The Sublime Machine: Conceptions of Masculine Beauty 1750-1850

Thesis

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 1996 The Author

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Redacted Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0001028a

oro.open.ac.uk
THE SUBLIME MACHINE:
CONCEPTIONS OF MASCUINE BEAUTY 1750-1850

by

Anthony J McGowan, BA, MPhil

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Open University, in the discipline of Philosophy

February 1996
This thesis undertakes an investigation into the concept of personal beauty, insofar as it was applied to men, in the period 1750-1850. As a necessary first step the concept is defined. Two contemporary theories of beauty are rejected. The sociobiological attempt to incorporate an objectivist account of personal beauty into an all-encompassing evolutionary theory of human nature is shown to be incoherent, contradictory and implausible. The opposed, ultra-relativist, 'feminist' view, which represents beauty as nothing more than a device for the exploitation and subjugation of women, although given more credence, is also rejected.

In place of these, it is argued that beauty is a 'mythology', a system of interlinked narratives, of persistent archetypes and enduring themes, into which new ideas are periodically introduced and new conformations established. Despite these new elements the 'meaning' and the coherence of the concept are not lost - it remains possible to use the term in comprehensible way.

The main body of the thesis examines, through the work of a wide variety of authors, the meanings associated with male beauty in the specified period. Chapters are devoted to: the novels of Samuel Richardson; the art-historical writings of Winckelmann; the works of the anthropologists Blumenbach and Camper; the heroes and villains of Gothic fiction from Mrs Radcliffe to
Charlotte Brontë; the doomed protagonists of Byron’s longer poems and dramatic works; and to the Leatherstocking novels of James Fenimore Cooper.

In each case the texts discussed are investigated to reveal two things: the extent to which they illustrate ideas of beauty current in society; and the influence they were to exert on the way in which beauty would be understood in the future. A number of common themes are identified running through the works discussed, in particular, the concept of the sublime, the influence of classical thought and artistic practice, and the relationship between beauty and race.
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ii

Acknowledgements iii

Chapter 1. Introduction: Beauty, Biology and Myth 1

Chapter 2. The Science of Beauty: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Beauty 64

Chapter 3. The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: Male Beauty in the Novels of Samuel Richardson 98

Chapter 4. Worshipping Bodies: Winckelmann and the Rebirth of Classical Homoeroticism 133

Chapter 5. A New Angle on Beauty: Petrus Camper and Enlightenment Anthropology 164

Chapter 6. Sexing the Sublime: The Personification of the Sublime from Burke to Charlotte Brontë 205

Chapter 7. Harrys, Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates: The Sublime and the Beautiful in Byron's Heroes 253

Chapter 8. Satan and Apollo in the Wild West: Male Beauty in the Leather-stocking Novels of James Fenimore Cooper 294

Conclusion: Arms and the Boy 327

Bibliography 334
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

From Petrus Camper's *Works* 203

Frontispiece - Engraving of Petrus Camper

Table I

Fig. 1. The head of a monkey (profile)

Fig. 2. The head of an ape (profile)

Fig. 3. The head of a negro (profile)

Fig. 4. The head of a Calmuck (profile)

Table II

Fig. 1. The head of a modern European (profile)

Fig. 2. A head with a facial angle of 90% (profile)

Fig. 3. A 'Roman' head (profile)

Fig. 4. A 'Greek' head (profile)

Table III

Fig. 2. The head of a negro (front view)

Fig. 3. The head of a Calmuck (front view)

Fig. 4. A 'Roman' head (front view)

Fig. 5. A 'Greek' head (front view)

Table IX

Figs. 1-4. Greek and Roman coins showing realistic portraits of rulers
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following: my supervisor, Professor Stuart Sim, for his expert guidance; Dr Michael Rossington and Professor Steven Rose for their specialist advice; and Dr David Goldthorpe for his close reading of the text. Thanks also to Rebecca Campbell and Margaret and Patrick McGowan.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: BEAUTY, BIOLOGY AND MYTH

I: Uncomplicated Joys

According to Professor Arthur Marwick, personal beauty, and the whole business of human sexual relations with which it is intimately connected, are perfectly straightforward matters:

All the complicated talk of politics and power struggles and male conspiracy and oppression seem to me to miss the simple heart of the matter: the sheer uncomplicated joy of going to bed with a beautiful woman.¹

