tiefe des Meers allezeit ruhig bleibt, die Oberfläche mag noch so wüten, ebenso zeiget der Ausdruck in den Figuren der Griechen bei allen Leidenschaften eine große und gesetzte Seele. Diese Seele schildert sich in dem Gesichte des Laokoons, und nicht in dem Gesichte allein, bei dem heftigsten Leiden. 

The immediately obvious parallel between the passages is the metaphor of waves of water driven by the wind. These waves move across the surface of the classical body and thereby exposes its beauty and greatness.

Although wallen today is outmoded except in a medical sense and in the sense of boiling liquids, and although Welle (from wellen from Old High German wellôn) and Wallung (from wallen from Old High German wallen) are etymologically unrelated, wellen (werfen) and wallen in the eighteenth century were synonyms and wallen had extended connotations with the movement of water, blood, fire, air, and emotions. The link between Lesbia’s heaving breasts and the heaving waves of water whether driven by a playful breeze or a storm is thus multiply reinforced, and Wallungen are the nexus of spirit, affect, body, matter, sign, and sign-perceiver.

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Lessing’s and Winckelmann’s passages diverge, however, in that in the former the wind is a playful breeze which creates waves of beauty and, in the latter, the wind is a tempest which creates waves that expose beauty by contrast. Simon Richter’s reading of these waves can help reconcile their opposed motion. Richter’s reading of eighteenth-century aesthetics begins with this passage from Winckelmann and proceeds with “a fundamental inversion, a decentering of beauty within the discourse of eighteenth-century aesthetics.” Richter finds pain at the origin of beauty and locates a number of Laocoon’s other bodies or doubles, among them most notably the crucified Christ and the satyr Marsyas who was flayed alive by Apollo. “The Laokoon has always been close to water” he observes, and its proximity to water becomes the key for deciphering the relation of beauty and pain in his reading. In Vergil, Laocoon dies on the beach, the Laocoon statue was rediscovered in a subterranean bath, and it has been displayed across from a fountain in the Belvedere courtyard in the Vatican. It is this last relation that serves as an allegory for beauty: “Water, in the last half of the eighteenth century, represents beauty seen under a particular and highly important aesthetic aspect”—namely—“Unbezeichnung” […] the water in the center of the courtyard is pure beauty, the source and origin (Quelle) […] of the sculptures that surround it.” Pure beauty in its unrepresentability (Unbezeichnung) requires “the instrumentality of pain” to

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64 Richter 30.

65 Richter 30-31.
expose it. According to Richter, aesthetics is caught in the paradox of requiring pain to expose beauty while concealing that pain through tropes such as euphemism so that it does not overwhelm or contaminate the aesthetic experience. The ripples in the fountain give way to the swelling, storming sea.

My thesis, however, suggests that beauty is not always reliant on pain—pure beauty is not unrepresentable. The ripples in the fountain, no less than gentle swells are representable. Richter uncovers pain’s fascinating and overlooked relationship to beauty but overreaches to the extent that he claims that beauty and pain are always linked. He notes that *Reiz* is both the term for aesthetic effect and the term for painful stimulus in anatomical discourse. I add that in erotic literature *Wallungen* coexist with *Reiz*. I can strengthen this claim by examining Richter’s further discussion of Lessing’s Laocoon essay. He writes that the essay is not so much about the statue itself as much as it is about “the denial of the statue, the denial of corporeality and death.” This denial extends to the body of language. Recalling Wellbery’s language he continues, “Lessing’s experience of language’s materiality is, through recurrent use of *frostig*, affectively likened to the coldness of the corpse.” *Frostig* was exactly the word that Abbt used to criticize Wieland’s *Comische Erzählungen*. Wieland’s verse remained dead until it was enlivened and set into undulations by the erotic charge of Venus’s numinous presence or body. My thesis would require that we add Venus and Lesbia to the list of Laokoon’s others. They are beauty’s center. But if Lessing’s vision of waves in the Laocoon essay

66 Richter 33.
67 Richter 32.
68 Richter 73.
lead us from centered beauty to decentered beauty (or back), then why does Winckelmann’s vision of waves seem resistant to centering?

Alex Potts too links the *Unbezeichnung* of beauty to waves in Winckelmann’s aesthetics. But rather than taking it as pure beauty’s unrepresentability in the absence of pain, he reads it as a regressive narcissistic fantasy. This is the result of the prohibitions and policing of an “implicit homophobia” and a fundamental inversion of the aesthetic conventions of his time.\(^6^9\) For Winckelmann, according to Potts, beauty itself as well as the viewer’s response to beauty is never static, complete or restful; it is always a vacillation between paradoxes, a shuttling tension. Replacing the feminine object of beauty with the male object of beauty and subject of identification leads to the “unresolvable ambiguity” of “ideologically loaded dualities” here the most important of which is the “bodily or erotic and the immaterial or idea-like.”\(^7^0\) The “apparently paradoxical gendering” does not just merely switch one term for another but instead “unsettles.”\(^7^1\) The beautiful male produces a “sharpening of the conjunctions between violent aggression and graceful beauty,” a “constant shifting between vividly contrasting polarities of beauty and power.”\(^7^2\) Winckelmann envisions “a male spectator who identifies with and submits to the figure before him” which “commands willing

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\(^7^0\) Potts 7-8.

\(^7^1\) Potts 113.

\(^7^2\) Potts 123.
submission” and which “overpowers” and “seduces” the spectator.\textsuperscript{73} This double motion constitutes Winckelmann’s “going beyond a simple model of aesthetic gratification and possession.”\textsuperscript{74} He arrives at “almost schizophrenic” alternations, “unresolvable tensions,” and “irreducible multiplicity.”\textsuperscript{75} All of the frenetic activity, all the the twitching unleashed by the switching of the male and female ideal of beauty represents for Potts a regression into the auto-eroticism of primary narcissism. The contours are waves which are the blurring of subject and object and the dissolution of the psychically organized body with its erogenous zones into the fragmented body and its polymorphous perversity. Whether read with the psychoanalytic specificity with which Potts inflects the contours or waves or undulations of the classical marble body which sets loose a similar motion in the modern concrete—to return to von Mücke’s term—body, or whether read without evocation of psychic structures such as the unconscious, the point remains that the swelling, undulating waves of the beautiful body leave their traces on the perceiver’s body, whether on the margins of aesthetic discourse or at its center.

At this point, the gendering of bodily aesthetics is obvious and unsurprising: the aesthetic body is male and the paphian presence is female. Male connoisseurs, critics, judges, and readers experience on their bodies the bodily beauty of women. (Winckelmann’s reading takes its exceptionality in replacing the female object with a male object.) Shortly after Wellbery’s book appeared, W. J. T. Mitchell offered a reading of Lessing’s Laocoon essay that became equally significant for those who would later

\textsuperscript{73} Potts 123, 127.

\textsuperscript{74} Potts 154.

\textsuperscript{75} Potts 158.
examine the gendering of aesthetics. In his investigation of the ideology motivating the distinction between image and text in the Laocoon essay, Mitchell locates gender at the root of genre: “Lessing has disclosed what is probably the most fundamental ideological basis for his laws of genre, namely, the laws of gender. The decorum of the arts at bottom has to do with proper sex roles.”

Mitchell pursues “the link between genre and gender” moving from the economy of the arts, to the political economy of states and their sectarian alignments, to finally gender. Instead of neutral categories of visual and linguistic signs which govern the distinction between the visual/spatial and linguistic/temporal arts and which themselves are natural, innocent, necessary, and absolute, Mitchell finds artificial distinctions that lack natural necessity but are instead endowed with a social function. They are drawn by a desire to regulate discourse and enforce the alignment of painting-space-body-feminine and poetry-time-mind-masculine. The visual arts are gendered feminine and hence denigrated. The verbal arts are gendered masculine and hence valorized. Simon Richter pursues this line of enquiry the furthest by constructing a “virtual” Laocoon essay that queers opera as both masculine-verbal and feminine-spatial.

Susan Gustafson, however, departs from the gendering of particular genres and offers the lengthiest and most detailed reading of gender in the Laocoon essay. She compellingly locates eighteenth-century German aesthetics in a locally specific chapter of the broad overarching narrative of Western patriarchy. She is thus

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77 Mitchell 105-109.

able to keep in sight the insights of the previous scholars whom I have quoted and to identify an aesthetic project that is culture-building, subject-forming, defensive, violent, and patriarchal. According to Gustafson, the Laocoon essay develops a gendered aesthetics in which it is the valorization of the paternal body and masculine imagination and the concomitant devalorization of the maternal body and feminine imagination that transcend the specificity of the generic and medial differences between the arts.\(^7^9\) (She translates this double operation into Kristevan paternal narcissism and the abjection of the mother, a translation made possible by what she deems Lessing’s “rudimentary” notion—both precocious and limited—of twentieth century theories of signification and subjectivity that will be developed in full only after the Age of Lessing.\(^8^0\)) In so doing she disagrees with Mitchell’s earlier attempt to read for gender in Lessing’s aesthetics by searching for gendering of the genres themselves.\(^8^1\) She locates them on a more fundamental plane, in “[…] the broader aesthetic deep structures that cross generic boundaries and bind the arts together in terms of means and purpose.”\(^8^2\) Bodily aesthetics genders bodies in a similar way—across specific genres and media.

**The Uses of Beauty**

While some scholars who have examined aesthetics prior to Kant with a theoretical eye have overlooked the bodily response to bodily beauty perhaps because

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80 Gustafson 83.

81 Gustafson 21, 114.

82 Gustafson 21.
Kant’s shadow had grown too long and stretched into the terrain of interested beauty, other scholars have made current attempts to extend Kant’s shadow into recent years. They have tried to defend disinterested beauty from theoretical incursions. The role of the erotic body in aesthetics, the interest that it necessitates, indicates a faultline dividing critical camps today. As the questions that I ask and the secondary sources that I have so far quoted indicate, my investigation of German aesthetics and erotic literature between Baumgarten and Kant approaches the primary sources from a perspective that is informed by what the editors of a recent volume titled *Theory’s Empire* skeptically call capital-T theory. But in recent years, as that volume attests, aesthetics has become a rallying call for scholars wishing to reject exactly these perspectives. A recurring theme in the volume is that theory has sacrificed the ability to appreciate the beauty of literature. Not only has it discarded such a regard for aesthetic appreciation, it also destroys that beauty. It destroys the organism of the text by isolating particular meanings from their organic contexts and thereby producing „a deadness, not just to beauty and fineness of perception and fragile inner life, but also to human suffering.“83 The main point of the author of that quote is that queer theory destroys the beauty of the text by considering the body and its pleasure. He can only imagine a bodiless aesthetic experience. In one of the foundational essays in the volume, René Wellek credits theory with the „simple denial of the aesthetic nature of literature.“84 He explains this with an off-handed invocation of Kant: „One can doubt the very existence of aesthetic experience and refuse to recognize


84 René Wellek, “Destroying Literary Studies,” in Patai and Corral 42.
the distinctions, clearly formulated in Immanuel Kant’s "Critique of Judgment," between the good, the true, the useful, and the beautiful.\textsuperscript{85} Wellek and the editors can take disinterest and the turn away from the body to be self-evident. But rather than taking the conflation of pleasure (\textit{Lust}) and enjoyment (\textit{Genuss}) and hence the conflation of the beautiful and the good and useful as a muddled problem that Kant solves for his time and for our own, I examine this conflation (bodily aesthetics) as a productive category for its own time.

Meir Sternberg exemplifies the conservative approach to aesthetics as counter-theory in regards to Lessing’s Laocoon essay. According to Sternberg, Wellbery—as the title of his book suggests—codifies semiotics \textit{as} aesthetics in the Age of Reason, and Sternberg objects to this thesis on two counts. On one count, he denies that the Laocoon essay is the authoritative statement of Enlightenment aesthetics Wellbery would have it be.\textsuperscript{86} He remarks without elaboration that this tradition itself was not monolithic but rather multiple—which is of course true to some extent. But my dissertation would corroborate Wellbery’s claim for the essay’s representativeness for an entire period. As I shall show, the principles of bodily aesthetics articulated in that essay are already in operation in the early 1750s in Lessing’s critical writings (Chapter 2), in the early- to mid-1760s in Wieland’s fiction (Chapter 3) and in the critical circles around Lessing (Abbt—as I have just shown), and on into the late 1780s in epigonal form in erotic cum pornographic novels (Chapter 4).

\textsuperscript{85} Wellek 42.

It is, however, the second count that preoccupies Sternberg. He argues that Wellbery’s conflation of aesthetics and semiotics is necessarily an assimilation of aesthetics to semiotics by which aesthetics loses its distinctiveness. Wellbery’s book title suggests this move as well; pride of place is awarded to semiotics which appears first and is thus the privileged term. Sternberg argues that Wellbery reduces aesthetics to illusionism when he claims that aesthetic pleasure arises from illusionistic representation regardless of object. Sternberg counters that for Lessing the Law of Beauty restricts aesthetic pleasure to representations of beautiful objects.  

Sternberg insists that the aesthetic is defined by two terms, beauty and illusionism, and that any reading that either isolates one or excludes both—like Wellbery’s and several other frequently cited, recent works—distorts aesthetics. The crux of Sternberg’s criticism is that Wellbery has forgotten beauty. Here, my dissertation would seem to corroborate Sternberg’s claim to the extent that Wellbery and others have forgotten some aspect of beauty’s impact, specifically its erotic dimensions.

Just as a reduction of aesthetics to semiotics elided the specificity of the former, so has an oversimplication of the modes of representation “flattened” Lessing’s semiotics. Again, Sternberg identifies a field of variables that operate in unison to produce specific effects that an artificial isolation destroys. He argues that too many scholars have made the mistake of locating the differences in the sister arts by simple binaries rather than complex arrays. In particular, he singles out what he calls W. J. T.

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87 Sternberg 324-325.

88 Sternberg 323.

89 Sternberg 292.
Mitchell’s “extreme misreading.” Any one of the oppositions audible / visual, arbitrary / natural, temporal / spatial are not sufficient to distinguish the arts. In order overcome such misleading reductions, he coins the terms auditrariness (audible, arbitrary, temporal) and iconoptic (optical/visual, iconic/natural, spatial). His contention is that his unflattening of semiotics obviates the need to take recourse to unflattering ideology to explain aesthetics. If we can only grasp auditrariness and iconopticality, we will not need to reach out beyond the text and grasp at the straws of politics or gender—or, really, any capital-T theory.

The bulk of Stenberg’s mammoth ninety-page essay and the significant intervention in the critical discussion that he hopes to achieve is to recoup Lessing from what he sees as reductivizing theoretical interpretations and reinstate Lessing as an Aristotelean and his theory of art as neither semiotic nor gendered but affective. Whether Sternberg’s opponents assimilate Lessing’s aesthetics to his semiotics or collapse his semiotics to an inadequate reductionist reading, Sternberg accuses them all of overvaluing semiotics—that is, not recognizing semiotics as means to aesthetic ends. The aesthetic is characterized by what it achieves, the pleasure of the illusionistic presence of beauty, not the representational means by which it achieves this effect. And finally here in this case, my dissertation would seem to uncover a complexity of aesthetics that neither Wellbery nor Sternberg address. Bodily aesthetics in the Age of Lessing exists in a certain tension between aesthetic effect and representational means.

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90 Sternberg 333.
91 Sternberg 336.
92 Sternberg 302.
As long as bodily aesthetics operates under absorption and the intuitionist doctrine of the sign, the effect of erotic art threatens to come into conflict with its representational means. The erotic appeal of aesthetic illusion can become too great and thus unnatural and perverse (Chapter 2). Or, it can become too great, and the paphian presence can begin to distract from erotic encounters with actual bodies (Chapter 3). This conflict exists as long as absorption remains the dominate semiotic paradigm and is resolved only when the erotic effects of bodily aesthetics is achieved without recourse to illusionistic conceptions of art and, thus, without the paphian presence (Chapters 3 and 4).

Sternberg intones that aesthetic pleasure is the end of art. But unsurprisingly, the body is again left out of the equation despite Sternberg’s eye for detail in the text. But positing aesthetic pleasure as the ultimate goal of art, a pleasure that is a response to beauty, renders any interrogation of beauty’s function superfluous and, thus, remains caught up in a Kantian paradigm. In Sternberg’s argument pleasure is self-sufficient; he elevates it to the self-causing Cause. Pleasure requires no further motivation and can be neither questioned nor further elaborated; it is for Sternberg unanalyzable. This assumption is manifested not only negatively as unasked questions but also positively in open hostility—primarily name-calling—towards theoretical approaches, particularly feminist approaches, which seek to find a social function for art or embed aesthetics in culture. (At other points, Sternberg discounts Mitchell’s reading because of its “trendy … Freudianized political correctness” and “sexual typecasting.”93 Throughout his article Sternberg cultivates a curmudgeonly tone while claiming that scholars have not

93 Sternberg 361.
interpreted the Laocoon essay competently since 1880. This dismissal does not necessarily have to be attributed to aggression or willful political incorrectness; it follows, at least in part, from his insistence on a text-immanent reading and his refusal of any recourse to extra-textual context. But on the other hand, Sternberg does seem to indulge what he calls his “joy of battle.”

In redressing the privileging of the “how over the what” of aesthetics (its means and ends), Sternberg does not address the where or the why of aesthetics. As I argue, the body is the site of aesthetic pleasure which Sternberg leaves out of his exposition of affective aesthetic illusion and pleasure. That is the where of aesthetics. This body leads to the why of aesthetics. The great appeal of readings of the Laocoon essay and German aesthetics in the wake of Wellbery’s reading is their ability to explain the need for aesthetics, its project, its agenda in a broader cultural context. I would speculate that he must leave the body out because its necessary politicization is too obvious. The body calls for the sorts of extra-textual appeals that are anathema to Sternberg. If Sternberg and the dissenters need to reestablish disinterest, it is because the body is too clearly a site of political and cultural intervention and contestation.

A leftist scholarly tradition has, in fact, looked to the body to recoup aesthetics for progressive politics. To return to Eagleton: aesthetics in its naissance functions to allow reason to colonize the body and is itself a symptom of absolutism. In the process of the ever-intensifying rationalization of the world, Enlightenment and absolutism collude to

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94 Sternberg 291-292.
95 Sternberg 324.
96 Eagleton 15.
render subjects more governable, but the schemas of reason, the generality of logic and concepts, run into a dead-end when they encounter the concrete and the bodily in all their specificity. Aesthetics attempts to render the concrete in all its particularity manageable, and it attempts to inscribe power more effectively onto subjects via their bodies. But in enlisting the body in its efforts to dominate, power also creates a new means of resistance: “there is something in the body which can revolt against the power which inscribes it.”

Eagleton in his more recent writing returns to the body to find his hope for a political and humanistic renewal in the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq War.

Susan Buck-Morss too looks to the body and its sensations to explain what can constitute—in Walter Benjamin’s formulation—a politicization of aesthetics would respond to the fascist aestheticization of politics.

The extent to which the body and its interest in beauty can be productive without writing either out of aesthetics is shown by Elaine Scarry. She recovers the dross of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, its bodily pleasure, and builds an aesthetics of interest that is politically motivated. It is precisely the sensory component of beauty as it registers on the body, the smelliness and sightliness of it, that produces the effect of “being in error” that she identifies as the structure of aesthetic judgment which motivates

97 Eagleton 28.

98 Thirteen years after the publication of The Ideology of the Aesthetic, Eagleton can nearly repeat the sentence that I just quoted above and passages similar to it throughout that book. He writes, “[i]f power had a body, it would be forced to abdicate. It is because it is fleshless that it fail to feel the misery it inflicts” in After Theory (New York: Basic, 2003) 183.

the perceiver to advocate for fairness and justice in the world.\textsuperscript{100} It is the insistence of the senses, “a perceptual slap or slam that itself has emphatic sensory properties” that are “kinesthetic,” that force one to reevaluate one’s position: “The correction, the alteration in perception, is [...] palpable [...] a striking sensory event.”\textsuperscript{101} For Scarry the perceiver of beauty is very much interested in the existence of beautiful objects; they “ignite the desire to lay hold.”\textsuperscript{102} And the perceiver’s body exists and pleasurably feels its own existence no less than it does the object’s. “Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster,” and at another point, she says that it “moistens.”\textsuperscript{103} The beauty of an object leads you to want to linger on it, but moreover, protect it, reproduce it, and caress it. In the case of a beautiful person, beauty does not shy from eroticism. It changes the perceiver, inwardly and outwardly, spiritually and physically. The adrenaline that Scarry describes, the beating heart, is similar to the \textit{Wallungen} that Abbt and Lessing detected—the perceiver’s heaving, swelling, and quivering body as it perceives another, beautiful body. But it is not altogether the same either, as it is located in a different historical context. Lessing, no less than Scarry, is aware of the aesthetic intersection of beauty and bodily interest as I have just shown. But as I will show in the next chapter, he is by no means convinced that beauty has to lead to perfection, fairness, and justice. He is much more afraid of its potential to mislead, to seduce, and to end in depravity.


\textsuperscript{101} Scarry 12-13.

\textsuperscript{102} Scarry 15.

\textsuperscript{103} Scarry 24.
CHAPTER 2

Lessing and The Dangers of Fisting

The definition of *curiöse Wollust*, with its emphasis on *Neuigkeiten* and *ingeniuse Schrifften*, allow us to recognize Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s journalistic efforts from the early 1750s, *Das neuste aus dem Reich des Witzes* and *Briefe, die neuste Literatur betreffend*, as the products of a voluptuary. In these same years, Lessing was a voluptuary, and he found it necessary to offer a defense of voluptuousness. In his philological-polemical tract *Rettungen des Horaz* (1754), he offers an apology of bodily aesthetics as outlined in Chapter 1. As I shall show in this chapter, Lessing also encounters the unruly potential of the voluptuary’s body and erotic signs and attempts to constrain it over the course of this text.

Beside Horace, Behind Hostius, Before Laocoon

In *Rettungen des Horaz* (translated as *The Vindications of Horace*), a polemical tract published in 1754 and seldom read today, Lessing praises Horace and defends him against accusations of sexual depravity. Lessing first attempts to defuse this charge by embracing it. He exclaims, “Himmel! was für eine empfindliche Seele war die Seele des Horaz! Sie zog die Wollust durch alle Eingänge in sich.” Here Lessing invokes a model of the soul that was an Enlightenment commonplace: the soul as camera obscura.

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104 Zedler 58:1427.

105 LWB 3:164.
Each sense is an opening or aperture to the soul through which passes the raw data of perception in an essentially visual form. It is in this regard that the eyes are windows into the soul—as are the ears, nose, mouth, and skin. But the thrust of Lessing’s exclamation is not epistemological. Rather, it is a provocative rhetorical gambit that valorizes lust and draws untoward attention to titillating sensations and scenarios. Indeed, in this essay Lessing cites extensively from Hoarce’s poetry in order to illustrate the erotic potential of each of the senses, and he finds a place in the refined sexual repertoire for even the earthiest senses of taste and smell. Lessing then ventures even further into risky territory in his attempt to rescue Horace’s reputation. He retells the story of Hostius, a man who cruised Roman baths searching out the men with the largest penises to have them penetrate him. Lessing introduces Hostius, whom he considers unsavory in the extreme, because—as he contends—critics have confused this figure and Horace. He needs to show that Horace was no Hostius. He neither allowed himself to be sodomized like Hostius, nor was he a pederast like his Roman compatriots. It is, therefore, possible to insinuate another, more literal reading of Lessing’s exclamation about Horace’s sensuality: “Heavens! what a sensitive soul Horace had! It drew voluptuousness into itself through all entrances [Eingänge].” Every opening but one, Lessing means to say. Lessing is happy to show that Horace opened all the windows into his soul to enjoy sex, but he needs to show that Horace did not open the backdoor.

It is not surprising that Lessing would tackle such explosive and elicit topics as cultivated sensuality, sodomy, and pederasty in an academic work of philological polemics. His biography exposes him as a committed voluptuary. The period preceding the composition and publication of the Horace essay is marked by Lessing’s wild student
days in Leipzig (1746 – 1748), his experimentation with anacreontic poetry, his introduction to the theater, and extended conflict with his father over these matters. These days ended as he was forced to flee creditors in Leipzig, and the years that followed mark a period of intensive interest in Horace for Lessing. A miserable translation of Horace’s *Odes* (1752) by Samuel Gotthold Lange provided him the direct impetus to write *Ein Vade Mecum für den Hrn. Sam. Gotth. Lange, Pastor in Laublingen* (1754) in which he lists and acidly comments on the shortcomings of that translation. This work was Lessing’s first significant polemical-critical piece and established his reputation as a literary critic to be reckoned with. The Horace essay followed sharp on its heels.

Lessing first published the Horace essay in the third volume of *G. E. Lessings Schriften* in which he promised a “Mischmasche von Critik und Literatur.”106 This volume and its predecessor mark a flurry of *Rettungen*. They contain four other vindications: the fragmentary vindications of Simon Lemnius, as well as *Rettungen des Hieronymus Cardanu*, *Rettungen des Inepti Religiosi, und seines ungenannten Verfassers*, and *Rettungen des Cochläus*. The subjects of these vindications were an Italian free thinker (1501-1576), the anonymous author of a biting invective critical of the Protestant sects, and a Catholic critic and contemporary of Martin Luther (1479-1552). All the vindications follow the same basic pattern of defending dead men against libel in a court-like proceeding. *Rettungen des Horaz*, however, distinguishes itself through its focus on philological and aesthetic issues; the other vindications concern themselves exclusively with theological and historical issues. The Horace essay also represents an

106 LWB 3:154.
exception to the other vindications in that its subject is the only one from antiquity and the only one declared exemplary. The others are vindicated only with caveats, as the full title of the final essay indicates: *Rettungen des Cochläus aber nur in einer Kleinigkeit*.

Wilfried Barner calls the Horace essay “das bedeutendeste Prosadenkmal der ersten Periode Lessings,” and writes that the text belongs “zu den historischen Glanzstücken der poetischen Hermeneutik.” But he also laconically notes that surprisingly few critics have been drawn to it. Wolfgang Ritzel—who was drawn to the work—contends that its broader significance lies in its articulation of the historian’s and the philologist’s ethical commitment to the highest standards of conscientiousness. He also situates *Rettungen des Horaz* in Lessing’s larger oeuvre as evidence of Lessing’s growing interest in the technical questions of artistic medium and production which he only later brings to fruition in *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766). I want to draw a stronger connection between these two texts than Ritzel’s reading, and I want to take into consideration the indiscreet eroticism that lies at the center of that essay.

Although the Horace essay was published more than a decade before the *Laokoon* essay, I argue that they should be read together because they both work through the same aesthetic problem. The Horace essay, in other words, can be read as the first draft of the *Laokoon* essay. The threat that Hostius poses to Horace’s reputation is in a more important sense a threat to Lessing’s aesthetic system. The large penises that Hostius finds are not large enough to satisfy him, so he needs to be fisted in order to find

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107 LWB 3:1008.

satisfaction. He is not literally fisted, but rather he constructs the sensation of being fisted through the use of magnifying mirrors that distort and enlarge the images that they reflect. He is fisted through the use of deceptive illusion, and in so doing he defies the laws of both aesthetics and nature. In order to develop a morally edifying aesthetics, Lessing must rein in Hostius, but neither philosophy, art, beauty, morality, nor theology can provide Lessing the means for achieving this goal. Ultimately, Lessing must invoke an extra-cultural, extra-artistic authority to keep Hostius from being fisted. Lessing arrives at his single effective solution, a political solution, only as he ends his discussion of Horace’s sexual character. This closing move, however, opens his discussion of the Laocoon group ten years later. The same political interdiction that prevents Hostius from practicing his perverse art is the same ban that prevents the Theban rhyparographs (Kotmaler) from practicing their ugly art. Only the state can enforce the separation of the immoral from the moral and the ugly from the beautiful.