The sublime simplicity of the subject is emphasised by Nancy Thornhill, a scientific researcher in the field of beauty. She regards with frank incredulity the idea that anyone might question the conventional view of what the sexes require from each other: 'Surely no one has ever seriously doubted that men desire young beautiful women and that women desire wealthy, high status men?'² Matt Ridley, another writer on the 'science of beauty', projects this same limpidity back through time and across cultures:

It is not necessary to explain to me why Antony falls under the spell of a beautiful woman. Across time just as much as across space, the fundamentals of our nature are universally and idiosyncratically human.³

A little historical investigation into the 'beautiful woman' who so bewitched Mark Anthony goes some way to showing the limitations of an approach that seeks to banish the obscurity, the complications and the doubt from beauty. Cleopatra, it seems, was, if we conclude along with Marwick, Thornhill and Ridley that beauty is a purely physical quality, a fortunate combination of features, anything but beautiful:

Her coins [...] show a strong, bony face with a hooked nose and a jutting chin, pretty neither by the standards of Cleopatra's own day nor by those of ours. Her appearance thus seems to have been very far from that of the fabled seductress of legend.4

Cleopatra's 'beauty' seems to have relied on the brilliance of her conversation, on her highly cultivated intelligence, and on her genius for flirtation. This ability to fascinate, combined with her wealth and high status (which Thornhill regards as crucial to male attractiveness, but irrelevant to female beauty) gave Cleopatra the power to waste empires and ruin heroes.

In the verse and prose of Charles Baudelaire we find ourselves being led yet further from the 'sheer uncomplicated joy' referred to by Marwick, into the labyrinths of the late Romantic erotic imagination. In 'I Prize the Memory' Baudelaire regrets that the physical perfection and innocent eroticism of the Athenian gymnasium may be lost, replaced by the 'wretched bodies, regular grotesques, runty, paunchy, flabby, scrawny, lame' he finds everywhere around him, but the modern world holds different attractions, 'beauties unrevealed to ancient times'. The modern poet celebrates beauty in 'countenances cankered by the heart' and in the subtle 'charm of listlessness'. Though he may be blind to 'belles in curlicues, those worshipped beauties of a shopworn age', he can

---

crave for a Lady Macbeth, or a bloodthirsty Aeschylean villainess or a marrow­sucking vampire.

Two of Baudelaire’s poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* illustrate the variety of impressions, moods and images that could be conjured up by the concept of beauty in the middle of the nineteenth century. In ‘Beauty’, Baudelaire gives us ‘a dream of stone’ with ‘snow for flesh’ and ‘ice for heart’. An ‘unguessed sphinx’ she exists beyond all human emotion, an object for ‘studious awe’. With her, Baudelaire lifts beauty outside the scope of human sexuality, placing it, quite literally, on a pedestal.

In the ‘Hymn to Beauty’ our ‘sheer uncomplicated joy’ seems still more remote:

> You walk on corpses, Beauty, undismayed, 
> and Horror coruscates among your gems; 
> Murder, one of your dearest trinkets, throbs 
> on your shameless belly: make it dance.

This beauty, for Baudelaire, is both sacred and sacrilegious, sensual and fascinating; its function is to cast its transfiguring light on the drab modern world and (a characteristically decadent touch) to banish boredom:

> Who care if you come from paradise or hell, 
> appalling Beauty, artless and monstrous scourge, 
> if only your eyes, your smile or your foot reveal 
> the Infinite I love and have never known?

> Come from Satan, come from God - who cares, 
> Angel or Siren, rhythm, fragrance, light, 
> provided you transform - O my one queen!
this hideous universe, this heavy hour.

In the various writings which make up the Intimate Journals, Baudelaire returns to the subject of beauty, and, if his prose treatment is more explicit, it is no less complex. 'I have', he begins, 'found a definition of the Beautiful, of my own conception of the Beautiful'. It is a concept that he intends to apply to what he takes to be the ultimate test: the human face. Baudelaire's definition does not attempt to describe a beautiful face in terms of its objective features, but rather focuses on the impression it has on the beholder:

A beautiful and seductive head, a woman's head, I mean, makes one dream, but in a confused pattern, at once of pleasure and of sadness; conveys an idea of melancholy, of lassitude, even of satiety - a contradictory impression, of an ardour, that is to say, and a desire for life together with a bitterness which flows back upon them as if from a sense of deprivation and hopelessness. Mystery and regret are also characteristics of the beautiful.5

Baudelaire's feminine ideal combines the 'melancholic' with an 'impression of voluptuousness' and it is this sensuality, the prospect or the residue of abandonment, that distinguishes the beautiful woman from the beautiful man (although he accepts that this is the consequence of his subjectivity, of seeing beauty through the eyes of a man). The passions conveyed by the beautiful male head are of an appropriately more violent and manly nature:

But this head also will suggest ardours and passions - spiritual longings - ambitions darkly repressed - powers turned to bitterness through lack of employment - traces, sometimes, of a revengeful coldness (for the archetype of the dandy must not be forgotten here), sometimes, also - and this is one of the

most interesting characteristics of Beauty - of mystery, and last of all (let me admit the exact point to which I am a modern in my aesthetics) of Unhappiness.

Melancholy is the key to both types of beauty, and although ‘Joy’ is not necessarily entirely banished from the presence of beauty, it becomes, ‘one of her most vulgar adornments’, and so Baudelaire ‘can scarcely conceive [...] a type of Beauty which has nothing to do with Sorrow’. If this is familiar to any student of late Romanticism and Decadence, it comes as still less of a surprise to discover the figure who, for Baudelaire, comes closest to a personification of (male) beauty:

In pursuit of - others might say obsessed by - these ideas, it may be supposed that I have difficulty in not concluding from them that the most perfect type of manly Beauty is Satan - as Milton saw him. (p. 12)

In the ‘Consoling Maxims Upon Love’, Baudelaire pushes still further the boundaries of the beautiful. If blood, the charnel-house, perversity, sadness and mystery can become signifiers of the beautiful, what about ugliness itself? Can the boundaries between the beautiful and the ugly be overcome? The trick is simply done, involving nothing more than a touch of elementary Enlightenment aesthetics. Gazing on the newly ravaged face of a poxed lover, one has only to imagine ‘a dying air executed by the rapturous bow of Paganini’ and henceforth, through an ‘association of ideas’ what had been an object of disgust will elicit not only ‘sweet sympathy’, but even ‘physical desire’. If this seems a little tame, there are ‘certain spirits, more precious and more jaded’ whose ‘delight in ugliness proceeds from a still more obscure sentiment - the thirst for the unknown and the taste for the horrible’. For those (among them

---

'certain poets') the dissecting room, the clinic and the gallows become theatres of delight (p. 65).

In this thesis I will investigate how such an extraordinary range of ideas could come to be associated with the concept of personal beauty. The hundred years from 1750 to 1850 produced a range of texts, literary, philosophical, art historical and scientific, which added to the existing 'mythology' of beauty creating a world in which lesbian vampires, his Satanic majesty and the emaciated, etiolated Dandy could join the ranks of the beautiful along-side Ganymede, Adonis, Hercules, Aphrodite and Helen. I have selected a number of these texts, drawing on the work of, among others, Samuel Richardson, Winckelmann, Petrus Camper, Edmund Burke, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Lord Byron and James Fenimore Cooper, which show how beauty could never be reduced to a matter of possessing a particular set of facial features, that to employ the terms 'beauty' or 'beautiful' always involves the invocation of a cloud of associations. This thesis examines those associations, tracing their origins in the wider culture. I will argue that this account of beauty, whilst rejecting objectivist views of beauty, does not leave beauty as an empty or meaningless concept - on the contrary, it is ripe with meaning, forming a fertile field for analysis, understanding and interpretation. As a prelude to the investigation of the period covered in the main body of this work I engage with sociobiological theories of beauty which form the principal contemporary objective account of human beauty. Although I will touch upon female beauty my study focuses on conceptions of male beauty for reasons I set out at the end of this introduction.