The Proper Aesthetics of Proper Sex

In regards to Horace’s supposed sexual activities, Lessing needs to explain away a troublesome rumor about Horace. The immediate purpose of Lessing’s essay is to clear up an ambiguous passage found in the Roman historian Suetonius’s (c. 69 – c. 122 C.E.) *Vita Horatii* (*Life of Horace*). The passage had been taken to mean that the poet had a mirrored chamber in which he would have sex with his mistresses while observing the act from all angles: “Horaz soll in den venerischen Ergötzungen unmäßig gewesen sein; denn man sagt, er habe seine Buhlerinnen in einem Spiegelzimmer genossen, um auf allen Seiten, wo er hingesehen, die wollüstige Abbildung seines Glücks anzutreffen.”

109 LWB 3:163.
In an act of “philologische Mikro-Kriminalistik,” Lessing employs two initial, aesthetic arguments to refute the mirror accusation: one argument, which regards the problem from an aesthetic-moral perspective, and another argument, which regards the problem from an aesthetic-semiotic perspective. In his opening salvo Lessing denies the impropriety of sex in front of mirrors per se:

Weiter nichts? Wo steckt denn die Unmäßigkeit? Ich sehe, die Wahrheit dieses Umstandes vorausgesetzt, nichts darinne, als ein Bestreben, sich die Wollust so reizend zu machen, als möglich. Der Dichter war also keiner von den groben Leuten, denen Brunst und Galanterie eines ist, und die im Finstern mit der Befriedigung eines einzigen Sinnes vorlieb nehmen. Er wollte, so viel möglich, alle sättigen; und ohne einen Wehrmann zu nennen, kann man behaupten, er werde auch nicht den Geruch davon ausgeschlossen haben.  

It is excusable, even laudable for a poet who wishes to cultivate all his senses to hang mirrors above his bed. (This is the context for the exclamation that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter.) But this first polemical gambit is only a feint. According to Lessing’s first argument, the mirror cabinet is morally acceptable, but he goes on to use an essentially aesthetic-semiotic argument to deny the necessity of the so-called na-und? argument. Such a chamber cannot exist, because there is no reason for it to exist. It would have been morally permissible for Horace to have sex in his mirrored chamber, but:

in den süßen Umarmungen einer Chloe hat man die Sättigung der Augen näher, als daß man sie erst seitwärts in dem Spiegel suchen müßte. Wen das Urbild nicht rühret, wird den der Schatten rühren? […] und es wäre ein sehr wunderbares Gesetze, nach welchem die Einbildungskraft wirkte, wenn der Schein mehr Eindruck auf sie machen könnte, als das Wesen.

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110 LWB 3:163.

111 LWB 3:1004.

112 LWB 3:164.
Horace can observe Chloe all he wants, but there’s no need for a mirror to do that. The Enlightenment model of the sign makes the mirror redundant. The mirror is senseless to Enlightenment semiotics, because it is the insertion of a sign between subject and object. If Chloe is the Urbild, then her reflection is only a Bild. The mirror produces shadows and represents a look sideways rather than a direct regard. For Horace to peer into the mirror means to be distracted and to give up the object for a sign. Standing in the presence of the object is equivalent to the object’s direct representation-to-intuition without the need to imagine a hallucinatory presence constituted from a sign. This is a fullness of presence that cannot be outdone; it obviates the usefulness of the aesthetic body.

Once Lessing puts the mirrors behind him, his task to make Horace sexually respectable is almost complete but not quite. Horace might not have had sex with anyone in a mirrored chamber, but one might still suspect that he was a pederast. He was a Roman after all. Lessing expects his readers to cite Horace’s odes to boys as counter-evidence. Lessing rallies his next defense and argues that Horace did not sleep with boys even though he sings about it. Rather, he was merely imitating Anacreon’s odes to the young boy Bathyllus. (Later in Chapter XX of the Laokoon essay, Lessing will go on to justify Anacreon’s odes by claiming that they express praise more for a painter’s skill than so much for the boy’s beauty itself.) Lessing thus argues that the content of a poem is not contingent on the experiences of the poet. A poem is not necessarily the true confessions of its author. In his 1979 bookIllusion und Fiktion: Lessings Beitrag zur poetologischen Diskussion über das Verhältnis von Kunst und Wirklichkeit, Otto Hasselbeck argues that erotic poetry provides Lessing with an early impetus to consider
the nature of aesthetic illusion. He argues that the poetics, and later aesthetics, of the Enlightenment is an attempt to sort out the confused and conflicting conceptions of mimesis and nature as they were inherited from Baroque rhetorical traditions. A fundamental tension produced a contested notion of aesthetic illusion, with Täuschung, Irrtum, Vergessen which conflate Nachahmung and Wirklichkeit on the one, and with Fiktion which maintains a self-conscious awareness of artifice on the other hand. As with so many other narratives of the German Enlightenment in which Lessing appears, Lessing solves the problem: “In vielfältig verflochtenem Dialog mit den Aussagen und Problemstellungen der älteren poetologischen Tradition hat Lessing den Gedanken von der Fiktionalität des in der Literatur Dargestellten aus der ‘bloßen Formel’ befreit und für die Ästhetik der Aufklärung zur aktuell-geschichtlichen Erkenntnis gebracht.”

Anacreontic poetry plays a central role in this development; Lessing must defend his own anacreontic poetry to his father, arguing that it is an intellectual exercise and not a record of his lasciviousness and erotic escapades. He must argue its fictionality. His defense is typical for authors of the genre, and we can recognize it foreshadowing the arguments he relies on in Rettungen des Horaz. Some have gone even further and taken Anacreontic poetry as a precursor to the doctrine of autonomous art: “In [the] refusal [of Lessing’s Anacreontic poetry which he published as Kleinigkeiten in 1751] to submit to the rules


114 Hasselbeck 159.

115 Hasselbeck 69-75.
and didacticism governing early Enlightenment literature, anacreontic poetry presented, in its way, a declaration of the aesthetic autonomy of literature.”¹¹¹

This argument seems at first to contradict his earlier citation of Horace’s odes as proof of his sensuality and tastes. But more importantly, it accords with the aesthetic principles established in his discussion of Horace’s hypothetical mirrors. Verse reflects only shadows, as do mirrors. Horace’s mirrors, if he had had any, would reflect only Chloe’s shadow. His odes to boys reflect only shadows of Anacreon’s love for the young boy Bathyllus. Lessing’s language makes this link explicit: “[…] schämt man sich denn nicht, alles im Ernste auf die Rechnung des Dichters zu schreiben, was er selbst, den künstlichen Blendwerks wegen, darauf geschrieben hat?” And “[e]r konnte es allzuwohl wissen, daß in den Versen nur [der Knabenliebe] Schatten wäre, welcher dem menschlichen Geschlechte wenig Abbruch tun würde”.¹¹⁷ Künstliches Blendwerk recalls mirrors, and the term Schatten appears both here and in Lessing’s first argument against the mirror accusation. The same aesthetic principle that disproved Horace’s use of mirrors here ensures that he did not use boys, or at least that his poetry cannot be taken as proof of it. For Lessing in these cases, the sign is always a shadow, whether it be the natural sign of Chloe’s image in the mirror or the arbitrary sign of language in Horace’s odes.

As David Wellbery argues, the Laocoon essay is not an originary moment. It only codifies the already ubiquitous Enlightenment theory of the sign as it underpinned and

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¹¹⁷ LWB 3:171, 180.
permeated German rationalist aesthetics. It is no surprise then that _Rettungen des Horaz_ conforms to this later, more central text in Lessing’s oeuvre. Both texts require the signs of painting and poetry to function as dead, material traces of the sign author’s spiritual activity that await their reanimation in the sign perceiver’s soul. Wellbery insists that the thrust of this essay is to unify the signs of art on this level, and he argues against readings that seek to differentiate rigorously the signs of painting and poetry according to their spatial, temporal, natural, and arbitrary characteristics. Wellbery provides a diagram to express this unity:

![Progressive Semiosis Diagram](https://example.com/diagram.png)

**FIGURE 3:**

Progressive Semiosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worldliness</th>
<th>Painting</th>
<th>Natural Signs</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Mind / God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(progressive semiosis)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The signs of the sister arts converge on the continuum of progressive semiosis. Progressive semiosis treats art as a medium of direct communication between sign users. The signs of painting are set in motion along the continuum when the artist has chosen to display his or her subject matter optimally according to the rules of selection of the pregnant moment. The painter must arrange natural, spatial signs in such a way that the static tableau invites the perceiver to imagine it in motion. Painting thus takes on a

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118 Wellbery 7-8.

119 Wellbery 136.
temporal, life-like quality in the perceiver’s imagination and approaches the narrative qualities of poetry. Likewise, the signs of poetry are set in motion along the continuum when the poet has chosen to present his or her subject matter in a painterly way. The poet must present his or her arbitrary, temporal signs in such a way that they take on a quasi-visual, image-like immediacy in the perceiver’s imagination. Thus, the signs of painting and poetry converge at the point at which they take on the qualities of their opposite and at which they come to life in the perceiver’s imagination and allow for a sense of immediacy and direct communication between sign users.

The continuum of progressive semiosis also functions diachronically according to Wellbery. The signs of the sister arts move sign users and culture as a whole in a forward direction towards a perfected system of signs that retains the flexibility of arbitrary signs but reclaims the immediacy and necessity of natural signs. Such a system of signs would move humanity completely out of the realm of animal nature and allow it to approach the perfect understanding of God.

The Horace essay, however, exposes a potential danger to progressive semiosis. Hostius’s fisting threatens to break the continuum and derail the teleological movement of art and culture. Hostius’s use of magnifying mirrors introduces a new class of signs into the equation that are neither natural nor arbitrary. They are unnatural because they are distorted and yet possess all the efficacy of the signs of art. They even exceed the potency of the signs of art, and they show that aesthetic illusion does not necessarily move culture along but rather can be coopted for immoral, regressive ends. Another arrow needs to be introduced into Wellbery’s diagram:
Unnatural Signs and Unnatural Sensations

Lessing’s first line of argumentation, his combined aesthetic strategy, should suffice to prove the mirrored chamber—any mirrored chamber—a myth, but one did exist. Only, it did not belong to Horace. Lessing proceeds to introduce his second line of defense against the mirror accusation, a philological argument. His evidence is Hostius, a Roman citizen, roué and contemporary of Horace. To prove that Horace did not have a mirrored chamber, Lessing reaches deep into the annals of classical antiquity and pulls out the story of Hostius who liked the sensation of arms reaching into his rectum. (Lessing finds this anecdote in an obscure passage of Seneca’s *Naturales Quaestiones*.)

He admits that, “Der Unschuld zum Nutzen kann man schon den Mund ein wenig weiter auftun.”\(^{120}\) Lessing opens his mouth wide, but not quite so wide as Hostius’s cheeks. Lessing most certainly does not intend to offer up the story of Hostius for the reader’s delectation. He does not linger long on Hostius, because the story is there to serve only as one argument among several to prove Horace’s respectability, but more importantly because he senses the indecency of presenting this passage. This story is by Lessing’s own admission “ziemlich schmutzig,” and other translators would rather “verstümmeln”\(^{120}\) LWB 3:166.
the original text at this point. But Lessing tells the story and promises to be “weit bescheidener” than Seneca.\textsuperscript{121} Lessing assumes a reader proficient in Latin and leaves other Latin citations untranslated in this tract. But here, loose translation becomes an act of censorship. Lessing finds himself in the bind that he must tell a story that he would ostensibly prefer not to tell. Translation becomes the middle ground, and he softens Seneca’s language. Although Hostius’ sexual practices disgust Lessing, he considers Hostius his discovery and his most significant contribution. He is quite ashamed of and quite proud of his philological coup-de-grâce.

In this second, philological line of attack, the mirror accusation becomes the insertion of a confused copyist who conflates Seneca’s account of Hostius with Suetonius’ account of Horace, the “Einschiebsel eines Abschreibers.”\textsuperscript{122} Hostius had special mirrors made:

\begin{quote}
Spiegel […], die Bilder um vieles vergrößerten, und den Finger an Dicke und Länge einem Arme gleich machten. Diese Spiegel stellte er so, daß wenn er sich selbst von einem seines Geschlechtes mißbrauchen ließ, er alle Bewegungen seines Schänders darinne sehen, und sich an der falschen Größe des Gliedes, gleichsam als an einer wahren, vergnügen konnte. Er suchte zwar schon in allen Badstuben die Muster nach dem vergrößerten Maßstabe aus; gleichwohl aber mußte er seine unersättliche Brunst auch noch mit Lügen stillen.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

The contours of fisting can also be read very easily from these lines. Whether or not a finger or a hand ever penetrated Hostius’s anus is unimportant; the text brings Lessing’s \textit{Finger} and \textit{Arm} into close proximity to Hostius’s abuse and pleasure. As these mirrors magnified, they metaphorically transformed fingers into arms and, similarly, penises into

\textsuperscript{121} LWB 3:166.

\textsuperscript{122} LWB 3:168.

\textsuperscript{123} LWB 3:166-167.
even larger arms. Hostius then experienced receptive anal sex as though he were being penetrated by something at least as large as an arm. Through a chain of linkage in the text, he was being fisted.

Calling this incidence fisting is warranted because the, granted, anachronistic and perhaps excessive term emphasizes not only the processes of magnification and metaphorical substitution that create Hostius’s aesthetic illusion but more importantly also the emphatically bodily sensations that that illusion entails. To stick with Lessing’s terminology, I could call this fisting-as-Einschiebel and offer it as an alternative to Eve Sedgwick’s “fisting-as-écriture.” Sedgwick has previously explored the intersection of fisting and aesthetics—though in a context quite different than German literature of the eighteenth century. In the context of a discussion of the crisis in homosocial culture that is induced by the arbitrarily shifting censure on various forms of male-male desire and relationships, she first coins the term to capture Henry James’s homosexual desire as he acknowledges it and as it bears on the production of his art. (She later revisits the term and expands it into an entire lexicon of terms that link James’s anal eroticism and creative processes.)

It is this process of fisting-as-Einschiebel that threatens the aesthetic framework that Lessing relies upon in his discussion of Horace’s sensuality and later explicitly codifies in his Laocoon essay. Lessing does not entertain the question how Hostius could

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make use of mirrors when an acutely sensual and sensitive Horace could not. If “shadows” and “glances aside,” the redundancy of the sign in the presence of the object, render mirrors pointless and distracting for Horace, then the same should hold for Hostius as well. The kink in Lessing’s argument is that Horace’s quest for a fullness of perception and sensuality via signs and shadows is actually achieved by Hostius through the very same means that were ineffective for the poet. The example of Hostius presents a problem for the model of semiosis that Lessing employs in his aesthetic arguments.

Recall the language that Lessing uses to deny the possibility of Horace using mirrors with Chloe: „es wäre ein sehr wunderbares Gesetz, nach welchem die Einbildungskraft wirkte, wenn der Schein mehr Eindruck auf sie machen könnte, als das Wesen.“ This marvelous and strange law is valid in the end. It is valid in Hostius’s rear end. For Hostius, the sign penetrates him farther—impresses itself into him \((\text{Eindruck machen})\) more deeply—than the object. Hostius, unlike Horace, uses mirrors to experience more than he actually received. Through reflections and shadows he gets more than he gives and outdoes that most sensitive poet and consummate artist.

The following, longer quote from Lessing’s \textit{Laokoon} essay illustrate to what a great degree, Hostius’s mirrors do not accord with his aesthetic laws:

Und hiernächst lasse man sich belehren, daß selbst [die] natürlichen Zeichen [der Malerei] unter gewissen Umständen, es völlig zu sein aufhören können. […] Derjenige Maler also, welcher sich vollkommen natürlicher Zeichen bedienen will, muß in Lebensgröße, oder wenigstens nicht merklich unter Lebensgröße malen. Derjenige welcher zu weit unter diesem Maße bleibt […] kann zwar im Grunde eben derselbe große Künstler sein, \textit{nur muß er nicht verlangen, daß seine Werke eben die Wahrheit haben, eben die Wirkung tun sollen, welche jenes Werke haben und tun}. Eine menschliche Figur von einer Spanne, von einem Zolle, ist zwar das Bild eines Menschen; aber es ist doch schon gewissermaßen ein symbolisches Bild; ich bin mir der Zeichen dabei bewußter, als der bezeichneten Sache; ich muß die verjüngte Figur in meiner
Einbildungskraft erst wieder zu ihrer wahren Größe erheben, und diese Verrichtung meiner Seele, sie mag noch so geschwind, noch so leicht sein, verhindert doch immer, daß die Intuition des Bezeichneten nicht zugleich mit der Intuition des Zeichens erfolgen kann.126

Here Lessing considers the effect of a painting’s scale on the viewer. He considers miniature painting but not monumental painting. He insists that miniaturized natural signs lose their efficacy, their truth and effect, but he does not consider the converse: that magnified natural signs have an excess of truth and effect. Distorted images should remain symbolisch by calling attention to themselves as signifiers at the cost of their ability to convey signifieds. But Hostius proves that wrong.

Hostius generates distorted, unnatural but real-seeming signs that defy Enlightenment semiotics. Horace and Chloe in front of mirrors that do not enlarge would be an acceptable act, although a strictly unnecessary one, as the mirrors produce only shadows. Lessing repeats this language and intensifies it when he considers Hostius’s mirrors. His mirrors and his sexual activity represent a double remove from reality. Mirror images are already merely the shadow of reality; distorted, enlarged mirror images double the lie creating falsch sizes and Lügen. The unnatural sign produces a reality effect stronger than the presence of the object. This reality effect is more than Wellbery’s “illusionary presence of the existentially absent object.”127 The synergistic compiling of falsehoods creates a new virtual truth, a second nature (gleichsam als an einer wahren).

This last formulation of the problem reveals that what appears to be merely a contradiction in Lessing’s argument, a kink in his aesthetic system, is in actuality a full-blown cultural and theological crisis. To recall David Wellbery’s argument, it is the task

126 LWB 5/2:304-305.
127 Wellbery 181.
of German Enlightenment aesthetics to elucidate how poetry and the visual arts can shed
the materiality and arbitrariness of their signs and obtain the spirituality and naturalness
of the imagination. German Enlightenment aesthetics attempts to substitute art for the
“lost word of revelation,” and it locates art between humanity’s archaic origin and
utopian end. Art is to elevate humanity’s sign-use beyond its lost natural origin, beyond
its present in a fallen civilization, up within a perfected reclaimed nature. Hostius’s sign-
use, however, would indicate that aesthetic illusion does not necessarily guarantee art’s
redemptive possibilities. Its immediacy and illusion can lead to something altogether
unnatural, a perverted false nature. Fisting is dangerous.

Conservative Legislation and Progressive Semiosis

Lessing is aware of the threat that fisting and the second nature of Hostius’s
aesthetic illusion undermine the notion of a true nature. He first attempts to diffuse this
threat with a theological argument that draws a distinction between fashion and nature:

Nimmermehr wird man mich überreden können, daß einer welcher der
Natur in solchen Kleinigkeiten [daß er … nicht einmal die Schmünke und
die hohen Absätze leiden wollen] nachgehet, sie in dem allerwichtigsten
sollte verkannt haben. Der, welcher von einem Laster, das die Mode
gebilliget hat, so wie von einer Mode redet, die man mitmachen kann oder
nicht, muß dieses Laster selbst ausgeübet haben.¹²⁸

And “[Horaz] würde etwas edlers in der Liebe nachgebildet haben, wann zu seiner Zeit
etwas edlers [als ein so häßliches Laster als Knabenschänderei] darinne Mode gewesen
wäre.”¹²⁹ One should not be mislead into believing that Lessing’s permissive reading of
Horace’s odes to boys represents a moment in some program for enlightened tolerance, as
the deceptively relativistic line “Allein die Liebe, hat sie nicht jedes Jahrhundert eine

¹²⁸ LWB 3:175.
¹²⁹ LWB 3:178.
andere Gestalt?” might read. While love between men and women may change its *Gestalt*, it forever remains within the bounds of “[die] schön[e] Natur.” What will become the Law of Beauty in the Laocoon essay is here contained in what is natural. In opposition to Horace’s desire for Chloe and nature stand sodomy, pederasty, fisting, and a false nature. Here, pederasty is equivalent to trends in make-up and high-heeled shoes, the essence of which a lack of nature or necessity. Pederasty and high-heeled shoes are always frivolous, decadent, and fallen. Viewed from the perspective that Lessing establishes in *Rettungen des Horaz*, the fashion of pederasty is the distorted imitation of nature and the *Gestalt* of love that is indeed variable through the centuries, but only within certain proscribed limits by nature.

But Lessing senses that this argument is too weak. It is at this point that he introduces his final argument. He must invoke a political argument to secure his aesthetic project. Lessing’s primary defense here is that Horace loved nature and its laws, so he would never have engaged in that unnatural practice. He also obeyed the laws of the Republic, and Caesar Augustus had outlawed pederasty, thereby turning this breach of nature into a crime as well. Horace surely would have heeded this double injunction: “Sollte also wohl der, welcher für die gesellschaftlichen Gesetze so viel Ehrerbietung hatte, die weit heiligeren Gesetze der Natur übertreten haben? Er kannte sie, diese Natur, und wußte, daß sie unsern Begierden gewisse Grenzen gesetzt habe, welche zu kennen eine der ersten Plichten sei.” And, here, Lessing cannot resist a dirty pun,

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130 LWB 3:169.

131 LWB 3:177.

describing Caesar Augustus’s legislative attempts to eradicate pederasty which had “verstopft” “alle Schlupflöcher” in the law.133 Hostius on the other hand is murdered by his slaves who are revolted by his depravity, and Augustus, in a very un-Roman gesture, takes the side of the revolting slaves. He looks the other way and thus sanctions the violent censure of fisting. In short, fisting in Lessing’s text is an aesthetic problem that undermines the grand project of progressive semiosis and it must be solved. Aesthetic illusion is not only a force for progress and good. It can also be harnessed for depravity, unless it is held in check by forces outside the realm of the aesthetic.

Fisting-as-Einschiebsel, or the way in which the Hostius account finds its way into Suetonius’ *Vita Horatii*, is repeated throughout the text as the trope of distortion and insertion, falsehoods becoming truth. Penises experienced as arms are being inserted into Hostius’s anus, inaccurate copy is being inserted in Suetonius’s annals, and Lessing’s German *Arm* and *Finger* are being inserted where Seneca had his Latin finger and arm in the *Quaestiones Naturales*. Distortion and insertion opens up holes in buttocks, manuscripts, and translations. Hostius’s mirrors enlarge and it becomes sensation, the copyist gets it wrong and it becomes history, and Lessing mistranslates and it becomes a decorous vindication. Only the law, only Caesar Augustus, can close all these holes. The male’s *Eingänge*, *Schlupflöcher*, and *Öffnungen* must be closed; the Laocoon essay closes Laocoon’s and *Rettungen des Horaz* closes Horace’s.

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133 LWB 3:178.
Postscript: How Winckelmann Won the Laocoon Debate

The principal statement of German rationalist aesthetics, Lessing’s Laocoon essay, self-consciously defines itself against Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s vision of Greek art. Famously, the Laocoon essay begins with Winckelmann. The first chapter begins by naming Winckelmann and establishing the thesis of *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerie und Bildhauerkunst* (1755) as its foil: “Das allgemeine vorzügliche Kennzeichen der griechischen Meisterstücke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst, setzet Herr Winckelmann in eine edele Einfalt und stille Größe, sowohl in der Stellung als im Ausdrucke.” Somewhat less famously, however, the Laocoon essay ends with Winckelmann as well. In Chapter Twenty-Nine, Lessing criticizes Winckelmann for his less than rigorous examination of his literary sources: “Schon in seinen Schriften über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Kunstwerke ist Herr Winckelmann einigemal durch den Junius verführt worden.” And again: “Denn hätte [Winckelmann] den Juvenal selbst nachgesehen, so würde er sich nicht von der Zweideutigkeit des Wortes ‘lanx’ haben verführen lassen, sonder sogleich aus dem Zusammenhange erkannt haben, daß der Dichter nicht Waagen oder Waageschalen, sondern Teller und Schüsseln meine.” Such a closing is understandably overlooked, as it is tedious and anti-climatic. Whether Juvenal meant scales or plates is of no interest to readers of either Lessing or Winckelmann today. The rather direct beginning and end of

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134 LWB 5/2:17.

135 LWB 5/2:200. Franciscus Junius (François Du Jon, 1589-1677), author of *De pictura veterum*, 1637 and 1694.

136 LWB 5/2:202.
the Laocoon essay notwithstanding, the most concise expression of Lessing’s conception of his essay’s relationship to Winckelmann appears in his unpublished notes: “Laocoon; Widerlegung der Winckelmannischen Anmerkung.”  

Lessing’s refutation of Winckelmann appears to have been decisive. Although Werner Schubert summarizes the literature on Winckelmann and Lessing as infinitely repeating the questions how each author influenced the other and how their visions of art and antiquity compare, he must admit that there has always been a general sense that Lessing prevails when the two are set against each other. By all accounts, Lessing won the argument that he started with Winckelmann over the dating of the Laocoon group and whether its characteristic sigh was the expression of the greatness of the Greek soul or merely a requirement of the sculptural medium. He won so handily that Winckelmann never even managed a rebuttal; Winckelmann’s behavior suggests he had been stunned. Although Lessing’s engagement with Winckelmann quickly descends from the broad and productive to the nit-picking, the impression left by the whole is that Lessing got the best of Winckelmann.

However, the pedantic closing of the Laocoon essay suggests that Lessing’s argument with Winckelmann extends beyond the merely art-historical (the dating of the Laocoon group), philological (the meaning of lanx), or even aesthetic (the expressive potential and limitations of art); Lessing’s quip about Winckelmann’s sloppy use of sources intimates and condemns—through the use of the verb verführen—the

137  LWB 5/2:257.

homoeroticism at the root of Winckelmann’s work. Lessing’s disapproval of Winckelmann’s seduction by another man suggests that the constitutive role of homoeroticism in their respective aesthetics is another point of comparison, and compared in this regard the Laocoon essay falls far short of being a definitive refutation of Winckelmann. A homoerotic seduction might mislead Winckelmann to misunderstand the originals with which he works, but this homoeroticism is Winckelmann’s victory as it establishes an entire tradition of German aesthetics.\textsuperscript{139} Winckelmann’s homoeroticism creates the conditions necessary for the flourishing of the aesthetics of German classicism; Paul Derks calls this “die fundamentale Einsicht, daß die von Goethe inaugurierte Klassik ihr Schönheitsideal einem Homosexuellen verdanke, der es nur entwickeln und eindringlich darstellen konnte, weil er homosexuell war.”\textsuperscript{140} This homoeroticism lies at the root of German classicism’s vision of antiquity, it also shapes and accounts for the successful dissemination of that vision through homosocial friendship and epistolary culture, as Simon Richter argues. Entire homosocial networks were founded on what he calls the imatio Winckelmanni.\textsuperscript{141} As Alice Kuzniar and the

\textsuperscript{139} Alice Kuzniar writes that “[...] beauty and grace are not invariably associated with the feminine, as scholarship is wont to claim. To push the argument further, one is tempted to trace a lineage from Winckelmann to Hölderlin of the homoerotically beautiful, a tradition running counter to the (post)-Kantian disinterested study of beauty [...]” Alice A Kuzniar , ed., Outing Goethe and His Age (Stanford: Stanford U P, 1996) 15.