The rest of the introduction is divided into four sections. Part II looks briefly at the declining importance of beauty in twentieth-century aesthetic debates, before moving on to survey two current theoretical approaches to personal beauty. In Part III I give my own account of the meaning of the concept of
beauty. Part IV undertakes a rapid, and highly selective historical survey of attitudes towards beauty in Western culture from classical times, emphasising two elements - its diversity, and the role of men as objects of beauty. In Part V I give the reasons for investigating beauty in the period 1750-1850, and for concentrating on male beauty

***

II: Current Approaches

But we expect people who are beautiful in one way or the other to be good in every way, and an expectation that persists although recognized as unreasonable needs to be explained. Is it that beauty as 'good appearance' slips easily into 'appearance of good'? Why is it that poisonous blossoms or beautiful witches strike us (apart from practical hazards) as eerie and anomalous? (Of course it works the other way too: Cinderella, being good, needs only a few props and the right setting to be seen as beautiful.7

From Socrates to Kant, the question 'what is beauty?' was considered to be of grave importance not only to philosophy, but also to artistic practice and, perhaps less obviously, to religious experience. From Thomas Aquinas to Gerard Manley Hopkins, it was impossible to answer the question 'what is beauty' without making some reference to the human body, and, as often, to the human soul within that body.8

What might be termed the theoretical discourse of beauty has, however, since Kant, become increasingly marginal. With a very few exceptions,

8The linking of religion and beauty has not been entirely broken. Such works as Beauty and Holiness: The Dialogue Between Aesthetics and Religion, by James Martin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Divine Concepts of Physical Beauty, by Michael Bracewell (London: Minerva, 1990), show that the ancient link between the two has not been completely severed.
philosophical aesthetics has, over the past forty years, largely abandoned the discussion of beauty. And so instead of the traditional and general question, 'what is beauty?' we find endlessly detailed discussions about the meaning of art or descriptions of the 'aesthetic experience'. Oswald Hanfling has traced what he terms 'the decline of beauty' in twentieth century aesthetics (mentioning Clive Bell, Collingwood and Herbert Read, to which we could add Beardsley, Sibley and Goodman), which he attributes to the revelation that beauty is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for an object to be considered a work of art, that it is used sloppily and lazily and that it has lost its ability to signify anything distinctive. The view that aesthetics can proceed without reference to beauty has been energetically challenged by Mary Mothersill, in her book Beauty Restored and Guy Sircello has made a strong case for a meaningful, but still widely encompassing understanding of beauty based on an analysis of the experience of beauty in nature and art. They remain firmly in the minority.

The biggest casualty in the 'cleansing' of beauty from aesthetics has been what might be called 'natural beauty': the beauty of the natural world, which includes the beauty of the human form. An important stage along the way to the near exclusion of natural beauty from modern aesthetics occurs with Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics, where for the first time a major work on aesthetics consciously excludes natural beauty, focusing as it does on the products of human will, of the manifestations of spirit in the phases of artistic development.

---

It is not that Hegel overvalues art, indeed as Terry Eagleton puts it, Hegel consigns art 'to a lowly rung on the ontological ladder, below religion and philosophy'. It is rather that nature remains somehow impenetrable, or at least strongly resistant to philosophical analysis. As he puts it, 'the hard rind of nature and the common world give the mind more trouble in breaking through to the idea than do the products of art'. Of more significance than the opacity of nature, however, is the fact that nature simply offers a lower level of beauty:

In ordinary life we are of course accustomed to speak of a beautiful colour, a beautiful sky, a beautiful river; likewise beautiful flowers, beautiful animals, and even more of beautiful people. We will not here enter upon the controversy about how far the attribute of beauty is justifiably ascribed to these and the like, and how far, in general, natural beauty may be put alongside the beauty of art. But we may assert against this view, even at this stage, that the beauty of art is higher than nature. The beauty of art is beauty born of the spirit and born again, and the higher the spirit and its productions stand above nature and its phenomena, the higher too is the beauty of art above that of nature.

Artists' attempts to represent the absolute in terms of images may be constrained and inadequate ('The form of art is enough to limit it to a restricted content. Only a certain circle and grade of truth is capable of being represented in art', p.16) but at least art can be understood historically, and its development traced, which is precisely what the Lectures on Aesthetics proceed to do.

The radicalism of the exclusion of natural beauty from the sphere of aesthetics becomes clear when we compare the positions of Hegel and Kant. In The Critique of Judgement Kant accepts that there is no necessary link between

---

an appreciation of art and the possession of a developed moral sense; on the contrary 'virtuosi in matters of taste' are 'as a general rule, vain, capricious, and addicted to injurious passions'. The portrait of the lover of nature is quite different:

One who alone (and without any intention of communicating his observations to others) regards the beautiful form of a wild flower, a bird, an insect, or the like, out of admiration and love of them, and being loath to let them escape him in nature, even at the risk of some misadventure to himself - so far from there being any advantage to him - such a one takes an immediate, and in fact intellectual interest in the beauty of nature. (p.158)

Kant has already announced that to take 'an immediate interest in the beauty of nature [...] is always a mark of a good soul' (p.157). Although in the Third Critique Kant is mostly silent on the beauty of persons the surprisingly entertaining pre-Critical treatise, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime more than compensates. The whole of Section Three is devoted to detailing the qualities of beauty and sublimity as they express themselves in the male and female form (and character).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in another recent last-ditch attempt to redeem the 'fecund power' of the beauty of nature as an object of theoretical interest, helps to account for the very decline he attempts to stop. The perception of natural beauty provides an 'ethical experience bordering on the miraculous', which, for Kant, and by implication for all of us, requires a basis in religion. For Kant 'a creationist theology stands behind this unique human capacity to encounter natural beauty'. The creative power of the artistic genius becomes one

---

15 See below, Chapter 3.
manifestation of the creative power of nature, rendering meaningless any absolute division between the (divine) creations of nature and the (equally divine) creations of man.\textsuperscript{16} Kant stands at the end of a tradition in which the philosophical discussion of the arts invariably included constant reference to the beauties (or sublimities) of nature. Nature could hardly be excluded from aesthetics when, as Ludmila Jordanova has argued, every aspect of intellectual life in the eighteenth century was interpenetrated by that protean concept.\textsuperscript{17}

In contrast to beauty, the concept of the sublime, which used to play a sinister Mr Hyde to beauty's beneficent Dr Jekyll, has staged a dramatic comeback in Postmodernist thought. Jean François Lyotard in such works as \textit{The Inhuman} and \textit{The Postmodern Condition} sees the sublime as the ultimate source of modern art and gives its disorienting and disruptive power a central role in his assault on the tyranny of Enlightenment rationalism. I will discuss the concept of the sublime at length in chapter 6.

Returning to the twentieth century, it is possible to detect a faint embarrassment among some philosophers at the very mention of beauty. Wittgenstein in his \textit{Lectures on Aesthetics} suggests that terms such as beautiful should play no role in the discussion of the arts, comparing the use of them to a dog wagging its tail when it hears a piece of music. Wittgenstein goes further in claiming that such terms are seldom used 'in real life',

When aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'fine', etc., play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: "look at this transition", or [...] "The passage here is


incoherent". Or you say, in a poetical criticism [...] "His use of images is precise". The words you use are more akin to 'right' and 'correct' (as these words are used in ordinary speech) than to 'beautiful' and 'lovely'.

Rather than the expression of approval conveyed by terms like beautiful, Wittgenstein suggests that what is needed is technical knowledge, like that of a tailor. And yet Wittgenstein himself often uses the term in a general sense. In one of the remarks gathered in *Culture and Value* he writes:

The mathematician (Pascal) who admires the beauty of a theorem in number theory; it's as though he were admiring a beautiful natural phenomenon. It's marvellous, he says, what wonderful properties numbers have. It's as though he were admiring the regularities of a kind of crystal.

If it is true to say that, despite the occasional counter-attack (and in the face of the popularity of the term in every-day discussions of works of art), aesthetics has marginalized, if not excluded the concept beauty, it must equally be admitted that one subset of 'natural beauty' has flourished. In popular culture and academic debate, personal beauty has achieved a striking level of visibility. I will discuss the current manifestations of personal beauty (with particular reference to male beauty) in popular culture below, but I wish now to outline the two main contemporary theoretical approaches to the subject. These two approaches set themselves up in opposition to each other, but I hope to show that at a deeper level, and in certain respects, they have a surprising amount in common.


The first of these schools finds few supporters among the humanities and I certainly regard it as dangerously mistaken - a doctrine both unconvincing and unappealing. In the wake of Darwin's tentative attempts at explaining beauty in terms of sexual selection in *The Descent of Man*, evolutionary biology has endeavoured to show that beauty is as much a product of natural selection as the human eye or opposable thumb. And before Darwin there were plenty of pseudo-scientific attempts to divide humanity into different races, or even species, each of which would have its own physical ideal.