\textsuperscript{140} Paul Derks Die Schande der heiligen Päderastie: Homosexualität und Öffentlichkeit in der deutschen Literatur 1750-1850 (Berlin: Rosa Winkel, 1990) 208.

contributors to the volume Outing Goethe have shown, the age of Goethe finds its “self-grounding in a gay-positiveness” with Winckelmann at its center.142

Kuzniar argues that this homoeroticism is acknowledged, neither closeted nor condemned, but even more significantly that it cannot be aligned exactly with current configurations of sexuality and gender.143 The gay-ness of which Kuzniar writes is a bracketed and guarded use of the term gay; it is not meant to connote the identities that “gay” and “homosexual” mean today; rather it is invoked mindful of “various homosexualities” and used while “recognizing a plurality of sexual expression.”144 And if Winckelmann’s homoeroticism does not align exactly with recognizable categories today, it also does not align easily with narratives of the history of sexuality. Kuzniar argues that Foucault’s term sodomy cannot contain Winckelmann’s homoeroticism: “it is with Winckelmann that eighteenth-century homosexuality begins decisively to accrue meaning beyond that which Foucault ascribes to it and which he capsulates in the term ‘sodomy.’”145 Winckelmann’s homoeroticism, for example, is not centered around the (ab)use of the genitals that defines sodomy; rather, “Winckelmann inaugurated a cultured, hence permissible voicing of same-sex attraction.”146

To compare Winckelmann’s and Lessing’s aesthetics, then, is not to identify merely a difference between a gay-positive and a homophobic aesthetics, but rather to

142 Kuzniar, 31. See also, Susan E. Gustafson, Men Desiring Men: The Poetry of Same-Sex Identity and Desire in German Classicism, (Detroit: Wayne State U P, 2002).

143 Kuzniar 9, 11-12.

144 Kuzniar 4, 16.

145 Kuzniar 9.

146 Kuzniar 12.
recognize how Winckelmann creates a same-sex attraction that is not sodomitical and how Lessing collapses same-sex attraction to sodomy. In *Rettungen des Horaz* the abuse of aesthetic illusion, the disruption of progressive semiosis, coincides with male-male sex, whether Horace and young boys or Hostius and grown men. In contrast to Winckelmann’s aesthetic, Lessing’s aesthetic reduces male-male sex to sodomy. Lessing’s contempt for Hostius and pederasty is expressed in a traditional condemnation of sodomy that can be clearly read in his description of Hostius’s mirrors when he uses the terms *mißbrauchen* and *Schänder*. Elsewhere in the Horace essay, he calls male-male sex “allzugrob[e] Ausschweifungen,” “unzüchtig[e] Lüste,” “widernatürliche[s] Verbrechen der Wollüstlinge seiner [des Horaz] Zeit,” “Knabenliebe,” and “Knabenschänderei.”¹⁴⁷ The entry for *Sodomie* in Zedler’s *Universallexikon* shows just how typical Lessing’s nomenclature is for discourses surrounding male-male sex in this period: male-male sex is subsumed under sodomy as a crime constituted by “einen jeden unnatürlichen Gebrauch der Zeugungs-Gleider, es sey mit Menschen, oder Vieh” and “wieder die Natur Unzucht .. Mit was? Vieh, oder Knaben?”¹⁴⁸ Before ultimately rejecting the possibility that Horace could have been a pederast, Lessing briefly considers the scenario hypothetically. He insists on recognizing no difference between Hostius’s practices and pederasty. He posits: “Nun malt man uns den Horaz zwar nicht völlig als einen Hostius; allein was daran fehlt, ist auch so groß nicht…” and “… so ist Hostius dem Horaz nur noch in kleinen Umständen überlegen; und ihr Hauptverbrechen ist eins.

¹⁴⁷ LWB 3:168, 173, 175.

¹⁴⁸ Zedler 38:1742. Also quoted in Derks 22.
Es ist eins, sage ich…” He nullifies the difference between penetrative / receptive anal sex as well as age differentials. All male-male relations are sodomitical and bad, and any difference between them is academic. In fact, what most stands out is Lessing’s adamant refusal to recognize any differences. Here, as in the Horace essay, Lessing is continuing Augustus’s project to close holes in the law, to foreclose homoerotic possibilities that Winckelmann opens up.

It is, of course, not only homoerotic possibilities that Lessing forecloses. After all, he takes away Horace and Chloe’s mirrors as well. He grants them the right to use mirrors only to take away their desire to do so. This conflictive movement is indicative of a general tension of erotic literature as it exists under the paradigm of absorption in the Age of Lessing. The voluptuary is allowed to be interested in bodily beauty in art; he is allowed to feel its pleasurable effects on his body. But the danger exists that the signs themselves and their effects might become too interesting. Erotic signs are allowed to stimulate the voluptuary’s body, but he must not come to prefer the stimulation that they afford to the stimulation that another real body can afford. The paphian presence must not compete with the actual presence of the beloved; Chloe’s shadow must not compete with Chloe. The erotic sign must yield to its referent. This dynamic, then, aligns with Wellbery’s model of semiosis and aesthetics in this period to the extent that erotic art is taken to be a special case of art. The signs of art whether erotic or not must yield to something other than themselves; they must yield to the hallucinatory presences and sensate intuitions that they engender. But the signs of erotic art together with their effects both bodily and spiritual must cede the ground yet again when confronted with actual

\[^{149}\text{LWB 3:167.}\]
bodies. The danger of fisting, then, exceeds the specifically sodomitical threat that it carries in the case of Hostius. The latent danger of erotic literature is that it can render every reader a Hostius in a sense other than sodomitical. Erotic literature has the potential to fist every voluptuary, in essence rendering him a porn addict—to resort to another anachronistic term. In the next chapter, I shall examine Wieland’s solution to this problem.
CHAPTER 3
Wieland’s Shocking Prurience

In this chapter I shall examine Christoph Martin Wieland’s major works of the mid-1760s as they participate in the discourse of bodily aesthetics. These works are his first novel, *Der Sieg der Natur über die Schwämerey, oder die Abenteuer des Don Sylvio von Rosalva, Eine Geschichte worinn alles Wunderbare natürlich zugeht* (1764), a set of verse tales, the *Comische Erzählungen* (1765), and his second and most famous novel, *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766 / 1767). Whereas in *Rettungen des Horaz* (1755) Gotthold Ephraim Lessing apologizes for the voluptuous body as a site of aesthetic pleasure (when properly cultivated), he also attempts to constrain it. The voluptuous body can be abused when the signs that pleasure it are unnatural (distorted or sodomitical) or when signs exert an unnatural appeal that is greater than another body, so Lessing suppresses those instances in which such abuse might occur. Lessing assumes this tamed voluptuous body as a model of aesthetic response in *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766) in which the paphian presence is allowed to stimulate the voluptuary’s body only in the absence of a living female body. Like Lessing, Wieland recognizes a certain resistance of the signs of art to cede the ground to real bodies at the appropriate moment, (a sort of “stickiness of signs” that Lessing implicitly recognizes in the Horace essay), but unlike Lessing, Wieland harnesses rather than constrains the voluptuous body in order to overcome this stickiness of the erotic
sign. Wieland creates an erotic literature that probes the voluptuous body by testing its responsiveness and the extent to which it can be manipulated. He creates an erotic literature that shocks the reader’s body and arouses it to action.

These aesthetic experiments are shocking, because they are obscene. On one hand, Wieland develops a distinctive style of narration that follows Lessing’s precepts for beautiful, vivid poetry. Wieland’s writings maximize their potential by respecting the limits of poetry as Lessing delineates them in the Laocoon essay. But through this effective use of style, they achieve a maximum of obscenity. Wieland’s fiction achieves its shocking effect precisely by allowing readers to experience obscene aesthetic illusion on their bodies. They are aroused and feel *Wallungen*. On the other hand, these works are shocking also because they—though similar in their aims—are unexpectedly varied and diverse in form. These aesthetic experiments range across and freely combine genres, periods, and literary traditions. They are doubly shocking to their contemporaries, because in their obscenity they thwart expectations through their combination of verse narrative and burlesque, sentimentality and libertinism, novel and fairy tale, pedagogical intent with bawdiness, and morality with obscenity.

Both Lessing and Wieland examine the power that aesthetic illusion has to affect the body. For Lessing this potential can be either good—as it constitutes in part the desired effect of beauty—or bad as it threatens the undermine his aesthetic project as a whole. For Wieland, it can be either good or bad, but more importantly it can be trained and transformed. It is a site for the intervention of the teacher of virtue. In making this argument, I take my cue from Kathleen Lubey and her notion of amatory aesthetics. Lubey poses the question why the British novelist Eliza Haywood (1693 – 1756) devotes
her early works to eroticism and seduction. She answers that the author “refuse[s] to posit a contest between illicit pleasure and morality,” and that “[i]n fact, Haywood utilizes eroticism for pedagogic ends, demanding that readers detoxify their visceral response to ‘warm’ description by remaining mentally attentive to the instructive warnings contained therein.”

Readers learn how easy, fast, and dangerous seduction can be as they themselves are seduced. Fortunately for the reader of Haywood’s novels, the novel seduces him or her safely—his or her seduction cannot lead to any harm, since in the end he or she is alone in a room with only a book, not a rake. Wieland’s post-seraphic works operate in a similar manner, enticing and seducing the reader in service of virtue and edification.

However, for Wieland, the problem that his amatory aesthetics must solve is precisely that the reader is alone in a room with a book. Wieland’s erotic fiction must be arousing enough to drive the reader to put down the book and find a lover.

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151 My reading of Wieland differs from another readings of Wieland as “aesthetic educator” in precisely this last point. See Josef Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 41. Chytry identifies Wieland as such by virtue of his journalistic activities, his facilitating role in assembling the pantheon of Weimar intellectuals, and his help in “transferring Winckelmann’s lessons to modern life” which for Chytry means experimenting with the Bildungsroman, idyll, and music drama. (42-45). The body and the bodily reaction to beauty are very far from his model of aesthetic education, as can be seen in his reading of the judgment of Paris. The myth is of central importance: “Paris’s Judgment records the very birth of the basic subject matter of aesthetics […] it initiates the aesthetic judgment itself.” But Chytry’s reading of the myth is very different than Abbt’s reading of Wieland’s burlesque: “[Aphrodite’s] ‘gift’ of Helen […] represents the appropriate reward for executing the aesthetic judgment: namely, the literal presencing of a beauty that echoes its universal source” (xxxvii-xxxviii). As Chytry allegorizes the Judgment of Paris into “the single most important source for the future blending of the political and the poetic,” he leaves Paris’s swelling body out of his discussion (xxxviii-xxxix). But it is changing, metamorphosing bodies as they are aroused by bodily beauty that Wieland’s post-seraphic writings stage.
His works emphasize the bodily, somatic responses of the characters in the fiction in hopes of triggering similar reactions in the readers themselves. He thus creates what is more explicitly an aesthetics of arousal than an amatory aesthetics.

The conflict between aesthetic effects and representational means in the Age of Lessing, or the tension between erotic art and absorption that I discuss in Chapter 1, necessitates Wieland’s solution to the sticky pages of erotic literature. The shocking prurience that Wieland displays in these works is his response to this problem. But taken together these same works record another solution to the problem of erotic literature under absorption. They track a movement away from absorption. They precociously anticipate how bodily aesthetics will function after the Age of Lessing has come to a close. Bodily aesthetics will come to bypass hallucinatory presences—it will do away with a stubbornly persistent paphian presence that refuses to recede—and come to function as erotic ornamentation that is all surface.

Comische Erzählungen: Frivolity and Frustration

German letters has had a difficult time knowing what to do with Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813). His many epithets include courtly rococo poet, bourgeois novelist, publicist, enlightenment reformer, the first Weimar classicist, and proto-Romantic—or more fancifully—rococo-Romantic. Wieland, though an early mentor to Goethe and one of the preeminent literary figures of eighteenth-century Germany, has a reputation that has suffered at the disavowal of subsequent generations. Classicists considered his works too digressive, and Romantics called them effeminate and un-German. But the

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152 Friedrich Sengle, Wieland (Stuttgart: Metler, 1949) 169.

153 Sengle 176.
loudest, most common dismissal of his works has been the charge that they are obscene and immoral.¹⁵⁴ In 1827 Johann Gottfried Gruber, Wieland’s first biographer, had such accusations in mind when he wrote that “eine ansehnliche Partei spricht dem Herrn Wieland Genie und Geschmack ab und warnt vor ihm wie vor dem leidigen Satan, da er seine Nazion an den Abgrund des ungeheuersten sittlichen Verderbens geführt [habe].”¹⁵⁵

These criticisms are reactions primarily to the so-called post-seraphic writings that he published in the second half of 1760s and that mark his break with the work of his youth and his tutelage under Johann Jakob Bodmer.¹⁵⁶ The one-time singer of virtue and sentimentality suddenly made waves on the literary market with hybrid works that mixed genres, national literatures, and sexual arrangements into odd and new configurations that were difficult to classify. Perhaps what was most disconcerting about all this was the sense of his combining the incompatible: in these works bourgeois and aristocratic perspectives as well as the moral and the immoral stand side by side, and patently outdated literary elements that were no longer in vogue are placed into arrangements that were perceived to be strikingly modern.

Of these works, Wieland’s Comische Erzählungen were the most scandalous. They were published anonymously. Despite the absence of author and publisher

¹⁵⁴ One of the most striking examples of the condemnation of Wieland’s works is when followers of Klopstock burn Wieland in effigy. Hans-Jürgen Schrader, “Mit Feuer, Schwert und schlechtem Gewissen: zum Kreuzzug der Hainbündler gegen Wieland,” Euphorion 78 (1984) 325-367.


¹⁵⁶ The term post-seraphic is commonly used in the secondary literature on Wieland and derives from a nickname that was mockingly given to him as a young sentimental writer in Switzerland, “the seraph.”
information on the title page, eighteenth-century readers would have some idea of what to
expect. The title alone would have suggested the tradition of Jean de La Fontaine’s
*Contes et Nouvelles en Vers* (1664) and *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* (1669),
erotic tales in verse taken primarily from classical mythology.\(^{157}\) Our hypothetical
readers might already have suspected why this work appeared anonymously, before
turning past the title page. Thumbing through the pages, they would have found four
tales and their suspicions confirmed. They would have recognized the four titles “Das
Urtheil des Paris,” “Endymion,” “Juno und Ganymede” and “Aurora und Cephalus” as
stories about the beauty of Greek goddesses, Diana’s paramour, Jupiter’s wife and his
boy lover, and a mortal’s abduction by a goddess. The epigraphs taken from Lucian’s (c.
125 – c. 180 C.E.) satiric *Dialogues of the Gods* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* that preface
each story would have guaranteed that these tales would be told without the highest
regard for piety and morality.

If our hypothetical browsers were anything like actual readers of the time, then
they would have probably bought the book. The *Comische Erzählungen* were reprinted
several times. The *Gesamtverzeichnis des deutschsprachigen Schrifttums* lists a reprint
from the following year, and a “zweyte verbesserte Auflage” in 1768.\(^{158}\) Together
Goedeke and the *Gesamtverzeichnis* list an additional eight reprints (and a French

\(^{157}\) For a brief discussion of the history of verse narratives in English, German and
French, see Thomas Lautwein, *Erotik und Empfindsamkeit: C. M. Wielands “Comische
Erzählungen” und die Gattungsgeschichte der europäischen Verserzählung im 17. und
18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996) 26-30, 60-68.

\(^{158}\) Peter Geils et al., *Gesamtverzeichnis des deutschsprachigen Schrifttums* (München:
translation of “Endymion”) published before 1800.\footnote{Die Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Institut für Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, \textit{Goedekes Grundriss zur Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung} (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962).} The University of Chicago owns an additional reprint from 1769 listed in neither reference work, bringing the total number of known authorized and unauthorized printings and pirated editions in the eighteenth century to twelve.

Consumers would probably have had an easier time buying a copy in the eighteenth century than today. No edition is currently in print, and \textit{Projekt Gutenberg} has no digital version. Modern buyers would have to search used bookstores where they could buy one of the two twentieth-century reprints from 1984 or 1926—or for a few hundred euros more one of the editions from the eighteenth century. Of course, the \textit{Comische Erzählungen} are not actually difficult to find, but today they are easier to find in collections of Wieland’s works than under a separate cover. Wieland’s authorship was hardly a secret even in 1765; he was outing almost immediately by an anonymous reviewer.

There seems to be little more scholarly interest in the \textit{Comische Erzählungen} in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries than consumer interest. Though once popular, these tales are not now considered crucial or central to the canon. The rather underwhelming presence that the \textit{Comische Erzählungen} have left in German scholarship after their initial appearance can be attributed to their perceived frivolity. On behalf of the Wieland-Sonderausschuss of the \textit{Lessing Yearbook}, John A. McCarthy wrote announcing Elizabeth Boa the winner of the 1980 C. M. Wieland-Preisausschreiben that 

\[\text{sei der Abtschen Rezension der Comischen Erzählungen in der Allgemeinen}\]
With this statement the preeminent Wieland scholars of the late twentieth century argue that these tales had been misunderstood and dismissed for more than two hundred years, from the initial reviews onwards, because no one has known what to make of their central component: their eroticism.

The eroticism of the Comische Erzählungen unleashed a series of reactions by Wieland’s contemporaries and a series of equivocations and defenses on his part. By Wieland’s own admission, his comic tales were a little “schlüpfrig.” He was nevertheless surprised and angered to hear them denounced as immoral. “Freilich darf man sie nicht nach der Sittenlehre beurtheilen,” wrote one anonymous reviewer, because in this regard they are worthy of “Verdammungsurtheile.” They are “unmoralisch” and an affront to “gute Sitten”—later in the same review the critic also speculated that Wieland was the author, a move that upset Wieland even more than the moral condemnation.  

Wieland offered the defense that the lascivious, adulterous behavior of the gods in his tales had been intended as good satire of bad morals. But this apology never really gained traction, although Wieland often insisted that that was indeed his intention.

Although it is indisputable that Wieland’s eroticism has embarrassed many of his readers, there is another reason why his comic tales have left scholars nonplussed: the

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161 Rev. of Comische Erzählungen by Christoph Martin Wieland, Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste 1 (1766): 300.
Comische Erzählungen are disconcertingly hybrid. Abbt’s review that McCarthy references and that I cite in Chapter 1 gives the following suggestion along with various other bits of advice to the author: “daß er sich eine Manier im Erzählen wählte und sich nicht bald Fontainen, bald Crebillon, bald Marmonteln, bald einen anderen zu erreichen vorsetzte, welches bey ihm gleichsam mit der Laune oder vielleicht je nachdem er einen dieser Autoren zuletzt in der hand gehabt, abwechselt! Auch Küchenstücke wollen eine feste Manier haben.”\textsuperscript{162} This point—that the style of the tales is inconsistent—is the crux of Abbt’s criticism, not the amorality or the lack of gravity of these tales. Abbt’s review indicates that the Comische Erzählungen in some ways both exceed and frustrate the expectations that the title raises. These tales are not adequately confined by the rules of genre that should govern them—conventions that render the tales governable for critics.

Abbt’s observations are confirmed by the author’s own comments on the tales. In letters to his publisher Wieland initially envisions multiple volumes of other Comische Erzählungen. Reading Wieland’s ever-changing plans for the tales can induce vertigo. He suggests tales that he never writes and tales that eventually take other forms.\textsuperscript{163} He suggests appending short poems to the tales.\textsuperscript{164} And he alternately insists on publishing Musarion and Idris und Zenide as Comische Erzählungen and emphatically denies that they can ever appear together.\textsuperscript{165} At times Wieland suggests that he might not want to

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\textsuperscript{162} Abbt 215-216.

\textsuperscript{163} WB 3:261, 293 – 294, 298, 408, 460.

\textsuperscript{164} WB 3:445.

\textsuperscript{165} WB 3:298, 301, 396, 408, 431-432, 445, 461.
see “Das Urtheil des Paris” republished, while insisting he loves the other three tales.\textsuperscript{166}

That tale is never dropped, but eventually “Juno und Ganymede” is. Wieland revises the tales significantly between reprintings.\textsuperscript{167} And he suggests different titles and tale combinations for reprints.\textsuperscript{168} When he argues that \textit{Musarion} should appear with the \textit{Comische Erzählungen}, he calls it “ein ziemlich systematisches Gemisch von Philosophie, Moral, und Satyre.”\textsuperscript{169} But soon thereafter he decides it can’t appear with them, because it is “eine neue Art von Gedichten, welche zwischen dem Lehrgedicht, der Komödie, und der Erzählung das Mittel hält, oder von allen dreyen etwas hat.”\textsuperscript{170} And \textit{Idris und Zenide} is “das erste in seiner Art” and “par consequent ne ressemble à rien.”\textsuperscript{171}

It is:

Die Quintessenz aller Abenteuer der Amadise und Feen-Mährchen – Und in diesem Plan, unter diesem frivolen Ansehen, Metaphysick, Moral, Entwicklung der geheimsten Federn des menschl. Herzens, Critick, Satyre, Charactere, Gemählde, Leidenschaften, Reflexionen, Sentimens – kurz alles was sie wollen, mit Zaubereyen, Geister-Historien, Zweikämpfen, Centauren, Hydern, Gorgonen, Hyänen und Amphisbänen, so schön abgesetzt und durch einander geworfen, und das alles in einem so manchfaltigen Styl […]\textsuperscript{172}

\textsuperscript{166} WB 3:431 – 432.


\textsuperscript{168} WB 3:461.

\textsuperscript{169} WB 3:396.

\textsuperscript{170} WB 3:408.

\textsuperscript{171} WB 3:387.

\textsuperscript{172} WB 3:396.
Wieland’s exuberance here is palpable. His shifting and indecisiveness are more than mere enthusiasm or lack of focus; they indicate a strategic genre confusion that should be taken into account when interpreting these tales.

If his contemporaries had difficulties describing and categorizing these works and if Wieland could not decide exactly what he was writing, then recent readers have reduced this dynamic to an either-or dilemma. Jürgen Jacobs describes two camps dominating the interpretation of the *Comische Erzählungen* in the twentieth century. One sees “den Anstrich von Libertinage” in them, and the other looks for “eine Moral […], die diese Texte im Einklang mit Wielands übrigen Werk hält.”173 Jacobs concludes that both sides are partially correct: “Die *Comischen Erzählungen* […] sind Symptome für Wielands prekäre, schwankende Lage zwischen den Gegensätzen von empfindsamen Tugendkult und sinnenfreudiger Libertinage.”174 I argue, however, that Wieland’s post-seraphic works do not need to be read as written in either one style or another, as either virtuous or sensual, sentimental or libertine, or as something poised between two extremes precariously alternating from one line to the next by mistake. Rather, these tales depend on their indeterminacy for their shocking aesthetic effect. They employ sensuality in service of virtue and obscenity in service of pedagogy, as they mediate between bodies, not only between the voluptuary’s body and the paphian presence but also between the bodies of husband and wife or husband-to-be and wife-to-be.


174 Jacobs, 44.
Stylists, Beauticians, and Aestheticians

In the most comprehensive study of the *Comische Erzählungen* available, Thomas Lautwein reads “Das Urtheil des Paris” as what he calls a shift in aesthetic paradigms couched in the language of erotic attraction. In his reading, Paris prefers Venus’ rococo features, her small frame, thin ankles to the baroque features of Juno and Minerva, their majesty, and their large breasts and frames. I would like to state the problem more dynamically. I argue that what becomes evident in “Das Urtheil des Paris” is less Paris’s choice between styles of beauty or a question of preferences than it is the shifting nature of how beauty is mediated through art and experienced. The vicissitudes of aesthetics is more than a chronicle of taste which notes preferences for some features over others: fat to thin, light to dark, the popularity of this or that type. It is not merely one body type that falls in or out of favor, rather, it is how these bodies are represented and appreciated that changes. What Lautwein calls a shift in aesthetic paradigms is more properly a shift in the taste of stylists and beauticians. Aestheticians, however, trace how Venus inhabits verse rather than exactly what Venus should look like. Aestheticians might react to a reading of the *Comische Erzählungen* like Count Stadion, Wieland’s patron at the time, who “wunderte sich gar zu sehr, daß man das alles in deutscher Sprache sagen könne.” He was amazed to hear what had always been for him the language of bureaucracy generating lusty tales that gave him pleasure.


176 WB 304.
As I have discussed Chapter 1, Abbt quotes a passage from “Das Urtheil des Paris” and uses it against Wieland. He takes these lines out of their original context and transforms them into a statement of normative poetics. The narrator of “Das Urtheil des Paris” uses these lines to explain why Juno, Minerva, and Venus must disrobe so that Paris is able to judge their beauty. The narrator offers this explanation to overcome the fictional audience’s objections to the goddess’s presenting themselves in naturalibus.

When the narrator speaks these lines, they are not the criteria of a poem’s beauty. Rather, they are the criteria by which Paris judges the beauty of the goddess’s nude bodies:

> Sie sollten ihre heil’gen Leiber
> Vor Männer-Augen so entweyhn?
> Sich critisch untersuchen lassen,
> Ob nichts zu groß, ob nichts zu klein,
> Zu lang, zu kurz? Ob alle Theile fein
> Symmetrisch in einander passen,
> Durch gute Nachbarschaft einander Reitze leyh’n,
> Schön an sich selbst, im ganzen schöner sey’n?
> Ob auch ihr Fell durchaus so rein,
> So glatt und weiß wie ihre Hände?
> Kein schwarzer Flek, kein stechend Bein
> Den weichen Alabaster schände;
> Und kurz im ganzen Werk, von Anfang bis zu Ende,
> Der Kunst gemäß, auch alles edel, frey,
> Untadelich, und rund und lieblich sey?

The same examination (critisch untersuchen) and evaluation by which Paris is to judge the beauty of a woman’s body can be applied equally well by the critic to poetry. Abbt makes no distinction between the bodies of the goddesses and “Das Urtheil des Paris.” Not only a statement of prescriptions for beauty (whether for a woman or for poetry), this passage is also an exhibition of desirable bodies. It is a list of formally desirable characteristics, and it is also the first of several peepshows in this tale. It is in this last

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177 CE 20-21.
regard that it participates in bodily aesthetics. Although neither an actual body nor even its visual representation is actually present before the reader—there were no illustrations—Abbt imagines the effect of the verse on the reader to be indistinguishable from an erotic encounter with an actual body. According to Abbt, the fine, symmetrical verse arouses the narrator just as the fine, symmetrical bodies of the goddesses arouse Paris. The lines of verse conjure the sensation of the numinous presence of the godly bodies to the narrator who is no longer frigid.

But Wieland’s *Comic Tales* resist Abbt’s slight-of-hand by which he has them act as complete and whole stand-ins for the goddesses. The *Comic Tales* insist that they are not perfect substitutes for the goddesses—indeed, they acknowledge a certain danger inherent to the placing of bodies into the tales or Venus into verse. They insist that they must hold the reader at a distance from the godly bodies rather than issuing the reader into the paphian presence. This distancing mechanism is Wieland’s attempt to avoid a conflict between the representational means and aesthetic effects of erotic literature; it is his attempt to navigate the sticky sign.

The goddesses in these tales frequently place their mortal male lovers into a position that can best be described as readerly. But whereas Abbt equates Wieland and Paris by pushing Wieland forward into the latter’s position, the goddesses explicitly move Paris a step back to the same position as Wieland—that is, Paris is more like a reader than Wieland is like a first-hand observer:

Versichre dichs, wir kommen aus der Höhe;  
Du siehst Gesichter hier, wie man im Himmel trägt;  
Sie haben nur die Stralen abgelegt,  
Die, wie man weiß, sonst Götter-Köpfe schmücken,
Denn diese köntest du nicht ungestraft erblicken.\textsuperscript{178}

As they stand before Paris, without their auras, they are not themselves. They appear to Paris at a certain distance. They are only shadows or representations of themselves, and so like Abbt they affirm that their effect on Paris is the same as their effect on the reader who knows them only through the signs of the text and the imagination. When they admit that they are appearing without their auras, they explicitly deny the immediacy and fullness of the \textit{praesens numen} that Abbt believes that Wieland feels. Indeed, they intimate the danger of such a full and immediate presence (\textit{nicht ungestraft erblicken}). Whereas Abbt insists on their numinous presence to Paris and their aesthetic equivalent to Wieland, they insist on the absence of their presence to Paris, and hence to the narrator as well. But the eponymous protagonist of “Endymion” is a better stand-in for the reader than Paris, because his tale is explicitly about how erotic literature functions. In his tale we learn that every erotic tale contains the distant kiss of a goddess and that such an erotic tale is as close as the reader can approach that goddess.

The tale “Endymion” places Endymion in the same position as the reader—both their bodies react to Diana’s caresses as though they were reacting to erotic narratives rather than Diana’s touches directly. My reading thus represents a fundamental disagreement with Elizabeth Boa’s reading of the same tale (in her prize-winning essay that I mention above). Specifically we disagree on how to interpret the word “dichterisch” which appears in the opening lines of this tale. Boa argues that “The thesis of the \textit{Comische Erzählungen} is the central value of sexual pleasure to men and women

\textsuperscript{178} CE 15.
alike. With their mythical setting the poems have an abstract simplicity.”  Boa elaborates on the significance of the mythical setting of the poem using it as crucial part
of her argument. She quotes the first stanza, beginning with the fourth line to establish:
“Wieland’s mythical world is pre-social and pre-economic. No divisions of labour
separate the sexes into economic categories. Class differences and the necessities of
production do not exist. Nor does morality, for morality arises from social corruption.”
Her point is that in the world of “Endymion” women’s sexual desires and ability to
express their wishes are not different than those of men, as they are not yet corrupted by
society. But I emphasize the first three lines of the tale: “In jener dichterischen Zeit /
Mit deren Wundern uns der Amme Freundlichkeit / Durch manches Mährchen einst in
süssen Schlummer wiegte.”  The age of “Endymion” might be “dichterisch” in the
sense of an age of innocence as Boa has it, but it is more importantly “dichterisch” in a
stronger sense than that. The narrator and the reader have access to this age only through
narratives, through Mährchen. It turns out that Endymion who will become Diana’s lover
will have access to her only through Mährchen as well. This age is dichterisch not in the
sense that poetry has been written about it, but rather in the sense that it exists only as
poetry. This is a distancing move which defines the narrative world as that of the reader
rather than separating the narrative world from that of the reader. We see the
implications of this distancing move in the central paradox of the tale. The first stanza

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180 Boa 198.

181 CE 41.
promises the reader a story of a golden age “Da die Natur, von keinem Joch entweyht, / 
Gesetze gab wodurch sie glüklich machte.” Yet the tale begins with Diana punishing 
h her nymphs for sleeping with Endymion by forbidding them to go out at night. Diana is 
furious and her nymphs both terrified and saddened. The tale breaks its promise, because 
a golden age cannot be represented in a post-lapsarian world. The representation of 
sexual pleasure finds itself in the same bind. The pleasure of erotic tales is *dichterisch* 
too; it can only be present through representation.

In Wieland’s retelling of this myth, Diana comes across the sleeping Endymion 
after having grounded her nymphs and is overcome by his beauty. Her desire 
irresistibly draws her closer. Afraid for her reputation, she casts a spell that sinks him 
into an even deeper sleep. She is free to kiss and caress him without fear of waking him. 
He experiences the encounter only through his dreams. In terms of the plot, this tale’s 
title seems an odd choice. Endymion is no actor in the story; he is merely the passive 
recipient of a pleasure of which he is not consciously aware. A title like “Diana und 
Endymion” would seem to reflect the plot more accurately. Diana is the true protagonist 
of this tale; she acts and reacts and develops as a character. Far from being a mistake, the 
title indicates that Endymion’s character is central to the tale in another way. 
Endymion’s pleasure is the center of the tale. He presents the reader with a point of 
identification in the text, and his pleasure mirrors the reader’s pleasure. (The tale could 
just as well be titled “You, dear reader.”)

182 CE 41.

183 For a survey of the sources of the Endymion myth and its treatment in eighteenth-
century literature and visual arts, see Lieselotte E. Kurth-Voigt, “C. M. Wielands 
Endymion never experiences Diana’s touch directly; he stands in relation to Diana just as Wieland and Paris stand in relation to Venus without her aura. His only experience of sexual pleasure is a hallucinatory presence. His enchanted slumber not only keeps him from waking but also transforms his pleasure: “Und unter ihren Küssen / Den Schlaf ihm zu versüßen / Wird jeder Kuß ein Traum.” Instead of counting kisses, the text lists fragments of erotic myths. The text does not describe a kiss; it tells stories. The substitution of narratives for sexual acts does not occur only on the level of the literary representation of desire; Endymion’s experience of Diana’s kisses becomes experiences of narrative fragments as well. Instead of pleasant sensations of pressure, moisture, heat, friction, and tickling, he is a spectator in dreams. If it were possible to experience an unadulterated pleasure outside of any narrative context, Endymion would be a certain candidate. His senses are closed to the outside world, and he has no knowledge or anticipation of what is happening to him. He is surprised by a pleasure he did not anticipate. But instead of an unreflected sensation of sensual stimulus, uncontexualized arabesques of pleasure, Diana’s kisses become “dreams,” or fragments of narratives otherwise well-known:

Was Jupiter als Leda’s Schwan
Und als Europens Stier gethan,
Wie er Almenen hintergangen,
Und wie der hinkende Vulcan
Sein Weibchen einst im Garn gefangen;
Wie stille Nymphen oft im Hayn
Dem Faun zum Raube werden müssen,
Wie sie sich sträuben, bitten, dräun,
Ermüden, immer schwächer schreyn,
Und endlich selbst den Räuber küssen;
Des Weingotts Zug, und wie um ihn
Die taumelnden Bacchanten schwärmen,

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184 CE 58-59.
Endymion’s sensations are transformed into a series of dependant clauses describing the
erotic escapades of the gods—two of which Wieland intended to recount at greater length
in other comic tales. Not even Endymion’s dreams are his own; they are other
people’s stories.

Diana’s enchantment is both a boon and a loss for Endymion. His shifting dreams
represent a multiplication of pleasure that guarantees that he need not heed Tibulle’s
warning: “So süß auch Küsse sind, wenn wir Tibulle hören, / So haßt doch die Natur ein
ewig Einerley.” And the narrator makes it clear that Endymion’s pleasure is
immense. Yet the culmination of Endymion’s dreams underscores the distancing
function of his dreams. His dreams, while constituting his pleasure, bar him from the
source of his pleasure:

Ein sanfter Anblik folgt dem rohen Bacchanal.
Ein stilles, schattenvolles Thal
Führt ihn der Höle zu, wo sich die Nymphen baden;
Diana selbst erröthet nicht
(Man merke, nur im Traumgesicht
Und von geschäftigen Najaden
Fast ganz verdekt) von ihm gesehen zu seyn.

185 CE 59-60.
186 These tales would have been “Europas Stier” and “Die Netze Vulkans.”
187 CE 61.
188 CE 59.
The pleasant dreams that are her kisses are exactly what shield him from direct contact with Diana. Endymion does not see Diana, only her face in a dream and even within this dream she is obscured. Every time that erotic pleasure is experienced, a narrative is substituted for an erotic touch.

Unlike Endymion, Diana kisses without dreaming. Diana offers a model of pleasure different than Endymion’s, but her pleasure is not the focus of the story. The reader’s perspective never coincides with Diana’s as it does with Endymion’s. The narrator never occupies Diana’s point of view. Instead he offers psychologizing glosses of her actions, as in the following example when Diana first glances Endymion on her nightly flight across the sky:

Das sicherste war hier die Augen zuzumachen.
Sie that es nicht und warf, jedoch nur obenhin
Und blinzend, einen Blick auf ihn.
Sie stutzt und hemmt den Flug der schnellen Drachen,
Schaut wieder hin, erröthet, bebt zurück,
Und sucht mit verschämtem Blick
Ob sie vielleicht belauschet werde; 190

The goddess’s conflicting urges, her desire and her pride, must be inferred from her actions. Lieselotte Kurth-Voigt sees this as a moment of psychological insight and calls this tale “ein Meisterstück versifizierter Frauenpsychologie.”191 Whether this tale represents a significant revelation about woman’s inner life, I cannot say. What I stress though, is the way that the narrator distances the reader from Diana’s thoughts in a way

189 CE 60.
190 CE 52.
that he does not do with Endymion’s. In another moment, the narrator reveals that he has privileged knowledge about Diana’s state of mind:

Indessen klopft vermischt mit banger Lust
Ein süßer Schmerz in ihrer heissen Brust;
Ein zitterndes, wollüstiges Verlangen
Bewölkt ihr schwimmend Aug und brennt auf ihren Wangen.
Wo, Göttin, bleibt dein Stolz, die Sprödigkeit?\textsuperscript{192}

The narrator knows what only Diana can know, her feelings. But he describes her feelings as an omniscient third-person narrator: Diana remains “sie / ihr” no matter how intimately acquainted the narrator is with her thoughts. When the narrator turns and addresses Diana directly, it serves only to underscore their opposition.

A series of distancing techniques separates the reader from Diana’s point of view. Her actions are conveyed through metaphors and thereby simultaneously revealed and veiled, as when she pulls back Endymion’s robe and sees his penis: „So zog sie doch beym ersten Blik / Gewiß die Hand so schnell zurück / Als jenes Kind, das einst im Grase spielte, / Nach Blumen griff und eine Schlange fühlte."\textsuperscript{193} The snake metaphor is an obvious one, yet it nevertheless allows for the possibility of denial. At times the narrator interrupts the action with an aside his audience, conveying Diana’s actions on a different level of narration through esoteric allusions. Wieland avoids mention of any unequivocal references to sex, instead talking around the details or referring to outside texts, as in this example:

Sie that (so sagt der Faun, der sie beschlichen hat)
Was Platons Penia im Götter-Garten that.
Was that dann die? wird hier ein Neuling fragen?
Sie legte – Ja doch! Nur gemach!

\textsuperscript{192} CE 53.
\textsuperscript{193} CE 52-53.
These techniques that the narrator avails himself of explain why this tale is titled “Endymion” and not “Diana und Endymion.” The reader’s and Endymion’s experiences of pleasure have more in common than the narrator acknowledges. While the narrator’s knowledge of Diana’s and Endymion’s inner selves is equally omniscient, only the narrator’s and Endymion’s points of view coincide. Endymion experiences his dreams (or Diana’s kisses) from the perspective of a third person observer. The focus of the tale is not Diana’s pleasure or her psychological development, it is Endymion’s pleasure which is identical to the reader’s pleasure. Diana stands in for Venus in this instance of the paphian presence. Endymion’s body is touched through poetry—Diana’s kisses reach him through fragments of narrative. This is a figure of bodily aesthetics functioning properly: disrobed goddesses who have cast their auras aside kissing and touching the reader. The loss of their auras should protect the reader from the goddesses’ presence—it reinstates a distance that erotic signs under absorption threaten to collapse (as we saw happen with Hostius and as we shall see happen when Don Sylvio reads fairy tales). This distance should keep the erotic sign from becoming to sticky; with its loss of power, the erotic sign should easily cede to a real body at the appropriate moment.

**Excursion: Rancorous Marriages**

I read Wieland’s post-seraphic works as aesthetic experiments—specifically as experiments in bodily aesthetics that are designed to test how and to what extent erotic literature can affect the voluptuary’s body. In the previous section I established what for Wieland are the proper limits of erotic aesthetic illusion—or the limits of the paphian

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194 CE 61.
presence’s ability to interface the reader’s body and the implicit danger of exceeding those limits. However delicious, compelling, or real-seeming the paphian presence can appear, it—like Venus, Juno, and Minerva without their auras or like Diana’s dream-face and dream-kisses—is always best understood as indirect or existing at a distance from the reader. The paphian presence should always serve as an aphrodisiac leading to amorous adventures, never a substitute for them. The paphian presence, or erotic literature in general, should never distract from a real body. (In the face of a too powerful paphian presence, the reader can sink into the erotic aesthetic illusion and come to prefer it to the “real thing.”) It should be remembered here that, according to most versions of the Endymion myth, Endymion was sunk into an eternal sleep never to awaken again from Diana’s kisses. The reader should not imitate Endymion in this aspect and forever experience erotic narratives instead of direct kisses from living bodies.) In his first novel, *Don Sylvio von Rosalva*, Wieland develops his shocking aesthetics precisely as a solution to the problem of the sticky sign which is the break-down of the proper functioning of erotic literature, a moment in which the paphian presence fails to maintain its proper distance. In this section, however, I shall turn my attention to the remainder of the *Comische Erzählungen* and a second complication of the paphian presence, its potential unruliness, before moving on to Wieland’s first novel.

All of the moralistic, anonymous critic’s objections who found the *Comische Erzählungen* worthy of “Verdammungsurtheile” lead to a point: “[H]ier werden Ehen und Pflichten gespottet.”195 Despite Wieland’s protestations, this critic saw another message stated much more strongly in these tales. It must have appeared to him that the

195 *Neue Bibliothek* 300.
true moral of the tales was: to remain virtuous and married is impossible, because monogamy is boring. But that is to put it a little baldly; context is needed. It is the uppity wives of these tales that lead the critic to this conclusion. This critic was struck by the unruly behavior of the wives in these tales, Juno and Aurora and their infidelities, and he was outraged instead of turned on. The jackalope-like quality of these tales opens up a space for an unruly paphian presence. But how can the paphian presence misbehave, be unruly, or revolt? It is no real body, no living body. It has no will of its own, no desire of its own. It is the signs of art taken as a body, or a Körper without a Leib. The answer is that different literary codes as they constitute specific genres can require the bodies that they represent to behave in contradictory ways, and these contradictions imbue representations with what appears to be an unruly will of their own, or the ability to resist a moralizing critics expectations.

Wieland’s Comische Erzählungen are liminal texts that inhabit a space between libertine and sentimental discourses. I argue that this ambivalence between libertine and sentimental discourses opens up the possibility for the characters in these texts to misbehave and the possibility to construct these texts as immoral and an affront to decency. These tales contain generic conventions that were appropriate to libertine literature, conventions such as marriages of convenience, adultery as the proper site of passion, woman’s self-conscious sexual desire, the seduction and erotic education of a naïve youth by an experienced woman, and the inconstancy of love. These libertine conventions are juxtaposed with sentimental conventions such as Liebesehe, love characterized by constancy and faithfulness, woman’s sexual naïveté, her sexual education at the hands of her experienced and loving husband, and her lesser desire and
pleasure. Wieland’s own uncontainable exuberance, as well as the frustration of his contemporary readers—whether they objected to the *Comische Erzählungen* on stylistic or moral grounds—and the debates of his readers nearly three hundred years later can be explained by considering how Wieland’s work straddles competing traditions. A comic tale which would have aptly represented libertine models of love was poorly equipped to represent sentimental love. Wieland was writing in a genre that had been functionally superseded. As Frank Palmeri argues in reference to Foucault, “the history of genres, especially their coming to prominence and their subsiding into disuse, may reveal shifts in underlying paradigms, the largely unwritten rules that delimit and shape what can be thought, written, and seen as true in different periods […]” and in conjunction with Frederic Jameson, “such survivals [the persistence of elements of previous discursive formations within their newer replacements] reveal the history of a genre to be a process of transformation and sedimentation […].” It is this historical succession that allowed Wieland’s texts to be perceived as so shocking—that is, obscene and surprising.

Isabel Hull in her book *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700 – 1815*, summarizes most succinctly the transforming civil discourses on marriage in the latter half of the eighteenth century with the statement, “Sexual passion, once the epitome of transience, became increasingly expected to characterize enduring marriage.” By evoking sexual passion and the “epitome of transience,” Hull could easily be referring to the conventions of erotic humanist verse, but she is only tangentially interested in the

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literary matters of sexuality. Instead, her aim is to examine how state and social institutions transformed sexuality in the transition from absolutism to the earliest forms of the modern state. She uses state documents (legal codes, for example) and the organs of nascent civil society and public opinion (Enlightenment journals, for example) as her sources. In his book *Liebe als Passion*, Niklas Luhmann argues that as over the course of the eighteenth century the institution of marriage ceded its functions as the primary site of economic production and political reproduction, it increasingly became the site of intimacy in an increasingly anonymous social system. This occurred as discourses of marriage were augmented by evolving literary discourses of passionate love.\(^{198}\) His emphasis falls on the articulation of passionate love in those literary discourses. Together Hull and Luhmann provide compatible models of the development of love and marriage in the eighteenth century, each focusing on different discourses, political and literary respectively. Together, they provide an additional theoretical framework within which my reading of *Comische Erzählungen* operates. But I emphasize that the ongoing development of literary discourses of love in the eighteenth century was neither deliberate, thoroughgoing nor immediate. This development in conceptions of love proceeded in starts, fits and reversals. The *Comische Erzählungen* reveal the heterogeneous, uneven nature of those developments.

The *Comische Erzählungen* represent an eddy in the general development from a libertine model of love and marriage to a sentimental model. Because literature functioned as one of the cultural crucibles in which love and marriage are alloyed, it proves to be an important site from which their alliance can well be problematized. A

\(^{198}\) Niklas Luhman, *Liebe als Passion: Zur Codierung von Intimität* (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp, 1982).
moment when the ideology of marriage was shifting permitted a literary text embedded in an older discourse of marriage to become disruptive to a newer discourse. Caught between the waning tradition of libertine marriage and the ascendant tradition of sentimental marriage, the Comische Erzählungen present a libertine critique of sentimental marriage—not the commonplace other-way-around. It achieves this through the juxtaposition of elements and expectations of each within the same narrative. Through their mere presence, the remnants of the older, libertine discourses of marriage were perceived to be irritating to readers with sentimental expectations, an implicit critique of the ascendant ideology of marriage. In order to be grounded in ostensible universals (be it invariable human nature, God’s will, the natural order) marriage must disavow its historicity and ignore the literary record of its vicissitudes. Texts, then, in which the historical change of the institution is inscribed obtain a disruptive, subversive potential.

Of the four Comische Erzählungen, scholars have discussed “Juno und Ganymed” the least—which comes as a surprise, as it was clearly the most controversial one. Wieland later disavowed this tale because of its “teuflische Caricatur und Bordellcharakter,” as he called it. He struck it from later editions and did not allow it to be reprinted in the authorized version of his collected works. Even before its publication there were signs that this text crossed some line of decorum. Over the course of a long back-and-forth correspondence with his publishers, they insisted that one particularly offensive scene, which is now lost, be deleted. After initially resisting, Wieland relented. For all this ado, the premise of the tale is simple: Juno, goddess of marriage, wife of Zeus, seduces Ganymede, Zeus’s cup-bearer and boy lover.
Lautwein gives “Juno und Ganymed” relatively short script, reading it as little more than an instance of misogyny in which Zeus’s sexual relationship with Ganymede is nothing more than a tactic to demean Juno. In turn, Juno is frigid and her relationship with Ganymede is merely an act of vengeance which exposes her repeated claims to virtue as hypocrisy. The tale is, in essence, the narrator’s attempt to smear Juno.\textsuperscript{199} To do this, he opens the tale with the statement of a principle: “Es sey ein grillenhaftes Weib / Bey Tag, oft auch bey Nacht, ein schlimmer Zeitvertreib” and then offers the rest of the tale as an illustration of that point.\textsuperscript{200} Lautwein is correct when he argues that the narrator illustrates that point quite well. But it is the moments that Lautwein overlooks, the moments when the narrator does not succeed in proving his point that make the tale interesting.

Throughout the text the nameless narrator is Zeus’s ally. He invites the reader to identify with Zeus, calling him “unser Zeus” and “der gute Jupiter.” In lines devoted to Juno, he takes an ironic, mocking tone. But while his taunting of Juno is direct he inadvertently lets slip Jupiter’s inadequacies. For example, one proof of Juno’s ostensible frigidity is as much a suggestion of Zeus’s lack of sexual prowess:

\begin{flushleft}
Das Mittel selbst, das in dergleichen Span  
Ovidius den Männern sehr empfiehlet,  
Das sonst den Gift der Zänkerinnen kühlct,  
Und Löwinnen zu Täubchen machen kan,  
Wird oft vom Zeus, doch immer ohne Frucht  
Und endlich gar nicht mehr versucht.\textsuperscript{201}
\end{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{199} Lautwein 151.

\textsuperscript{200} CE 66.

\textsuperscript{201} CE 69.
If Ovid can recommend sex to so many men as the best way to tame the shrew, then why does it not work for Zeus? Although the narrator suggests that Zeus chooses to walk away from the nuptial bed, reading between the lines suggest otherwise. Zeus is impotent in Juno’s presence:

Der gute Zeus, dem [Junos] Zunge Lauff
Beschwerlich war, stund oft vor Unmuth auf,
Und fieng (was thut nicht ein geplagter Mann?)
Vor Langerweile zu Donnern an.
Die Cedern auf dem Libanon,
Der Alpen weisses Haupt, der steile Helikon
Empfanden schuldlos seine Stösse:
Es zitterten die armen Erdenklösse;
Doch schlug er nur in Felsen, Meer und Wald
Und alle Streiche waren kalt.\(^{202}\)

And Zeus’s behavior devolves from the misplaced aggression and a lack of potency to outright emasculation when he raises Juno’s ire: “Kein Droh’n, kein Flehn erweicht sie, / Umsonst umfaßt er ihre Knie.”\(^{203}\) Zeus might be king of the gods, the patriarch of Olympus, but his power where Juno is concerned is not absolute.

The narrator’s name-calling is thus little more than an attempt to shield Zeus from scrutiny. Calling Juno frigid is an attempt to obscure the fact that Zeus is not the object of her desire. Sex with her husband is her conjugal duty but it is not what she desires: “Die Pflicht allein zwang mich, nicht ohne Schaam zu leiden, / Was mir mein Stand verbot zu meiden.”\(^{204}\) In Ganymede Juno finds an object to desire: “Die Göttin war vom ersten Anblick an / Von Ganymed nicht ungerührt geblieben; / Sie haßt’ ihn anfangs nur,

\(^{202}\) CE 70.

\(^{203}\) CE 73.

\(^{204}\) CE 79.
aus Furcht sie mächt’ ihn lieben.” ^205 And once she chooses to engage in an adulterous affair, her pleasure is no less than her husband’s. What Zeus witnesses when he spies on their tryst proves this: “Nur wundert ihn, die ungemeine Gaben, / Die seine liebe Frau bey diesem Anlaß zeigt, / Noch nie an ihr endekt zu haben.” ^206 Zeus witnesses Junos body in motion as she reacts to the beauty of Ganymede. Once Zeus catches Juno and Ganymede together, the text winds quickly to its conclusion: the confrontation between spouses. Zeus accuses her of hypocrisy. She counters by shaming Zeus for his relationship with Ganymede. He defends his relationship with Ganymede by insisting that his love for Ganymede is purely spiritual. Then in a clever rhetorical move she calls his bluff and wins the argument:

Ganz gut, mein Herr, es steht euch frey
An [Knaben-] Seelen euch nach Herzenslust zu weyden;
Ich gönn’ euch diesen edeln Trieb,
Und nehme, wie ihr seht, bescheiden,
Mit ihrem gröbern Theil vorlieb. ^207

She wins the arguments by exposing Zeus’s claim to aesthetic pleasure apart from bodily pleasure—his appreciation of bodily beauty without erotic interest—as hypocrisy; she forces him to follow through with his disingenuous claim to separate the spiritual from the sensual. And that is the end of the tale. Neither Jupiter nor the narrator has a comment to add. Juno has the last word, and so appears to win the argument when we would expect male domination to be restored—if not by Zeus, then at least by his advocate, the narrator. One would expect a sarcastic gloss by the narrator, but like Zeus,

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^205 CE 86.

^206 CE 95-96.

^207 CE 96.
he cannot master Juno, although he would like to. The narrator is as impotent as Zeus. Juno wins the argument with Zeus by appealing to bodily aesthetics, and she resists the narrator and upsets the prudish critic.\textsuperscript{208}

The tale does, however, present an example of a successful narrator and a passive paphian presence. Once, when Zeus returns to Olympus after a night on earth, Silenus recounts to him the drunken revelry of the gods from the night before. Silenus’s narrative is inset into the tale; he, thus, temporarily assumes the role of the narrator telling his own comic tale: „Silen, der Wanst, erzählt’s, mit vielem Lachen, / Nach seiner Art nicht allzufein, / Und streut, den Spaß kurzweiliger zu machen, / Viel Doppelsinn und kühlen Witz hinein.\textsuperscript{209} This passage could just as well describe the primary narrator. Silenus tells the following story: When Hebe, the cupbearer of the gods before Ganymede, brings the chalice around to Silenus, he grabs her. In trying to dodge his groping hands, she turns around, trips, and falls and lands with her legs splayed and her robes up over her head. After a hearty round of laughter, Dionysus helps her up, but takes advantage of the situation and fondles her. Silenus, as narrator, has his way with Hebe, the object of his narration. He succeeds where the primary narrator fails. Unlike Juno, Hebe does not triumph in this text. She does not successfully resist Silenus’s and Bacchus’s designs, because unmarried and wholly contained within the drunken revelry on Olympus, she remains wholly confined within libertine literature and its expectations. She is governable.

\textsuperscript{208} Although Juno wins this argument with Zeus and the narrator, she is still on the narrator’s side in another respect. She affirms the first principle of bodily aesthetics—that bodies react to beautiful bodies—and that the appropriateness of this response. Even as she misbehaves she affirms erotic literature.

\textsuperscript{209} CE 75.
At this point I would like to return to the question how “Juno und Ganymed” challenges marriage. “Hier werden Ehen und Pflichten gespottet?” Where? Domineering wives, adulterous wives, impotent husbands, and cuckolded husbands all had long been stock figures in the tradition of medieval and early modern Schwänke. The seduction of a naïve youth by an older, experienced (married) woman was a well established trope in libertine literature. There is nothing new in this text to shock anyone. Abbt, a more jaded critic than the outraged one who sees a mockery of marriage, read the tales as part of an established tradition of libertine literature citing Crébillon and La Fontaine for example, and he raised nary an eyebrow. The offended critic was reading the Comische Erzählungen from a sentimental perspective and lacked the frame of reference that Wieland expected from his readers. To such a reader who reckoned with the feasibility of lasting sexual passion coupled with monogamy, such prerequisites of libertine love as the specifically extramarital aspect of love, or the equality of desire between the sexes must have been disconcerting. When Juno fusses at Jupiter for his sexual excesses, taking over twenty lines to list them, and when Jupiter takes up another twenty lines detailing just how he has been an “epicurisch Schwein,” our prudish critic must have felt overwhelmed.\footnote{CE 78 ff., 81 ff.}

The clash between traditions that I have so far described is a clash between the reader’s expectations and the text that arises out of Wieland’s self-conscious deployment of a functionally superseded form. To illustrate my point, I have looked to actual reader’s reactions to “Juno und Ganymede” by citing reviews of the tale. I turn now to take a look at an implied reader and an episode from the next tale in which the narrator
relies on the collision of discourses of love to create humor. By making a joke out of the incongruency between the text and the reader’s expectations, the narrator shows that he is aware of this clash.