More recently, the sociobiology of E.O. Wilson, much popularised by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, represents a particularly aggressive and malignant strain of Darwinian theory, insisting as it does that every aspect not only of morphology, but also of behaviour is genetically determined. Sociobiologists argue that beauty is a recognisable quality coded for by a particular gene or genes providing its possessors with distinct advantages over 'the ugly', advantages always measured in terms of reproductive success. Modern theories of sexual selection have become increasingly complex in their attempts to come to terms with the almost infinite variety of human sexual choices. Because of that complexity, and the importance of the subject, I have devoted the whole of the following chapter to a detailed discussion of the intervention of sociobiology in the field of human beauty.

Sociobiological and other 'scientific' explanatory models pass themselves off as demythologising, as a process by which myth is replaced by reality; a reality founded on the bed-rock of biological science. Beauty thus loses, so it is claimed, the obfuscating fog of myth and reveals itself as a simple presence. This simple presence is stable, universal and self-evident. It does not have to be learnt, it merely has to be seen. It stands alone, outside society, but within a reconceived, restructured version of nature.
In a lengthy article in *The Observer*, Dr John Collee summarised the sociobiological view of beauty. The article fully endorsed the sociobiologists' interpretation:

The way that [a] gene survives is by replicating and then incorporating itself into a new and hopefully more hardy assembly of genes. The way it does this is through sex. It follows that genes which encourage or facilitate sexiness will over time become more prevalent in our species. This is because any gene that contributes, however obliquely to people having sex, increases our chances of survival. [...] So the competition of those 75,000 genes to survive can be detected in the way we choose a partner, in the elaborate courtship rituals we employ, in our imprinted concepts of what makes a woman beautiful and what makes a man attractive.  

This passage is particularly helpful in delineating the sociobiological position on beauty as it has entered the higher levels of popular culture. Genes control our behaviour; all behaviour is directed towards the goal of sexual reproduction; men and women carry an inherited template which dictates our choice of partner; beauty is a quality possessed (for the most part) by (some) women; men, if they are fortunate, carry a rather wider group of qualities, which may include some physical components, but which are primarily of the intellect or personality, and which indicate status and social success.

I want to argue that this 'scientific' account of beauty is not case of a myth being overthrown by truth but of one myth being substituted for another. The

---

20 Dr John Collee, 'Libidology', *The Observer*, 29 September 1995, 'Life' Section 24-27 (p. 24). The 'Life' section is devoted ominously to a series of articles on 'Future Sex', which necessitated, it seemed, a 'scientific' account of human sexual relations.

21 By which I mean the broad-sheet news papers and science programmes on television. I have yet to see sociobiology discussed in the pages of the tabloids, although the images of femininity found there would seem to have exercised some influence on the views of sociobiologists on personal beauty.
The biological paradigm postulates that there is only one true meaning to beauty - sexual attractiveness (measured in terms of reproductive success) and that those features often associated with beauty in our culture, derived from the spheres of ethics, religion, philosophy and art are either representations of this original pure, biological beauty, or ideological constructs, which interfere with and obstruct our understanding of true beauty. Thus we see Arthur Marwick, in *Beauty in History*, simply dismissing the religious and ethical associations that beauty has acquired in our culture as having nothing to do with sexual attraction, and therefore by definition falling outside the boundaries of beauty.

Marwick argues that beauty is universal and timeless, that a woman found beautiful in ancient Athens, or at a Renaissance court, would still be found beautiful today. His theoretical position is summed up by the title of his first chapter - 'Beauty; Only Skin Deep, but in the Eyes of All Beholders'. Beauty never means anything beyond itself; it signifies nothing beyond its own desirability; beauty 'is a surface, purely physical phenomenon'. Furthermore, that desire will be experienced by any observer with the requisite organs and hormones. In this, he sets himself against what he takes to be the liberal/feminist orthodoxy:
Almost every book written concerned with any aspect of beauty has insisted that standards of beauty vary from age to age; personally I do not believe that this is so [...]. It is a central argument of this book that as society has changed, so the manner of defining beauty and the value placed on physical beauty have changed, but that the perception or definition of physical beauty itself [...] has changed rather little.\textsuperscript{22, 23}

Marwick sides decisively with sociobiology although he conceives of the problem in a classical Darwinian form rather than from the point of view of the selfish gene.\textsuperscript{23} He is drawn to agree with Darwin, who claimed that those in a position to choose a mate, chose beauty, and Darwin’s followers who,

more strongly emphasised the notion that physical beauty represented all the highest qualities of humanity and that it was therefore in the interest of the survival of the race for individuals to seek out beautiful partners. (p. 39.)