“Aurora und Cephalus” begins with Aurora waking and leaving her and Tithon’s, her husband’s, bed while he sleeps. The narrator portrays this scene in a sentimental fashion:

Und kurz, es war zur Zeit der Mette,
Als sich Auror zum erstenmal
Aus ihrem Rosen-Bette
Von Tithons Seite stahl.
Die Schlafsucht, die sie ihrem Gatten
Sonst öfters vorzurüken pflag,
Kam diesesmal ihr wohl zu statten.
Sie zieht die Brust, an der er schnarchend lag,
Sanft unter ihm hinweg, verschiebt mit Zephyr-Händen
Die Deke, glitscht heraus, dekt leis ihn wieder zu,
Wirft einen Schlafrok um die Lenden
Und wünscht ihm eine sanfte Ruh.  

Although her intentions to commit adultery are clear to the reader from the title, and although the verb “stahl” and the phrase “Die Schlafsucht … kam ihr zustatten“ indicate that she is sneaking away from her nuptial bed for reasons that she would want to hide from her husband, the narrative has not yet directly revealed her aim. Instead its emphasis on softness and quietness (“sanft unter ihm … dekt leis ihn zu … wünscht ihm eine sanfte Ruh“) and tenderness (“die Brust, an der er … lag“) in the nuptial bed evoke a sentimental scene of domestic affection and tranquility. (Tithonus’s snoring, however, disturbs this atmosphere and refuses to let the reader forget that this is a burlesque.) Wieland’s characteristic irony establishes the grounds of possibility for the joke; he

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211 CE 98-99.
pretends to establish a romantic idyll while indicating that what follows will be just the opposite.

Once the narrator reveals Aurora’s purpose for rising so early, so that she can find Cephalus, the attractive hunter who caught her eye the morning before, he ironically mocks the reader who would be surprised. He affects the voice of a reader who has fallen for his trap:

Aurora? Wie? -- das Muster weiser Frauen,  
Auf deren Treu, die schon Homer uns prieß,  
Ein jeder alte Mann sein junges Weibchen schauen  
Und sie zum Vorbild nehmen hieß?  
[… ] Aurora, die so viele Proben gab  
Wie zärtlich sie den alten Tithon liebe;  
Sie fiene nun auf einmal ab  
Und hegte fremde Triebe?  

The joke is that the reader gets an unfaithful wife, when he or she expects a Pamela or a Penelope. Of course, no reader would have actually fallen for his trap. No one would have called her wise or faithful. A lack of intelligence was one of her attributes, and so was her promiscuity. She had abducted several mortals to be her lovers and had had several husbands. Out of love for one of her mortal husbands, Tithonus, she asked Zeus to grant him immortality. However, she forgot to ask him to grant Tithonus eternal youth as well, so Tithonus aged eternally, growing ever more decrepit. Aurora continued to care for him breastfeeding him once he could no longer eat solid food. (Aurora’s breast and Tithonus’s snoring and sleepiness, indeed, all appeared in the passage quoted above. The reader would have understood these references all along.) Given Aurora’s actual reputation, listing the attributes of an ideal sentimental wife (“Treu,” “Vorbild,”

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212 CE 99-100.
“Proben,” “zärtlich lieben” in opposition to “fremde Triebe“) turns out to be an instance of malicious irony.

A monogamous marriage with the eternally aging Tithonus poses a particular problem for Aurora, since “An Neigungen und Reizbarkeit der Sinnen, / Sind, wie man weiß, die ältesten Göttinnen / Stets sechzehn Jahre alt.”213 In order for an enduring passionate sexual desire to work, a particular inversion has to occur. It cannot work under libertine models, because according to the libertine code, as Luhmann writes:

“*Weil Personen nicht geändert* werden können, ist die *Liebe unbeständig.* Die Konstanz der Personen produziert die Inkonstanz ihrer Liebe [...].”214 The terms of the constant individual and inconstant love had to be rearranged. The result: “*Die Personen werden als änderbar, als entwicklungsfähig, als perfektibel begriffen, und die Liebe dadurch als bestandsfähig, ja schließlich sogar als mögliche Ehegrundlage. [...] die Unbestimmtheit und Plastizität der Charaktere ermöglicht Beständigkeit in der Liebe.*”215 If constancy in love requires the mutability of the individual, it fails when only one individual changes while the other remains constant. Aurora and Tithonus’s marriage is a moment of instability and transition between two incompatible discourses, and the entire humor of this tale is predicated on that incompatibility. But Luhmann’s formulation of new literary possibilities for the expression of the developmental potential or perfectibility of the individual human suggests the necessity of discussing a generic innovation that Luhmann does not consider, the Bildungsroman. In particular, Luhmann’s discussion suggests

213 CE 101.

214 Luhman 126.

215 Luhman 126.
examining innovations in this genre together with their implications for eroticism (and vice-versa). In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine Wieland’s first two novels, both of which were composed together with the *Comische Erzählungen*, and the second of which is arguably the first Bildungsroman. Not only shall I argue that these novels work through the problem of bodily aesthetics in the Age of Lessing (that is, Wieland’s shocking aesthetics as a response to the sticky erotic sign) but also that together these novels work through the Age of Lessing. Together they track a progression beyond the paradigm of absorption. In these works we see the paradigm of absorption being superceded. Wieland’s post-seraphic works straddle literary traditions, genres, styles, and epistemes; they are liminal in every way.

*Don Sylvio von Rosalva: A Debauchery of the Spirit by of a Teacher of Virtue*

Such loud disdain as Wieland’s post-seraphic works encountered should not obscure the enthusiasm with which many readers received them, particularly his novels. His second novel, *Geschichte des Agathon*, was trumpeted as a spectacular first for German literature. It achieved canonical status despite being perceived by some as dangerous. It is often considered the inaugural Bildungsroman, and it was banned by the Zürcher censor upon its publication.\(^{216}\) According to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s oft

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quoted comment in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-1786), *Geschichte des Agathon* was “der erste und einzige Roman für den denkenden Kopf.” And in his influential attempt to develop a theory of the genre (1774) Friedrich von Blanckenburg identifies *Agathon* as the paragon of the modern novel. The significance of these claims becomes evident when considered together with the status of the novel in the mid-eighteenth century. The novel was an ill-defined, amorphous genre that was closely associated with the romance, gallant tales, and other scandalous tales written in prose. The association with the romance lent the novel the air of something old fashioned, out of date, and in bad taste, while the association with gallant tales and the like lent it the air of something improper, even salacious. Gotthard Heidegger’s attack on the novel, *Mythoscopia romatica oder Discours von den so benanten Romans* (1698), can be taken as the typical line of argumentation that the novel’s detractors repeated well into the eighteenth century: the novel contained lies, deceived readers, and excited their passions, while rendering them reading addicts. The aestheticians of the early Enlightenment were generally more generous than the Protestant pastor Heidegger. In his *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst* (1730), Johann Christoph Gottsched allowed for the novel as a kind of poetry which must teach clear moral lessons and observe a strict verisimilitude (thus standing in opposition to both gallant tales and marvelous romances). Nevertheless, the novel had not been held in particularly high regard in Germany when Wieland’s

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217 LW 5:293.


Agathon appeared, convincing the likes of Lessing of its aesthetic worth that went beyond simple entertainment value.  

Not only Wieland’s second novel, but also his first, less weighty novel, one of several German Donichottiaden, has been acclaimed as a major development in the history of the German novel. Wolfgang Kayser and Keith Leopold have called Don Sylvio the first modern German novel, and so attempted to extend Lessing’s pronouncement backwards to the earlier work. While later reviewers have made arguments about Don Sylvio’s generic innovations, many contemporary readers were struck by something altogether different: its obscenity. Wieland’s own appraisal of Don Sylvio would seem to anticipate such reactions: he dubbed it a “debauche d’esprit.” At the same time, Wieland’s erstwhile love interest, Julie von Bondeli, asks him, “wozu die Unanständigkeiten?” And in a letter to his friend Johann Georg Zimmermann, Wieland refers to a Swiss reviewer who wrote of Don Sylvio as containing “contes

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222 WB 3:228 (to Sophie von La Roche, December 11, 1763).

223 WB 3:281 (June 21, 1764).
indecens” and “situations plus qu’immodestes, qui ne seront approuvés ni des honnêtes gens ni de deux qui respectent les moeurs.”

Those readers who took offence to the excesses in Don Sylvio certainly found provocative enough material in “Die Geschichte des Prinzen Biribinker,” the bawdy fairy tale embedded within the main narrative. Don Sylvio’s adventures and Prince Biribinker’s erotic exploits have always competed with one another for attention. The inset narrative eclipsed its frame almost immediately. Soon after the novel’s initial publication, the Biribinker episode appeared separately (1769) and later began appearing in fairy tale anthologies and erotic anthologies with titles like Romantische Erotic. The history of Don Sylvio von Rosalva reception follows a relatively simple curve. While enthusiasm for the novel eventually ceded to apathy towards a perceived unimaginative imitation of Don Quixote, praise for the Biribinker episode remained high despite—or rather because of—its reputation for being off color and more than a little odd. The editor of a 1919 edition of the Biribinker episode sums up this attitude when he writes, “Wie ein überladener barocker Rahmen umschließt Wielands großer Roman […] das entzückende, linienzarte Märchen vom Prinzen Biribinker, das unsere vorliegende Ausgabe, von allem Ballast befreit, den Lesern darbietet.” However, in the last couple of decades as critical interest in the novel as a whole and in the frame narrative specifically has been revived, the interest of erotobibliophiles and critics in the inset fairy tale has waned.

224 WB 3:311 (October 29, 1764).

225 Romantische Erotic (Berlin: Borngräber, 1913).

Of course not all readers of *Don Sylvio* were scandalized. Despite objections from some of the more prudish readers, the novel was a success and was reprinted twice before Wieland’s death in 1813 (1777 and 1794). Proponents invoked Gottsched’s traditional defense of the novel, upholding its morality and verisimilitude. An anonymous reviewer in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* finds its author knowledgeable, insightful, and wise:

So ist dieser Roman im übrigen, was Ausführung und Einkleidung anbelangt, ein wirkliches Original, und ein Original, das den Deutschen Ehre macht […] wir finden durch und durch einen feinen und fruchtbaren Witz, eine spottende Satire, und an sehr vielen Stellen etwas, das uns Deutschen nicht so sehr eigen ist, einen wirklichen *Humor*. Zu dem allen bemerken wir noch zwei den deutschen Schriftstellern, zumal in dieser Gattung Schriften, noch nicht ganz so geläufige Eigenschaften, einmal daß, ungeachtet die ganze Handlung komisch […] ist, gleichwohl die Sprache und der Ausdruck einen so feinen und anständigen Charakter behält, daß kein pöbelhafter Zug leicht eine widerwärige Empfindung erreget; und zweitens, daß sich in diesem Roman Welt, Kenntnis des Menschen, scharfsinnige Beobachtung und eine Philosophie äußert, die nicht bloß in einem Compendio erlernt worden sein mag…

And despite his own winking appraisal of his novel, Wieland vehemently denied blanket condemnations of his work as immoral. Taking up his own defense he wrote: “Wenn aber die Frage ist, ob vor dem Richterstuhl der Vernunft Don Silvio von Rosalva eine Composition sey, die eines Lehrers der Tugend unwürdig: So denke ich, vermuthlich aus väterlicher Verblendung für das jüngste Kind meines Witzes, ich sollte meinen Proceß vollkommen gewinnen.” Wieland defends his work finding it worthy of a “teacher of virtue.” (In fact, his defense of *Don Sylvio* would seem to be a rehearsal for this later...

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227 Rev. of *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* by Christoph Martin Wieland, *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* 2 (1764): 993.

228 WB 3:206 (to Salomon Gessner, November 7th, 1763).
defense of the *Comische Erzählungen*. While the novel’s contemporary readers tended to have polarized reactions to the novel, seeing either a decent or an indecent work, I will present a reading of *Don Sylvio* that takes its cue from Wieland, who saw both a debauchery of the spirit and a product worthy of a teacher of virtue, one that reads both the frame narrative and the inset narrative together.

In the frame narrative, the novel’s eponymous protagonist is raised in the isolated Spanish countryside by his spinster aunt Donna Mencia. She reads démodé romances naïvely and enthusiastically, so much so that she uses them exclusively in Don Sylvio’s education. Donna Mencia’s reading habits render her susceptible to a commoner’s plot to marry her and to wed his niece to her nephew in two unequal matches. To seduce the old noblewoman, he courts her in the style of hopelessly out-of-date romances, praising her in a ridiculous chivalric tone. He nearly succeeds in his plot. But Don Sylvio resists, because he has long been reading a secret cache of fairy tales just as naively as Donna Mencia reads romances. These tales convince him that fairy tale conventions govern the world and that he is destined to marry a fairy princess when a chance mishap strengthens him in this belief. As he strolls in the woods, he comes across a locket with a miniature portrait of a beautiful woman, and he takes the portrait to be the image of his princess. He and his servant set off on a quest to find his bride. Underway he encounters Donna

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229 That Wieland’s *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* has much in common with the *Comische Erzählungen* might seem counterintuitive. *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* is a novel that mimics *Don Quixote* and parodies fairy tales while the *Comische Erzählungen* are verse retellings of Greek myths. Yet despite those glaring generic differences, the two works overlap on multiple levels. A leap from the prose of *Don Sylvio* to the verse of the *Comische Erzählungen* is not far fetched considering that “Die Romanproduktion Wielands kommt seinen Verserzählungen nirgends so nahe wie im *Don Sylvio*.” See Sven-Aage Jørgensen, *Christoph Martin Wieland: Epoche, Werk, Wirkung.* (München: Beck, 1994) 135. Both share a similar thematic concern, their eroticism, and both lie caught between genres.
Felicia. They fall in love at first sight, except Don Sylvio is torn between the real person standing before him and the princess of his dreams. To help Don Sylvio out of this dilemma, Don Gabriel, a friend of Donna Felicia’s, tells the “Story of Prince Biribinker,” a fairy tale so outrageous that it should lead even Don Sylvio to the conclusion that fairy tales are fantastic. This exaggerated fairy tale shakes Don Sylvio’s belief in fairies, and Donna Felicia delivers the coup-de-grace when she reveals that the locket is not the portrait of a princess. It is her grandmother at a young age and it belongs to her—she lost it while traveling. The stage is then set for their marriage.

The inset narrative, “The Story of Prince Biribinker,” pairs innuendo and scatological humor in fantastic scenarios. Biribinker is given away by his parents to be raised in a kingdom of bees where he is fed only honey and all his excretions are delicious sugary nectars and candies that are eaten at his parents’ court. Once he enters puberty, the isolation from other humans becomes unbearable for him. He eventually escapes and meets Galactine, a princess disguised as a milkmaid. Three times she flees him, three times he swears love and loyalty to her, and three times he breaks his vow by having sex with magical women. Each of his three affairs turns out to be a cursed former lover of Padmanaba, a jealous, impotent magician who had cursed them because of their previous infidelities. He transformed the first nymph into a chamber pot. Biribinker frees her from the curse by urinating in the pot. The magician’s second lover is transformed into a monstrous alligator whenever she has sex. Fifty thousand men had tried unsuccessfully to free her from this spell before Biribinker breaks the curse. The magician turned his third lover invisible and placed her under a deep slumber to prevent her from cuckolding him. Biribinker literally stumbles across her sleeping body and has
his way with her in her sleep. But in the end, Padmanaba is punished for his inability to please women, and Biribinker and Galactine are united and live happily ever after.

The frame narrative in which “the Story of Prince Biribinker” is embedded is itself set within yet another frame, the *Quellenfiktion*. The novel begins with an afterword that the copyist supposedly misplaced as a foreword. In this afterword, the fictive editor of the novel relates the convoluted origin of the novel: He received the text from a translator who had, in turn, received it from a Spanish gentleman who was the author of this true story. (Wieland plays a similar game with the reader in the introduction to *Agathon*. In both introductions, the editor claims tongue-in-cheek to be presenting the reader with a credible manuscript, thereby guaranteeing the historical accuracy of the story being told. This ironic foreword is omitted from the second and subsequent editions of *Don Sylvio von Rosalva*.) The editor then goes on to tell how he and others—including a religious fanatic and an enlightened parson—react to the text. He finds the text hilarious. And while the fanatic tries to burn it, the parson cautiously extols its pedagogical merits. The editor, the fanatic, and the parson each read differently, as do the characters in the frame narrative.

How the characters in the frame narrative and in the *Quellenfiktion* read has been the focus of the most recent scholarship on this text, as I shall explain in the next section. But the scenes of reading in the Biribinker episode have been overlooked, as have the erotic ends to which reading in both the frame narrative and the inset fairy tale lead.

**Happy Endings**

Many recent critical discussions of *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* have examined the role of reading in the novel as part of an explicit pedagogical project. Critical discussion
of *Don Sylvio* can be fairly characterized as focusing on happy endings, whether the happy ending as an implicit social critique or the happy ending as a pedagogical tool that forces readers to focus on the artificiality of narrative. I, too, am interested in happy endings—but a happy ending of an altogether different sort. The happy endings that bodily aesthetics seeks occur three times in the Biribinker fairy tale and they will presumably occur on the night of Don Sylvio and Donna Felicia’s nuptials. The pedagogical project that this novel undertakes is the proper and timely arousal and release of the reader’s body.

In his book *The Narrative Strategy of Wieland’s Don Sylvio von Rosalva* (1981), W. Daniel Wilson argues that the novel’s primary purpose is to train intelligent readers by satirizing bad reading habits. Wilson convincingly shows that *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* is not the novel satirizing Schwärmerey that the title claims. Instead, the novel actually plays a joke on gullible readers and their reading habits. Beginning with the foreword, Wilson proceeds through the frame narrative and shows how it and the Quellenfiktion simultaneously address two readers, the gullible reader and the critical reader. The gullible reader is not so naïve as not to recognize that the claims of veracity that the editor promotes and that other novel conventions bolster (such as the word *Geschichte* in the title and the supposed disguising of names of actual people and places) are bogus, but this reader nevertheless believes the novel to represent reality as it could be. The gullible reader will believe that *Don Sylvio von Rosalva* is a satiric novel with valid claims to verisimilitude but not veracity. This reader laughs at the protagonist for his belief that the mundane events that transpire in the story are manifestations of the

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supernatural world of fairies. This reader, like the critical reader, will laugh at all the obvious misreadings described in the frame narrative; Donna Mencia, Don Sylvio, and Donna Felicia all misrecognize the fictionality of romances, fairy tales, and Schäferromane respectively. The critical reader, however, will notice that the characters in the Quellenfiktion are also misreaders. Those characters misrecognize the intent of Don Sylvio von Rosalva. The editor sees primarily a humorous work, the religious fanatic sees primarily a blasphemous work, and the enlightened parson sees a work that educates through parody. The critical reader recognizes any of these characters as a potential stand-in for the gullible reader. None of those readers recognizes that Don Sylvio von Rosalva is a disguised fairy tale. The critical reader, however, will pick up the many clues that the frame narrative is written with the conventions of the fairy tale in mind. In other words, this reader will recognize Don Sylvio von Rosalva as a self-conscious piece of fiction with bogus claims not only to veracity but also to verisimilitude as well. The outrageous coincidences such as the locket and the happy ending as well as multiple clues in the text locate the fictive world of Don Sylvio von Rosalva in the realm of fairy tales. The joke is that Don Sylvio more or less rightly believes that he is in a fairy tale world while the characters in the novel and the gullible reader believe that precisely that is his folly.

The characters in the novel enact the distinction that Wilson makes between the gullible and the critical modes of reading. While almost all the characters in the novel are shown to read some sort of fiction naively, the characters at Donna Felcia’s estate also show that they are able to read fairy tales in a sophisticated way. After Don Gabriel tells the story of Biribinker, the assembled listeners discuss what they are to make of the
story. These otherwise naïve readers show an ability to approach the Biribinker episode critically. They are aware that the Biribinker fairy tale requires an altogether different mode of reading than their own pet reading materials. To put it differently, most of the characters in the frame narrative read fiction in an identificatory, emulative way, modeling their lives after the characters they read about and orienting themselves in their surroundings according to their favorite fiction. The sort of reading that Don Gabriel intends the Biribinker fairy tale to evoke relies on a distanced, analytical, reflective reading. Rather than operating through identification, the story of Biribinker presents an almost Brechtian example of broken identification and distance to plot and character. The public (Don Sylvio and his friends) should reflect on the art presented to them and reflect on its artifice.

The different mode of reading that Biribinker requires of its characters for the resolution of the frame narrative should not be taken to necessarily imply the devaluation of the identificatory mode. Friedhelm Marx offers a consideration of enthusiasm and reader novels in the eighteenth century. He also takes the Enlightenment pathology of enthusiasm as the starting point for his interpretation of Wieland’s first novel, but he recognizes more than just a diagnosis in its pages. Don Sylvio’s hallucinatory reading becomes a vehicle for a social critique of the private citizen’s reduced sphere of freedom and agency in the absolutist state. At the same time, the novel’s self-reflexive treatment of hallucinatory readers becomes an apology for the much maligned novel; through scenes of reading the novel examines the charges leveled against it and reflects on its own value and power as literary art. Marx argues that such reading is the mechanism through which the novel inspires readers to virtue, while compensating them for banal
lives in a mundane, uninspiring world. As he notes, Don Sylvio’s delusional readings provide him with the motivation to conduct his life in a way that saves him and his aunt from undesirable marriages and rewards him with an appropriate match.\(^{231}\)

Given Wilson’s and Marx’s readings of *Don Sylvio von Rosalva*, the narrator’s frequently cited statement about the protagonist’s reading habits—“er las nicht, er sah, er hörte, er fühlte”—sounds far less ridiculous than it might at first appear.\(^{232}\) Don Sylvio’s enthusiastic reading is neither an absurdity nor an aberration or eccentricity but rather a generalized quality of the reading public. This point makes those interpretations that see a simple satire on Schwärmerey seem somewhat one-dimensional. (For example, while arguing that Wieland’s evolving concept of the enthusiast informs the development of his novels over the course of his career, Jutta Heinz presents *Don Sylvio* as a case study of the Enlightenment definition of enthusiasm, its etiology, its symptoms, and its cure. For Heinz, Don Sylvio’s reading materials simply exacerbate his predisposition for enthusiasm.\(^{233}\)) However, in a more complex argument, Claire Baldwin argues that no later than the 1770s authors and theoreticians in Germany were trying to disassociate contemporary novels from older, disreputable novel traditions and establish them as modern works of art. Given this concern, it becomes clear why the fear of “inverted mimesis”—or the reader’s misguided identification with and imitation of fictional


\(^{232}\) DS 26.

characters—that Baldwin locates in the mid-century debates on the novel is so acute. Baldwin recognizes a cultural anxiety surrounding Don Sylvio’s reading. Whereas Wilson and Marx examine novels of reading that champion enthusiastic reading, Baldwin takes a look at its detractors. Both sides of the issue agreed on the power of enthusiastic reading; it was the question of its value that was contentious. In regards to these discussions, I counter that Don Sylvio’s reading should be considered appropriate and good except for one very specific problem—his Schwärmerey is neither simply a naïve reading nor a predisposition of the soul to be cured, just as it is also not a completely correct and sophisticated mode of reading either. Rather, his enthusiastic reading is his adherence to the sticky signs of erotic literature. Once this problem of Schwärmerey is overcome, Don Sylvio can claim his bride.

Whereas Wilson and Marx focus on how Don Sylvio and the circle around him read, I focus on the correspondences between the fairy tale that Don Sylvio lives and the one that he is told. Both the frame narrative and the inset narrative tell the same story of arousal through narrative. Taken as a whole, the novel presents every arousal that its characters experience as a textually induced change in their bodies. While no one who has read Don Sylvio von Rosalva will have missed that the literature that the characters read gives their erotic tastes and perception of the world around them their particular bend, it is less obvious how insistently their reading materials assert themselves on their bodies. Even in the Biribinker episode, in which no character reads anything, the characters’ couplings have been shaped by narratives that they have encountered. The

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234 Claire Baldwin, The Emergence of the Modern German Novel: Christoph Martin Wieland, Sophie von La Roche, and Maria Anna Sagar (Rochester: Camden House, 2002) 47.
lesson that Don Sylvio must learn is that signs can mediate between bodies by arousing the aesthetic body with the paphian presence but that they should not stand in the way of two desiring bodies. Bodily aesthetics must not impede the functioning of its first principle: bodies react to beautiful bodies. The point of the Biribinker fairy tale is not to teach Don Sylvio and the reader how to read *per se*, but rather to teach them how their reading impacts their own happy endings, their love lives. Don Sylvio must learn that his reading—far from promising him his fairy princess—is keeping him from his lover.

The arousal of men’s and women’s bodies is the crux of the Biribinker fairy tale. Because he is impotent, Padmanaba’s blood does not swell into an erection in response to the beauty of his consorts. They in turn are left *frostig* and unresponsive to him, so he resorts to his magic incantations to transform their bodies. It is Biribinker’s most responsive, swelling body that restores the proper functioning of their bodies. And it is signs (in the form of a narrative prophecy) that brings their bodies together. Don Sylvio should—like Biribinker!—should cheat on the woman of his fairy tales and take the woman in front of him.

The parallels between Don Sylvio’s story and the Biribinker episode foreground the signs that occasion their arousals and bring their bodies together. Biribinker’s third erotic exploit reenacts Don Sylvio’s discovery of the locket and points to the solution to his and Donna Felicia’s crisis. In both cases, the protagonist finds the image of a woman that excites his passions before he finds the woman herself. When Don Sylvio discovers the locket in the woods he is stunned by the beauty of the woman depicted on it: “Er stund etliche Augenblicke unbeweglich.”²³⁵ His first reaction is prelinguistic: “Er besah

²³⁵ *DS 36.*
But his first attempts to articulate his feelings for the subject of the portrait are already conventional fairy tale formulas: “desto mehr beredete er sich, daß es das Bildniß einer Göttin, oder doch zum wenigsten der Allerschönsten Sterblichen sey, die jemals gewesen, oder künftig seyn werde.”

Already at this point, Don Sylvio’s reading materials assert themselves in his desires. From there his thoughts wander to comparisons with specific fairy tales and then culminates in the full transformation of the woman depicted in the locket into his fairy princess:

Kurz, es deuchte ihn unmöglich, daß Gracieuse, Bellebelle, die Schöne mit den goldnen Haaren, oder Venus selbst so schön gewesen seyn könnten, und er wurde vom ersten Anblick an so verliebt in dieses Bildniß, als es jemals ein irrender Ritter, oder ein Arcadischer Schäfer in seine Dulcinea oder Amyrillis gewesen ist. Endlich, rief er in seiner Entzückung aus, endlich hab ich sie gefunden, sie, die ich mit ahnender Sehnsucht überall suchte, die ich zu lieben bestimmt bin […].