Stressing evolution inevitably reduces the role of society in determining beauty:

Notions of physical beauty, I believe, are the product of an immensely long period of biological and social evolution (as is human sexuality itself) and in their essence (as distinct from minor fluctuations in convention) not subject to ‘short-term’ change, that is change directly related to shifts in the economic structure or ideological imperatives of society. (p. 20.)

He does allow culture a minor role in dictating fashion and slightly altering perceptions of what is beautiful and this leaves him an escape clause: when confronted with indisputable changes in beauty, he can simply relegate them to

\textsuperscript{22} Marwick, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{23} The distinction is explained below in Chapter 2. It is a major weakness in Marwick’s work that he has not taken account of the major shift in perspective brought about by E. O. Wilson’s Sociobiology, and its successors. Again, greater detail will follow in Chapter 2.
the margins where fashion plays its irritating games, covering up beautiful people in ridiculous clothing or layers of unseemly, but fashionable fat. He thus renders his thesis unfalsifiable.

The biological myth attempts to subjugate all other views of beauty to its phallocentric view that beauty is the sexually desired indicator of reproductive fitness. It is in this way that the reductive biological paradigm severs itself from other myths of beauty and it is by presenting itself as a magic bullet, as a cure for the dazzling complexity of beauty that it becomes pathogenic. Beauty is singularly vulnerable to such pathogens. The undoubted positioning of eroticism and sexuality in the mythic superstructure of beauty makes it possible to argue that beauty is a function of the reproductive process. Through this fissure, beauty enters the body of science and what was always understood as one of the facets of beauty, sexual desire, becomes its sole determinant.

There are, of course, major problems with the view that beauty is a product of natural selection and I will outline some of these in the following chapter in which I engage more fully with the biological paradigm. I wish now to move on to the opposed view that beauty is simply a lie, a device for oppressing women and repressing difference. This position is trenchantly and persuasively stated by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*. For Wolf, 'the beauty myth', is precisely the biological paradigm of beauty:

The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary.24

---

Wolf counters the beauty myth with the view that beauty is ‘a currency system, like the gold standard’:

[The beauty myth] claims to be about intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women. It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power. (p. 13.)

The driving force behind the modern beauty myth is big business, ‘the $33-billion-a-year diet industry, the $20-billion cosmetics industry, the $300-million cosmetic surgery industry, and the $7-billion pornography industry’ (p. 17).

Wolf’s argument that beauty is a pernicious and mendacious construction of patriarchy relies for its theoretical underpinning on the observation that other cultures operate with radically different aesthetic and sexual norms. She lists the various anatomical features that other cultures have focused on as evidence for the relativism of beauty: “Beauty” is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman; the Maori admire a fat vulva, and the Padung, droopy breasts’ (p. 12). In the same way, the contemporary Western restriction of beauty to the feminine is shown to be narrowly specific, rather than universal. Mediterranean Goddess-centred religions partnered powerful female deities with ‘beautiful but expendable’ youths, and today there are African tribes where women enjoy economic power and men use adornment to clamour for attention: ‘Among the Nigerian Wodaabe [...] men spend hours together in elaborate makeup sessions, and compete - provocatively painted and dressed, with swaying hips and seductive expressions - in beauty contests judged by women’ (p. 13).

I have no quarrel with Wolf’s central claim, that the various male-dominated beauty-related industries have utilised beauty as part of an attempt to re-
establish the control that women have managed to wrest from the grip of the patriarchy over the past thirty years. I do, however, reject her definition of beauty. Wolf’s argument leaves beauty, paradoxically, as a universal: all human cultures have the concept of beauty and only its form, or its manifestation changes. This permits her to suggest that the modern, restrictive paradigm of female beauty has been constructed with the purpose (explicit or implicit) of subjugating women, or rather of re-establishing their subjugation through ideology rather than legal mechanisms. Wolf’s relativism, however, stops at this point. Beauty is used as the solitary signifier for the enormous range of phenomena associated with courtship and sexuality in different human cultures. This involves a concealed Eurocentrism. It assumes that anthropological data from other cultures can be interpreted using the Western concept of beauty, that the various ethnically diverse views of attractiveness can be simply slipped in alongside the familiar images of Venus in the system of signs we use to connote beauty. Certainly, that conception of beauty is widened, but I would argue that this is at the price of misunderstanding both our culture, and the different societies under investigation.