The portrait excites a desire for the woman who sat for it. But that desire would be formless and meaningless if it were not for the fairy tales that he reads. The strong erotic appeal that fairy tales hold over Don Sylvio evidences itself here. Once he is promised a fairy tale princess, all subsequent encounters with potentially desirable women are determined by that promise specifically and fairy tales generally.

Biribinker’s third erotic adventure follows this same pattern. In that adventure, Biribinker discovers portraits of a female fire spirit that excite his passion:

[…] so vergaß er doch alles andere über den Gemälde einer so unvergleichlich schönen jungen Salamandrin, womit alle diese Zimmer
behangen waren. Er zweifelte nicht, daß es die Geliebte des alten Padmanaba seyn werde, und diese Copien, worin sie in allen nur ersinnlichen Stellungen, Anzügen und Gesichtspuncten, bald wachend, bald schlafend, bald as Diana, bald als Venus, Hebe, Flora, oder eine andere Göttin vorgestellt war, gaben ihm eine solche Idee von dem Urbilde, daß er bey der blossen Erwartung seiner bevorstehenden Glückseligkeit vor Entzückung und Wonne hätte zerfliessen mögen.²³⁹

These portraits situate the fire spirit in possible erotic narratives (myths of Diana, Venus, and Hebe such as were told in the Comische Erzählungen, etc.), but these erotic possibilities are not Biribinker’s interest. He does not linger on the images and recall the various myths they represent. He relates to these portraits only in so far as they direct him towards the woman who sat for them. In this case, the text that determines his arousal is not a fairy tale, as it was for Don Sylvio, but the sorcerer Caramussal’s prophecy that foretold how Biribinker would be Padmanaba’s ruin. Although the portraits are beautiful, it is the certainty that the model is Pamanaba’s lover and the certainty of possessing her that gives Biribinker pleasure and shapes the tenor of his desire for her. The prophecy that determines Biribinker’s desire is a two-part prophecy, and it determines his interaction with his lovers—drives him towards them—even more profoundly than is already apparent. The first part of the prophecy warns that Biribinker should not see a dairy maid before his eighteenth birthday—that is why his parents sent him away to be raised in the kingdom of the bees. But as Donna Felicia’s brother remarks after the story of Biribinker, the prophecy is responsible for the entire adventure in the first place:

Hätte der König […] den grossen Caramussal unbefragt gelassen, so würde man nie gewußt haben, daß es gefährlich für den Prinzen seye, vor seinem achtzehnten Jahr ein Milchmädchen zu sehen […]. Er würde wie andere Prinzen am Hofe seines Vaters aufgewachsen seyn, und wenn es

²³⁹ DS 380.
Zeit gewesen wäre ihn zu vermählen, so würde man durch Gesandte um die Princeßin Galactine haben werben lassen, und alles wäre den natürlichen Gang fortgegangen. Der Vorwitz des Königs und das fatale Oraculum des grossen Caramussal war ganz allein an allem Unheil schuld. Die Mittel, wodurch man ihn vor dem Milchmädchen verwahren wollte, dienten zu nichts, als sie desto bälder zusammen zu bringen [...].

The prophecy is the catalyst that brings Biribinker and Galactine together: it is fully responsible for Biribinker’s amorous exploits. This prophecy—this text—arranged this particular constellation of bodies. The crucial difference between the Biribinker episode and Don Sylvio’s adventures and the crisis for Don Sylvio and Donna Felicia is that Don Sylvio will not let go of the signs and grab the body. The signs do not lead Don Sylvio to Donna Felicia.

*Don Sylvio* is a novel about reading. Each character’s favorite literature directs his or her happy endings. The same is true even for those characters who do not read (Biribinker, for example, does not read the prophecy that determines his adventures)—their loves are no less dependent on a textual negotiation. It is in this sense that arousal is a function of reading. The happy endings that I discuss are no less intimately connected to reading and pedagogy than the happy endings that Wilson discusses, but they cause the reader to reflect on his or her reading habits and erotic practice. These happy endings are also the end result of schooled reading. Wieland’s experiment in bodily aesthetics, then, is not all that different from Lessing’s. Like Lessing, he acknowledges a certain power of signs to distract bodies from bodies, but unlike Lessing, he emphasizes the power of signs to bring bodies together. Erotic literature should function as an aphrodisiac. The trick for Wieland is to find the optimal balance. We might not be surprised to learn, then, that within German neoclassical

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DS 394.
discourse that balance is struck when, in the case of erotic literature, poetry remains within its proper bounds.

**Pornography. On the Limits of Painting and Poetry**

Wieland’s post-seraphic texts provide an alternate model of how the erotic text displays the sexual act than pornographic fiction contemporary to them. Descriptions of the sexual act are most conspicuously absent, as are the explicit use of tabooed terms for eroticized body parts. Wieland’s novel operates in a distinctly different way than do eighteenth-century French pornographic novels according to Jean Marie Goulemot. He argues that the entire text of a pornographic novel acts as a gloss of the verb *foutre*, displaying the tabooed word as often, and with as many examples and synonyms as possible, thereby fetishizing the word. The absence of these terms emphasizes the absence of their referents, rather than attempting to mask their absence as is the strategy of fetishization. Rather than positioning the vulgar terms in the text and giving them a stultifying solidity, Wieland circumscribes that which he will not name pointing all the more insistently to its absence and the ephemerality of desire incited by and expressed for such objects. Whereas in French and English pornography the surface of the words themselves becomes erotically charged, in Wieland’s post-seraphic writings it is the surfacing of the words that becomes erotically charged. We recognize this style as Lessing’s painterly conception of poetry, that is his insistence in the Laocoon essay that poetry should restrict itself to representing actions in time rather than bodies in space (as

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painting does) if it wants to “paint” the most vivid, lively “image” it can in the imagination.

Wieland’s texts are noted for the way in which they hint at the nude body and sex without ever naming their objects. For example, the reader knows that the grotesque gnome Grigri from the Biribinker fairy tale has an enormous penis, but his member is never mentioned explicitly. Rather, it is only alluded to and talked around. His lover describes it to Biribinker as follows:

Es war keiner unter allen [den Gnomen], der nicht etwas übermäßiges in seiner Bildung gehabt hätte. Der eine hatte einen Höcker wie ein Cameel, der andere eine Nase, die ihm bis über den Mund herab hieng […] durch ein seltsames Spiel der Natur war bey ihm ein Verdienst, was bey anderen zu nichts diente als die Augen zu beleidigen. Ich weiß nicht, ob sie mich verstehen, Prinz Biribinker.  

The penis is a “was” and an “ob sie mich verstehen.” And sex is always referred to with a wink and a nudge. Wieland does not follow Aretino’s mandate at the core of the pornographic tradition to “speak plainly and say ‘fuck,’ ‘prick,’ ‘cunt,’ and ‘ass.’ To speak of sex in the narrative is, however, misleading. Sex in this text is never explicit; no embrace is described. That which might be called “hard core” is conspicuously absent. Sex, like the nude body and desire is hinted at, suggested, but can never be pinned down to a single, unequivocal word. It exists only between the lines, or in the trajectory and flow of the narrative. Don Sylvio von Rosalva provides the reader with no blunt words for genitalia and sex that can be fetishized. The hallucinating reader will not see skin in words on the page that can be isolated from

242 DS 334-335.

their context. But he or she will see it all the more clearly in his or her imagination by recreating the entire tableau printed on the page and following its movement. On the one hand, Wieland’s veiling and circumlocution are the strategies that allow Bondeli to criticize his obscenity while the reviewer from the *Göttingische Anzeigen* and the author himself see a text fit for a teacher of virtue. They allow Wieland some wiggle room if he wants to equivocate. But more importantly, it allows Wieland to paint an even more vividly obscene picture and achieve an even more powerful bodily aesthetic.

Wieland speaks most clearly in an extended example of a sexual encounter outside the Biribinker episode that occurs in the chapter provocatively titled “Der Autor hofft, daß dieses Capitel keiner Kammer-Jungfer in die Hände fallen werde.” In this chapter, the servant Teresilla sleeps with Pedrillo in exchange for his divulging Don Sylvio’s identity which had, until then, been kept secret from her and her master.

*Pedrillo bewieß ihr mit seiner gewöhnlichen Bündigkeit, daß ein Geheimniß von dieser Art sich nur einer Person anvertrauen lasse, für die man gar nichts geheimes habe; und er gieng endlich so weit, auf die Gefälligkeit, die sie von ihm forderte, einen Preiß zu setzen, welchen sie, ohne eben eine Lucretia zu seyn, hätte übermäßig finden können.*

Three phrases in this passage clue the reader into what exactly Pedrillo’s price is: sex. “A person for whom one has no secrets,” could suggest nudity. “A price that she … could have found excessive,” sufficiently suggests something sexual without betraying exactly what was being asked for. However, without the reference to Lucretia, it would be uncertain that Pedrillo asked for anything more than a kiss or to see Teresilla’s ankle. Only the clear reference to an outside text—“without exactly being a Lucretia”—

244 DS 199.
provides a solid point of reference from which sex can be inferred. Even this oblique reference to sex is couched in a denial (ohne) in an embedded clause. If the reader wants to verify what the characters do, he or she must wait until the next chapter for more unambiguous evidence. In that chapter Don Sylvio awakes to hear Teresilla interrogating Pedrillo about his identity in the next room. He storms into Pedrillo’s room and orders him to get out of bed and follow him into his room. Pedrillo responds, “Ich will in einem Augenblick fertig seyn, gnädiger Herr, … wenn ihr mich allein lassen wollt, denn es würde sich doch nicht schicken, daß ich in Eurer Gnaden Gegenwart die Hosen anzöge”.\(^{245}\) The pantless Pedrillo is the baldest evidence of sex but—in typical Wieland fashion—this evidence remains merely circumstantial.

The narrator’s apparent discretion is formally little more than his reticence to call sexual acts and organs by their name. He freely suggests all sorts of obscenities without saying them. When one nymph catches her first glimpse of Biribinker, he has his pants down. She looks at Biribinker “mit einem gewissen Blick, dessen Directions-Linie den bescheidenen Biribinker in einige Verwirrung setzte.”\(^{246}\) Shortly thereafter, through a thinly veiled comparison to her former lover, Grigri, the reader learns, as indirectly as possible, that Biribinker’s penis is unusually large: “…verzeihen sie meiner Schamhaftigkeit, daß ich den Umstand nicht nenne, worinn ich zu erst das Vergnügen hatte sie kennen zu lernen, und in der That, ohne ihnen zu schmeicheln, so sehr zu ihrem

\(^{245}\) DS 204.

\(^{246}\) DS 330.
Vortheil, daß ich in der ersten Bestürzung im Begriff war, sie für den armen Grigri selbst zu halten.”  

In the passage above, as well as throughout the Biribinker episode, the penis—though unnamed—is constantly discussed, whether it be Biribinker’s, his father’s or Grigri’s giant penises or Biribinker’s rival’s flaccid, impotent penis. But it is less those passages that describe the penis than the single passage where the female body is the object of extended consideration that explicitly reveal the text’s paradigmatic negotiation of indiscretion and discretion, silence and innuendo that characterizes Wieland’s optimal bodily aesthetic. Biribinker stumbles across the invisible body of the sleeping fire spirit whose portraits he had just seen:

Er stutzte, und da er die Hände zu Hülfe nahm, so fühlte er den artigsten kleinen Fuß, der je gewesen ist, auf einem Polster ausgestreckt. Eine so unverhoffte Entdeckung machte ihn neugierig, das Bein kennen zu lernen …. Er setzte also seine Beobachtungen fort, und entdeckte endlich von Schönheit zu Schönheit in der unsichtbaren Figur, die er vor sich hatte, ein junges Frauenzimmer.  

In this passage, Biribinker is feeling his way up a woman’s body, from her feet up. While the foot and the leg are named explicitly, the word Schönheit masks the other body parts. The invisible body is accessible through only one sense, the sense of touch. This limited access is emphasized several times, as in the following passage: “Dieser Gedanke, und das bezaubernde Colorit, womit sein Gedächtniß die Unvollkommenheit des fünften Sinnes ergänzte, dessen er sich allein bedienen konnte, setzte ihn zu sehr ausser sich selbst …”.  

This passage allows for an analogy between Biribinker’s

247 DS 337.  
248 DS 382.
experience of the invisible body and the reader’s experience of an erotic scene. Biribinker has access to this body through a single, limited sense, so his imagination and memory are called into service to conjure the beautiful object that is concealed from his other senses. The reader (or listener) has access to the erotic scene, specifically the woman’s body, through the use of one sense—whether seeing or hearing the ciphers of the text conjuring up an illusory presence for his or her pleasure. The reader’s imagination and memory must augment what is not available for the senses. This interaction between the words of the text and the reader’s imagination is what excites the reader’s body. (Even on the level of execution, Wieland employs the technique that Lessing suggests for vivid prose—transforming description into narration. Rather than simply describing what is on Achilles shield, Homer tells the story of Vulcan forging the shield; rather than describing the invisible body, Don Gabriel tells the story of Biribinker feeling his way up the body.)

The culmination of this particular erotic scene occurs in the following passage:

“Es findet sich hier eine abermalige kleine Lücke in dem Original dieser merkwürdigen Geschichte, deren Ausfüllung wir den Bentleys und Scribleris unserer Zeit überlassen wollen, ohne uns auch nur mit Vermuthungen über den Innhalt derselben aufzuhalten.”

This portion of the text self-consciously invites the reader to imitate Biribinker’s action—to use his or her imagination to augment that which is not present. The reader must imagine the complete text; Biribinker must imagine the body that he cannot see. There is, of course, also a dirty pun operating in these lines. The missing piece of text is

\[249\] DS 385.

\[250\] DS 386.
a tiny hole (kleine Lücke) that must be filled (Ausfüllung), and the tiny hole in the text is located at exactly the moment when Biribinker explores the sleeping body with his hands discovering its “beauties” one by one. The tiny hole is, thus, intended to suggest the vagina, and the filling of that hole is the act of copulation. This pun is the emblem of the erotic scene in this novel; in it reading, and desire converge: both are, at their roots, absences that call to be “filled in” with the imagination. But the narrator never says what he means. He uses slippery, evasive terms. And he declines to offer up the content (Innhalt) that he invites the reader to imagine. This technique when applied to the Biribinker episode should act as an aphrodisiac. Its vivid, erotic illusion should arouse Don Sylvio and encourage him to reach for Donna Felicia. But, ultimately, Wieland must acknowledge a certain limitation in this power.

The “sympathy between souls,” or the love at first sight that characterizes Don Sylvio’s and Donna Felicia’s feelings for one another, would seem to be irresistible: “Die Gegenwart des geliebten Gegenstandes verbreitet eine Art von magischer Kraft, oder […] eine Art von magnetischer Ausflüssen rund um sich her, und der Liebhaber tritt nicht so bald in diesen magnetischen Wirbel, so fühlt er sich von einer unwiderstehlichen Gewalt ergriffen […]”. However, the “magnetic maelstrom” of attraction is not powerful enough to overcome Don Sylvio’s dedication to the princess of his fairy tales and locket, and this dedication necessitates the telling of the Biribinker tale. But even this strategy—Wieland’s shocking or arousing aesthetics—is not a full success. Don Sylvio still hesitates after the Biribinker episode. The conflict between Donna Felicia and the fairy princess is overcome only after the true story of the locket is revealed. Don

251 DS 266.
Sylvio cannot tell the difference between the one portrait in the locket and another portrait of Donna Felicia wearing the same costume when the two are placed side by side. Don Sylvio does not truly give up the paphian presence of his fairy princess in the presence of his beloved, rather Donna Felicia accommodates herself to that image. Donna Felicia’s accommodation and Don Sylvio’s resistance to the arousing illusion of the Biribinker episode points towards the need for another solution to the problem of the sticky sign.

Die Geschichte des Agathon: The New Art of Seduction

To conclude this chapter, I turn to Wieland’s most influential and widely read novel Geschichte des Agathon and examine the solution that it provides to the problem of the sticky sign in bodily aesthetics. Wieland wrote Don Sylvio and the Comische Erzählungen while working on that larger project. In fact, he considered those works light-hearted side projects that provided him relief from the more arduous work that Agathon required. He also admits that he needed the quick profits that these more accessible works were likely to bring him, money that he felt Agathon as a difficult work was less likely to raise. Tracing bodily aesthetics across Wieland’s post-seraphic works from Don Sylvio to the Comische Erzählungen to Agathon represents a departure from the usual approaches to Wieland’s works of the mid-1760s, approaches which on some level reproduce Wieland’s division of those works into high or serious art and low or trivial or mercenary art. That is, the former works are seldom read together with the latter work, the earlier two being seen as mere diversions. This devaluation of Don Sylvio and the Comische Erzählungen leads to cycles of neglect and rediscovery (McCarthy, Kurth, Wilson). Or, when these works are mentioned in the same context,
they are read backwards, so to speak. Such readings attempt to recuperate the earlier
works by associating them with the later *Agathon*. For example, claims made for
*Agathon*, such as how it is the first modern German novel, are extended to *Don Sylvio*
(Kayser, Leopold). In this section, I suggest two other options: reading them together
(tracing a similar theme across all three) and reading them forward (asking how the
erlier works force us to rethink *Agathon*). All three works focus on the erotic potential
of art. In *Agathon*, as we have seen in Wieland’s earlier works, art is again an
aphrodisiac that arouses voluptuous bodies by setting them into *Wallungen* and bringing
them together. Only this time it creates those *Wallungen* from a greater distance than
Diana took from Endymion in the tale “Endymion.” Laying aside the auras of the
goddesses did not guarantee the reader’s safety, so in *Agathon* Wieland does away with
the presence of the goddesses altogether.

Agathon naively imagines that he can do what Zeus disingenuously claims to do
in the tale “Juno und Ganymede:” appreciate the beauty of another body without
involving his body, that is, substitute a spiritual attraction for an erotic attraction. The
crisis of Book Five of Part One of *Agathon*, is brought about by the protagonist’s denial
of bodily aesthetics. Because he misrecognizes the erotic potential of art, he falls into the
snares of his enemies who are seeking to corrupt him. The sophist Hippias wants to
convert the handsome young Agathon from an enthusiastic Platonist to his own brand of
materialism. His cynical use of reason and rhetoric fails, so he turns to his friend, the
beautiful hetaera Danae. She will seduce Agathon and lead him to Hippias’s side. She
executes the master stroke in her campaign to seduce Agathon by staging a musical duel
between the muses (Danae in accompaniment with her protégés and servants) and the
sirens (Danae’s servants) in her elaborately designed Lustgarten for Agathon to judge. She chooses this contest precisely because she knows that Agathon will confuse his bodily impulses with spiritual movement—the sensuous beauty of art, her bodily beauty and his bodily reaction with a heavenly movement away from the body and the material plane:

Agathon hatte seinen Platz kaum eingenommen, als man in dem Wasser ein wühlendes Plätschern, und aus der Ferne, wie es ließ, eine sanfte zerflossene Harmonie hörte, ohne jemand zu sehen, von dem sie herkäme. Unser Liebhaber, den dieser Anfang in ein stilles Entzücken setzte, wurde, ungeachtet er zu diesem Spiele vorbereitet war, zu glauben versucht, daß er die Harmonie der Sphären höre, von deren Wirklichkeit ihn die Pythagorischen Weisen beredet hatten; allein, während daß sie immer näher kam und deutlicher wurde, sah er zu gleicher Zeit die Musen aus dem kleinen Lorbeerwäldchen und die Sirenen aus ihren Grotten hervorkommen.\textsuperscript{252}

Agathon’s is tempted to believe—seduced into believing (versucht)—that he is entering communion with a celestial beauty, when really it is only beautiful bodies that are approaching him. He is duped, and it is his naivety that renders him vulnerable to Danae’s ruse.

It is no coincidence that this scene of seduction through art occurs in water. The splashing nymphs make the water heave and swell in waves as they play (wühlendes Plätschern), and these waves will soon give way to the heaving and swelling of their bodies and Agathon’s:

Danae hatte die jüngsten und schönsten aus ihren Aufwärterinnen ausgesucht, diese Meernymphen vorzustellen, die, nur von einem wallenden Steif von himmelblauem Byssus umflattert, mit Cithern und Flöten in der Hand sich über die Wellen erhoben, und mit jugendlichem Stolz untadeliche Schönheiten vor den Augen ihrer eifersüchtigen Gespielen entdeckten. […] indes daß Danae mitten unter den Musen, an den Rand der kleinen Helbinsel herabstieg, und, wie Venus unter den

\textsuperscript{252} Christoph Martin Wieland, Werke, vol. 1 (München: Hanser, 1964) 506.
Gratien, oder Diana unter ihren Nymphen hervorglänzend, dem Auge keine Freiheit ließ, auf einem andern Gegenstande zu verweilen. Ein langes schneeweißes Gewand floß, unter dem halbentblößten Busen mit einem goldnen Gürtel umfaßt, in kleinen wallenden Falten zu ihren Füßen herab […] Man muß ohne Zweifel gestehen, daß das Gemälde, welches sich in diesem Augenblick unserm Helden darstellte, nicht sehr geschickt war, weder sein Herz noch seine Sinnen in Ruhe zu lassen; allein die Absicht der Danae war nur, ihn durch die Augen zu den Vergnügen eines andern Sinnes vorzubereiten, und ihr Stolz verlangte keinen geringeren Triumph, als ein so reizendes Gemälde durch die Zauber gewalt ihrer Stimme und ihrer Saiten in seiner Seele auszulöschen. Sie schmeichelte sich nicht zu viel.

The *wallenden* robes around the nymphs’ hips and Danae’s exposed breast are themselves a work of art (*Gemälde*) intended to resonate in Agathon’s own body. Whereas Agathon believes he is hearing the harmony of the spheres, the perfect dimensions that he sees are not celestial. They are not Pythagorean truths. Agathon might mistake harmonious proportions of the women’s bodies and the pleasure they impart to his senses for the harmony of the spheres and their cognitive pleasures, but only because he is unaware of what actually moves him. The heaving waves, the heaving robes, and the heaving female bodies begin to resonate in Agathon’s body.

Agathon believes he is judging an allegory “über den Vorzug der Liebe, die sich auf die Empfindung, oder derjenigen, die sich auf die bloße Begierde gründet” in which the Muses represent the former and the sirens the latter. 254 But the allegory misleads him. The allegorical content is intended to lower Agathon’s defenses and to make him receptive to the bodily seduction that Danae has planned for him. Agathon reads the allegory wrong in so far as he looks beyond the signs (the bodies of the women and their effect on his body) to the allegorical content behind the signs. He attempts to read as


254 Wieland, *Werke* 507.
allegory something that is not at all allegorical. Danae as a muse sings first. Her
performance is, of course, much to his liking, because she sings of the sort of love that
Agathon believes in. But we learn what is really happening when the sirens sing:

Allein er wurde bald gezwungen anders Sinnes zu werden, als er sie hörte; alle seine Vorurteile für die Muse konnten ihn nicht verhindern, sich selbst zu gestehen, daß eine fast unwiderstehliche Verführung in ihren Tönen atmete. Ihre Stimme, die an Weichheit und Biegsamkeit nicht übertroffen werden konnte, schien alle Grade der Entzückungen auszudrücken, deren die sinnliche Liebe fähig ist; und das weiche Getön der Flöten erhöhte die Lebhaftigkeit dieses Ausdrucks auf einen Grad, der kaum einen Unterschied zwischen der Nachahmung und der Wahrheit übrig ließ.\(^\text{255}\)

Whereas Agathon believes he is judging the sirens’ performance by the criteria of how nature-like their imitation is, their (and the muses’) appeal to the senses expose the more fundamental criteria of erotic art to the reader. With bodily aesthetics it is not a question of veracity or verisimilitude, but rather of virtuality, real bodily sensations occasioned by the signs of art.

As Agathon is set to decide the contest in the sirens’ favor, the muses mount a response. They mock and rout the sirens, and by then Agathon is hopelessly entangled in Danae’s trap:

Eine süße Schwermut bemächtigte sich Agathons; er sank in ein angenehmes Staunen, unfreiwillige Seufzer entflohten seiner Brust, und wollüstige Tränen rollten über seine Wangen herab. Mitten aus dieser rührenden Harmonie erhob sich der Gesang der schönen Danae, welche […] aufgefordert war, die ganze Vollkommenheit ihrer Stimme, und alle Zauberkräfte der Kunst anzuwenden, um den Sieg gänzlich auf die Seite der Musten zu entscheiden.\(^\text{256}\)

\(^\text{255}\) Wieland, *Werke* 508.

\(^\text{256}\) Wieland, *Werke* 508.
Without knowing what has happened, he has been turned into a voluptuary as his wollüstige tears indicate. Danae, through the deceptive magic of art, has rendered Agathon a Wollüstling and seduced him through art that appeals to his voluptuous body.

Although it would appear to be framed as a corruption, the seduction of bodily aesthetics is not condemned in this work, rather it forms a necessary part of the hero’s education. In this regard, Agathon is much like Don Sylvio. In fact, Danae’s performance is the equivalent to the telling of “the Story of Prince Biribinker”—only more effective. Danae’s art of seduction, her successful aesthetics of arousal, suggest that the conflict that has been evident in erotic literature thus far has been resolved. Danae has overcome a problem that Lessing spared Chloe but that Wieland allowed to plague Donna Felicia; Danae does not have to compete with art as an erotic substitute for her, rather she utilizes it to enhance her erotic appeal. For Danae, the paphian presence is not the other woman. The signs of art do not distract Agathon from Danae, they bring him to her. Danae’s success reveals how the Age of Lessing is already starting to close and that bodily aesthetics as I formulated it at the beginning of this dissertation is coming to an end. The signs of erotic literature are no longer presenting beautiful bodies to the perceiver’s intuition in the absence of these bodies.

This transformation in the nature of erotic art and the dynamic of bodily aesthetics follows from broader changes in generic innovations and, most importantly, in an epistemic break that signals the end of absorption as a dominant model of signification. Gerhart Mayer presents a compelling argument for Geschichte des Agathon’s designation as the first Bildungsroman, and he bases his argument on the differences between the three different versions that Wieland authored. He argues that the first version
(1766/1767) is an Entwicklungsroman not a Bildungsroman, whereas by the final authorized version (1794) the novel has become something unprecedented, the first Bildungsroman.\textsuperscript{257} The defining features of the first version, as he sees it, are:

Das eigentliche Thema der Erstausgabe artikuliert sich vielmehr in der Darstellung eines “Individual-Charakters”, der “in einem manchfältigen Licht und von allen Seiten” erläutert wird …. Unter den verschiedensten Perspektiven—des Erzählers, der Nebenfiguren—wird Agathon betrachtet und gedeutet; eine Reihe von Schauplätzen gibt ihm Gelegenheit, seine vielschichtige Natur handelnd zu offenbaren. Es geht dem Erzähler nicht um die erzieherische Setzung eines Bildungsziels…\textsuperscript{258}

The crucial changes that lead to the novel’s becoming a Bildungsroman by the third version include, among other things, Agathon’s composition of his own autobiography and his \textit{Bildungsreise}, all of which finally enable him to become the wise ruler of a small Republic. His entire education now leads to this \textit{telos}. Danae’s seduction of Agathon, which had been just one misadventure among others in the first version, becomes the discovery of “die sinnenhafte Komponente seiner Natur” which he had denied as a youth but which he must claim if he is to be an agent in the world.\textsuperscript{259} My argument, however, does not rely on whether \textit{Geschichte des Agathon} is this or that sort of novel. Rather, throughout this chapter I have been more interested in precisely how Wieland’s post-seraphic works exceed generic categorization and my specific interest in this novel is how it solves a problem inherent to bodily aesthetics as I have traced it through the works that immediately preceded it. The scene of Danae’s seduction is present in the first, second and third versions. The resolution of the tension between bodily aesthetic means

\textsuperscript{257} Mayer 7-8, 11-13.

\textsuperscript{258} Mayer 11.

\textsuperscript{259} Mayer 12.
and bodily aesthetic ends that Agathon presents forms an integral part of both Agathon’s *Entwicklung* and his *Bildung*. This development in bodily aesthetics precedes the generic innovation of the Bildungsroman, and—as it shall turn out—is an important development that enables the formation of this genre.

In Danae’s performance, erotic effect and representational means are no longer in conflict (to recall my discussion of Sternberg in Chapter 1). Here, bodily aesthetics has reconfigured itself as the transparent model of the sign cedes to an intransitive model of the sign. In her book *Virtue and the Veil of Illusion* (1991), Dorothea von Mücke builds on the work of Michael Fried and David Wellbery and provides a theoretical framework that can account for the closure of the Age of Lessing and the shift in erotic art that is now apparent. Von Mücke describes Enlightenment semiotics and its implications for the literature, pedagogy, and subjectivity of the period. She elaborates an illusionistic attitude towards language that arises in France, England, and Germany in the mid-eighteenth century. She echoes Wellbery and writes that according to this attitude, literature “produces the illusion of quasi-immediate access to the world” and “offers an object to vision rather than signs to be read and deciphered.” Literature becomes “the semiotic utopia of sheer transparency; it seeks to render the signs of art […] diaphonous.” The result is an aesthetic experience of authenticity and immediacy that achieves the “obliteration of the artificiality of the poetic construct.” Reading under this paradigm is a silent, hallucinatory, and visualizing experience that culminates in “the reader’s […] absorption into the represented world.” But unlike Wellbery, von Mücke

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links Enlightenment semiotics and aesthetics to particular and specific genres of literature rather than literature generally conceived of as narrative poetry. She links the epistolary novel, the absorption of the reader, and the semiotics of transparency. Von Mücke then argues that a shift occurs to a new ideal to create the alignment of the Bildungsroman, a distanced, judging reader, and a new semiotic model of the opaque, self-referential signifier. She argues that the Bildungsroman can arise only because of this semiotic shift. Whereas Richardson’s novels exemplified the old model, she takes Wieland’s *Geschichte des Agathon* as the paradigm of a text predicated on the new semiotic model. Despite the lines that von Mücke draws between either side of the epistemic break that she describes, she acknowledges that the dichotomy of transparency and opacity is not so clear-cut. She acknowledges that the first version of *Agathon* appeared only six years after the paradigmatic novel of transparency, Rousseau’s *Julie* (1761), and that *Agathon* “still partially participates in the discourse of sensibility.” She emphasizes that it is not until much later (as exemplified with the publication of the third version of *Agathon*) that the constellation of reading and the opaque signifier fully crystallizes. Here, von Mücke explicitly builds her argument upon Mayer’s and stresses the addition of Agathon’s autobiography. Agathon’s mode of reading moves from his “sensible, feeling, sentimental” reading of Homer in the first version to abstract narrativization, abstract reason, universality, and cause and effect in the third version of the novel. Building on von Mücke’s argument, in turn, I argue that we can actually track this movement from *Don Sylvio* to the first version of *Agathon*. Agathon has successfully learned to read in the same way that it was hoped Don Sylvio would learn to read. We can track the shift

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261 Von Mücke 229.
from transparency to the intransitive sign from Don Sylvio’s private fairy tales to the public telling of “The Story of Biribinker” to Danae’s seductive performances in the first and subsequent versions of Agathon. Erotic literature heralds this development first—before the specific generic innovation of the Bildungsroman—and therein lies erotic literature’s special significance from a semiotic perspective.

In the next chapter, I shall examine the fate of bodily aesthetics after Danae’s art of seduction has stabilized and become the norm, that is after absorption and the Age of Lessing have come to a close. Erotic art will still produce Wallungen in the perceiver, but in a new way, vibrating directly on the perceiver’s body without recourse to the paphian presence.
CHAPTER 4

German Pornography:
From Venus in Verse to the Vibrator

In this chapter I read a neglected work, Gustav Schilling’s erotic novel *Die Denkwürdigkeiten des Herrn von H.* (1787) which has been called a rare German pornographic novel from the eighteenth century. But to call this novel pornography is to call attention to its status as an epigonal work that seems hopelessly outdated from an international perspective. It is more anacreontic than pornographic. It is as though that sort of erotic literature which had been coming out of France and England had very little influence on Schilling. His novel does conform to some of the conventions established by the pornographic classics which preceded it. However, it cites more conventions of classical erotic verse which at this time had come to be perceived as tired and outmoded. But whereas the *Denkwürdigkeiten* appears to be an epigonal work from a thematic or generic perspective, it reveals itself to be thoroughly cutting-edge erotic literature when considered from the perspective of bodily aesthetics. Coming after the Age of Lessing had passed, it registers significant changes in semiotic paradigms that cemented after 1781. It can be read as bodily aesthetics after absorption, as bodily aesthetics operating under what Dorothea von Mücke calls the constellation of the opaque signifier or what I call the new art of seduction (as discussed in Chapter 3). Bodily aesthetics still mediates

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between bodies—erotic literature is still no less an aphrodisiac than Wieland envisioned it—but it no longer mediates between the voluptuary’s body and the paphian presence. Venus’s presence in verse is no longer required nor is it any longer possible, since it was a product of absorptive illusion. Sympathetic Wallungen no longer radiate from Lesbia’s heaving breasts to Lessing’s swelling vessels; rather, the surface of the signs of erotic art now produce Wallungen without recourse to a hallucinatory semi-visual reading experience. The surface of signs now produce tickling sensations and arousing vibrations directly. Erotic art has become a vibrator applied directly to the Wollusttummelsplatz that is the voluptuary’s body.

Another Curious Lacuna, or a Hole in the Master-Narrative

To speak of Die Denkwürdigkeiten des Herrn von H. in terms of pornography is not to employ the term pornographic wantonly. It is not simply to establish how bluntly it puts sexual matters or with what intent it does so. It is not to measure how long the narrative lingers on the penis, the vagina, the breast, the anus and intercourse, and it is not to evaluate whether these works are more or less tasteful or more or less obscene, PG-13 or XXX. (Although, I could note that this work does treat genitalia and copulation in a more direct way than the other works I have thus far considered. Though veiled in metaphor—the Penis is “der kleine Amor” and the vagina is a “Liebesgrotto”—the narration does name these organs and their use rather than pointedly passing over them as Wieland had done.) Rather, to call this novel pornographic is to locate it in a contested literary history. As a whole, this literary history shows that three centuries elapse between the original publication of the founding texts of the pornographic genre and the emergence of the term “pornography” which designates that genre as a discrete yet
indiscreet phenomenon. The lapse between the appearance of the pornographic classics and their appellation is indicative of a general difficulty in our understanding of pornography, a difficulty that a look at German erotic literature in the Age of Lessing and beyond can help elucidate. This literary history has thus far excluded German works from the eighteenth century. Thus, to refer eighteenth-century German erotic literature to pornography is to call attention to a curious lacuna in that literary history, or a hole in that master-narrative.

Eroticism is constitutive of several genres in eighteenth-century European literature. However, as Heinz Schlaffer argues in Musa iocosa (1971), many of these genres (odes, madrigals, Anacreontic poetry, etc.) can be subsumed into a tightly coherent tradition of erotic light verse written from the Middle Ages until the end of the eighteenth century. As a whole, this tradition consists of various short verse forms written in Latin or the vernacular, which are set in bucolic landscapes, and which invoke a playful, erotic mood and motifs of love, sensual pleasure, carpe diem, complaints to unfaithful mistresses, and the like. Erotic light verse self-consciously traces its lineage back to models in classical antiquity beginning with Anacreon’s sixth century B.C.E. lyric poetry and includes other famous models such as the erotic works of Horace and Ovid. In the German context, Martin Opitz, J. W. L. Gleim, and Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn are all associated with this tradition, and Goethe’s Römische Elegien (1790) are some of its most well-known examples. Schlaffer calls erotic light verse a "middle genre," situating it in opposition to both the erotic “high genre” of spiritualized love represented by the Petrarchan tradition and chivalric romances on the one hand, and the

Heinz Schlaffer, Musa iocosa (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1971).
erotic “low genre” of bawdy tales represented by burlesque, satire, and scatological humor on the other hand. This “middle genre” comes to an abrupt end towards the end of the eighteenth century at roughly the same time that pornography unequivocally emerges from the “low genre” as Schlaffer would have it. Schlaffer posits no relationship between the “middle genre” and pornography—the former’s end and the latter’s beginning only coincide. In fact, Schlaffer takes pains to disassociate the “middle genre” from the “low” and its apparent heir, pornography. I, on the other hand, argue for their interrelatedness. I argue that “German pornography” is a continuation of the tradition of erotic light verse. But in order to make this argument, I have to explain why it is necessary for me to put quotation marks around the term “German pornography.”

Whereas Schlaffer takes pornography to be a self-evident phenomenon, one that requires no explanation, later scholars have problematized the notion of pornography in the eighteenth-century.

In *The Secret Museum* (1987) Walter Kendrick sketches the history of the word pornography: the term pornography first appears in modern discourse in 1769—only to be forgotten quickly thereafter—when Restif de la Bretonne uses it to describe himself as a social-reform-minded writer on prostitution. It reappears and dons its modern denotation of obscene representation in 1850. Kendrick’s argument, however, is that pornography does not really denote anything. There is no definition of pornography; there is no hardcore to be grasped. As suggested by former United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous dictum that he does not know what pornography is but recognizes it when he sees it, pornography names no content. Kendrick thus maintains

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that pornography names an argument instead. Specifically, Kendrick defines pornography as a strategy of censorship that responds to the increasing availability of supposedly subversive images and texts that were once the exclusive preserve of the elite. Pornography is a reaction to the democratization of culture—increasing literacy rates and decreasing printing costs were putting dirty books into the hands of everyone, even of women, children, and the poor! To follow this line of argumentation, erotic light verse is not pornography, because its esoteric nature (antique models, frequent use of Latin, limited circulation in humanistic and/or aristocratic circles, etc.) shielded it from consumption by the masses. The increasing accessibility of the novel in the eighteenth century, however, relegated works like *Fanny Hill* to the status of pornography. Lessing’s bowdlerizing translation of Seneca’s Hostius anecdote would conform to this argument. It was appropriate to direct those who were educated and could read the scandalous passage in the original to the source while denying the full details of the account to those who were not as privileged. Wieland’s dense and difficult web of intertexts would serve the same function and provide him with further cover against accusations of impropriety. Kendrick’s argument would thus seem to reinforce the notion of a black hole in the history of pornography into which eighteenth-century German erotic literature would fall. Perhaps, the Germans were just less sophisticated and more prudish than the French. But the obscenity that I have so far examined makes us pause at such an idea and exclaim, “*au contraire!*”

Kendrick’s attention to the role of censorship in the definition of pornography leads him to overlook the internal cohesion of the group of texts thus censored. In response, Lynn Hunt tries to establish the content of pornography in a politically nuanced
literary history. She traces the history of this genre in her introduction to *The Invention of Pornography* (1993): the papal ban of Pietro Aretino’s works in the early sixteenth century – dialogues between women, particularly prostitutes, and sonnets written to accompany a series of erotic engravings – and their subsequent rapid international dissemination and imitation constitute the founding moment of early modern pornography.\(^{265}\) The significance of these works lies in their explicit representation of sexual activity presented in self-conscious opposition to moral conventions; their achieving a broad audience thanks to printing; and their use of political satire, the figure of the prostitute, and the form of the dialogue between women. The next significant development in pornography occurred in the mid-seventeenth century with the publication of works like *L’Ecole des Filles* (1655) and *L’Académie des Dames* (1659 or 1660) which introduced the convention of the cataloging of “perversions” as so many permutations of sensual pleasure. The appearance of works like *Dom Bougre* (1741), *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), Diderot’s *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748), and John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* (1748-1749) represents the point at which pornography assumes the definitive contours by which it is still recognizable today: in the 1740s the genre begins to utilize the form of the newly emerged sentimental novel ultimately displacing the earlier verse and dialogue forms. And, finally, the early modern pornographic tradition culminates in the 1790s in the works of the Marquis de Sade where all the previously established conventions are rehearsed and carried out to their logical, absurd extreme (the destruction of the desiring and desirous body in the name of desire) thereby establishing the limits of pornography as it exists and is named today.

By the end of the eighteenth century, a distinct corpus of pornographic texts existed – these works referenced one another, imitated one another, and appeared together frequently on police indexes of contraband books and publisher lists of popular under-the-table sellers. But, as Robert Darnton cautions in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995), pornography cannot even then be assumed to be a settled and stable concept.\(^2\) Neither the Old Regime in France nor booksellers of that period clearly distinguished between the pornographic classics, materialist works like La Mettrie’s *L’Homme machine* (1748) and politically subversive works. They dubbed them all *livres philosophiques*. The genre of pornography—though, perhaps, internally coherent—was not yet a distinct category whose boundaries were rigidly enforced from without by the censor, the police, or the consumer.

In further efforts to define eighteenth-century pornography and explain its origins, several scholars concentrate on the link between pornography and the novel. The affinity between the pornographic and the sentimental novels is so strong that Peter Wagner argues in his 1985 introduction to *Fanny Hill* that the novel is foremost a parody of Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740).\(^2\) And Jean Marie Goulemot argues more generally in his book *Forbidden Texts* (1994) that the pornographic novel is merely the distillation of the sentimental novel.\(^3\) Whereas the sentimental novel seeks to produce tears in the reader,


the pornographic novel seeks to produce other fluids from the reader’s body. Even scholars examining pornography written prior to the publication of *Pamela* and the subsequent wave of pornographic novels note the link between pornography and the novel as it begins to distinguish itself from the romance. Joan DeJean argues in “The Politics of Pornography” that the unknown author of *L’Ecole des Filles* was experimenting with new techniques in prose fiction in combination with the dialogue form.  

While eighteenth-century French and English authors were availing themselves of the new possibility of the pornographic novel, erotic-minded German authors seemed moribund producing erotic light verse in an antique style (such as Lessing’s *Kleinigkeiten*). When viewed from the perspective of novelistic innovations, German erotic literature does not appear to be at the forefront of eighteenth-century developments in pornography at all. Typically, the apparent dearth of original German pornographic materials from this period is taken as evidence of this suspicion, and a look into the histories of erotic literature and the indexes of the major collections of pre-nineteenth-century pornography seems to confirm it. Not until the 1840s did domestic German pornographic novels begin to proliferate with an explosion of what could anachronistically be called S&M novels, novels with titles such as *Meine grausame süße Reitpeitsche* and *Tante Lottes Zuchtrute*.  

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270 Hunt 21-23.
While scholars have studied pornography in its relation to the novel, they have thus far considered erotic light verse and pornography as two separate, unrelated phenomena. As a consequence, eighteenth-century German literature has been rendered irrelevant to the development of pornography. But pornography should not be conflated with the pornographic novel alone; it should not be forgotten that up until the mid-eighteenth century, much pornography was written in verse—consider Piron’s *Ode à Priape* (1710) and Voltaire’s *Pucelle d’Orléans* (1755). It should not be concluded that erotic light verse and pornography are separate and unrelated, and thus that an examination of eighteenth-century German erotic literature can bear few insights into the development of pornography. The course of eighteenth-century German erotic light verse illuminates the development of pornography. Precisely the apparent lag that has caused scholars to relegate German literature to the status of bystander or late-comer in the development of pornography allows us to examine aspects of that development that tend to be elided when it is presented as a sudden epistemic break. German works such as the *Comische Erzählungen* and the *Denkwürdigkeiten* are liminal works caught between erotic light verse and pornography and can inform our understanding of the transition from one genre to the other. While scholars have convincingly shown how pornography develops out of what Schlaffer calls the “low genre” and its link to the novel, I approach the question of pornography’s evolution from a new angle, as a late

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271 See Patrick J. Kearney, *The Private Case: An Annotated Bibliography of the Private Case Erotica Collection in the British (Museum) Library* (London: Jay Landesman, 1981). These underground novels would seem to have one famous precursor (the 1815 novel *Schwester Monika* posthumously attributed to E. T. A. Hoffmann) and, as I hope to argue at another time, a famous imitator (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 *Venus im Pelz*) and, thereby, a significant impact on psychoanalytic, sexological, and medical categories of sexuality.
development of German erotic light verse and bodily aesthetics, thereby increasing our understanding of pornography.

Kendrick’s argument indicates a way to link these two genres that are otherwise taken to be mutually irrelevant. As he argues that pornography as a concept describes no particular content, he necessarily implies that any sort of definition of pornography based on formal characteristics will inherently be misguided. Instead of any particular generic convention, he offers pornography as a reactionary response. By shifting the meaning of the label pornography away from its designation of formal features to its function, Kendrick’s work makes it possible to begin to describe a single, unified context for both erotic light verse, German erotic literature of the eighteenth century, and pornography. As I have indicated throughout this dissertation, the obscenity, depravity, arousing potential, danger and pleasure, and the explicitness of erotic literature transcends specifically generic confinements without nevertheless transcending historical specificity and resorting to timeless, universal models. Just as Michael Fried, David Wellbery, and Dorothea von Mücke identified Michel Foucault’s classical episteme and its principle of transparency operating as a higher order or metasemiotic principle that determined and unified the disparate concerns of art such as medium, genre, hierarchy, etc., I too have pursued the implications of this metasemiotic model for German erotic literature of the period and vice-versa. To bring these considerations to bear on the topic of pornography, I look beyond specific formal features of pornography like Kendrick and unlike Hunt. To find this unity in pornography and German erotic literature of the eighteenth century, I look beyond generic conventions to the metasemiotic principles that govern them but are themselves historical and subject to change. Specifically, I look to bodily aesthetics, or
the way in which the signs of these texts impact the reader’s body. To speak of the bodily aesthetics of erotic literature and pornography in the eighteenth century is quite a bit more specific than simply saying that pornography arouses. It is to consider how it arouses and to what ends. And I have shown, erotic German literature as it emerges out of the Age of Lessing arouses in a particular way. I shall read the *Denkwürdigkeiten* as an exposition of Danae’s new art of seduction, or I shall read the *Denkwürdigkeiten* as erotic literature that stimulates without recourse to the paphian presence. This reading will allow me to link German erotic literature of the eighteenth century—which is only pornography in quotation marks—back to the pornographic mainstream.

**The Scholarship of Erotobibliophilia**

Before I venture into my textual analysis, however, I would first like to address what it means to consider the text of the *Denkwürdigkeiten*. The text is as ephemeral as the traditional motifs of eroticism that it employs. It is difficult to obtain a copy today. WorldCat lists only seven copies in North American libraries, all of which are the Kiepenheuer edition from the mid 1980s except one French translation from the 1970s and one copy of a private printing of one hundred exemplars printed in Bern in 1919. (The Kiepenheuer edition is based on that printing.) The Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag did reprint the Kiepenheuer edition (duplicating even the *Nachwort*) as part of a boxed set of *erotische Weltliteratur* in 2002. In the twentieth century, it has been translated into French as *Les mémoires d’un baron* (“pour adultes seulement”) and into English as *Memoirs of a German Baron*.

I have been able to find no significant secondary scholarship on this novel, and what little commentary that I have found amounts to arguments like this is the only extant
piece of eighteenth-century German pornography and that the Baron is the German Casanova.²⁷²

Similarly, minimal bibliographic information is available. As to what we do know: The novel was first published anonymously in 1787 in Berlin and Hamburg, although the frontispiece listed a false place of publication as was common practice in underground literature in general, and in pornographic literature in particular.²⁷³ It appeared unillustrated except for two vignettes, and twentieth-century editions have taken to providing illustrations themselves, usually contemporary engravings that appeared in Rétif de la Bretonne’s pornographic novel *Le Paysan perverti* (1782).²⁷⁴ Although the authorship has never been definitively established, it was subsequently and popularly attributed to Gustav Schilling whose poetry had been published in important journals like Friederich Schiller's *Thalia* and Wieland's *Neue Teutsche Merkur*. However, his 80-volume *Gesamtwerk Ausgabe letzter Hand* never included the novel.²⁷⁵ No serious doubt has been cast on his authorship. (Though I might note that one objection that I have found so far—apart from the fact that Schilling never claimed authorship himself—was that he was only 21 when the book was published and that no 21-year-old could have written such a “abgeklärte Reminiszenz.”²⁷⁶ Such an objection must seem unconvincing today as it is based on assumptions of authenticity of experience and narrative which

²⁷² DH 249.
²⁷³ DH 249.
²⁷⁴ DH 249.
²⁷⁵ DH 250.
²⁷⁶ DH 250.
denies the conventional nature of the text.) With later, less explicit yet nevertheless saucy novels to his name like *Röschens Geheimnisse* (1798/99), *Clärchens Geständnisse* (1799) and *Julchens Schwachheiten* (1799), the thematic could at least conceivably belong to Schilling’s repertoire.\(^{277}\)

Given the scarcity of copies and the absence of studies on this text, one has to rely on private printings in the place of critical editions, and erotobibliophilia in the place of scholarship. The efforts of erotobibliophiles is more quaint than rigorous, and their enthusiasm feels a little unsavory sometimes. Their commentary tends to reduce texts to instances of licentious forthrightness in the face of prudishness and moral hypocrisy. (This response is perhaps more appropriate than it would seem at first glance, since Hunt argues that one of the defining characteristics of pornography since Arentino is that it stakes exactly this claim.) Or their commentary presents these texts as examples of writing worthy of the other great authors who also wrote sexual pieces and whom every bourgeois reader venerates, such as Goethe who also wrote the *Venetian Epigrams*.\(^{278}\)

Yet, I believe that their work does have some merit. Although their discussions are unscholarly, they recognize some sort of history of styles: for example, what they might call the delicate witty playful erotic of Rococo which cedes to some sort of dumb obscenity arising from mass literacy and profit-driven publishers.\(^{279}\) In their respect for a


\(^{278}\) DH 248.

history of style and in their enthusiasm, I would suggest that their discussions maintain a language of eroticism much more similar to the texts that fascinate them than does any modern scholar. Thus they provide a possible corrective to anachronism and resist assimilation to twentieth-century master narratives of desire and subjectivity. In other words, erotobiophiles certainly are more like stylists and beauticians than they are like aestheticians in most regards, but in their archaic and enthusiastic language they take on the aesthetic spirit of the works that “moisten” them—to recall Elaine Scarry’s discussion of the effects of beauty on the perceiver.

**Mirrors in the Bedroom, or the Sign as Sex Toy**

Now, I would like to take a close look at the text as it is available. In this text, mirrors perform a fundamentally different function than the mirrors in Lessing’s *Rettungen des Horaz*. Rather than reflect shadows that are redundant in the face of the referent or—in perverse misuses—stimulate sodomitically and produce unnatural bodily sensations, they produce signs that are recognized as signs yet are still capable of producing pleasure in the presence of their referents.

From the start of the novel and throughout, mirrors play a positive role. They are neither strictly unnecessary and potentially distracting nor are they perverse; rather, they enhance or even enable the erotic encounters in which they appear. In the first erotic tableau of the novel, the young protagonist spies his father and his mistress through a crack in the door engaging in an activity that he does not understand. (The naïve voyeur is a standard trope from pornography.) The scene that plays out before Karl is defined by what is revealed to his gaze and how he witnesses it:

andersgearteten Werken, die dieser Niederung entwuchsen und als einzige überlebten, zählt der vorliegende Roman.” (DH 248-249.)
Ich schlich mich näher und konnte eben durch die Öffnung meines Vaters Bett sehen und noch besser links einen sehr großen Spiegel, neben dem zwei große Wachskerzen auf Wandleuchtern brannten. [...] Lilla trat in einem weißen, einfachen Kleid vor den Spiegel, steckte ihre Haare los, und eine lange, schwarze Wolke wallte über ihre Schultern hin. [...] Herr v. H. trat, in einen Schlafrock gehüllt, herbei, schlang seinen Arm um ihren Nacken und küßte sie. [...] Und damit zog er ihr das Halstuch ab, jede Nadel ward ihres Dienstes entlassen, nieder fiel das Kleid, und Lilla stand in bloßem Hemd da. [...] Lilla ließ die Arme sinken, ab fiel das Hemd.  

The inventory of the room’s furnishings (bed, mirror, wall sconces) would appear to be somewhat superfluous. All the reader needs to know is that the room is a bedroom. But the candles, mirror and bed demarcate the space of the action and, like the open door, create the conditions necessary for Karl’s witnessing the act. The action occurs in two spaces in the bedroom, in front of the mirror and in the bed. The candles illuminate the scene, and the mirror allows Karl to see the front of Lilla’s body. His vantage point would otherwise not reveal much, a view from behind or at best a silhouette. The mirror makes plausible Karl’s ability to survey the scene. Once Lilla’s blouse falls, Karl faints. After he regains consciousness, the scene has shifted from the space in front of the mirror to the bed. He sees, “meinen Vater auf dem Bett liegen. [...] Ich sah – Lilla lag auf dem Rücken, beide Schenkel erhoben, und die Hand meines Vaters spielte an einem Teil. Er erhob sich, bedeckte Lilla, und ich sah nichts als ein Steigen und Sinken seines Hintern und über seiner linken Hüfte das weiße Bein Lillas.”  

Without the mirror the scene becomes unintelligible and closed of to Karl’s view. Karl’s vision is now obscured by exactly that which he is witnessing. The movement of his father’s hips blocks his view of the sexual act. The concealment of the act and the lovers’ bodies is accentuated with

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280 DH 13.

281 DH 14.
the closing of the scene: “Herr v. H. legte sich wieder an seine Stelle, Lilla küßte ihn und zog die Decke über beide.”\textsuperscript{282} The cover rises, and there is now nothing to see. In this first tableau, the mirror serves a stock function in pornography by making plausible the voyeur’s field of vision. It is in this way no different than the standard keyhole, hole in the wall, or crack in the door. But it also suggests that the reflection of a body is pleasurable to look at, even in the presence of that body.

Additional meaning actually accrues to the mirror at the end of Book One, as the narrator approaches the end of his erotic tutelage under his first mistress, Madame Glossen. In their final erotic encounters on her estate, they intentionally use the mirror to stimulate one another just as Karl’s father and Lilla had done: “Wir standen auf, umschlungen traten wir vor den Spiegel und gruppierten uns auf alle ersinnliche Art,” and later, “Sie stand auf, nahm ein Tuch und trocknete mich sorgfältig ab und führte mich vor den Spiegel. ‘Sie sehen das wohl gern?’”\textsuperscript{283} The lovers actively pose in front of the mirror and enjoy looking at their reflections. Unlike Lessing’s conception of Horace and Chloe in front of the mirror, the reflected image as sign is no longer redundant and distracting in the presence of the object—it does not stand between the perceiver and the perceived. Instead, it provides a pleasure of its own that is different than the beholding of the body itself and that augments that pleasure. The sign obtains an existential independence from its referent. The images in the mirrors no longer constitute a complication in an aesthetic system, a problematic erotic representation, as they did for Lessing. The natural signs residing in the mirror and the arbitrary signs of language that

\textsuperscript{282} DH 14.

\textsuperscript{283} DH 66, 76.
constitute this novel become objects that can be manipulated to excite, increase, and produce pleasure. They become part of an array of acceptable techniques that modulate and stimulate the voluptuous body without needing to point beyond themselves or cede the ground to an hallucinatory vision or the object itself. Ultimately, the signs themselves become fungible objects—sex toys of sorts—and, hence, lose their stickiness.

In the scene quoted above in which Karl and Madame Glossen rub each other’s body with a clothe in front of a mirror, Karl delights not only in the reflection in the mirror, but also in the effect the vigorous rubbing has on their bodies. The friction from the clothe turns their skin bright red. This technique becomes one of his favorite ways, oft repeated, to pique desire. The sensation of rubbing is perceived as a pleasurable to the recipient, but more importantly, the blushing of the skin intoxicates the observer. Similarly, the blushing of the skin is a pleasurable sight for the one being rubbed as well—the perceiver perceives him- or herself. One’s own body becomes an erotic sign; its appearance can now be manipulated in order to optimize its stimulating effect for the participant-cum-perceiver. The same tendency to manipulate and alter the body to produce maximally stimulating images is evident in the novel’s frequent references to sexual positions. In an example taken from another standard contemporary pornographic trope, the male protagonist has sex with an ugly, wizened woman. Her use of sexual position is typical for every other reference to positions in this novel: “Gewiß kein sonderlicher Reiz, indessen—ich faßte Posto und benahm mich, so gut ich vermochte. Es war ein wahres Vergnügen, die abwechselnden Posituren und Kapriolen anzusehen, die sie annahm, um mich Feuer zu bringen, und es mißlang ihr auch nicht gänzlich.”

284 DH 199.
body is now an object to arrange in different configurations in well-timed succession, all with the intent to produce the most enticing effect possible. The bodies in this text thus obey a pornographic poetics the likes of which the painterly conception of poetry could only converge upon as a limit.

As the voluptuary’s body becomes one erotic sign among others, one might expect a concomitant devaluation of the body’s erotic potential. The lover’s body, imagined by Lessing to be a fullness of presence that renders the mirror image unnecessary, should remain interesting and erotic in its own right yet incomplete and capable of a supplement. It must be noted, however, that the narrator and protagonist of the *Denkwürdigkeiten* does not perceive his use of mirrors, rags, and sexual positions as a loss of access to his beloved or his own body. The text on this point is extremely optimistic and presents the new possibilities for the body as a dietetics of pleasure or a calculus of hedonism that is designed to permit maximum fulfillment and sustained pleasure. The text presents this development as the potential for an erotic augmentation of the body rather than an erotic supplement.\(^{285}\)

\(^{285}\) The shift in the status of the lovers’ reflection from uninteresting shadow to fetishized object accords with meta-narratives of the Enlightenment and modernity that locate a moment of alienation at the heart of the critical project. Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme identify the Enlightenment as the process by which reason colonizes aspects of what had been its traditionally defined other: nature, irrationality, fantasy, affect, and the body. Whereas prior to the Enlightenment, reason’s others enjoyed an autonomy and validity of their own—they could be considered coequal to reason—through enlightenment those aspects of reason’s others that could not be incorporated were denigrated and made abject. Emotions were valid only in so far as they conformed to reason. Ecstatic visions were no longer revelation, only delusions. Bodily sensations that could not be charted on an anatomist’s diagram or documented by a physician became hysterical symptoms. The project of Enlightenment is, thus, a process of disciplining and alienation from self and nature. It is an attempt to establish a transparent, stable subject through the repression of the non-rational. The body presents a special case in this general process, because it becomes the site at which the subject becomes alienated from
A unexpected device appears twice in this text, a seat that reclines via a mechanism, illustrates this self-understanding. This device—which I believe is a unique innovation of Schilling’s—illustrates precisely how signs effect the body in this novel. In the first instance, Karl is summoned to the boudoir of a mysterious woman in the middle of the night. They cannot proceed to her bed chamber and their tryst must remain confined to this room, so that the woman’s suspicious husband will not hear them. Not having a bed presents certain logistical problems that Karl reveals to his lover as he sits in a chair and she on his lap:


its own sensations. Böhme and Böhme privilege anatomy as the discourse that performs the most significant work of the rationalization and alienation of the body, but almost in passing, they mention a material condition that hastens this development: “Diese Entfremdung von der Leiberfahrung und die Objektivierung des Verhältnisses zum eigenen Körper werden noch verstärkt durch die seit dem 16. Jahrhundert entstehende Spiegelindustrie. In Venedig war es erstmalig gelungen, größere flache Glasspiegel herzustellen—die also den meist gewölbten und wegen der metallischen Oberfläche auch in der Bildqualität diffusen Spiegel des Mittelalters weit überlegen waren.” The perfection and production of mirrors contribute to the process of enlightenment as Böhme and Böhme understand it. In the court of Louis XIV mirrors become firmly established: “als festes Element der Innenarchitektur … und damit der Blick des anderen zum immer gegenwärtigen Bestimmungsstück des alltäglichen … Lebens.” Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983) 53. In so many words: the proliferation of mirrors are pre-requisites of Lacan’s mirror stage and the gaze. Improvements in mirror production in the Enlightenment, then, allow for a mirror-stage méconnaissance. This novel—I am sure—could be called upon to illustrate a fundamental self-alienation at the root of the modern subject and these mirrors could illustrate that there is no such thing as a sexual relationship. My point here, however, is merely that these are not the terms according to which the young baron and his lovers assess the situation.

286 DH 135.
In this case, as in the following example, the recliner enables the couple to have sex by allowing them to assume a conducive position. But the link between the chair’s mechanism and sexual pleasure is made explicit in the second occurrence of this device.

Karl attends another lover:

Wir fuhren einmal in ihrem englischen Reisewagen spazieren. Sobald wir ins Freie kamen, nahm sie mich in die Arme, drückte an eine Feder, und wir lagen ganz bequem nebeneinander. Ich hob bald ihren Rock auf und streifte meine Beinkleider ab, und wir lagen in eins vereinigt. Die Erschütterung des Wagens machte sonderbare Empfindungen und verursachte den wollüstigsten Taumel, der sich denken läßt.287

Here, the lever emphasizes, as does the coach, the technological art required to create this unique love-making-apparatus. The result of this mixture of bodies and machinery is not just that sex is accommodated or made possible, but that it is enhanced and ultimately transformed. The creation of sonderbare Empfindungen and instigating wollüstigen Taumel is the model for mirrors in this book and the book itself. Or, erotic art becomes like the mirror, the mechanical chair, the cloth, and the coach. The signs of art stimulate the body the same way these objects do without necessary recourse to a referent. The signs of art vibrate and stimulate without needing to conjure the paphian presence. They set the perceiver’s body “in Feuer”—a phrase repeated throughout the novel. It is no longer the representational means that are important, only the aesthetic effect.

**Beyond Verisimilitude and Veracity: Virtuality**

In later adventures, the young Karl leaves his country estate and embarks on a tour of erotic education. Underway in Paris he meets an obliging noblewoman, as one is wont to do in Paris. In a special cabinet in her petite maison, she stages an elaborate

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287 DH 181.
erotic ritual in which she disguises herself as Daphne and the Baron as Apollo, and she places herself in front of a painted backdrop controlled by hidden mechanisms: one pull of a lever changes the scenery around them, creating one mythological landscape after another. Her role-playing forces the protagonist to don the role of mythological lover. It is the virtual reality of this scene and its virtual effect that epitomizes the new art of seduction.

In the antechamber to mysterious cabinet, an old maid prepares the Baron for an erotic encounter, the details of which he can not yet anticipate. She undresses him, rubs oil into his hair, perfumes his body, and weaves an ivy wreath around his head. She then leads him to a spectacle for which he is wholly unprepared. She leads him to a marvelous room that stuns the already worldly and jaded Baron, and the only language he can find to convey his feelings at that moment is a fairy tale formula: he is blinded by the splendor and would believe that he has been transported into a fairy castle. Despite the conventionality of the language he chooses, it is significant in that it expresses his disorientation and marks the start of a hallucinatory experience that obscures the distinction between the room he is in and his imagination, ultimately rendering space subjective, obscure, indefinite and irrelevant.

The room is designed to appear as a forest at dusk. Artificial trees fill the interior. These props, as does their description in the narrative, blur the distinction between nature and artifice: “Die Bäume waren der Natur abgestohlen, und lange blieb ich zweifelnd, ob

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288 DH 193.

289 DH 193.
Their life-likeness is a potentiated mimesis, not merely imitating nature but stolen from nature. The walls beyond the trees achieve a trompe l’oeil effect through perspectival painting: “Die Wand war so vortrefflich gemalt, daß man den dunklen Wald in der Ferne und den Abendhimmel dort mit dem allerletzten Widerschein der gebrochenen Strahlen der unserem Horizont schon weit entfernten Sonne wahrhaft zu erblicken glaubte.” The illusion of light in these paintings is convincing, and again the language of belief and certainty is employed (glaubte, wahrhaft and wirklich).

At this point the distinction between actual objects in the room and the narrator’s impressions begins to slip, as the voice moves from the subjunctive to the indicative. Up until this point the artifice of the trees and painted walls is described self-consciously and technically; now the narration begins to hide the artifice, instead presenting the material reality of the room as an enchanting effect. The setting sun is the light source in the paintings, but it is unclear what illuminates the room itself. Stars and a full moon on the ceiling appear to produce light through some undescribed mechanism and hidden light sources are implied: “Der Sternhimmel an der Decke und der volle Mond, das einzige Licht, welches man sah, machte eine bezaubernde Wirkung.” It is not clear if the moon and stars are painted or are actually casting or reflecting light. Further special effects enter into play: “Ein Zephir durchsäuselte das Laub und hauchte den wollüstigsten Wohlgeruch. Ich stand wie angeheftet, und Wonne ergriff mich, als jetzt

\[\text{\textsuperscript{290} DH 193-194.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{291} DH 194.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{292} DH 194.}\]
Is this the technology or the enchanting effect? Are there other mechanisms in place creating light, wind, scent, and birdsong, or is it all part of the Baron’s blissful delusion? Either way, it’s unclear what technology is at work, as the narration obscures the sources of these effects.

The narrator makes his way through the forested room and finds his lover surrounded by the illusion—just as Danae costumed as a Muse had been draped and surrounded with erotic art. Beside a spring on the side of a hill, he comes across her hiding under the branches of a tree. “Wie ward mir, als ich neben einem Springbrunnen an einem großen Hügel, im Schatten eines dichtbelaubten Baumes, die schönste weibliche Figur in Paradieskleidung, natürlich auch ohne Feigenblatt, schlummern sah! Ich näherte mich ihr; sie erwachte, reichte mir die Hand und zog mich auf das elastische Polster neben sich.” With the springy cushion, artifice again becomes visible, but only for a moment. Here, his lover reveals herself as Daphne and his role as Apollo, although this time Dapne does not flee. They begin to have sex. But neither her technological repertoire nor the expanse of her room is yet exhausted. The baron “hörte es rauschen, blickte auf, und siehe da, eine Myrthenlaube war auf einmal über uns hibgezaubert. Welche himmlische Überraschung!” Afterwards, “Eine kleine Wendung meiner Marquise, und die Myrthenlaube existierte nicht mehr. Nun standen wir auf und gingen um das Gebüsch in eine heller beleuchtete Grotte, woselbst wir Erfrischungen fanden.”

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293 DH 194.
294 DH 194.
295 DH 195.
296 DH 195.
As the narrative presents it, the myrtle tree magically appears and disappears changing the setting; it is not moved on wires or wheels. And as the lovers wander farther into the forest reaching the grotto, the room reveals more hidden space and is, in fact, no longer the bounded space of a chamber but rather the unbounded space of nature.

Like the very setting of the encounter, the woman’s body is itself transformed into the space through which they wander, and both lover’s genitals are personified: “Bald lag ich in Daphnes Armen und sog Wollust aus ihrem Rosenmund. Mit Neckereien trat Amor in den Tempel der Venus, küßte Hymen und floh eilend an den Eingang zurück, um zu sehen, ob er verfolgt würde. Unversehens hob Daphne ihren wonnereichen Schoß, und Amor lag in Hymens Armen, ehe er an weitere Flucht denken konnte.”

What is significant about this instance of this standard trope is the sense of veritgo or mise-en-abime that it creates. The woman’s body becomes a microcosm of that erotic space that she has created through artifice, and both lovers’ genitals become actors in miniature, donning similar roles as the actors to which they are attached.

During the first round of love-making in the forest, another element is added: music. “Kaum begannen wir den Liebeskampf, als zwei Flöten gewissermaßen die Schlachtmusik dazu anstimmten.” Functioning like a porn soundtrack, the music establishes a tone and rhythm that the lovers reproduce in their movements. During the second round in the grotto, flutes again appear. “Die Glocke schlug zwölf, und zwei Flöten stimmten ein schmelzendes Adagio an.” This time, they play what is described

297 DH 195.
298 DH 195.
299 DH 196.
as a “melting” adagio, emphasizing the dissolving of boundaries. This dissolution is repeated, “… eine wollüstige Atmosphäre umgab uns, leichte Schweißtröpfchen machten unsere Körper noch schlüpfriger.”

Boundaries slip as the bodies become slippery, and it becomes unclear where the bodies end and the atmosphere begins. The hallucinatory effects of the encounter crescendo in the final sentence devoted to the description of the rendezvous: “… mit unbeschreiblichem Wonnegefühl sanken wir in einen Wollusttaumel…” In ecstasy and delirium all boundaries, all insides and outsides, blur. The sweating and the blurring show how far we have come from the Age of Lessing. The aesthetic illusion of this room has moved beyond verisimilitude and veracity; its value now lies in its virtuality. It is no longer just mimesis; it is a potentiated mimesis, no longer an imitation of nature but stolen from nature and producing the effects of nature. Its effects on the body coincide with those of nature. Art does not compete with real bodies but serves as an arousing ornamentation to a body, or it modulates new sensations for a body.

Throughout this dissertation I have written of erotic art and the signs of erotic art without maintaining a strict distinction between literature and the visual arts (or images in mirrors), between auditory and iconic signs. This looseness of terminology has been justified because of the metasemiotic higher unity of the arts according to the principle of transparency. As long as the sister arts converge at the point of the painterly conception of poetry, any distinction between them is merely one of degree not kind. As long as the Age of Lessing endured, my strategic substitution of literature and images in mirrors

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300 DH 196.
301 DH 196.
holds. But once that age passes and once the signs of art become opaque, it would seem that I would no longer be justified in speaking this way, in claiming the relevance of these mirror images for erotic literature, in speaking of these things as though they were *one* thing. Now I must locate this unity solely on the level of aesthetic effect and no longer on representational means. It is precisely in its virtual effect that erotic images and erotic words coincide—the both set the body afire.

**Voluptuous Kisses Are Not French Kisses**

Finally, to return to the question of what it means to speak of “German pornography” in the eighteenth-century: Ultimately, I see classical, humanist traditions of erotic verse as more relevant to the German texts of the period that contemporaries deemed obscene than libertine and materialist traditions were to French pornography. Therein lies the curious lacuna in the history of pornography; this point explains the perceived lack of German contributions to eighteenth-century pornography. The books that Germans read with one hand thus challenge our understanding of eighteenth-century pornography which has, so far, been an understanding of eighteenth-century French (and also English) pornography only.

Standard interpretations of French pornography emphasize how that genre evolved from libertine and materialist literary and philosophical traditions. Margaret Jacob’s reading of *Thérèse philosophe* as an elucidation of materialist philosophy, and Robert Darnton’s and Natania Meeker’s similar readings are typical interpretations of eighteenth-century pornography in this regard. In her essay “The Materialist World of

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302 Margaret Jacob, “The Materialist World of Pornography,” Hunt 157-202.; Darnton 188 ff.; and Natania Meeker, “‘I resist it no longer’: Enlightened Philosophy and
Pornography,” Margaret Jacob reads French and pornography from the end of the seventeenth- until the end of the eighteenth century as an extension of philosophical materialism and atomism. She creates a lineage of texts in which Thérese philosophe follows Descartes, Hume, and Spinoza. Such a constellation of traditions has wide currency in pornography scholarship – and with good reason as it is aptly applicable to French and English examples. Jacob finds at the root of French pornography a materialist conception of space. This conception of space reflects the anonymity of urban experience and the social unmoorings of modernity through a metaphor of atomization: bodies—human and otherwise—collide eternally, bouncing off one another in an empty vacuum. Dead matter colliding in a physicist’s experiment becomes the model of bodies bumping into each other on the street or on the bedroom.

However, as I contend, German pornography of the period – if we take its single relatively famous example – is a special beast requiring a different pedigree. The Baron’s memoirs cite an altogether different tradition than their French and English counterparts. The Memoirs of a German Baron is not materialism made into a pornographic novel; it’s Anacreontic poetry made into a pornographic novel. Using the concept of space in the pornographic novel as a point of comparison, I can show that Germany’s lone example of eighteenth-century pornography derives from Hans Schlaffer’s so-called “middle genre.” Space in this novel is the citation of a standard trope of anacreontic poetry: it is the locus amoenus. The forest and the grotto are, of course, not neutral, natural areas; they are rather classicized erotic spaces, each a locus amoenus or convention of classical erotic literature with a very long tradition indeed.

The lovers in the magical room of the Parisian petite maison imaginatively transport themselves through time and space and imitate the literary models that would have been readily available to a German audience familiar with the poetry of Uz, Gleim, Hagedorn, and with Wieland’s Comische Erzählungen.

Furthermore, the Denkwürdigkeiten clearly falls within the same literary tradition as “the middle genre” on a thematic level as well. The Denkwürdigkeiten mounts a similar criticism of marriage from the conventions of erotic humanist verse as Wieland’s Comische Erzählungen by deploying the familiar trope of the inconsistency of erotic attraction. The novel’s first chapter introduces the life philosophy of the protagonist’s father: “Er glaubte, wie der Mensch in allen Dingen der Veränderung unterworfen sei, so sei er es auch in der Liebe, und angenommene Fesseln der Ehe störten den ersten Endzweck: das Vergnügen, wozu der Mensch geschaffen sei.”

He changes lovers regularly and seeks out beautiful young girls from among his subjects. Once he no longer desires them, he marries them off to eligible bachelors, enticing the men with large dowries for what they call “des Herrn v. H. Mündel.” As a result, his discarded lovers never need to be concerned with their lost honor. Everyone is happy with the arrangement with the exception of the Mündels’s fathers, but they are easily mollified by the Baron’s arguments and money. He has established a small, rural, erotic utopia. Karl, of course, turns out to be like his father, and his sexual mentor, Madame Glossen, reinforces the father’s example. After Karl returns from his grand tour to settle on his estates, Madame Glossen, recently widowed, comes to him and arranges a suitable open

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303 DH 94.
marriage for him. She and Karl represent the primary erotic axis, but they have free access to Julie, who in turn is free to take any lover she pleases, as long as she is discrete.

At the same time that the metaphor of space allows us to differentiate eighteenth-century French pornography and German erotic literature, it also allows us to locate German literature in a pornographic continuum. Space in both Wieland’s post-seraphic works and in the Denkwürdigkeiten is clearly not the mechanical, Cartesian space common to French and English pornography of the eighteenth century. Rather, space is the citation of classicized erotic generic conventions. But the classicized setting of these German texts is no longer merely pre-pornographic. It is no longer simply a marker of an esoteric tradition, a strategy that Kendrick finds operating in pre-pornographic-era erotic texts. Rather, the classicized setting, the activated locus amoenus, is now a prop to exploit. And readers who exploit it so will read differently. Reading no longer requires a naïve hallucinatory absorption of readers into the text. In the cabinet, the instantly recognizable conventions of erotic literature are self-consciously displaced out onto the walls of a room in essence becoming sex-toys. Thus, erotic literature becomes an instrument designed to augment sexual pleasure in function and nature no different than the levers and cables of the salon array that I have just examined. When Die Denkwürdigkeiten des Herrn von H. reveals the mechanisms that allow that salon array to function, it reveals the mechanisms behind art that allow it to impact the voluptuous body after the Age of Lessing. Art no longer produces Wallungen by mediating between bodies—by allowing the perceiver to intuit Venus in verse—rather it produces Wallungen as a vibrator, just as the pulleys, cables, and rags in this novel produce their own friction and vibrations.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion:
Unfulfilled Fantasies

Throughout this dissertation it has been my intention to produce an aesthetic model of erotic literature that does not necessarily and directly implicate itself in discussions of subjectivity. However, I am by no means implying that such discussions are inappropriate for my topic. Indeed, as my references show, some of my most fruitful engagement with the secondary literature has come from scholars whose primary concerns are aesthetics and subject formation (Susan Gustafson and Dorothea von Mücke on abjection in Lessing’s Laocoon essay and von Mücke on narcissism in Geschichte des Agathon). However, by not engaging with those aspects of their discussions, my study has avoided a potential pitfall that frequently accompanies such work and it has gained a significant positive benefit. By avoiding the topic of subjectivity, I have also avoided establishing twentieth- and twenty-first-century theoretical texts as master-texts to be applied to these eighteenth-century literary works. I have avoided calling Lessing’s aesthetic system a “rudimentary” psychoanalytic model.\(^\text{304}\) I have tried my best not to condescend. Furthermore, in doing as I have done, I believe that I have been truer to the Age of Lessing and its own understanding of erotic literature than I myself would have otherwise been able to be. Though of intense concern to aesthetician’s today, it seems to

\(^{304}\) See page 37. See also Christoph Wild’s review of Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers by Susan Gustafson, South Atlantic Review 62.1 (1997) 184-186.
me that subjectivity is of only tangential concern in the body of texts that I examine.

Such an assertion, however, needs some justification.

From the framework of my study, it seems fair to insist that aesthetics and subjectivity first come to implicate one another in a significant way beyond its bounds, first with Kantian aesthetics in which beauty is no longer a predicate of the object but rather a subjective judgment requiring universal assent. Perhaps I can offer a suggestion of an argument that I am at this moment not capable of pursuing. Aesthetics in the Age of Lessing is a theory of artistic medium not subjectivity: “Die Malerei brauchet Figuren und Farben in dem Raume. Die Dichtkunst artikulierte Töne in der Zeit. Jener Zeichen sind natürlich, dieser ihre sind willkürlich.”

That passage taken from Lessing’s notes on Laokoon indicate the point at which his and Kant’s projects correspond and diverge. In the Kritik der reinen Vernunft Kant divides his transcendental aesthetic into the chapters “Von dem Raume” and “Von der Zeit” as he derives the pure form of sense perception prior to any empirical contingencies. Both begin with the principal division of aesthetics into time and space. For Lessing, this division of aesthetic categories lies in the nature of the signs employed by the various art forms and not within the subject. Time and space are properties of signs, not the pure forms of perception, just as beauty belongs to the object not the subject.

Instead of the subject as the site at which aesthetics and erotic art interface the perceiver—whatever entity that might now be—I have offered the body. I have presented an analysis of erotic literature and the potential of its signs to strike—or perhaps the better word is stroke—the body directly without recourse to concepts such as

305 LWB 5/2:209.
fantasy and desire understood in a properly narrow psychoanalytic sense. I now can only
hope that this analysis has been compelling as I have already made its case to the full
extent of my ability. But, again, my avoidance of these terms is not a rejection of their
usefulness. In fact, a secondary source whose focus is exactly eighteenth-century erotic
German literature and subjectivity has shaped my study—indeed, this text first brought
Wieland’s *Comische Erzählungen* and Lessing’s *Rettungen des Horaz* to my attention. In
his book *Eingebildete Körper*, Stephan Schindler maps the history of the representation
of erotic scenes in German literature onto the history of sexuality around 1800. He
argues that over the course of the late eighteenth century, from the 1770s on, a
transformation occurs that leads to the realization, “daß die geschechtliche Liebe neben
ihrem körperlichen und intersubjektiven Sein, als Geschlechtsverkehr zwischen zwei
Personen, auch eine innersubjektive Komponente aufweist, die sich in bildhaften
Vorstellungen manifestiert und das sexuelle Begehren repräsentiert, stimuliert, verschiebt
oder zuweilen sogar befriedigt.” And this “ins Innere des Subjektes verlagerte sexuelle
Interaktion mit den selbst produzierten Phantasien” is perceived as dangerous, because it
escapes social control. 306 My investigation varies from Schindler’s in that I ask how art
stimulates the body within German neoclassical aesthetics, rather than how fantasy and
desire become constitutive of the subject and how that subject, in turn, becomes endowed
with sexuality or the compulsion to reveal its truth by speaking its sex. As Schindler
examines the process by which sexual desire becomes unmoored from Christian
theological discourses on sin and its rootedness in the flesh, and is instead shifted onto

306 Stephan K. Schindler, *Eingebildete Körper: Phatasierte Sexualität in der Goethezeit*
fantasy and discourses of sexuality in the *Goethezeit*, he does address literature in the Age of Lessing. For Schindler, Lessing’s *Rettungen des Horaz* and Wieland’s *Comische Erzählungen* represent an exceptional moment in German literature. Lessing is a “Verfechter der ars erotica” and Wieland is ambivalently pleased with the possibility that his erotic literature might serve as an aphrodisiac. Together, these authors prove, “daß noch in den sechziger Jahren des 18. Jahrhunderts manche Autoren ein recht freizügiges Verständnis über die Beziehung von Literatur und Sexualität hatten.” But his point here is that these “liberal” voices are drowned out by a chorus of philosophers, critics, and pedagogues who by the 1770s succeed in banning explicit representation of erotic scenes from literature. This point is only a moment by which he frames the actual concerns of his book; the Age of Lessing is only the first bookend to his study. As I assigned these works to the center of my examination, I have been afforded the opportunity to elaborate a more detailed position on these works than calling them a moment of liberal reprise. And, if I may, I work in the opposite direction than Schindler does. He looks at how eroticism becomes sexuality, how erotic literature shifts from the body to an innersubjective plane. I move erotic literature from the mind to the body.

Focusing on the intersection of the aesthetics and the body instead of aesthetics and subjectivity in the Age of Lessing instead of the *Goethezeit* explains why I consider the texts that I have chosen rather than other famous literary texts in which eroticism plays a central role, Goethe’s erotic poetry and *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* being two examples that come readily to mind. If this study has accomplished anything, it has been a rigorous analysis of a narrowly defined range of texts. Recognizing that periods,

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307 Schindler 73-74.
schools, genres, and epistemes are only heuristic and not ontological—that none of these texts exist in vacuums, that no discourse is isolated, and that no classificatory system identifies absolute boundaries—I have nevertheless opted to concentrate on the aesthetics of German rationalism for which I invoke the name Lessing. This narrow focus suggests why I do not consider other important aesthetic and literary. Herder and Hamann are of course, important names that do not come up, nor do I examine Wilhelm Heinse’s *Ardinghello, oder die glückseling Inseln* whose text is most appropriately approached from a Herderian perspective. One possible way of carrying this study forward would be to consider how these other works, traditions, etc. can productively brought to bear on it. One could do like the Baron von H. and his Parisian mistress and engage in a further bit of a sweat-inducing work and delirium to blur those erotic boundaries that I have established.
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