Jeffrey Weeks, in *Sex, Politics and Society*, pushes relativism a step further. It is not simply beauty that is relative: sexuality itself becomes a social construct:

Some cultures have made little distinction between heterosexual and homosexual forms, concentrating rather on the age or class of the partner; our culture has made the distinction of prime social significance. In some societies,
sex is a simple source of pleasure, a key to the glorification of the erotic arts; in others it is a source of danger and taboo, of mortification of the flesh.\textsuperscript{25}

This radical relativising of sexuality leaves beauty in a difficult position. Either it becomes simply a synonym for attractiveness, which, I will argue, misses many of its connotations, or we restrict the use of the term to Western culture. It is this second suggestion that is elaborated in this thesis. What we mean by beauty cannot be divorced from the history of European culture and what other cultures find sexually or aesthetically pleasing cannot simply be interpreted using the Western concept of beauty any more than the Western concept of art can help us to understand religious icons in tribal societies. It is a point made by Wittgenstein in a lecture in 1938:

What would tradition in Negro Art be? That women wear cut-grass skirts? etc., etc. I don't know. I don't know how Frank Dobson's appreciation of Negro Art compares with an educated Negro's. If you say he appreciates it, I don't know what he means. He may fill his room with objects of Negro Art. Does he just say: "Ah!"? Or does he do what the best negro musicians do? Or does he agree or disagree with so and so about it? You may call this appreciation. Entirely different to an educated Negro's. Though an educated Negro may also have Negro objects of art in his room. The Negro's and Frank Dobson's are different appreciations altogether. You do something different with them. Suppose Negro's dress in their own way and I say I appreciate a good Negro tunic - does this mean I would have one made, or I would say (as at the tailor's): "No ... this is too long", or does it mean I say: "How charming!"?\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{26} Wittgenstein, \textit{Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief}, pp. 8-9. This view has, of course, become something of a cliché among art historians, who lament the use of tribal artefacts by European modernists purely for their formal qualities without reference to culture that produced
Wittgenstein's point is that to describe a cultured taste you have to describe a culture, or, as he repeats in the *Philosophical Investigations*, to understand a language, you have to enter into a form of life. I certainly do not want to suggest that sexual behaviour (or cultural artefacts) in non-western cultures are in any way less interesting, sophisticated or important. My point is solely that to understand both Western and non-Western traditions involves a detailed study of their unique histories. There will be many areas in which parallelisms may be observed, and direct influence demonstrated, but this must not blind us to the play of difference. And within Western culture, a concept of the beautiful can be seen to have evolved over the past two thousand years, forming a coherent, comprehensible, if amorphous collection of ideas, images, and stories. The family of ideas make up not a myth, but a mythology, and this mythology is neither the product of biological determinism, nor the meaningless collection of lies described by Wolf (although it has been exploited for the oppression of women). Before further elucidating my own view of beauty, I will briefly discuss the obvious dialectical resolution for the thesis of biological objectivism and the antithesis of relativism - is it not the case that beauty is a matter both of nature and nurture? Most human physical characteristics such as height and weight are the product of a complex interaction between environmental and genetic factors. Why not beauty?

In their book *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty*, Robin Lakoff and Raquel Scherr take this middle way. I have considerable sympathy with several aspects of Lakoff and Scherr's work: with their technique of analysing beauty as a series of myths and counter-myths, with their broad, historical perspective, as well as their abundant compassion and understanding into the tyrannical

---

aspects of beauty. Among the myths and counter-myths they analyse, Lakoff and Scherr oppose the views that beauty is universal and unchanging and that beauty is merely a matter of fashion. The ‘reality’ they find is that beauty is a combination of both: it is heavily influenced by fashion, and we must learn as part of our upbringing to ‘see’ it and make the necessary discriminations; and yet, ‘we still recognise certain changeless verities’. Images of beauty from ancient cultures can still move us, and certain features, ‘flowing hair, full lips, sculptured nose [...] recur again and again’.27

Lakoff and Scherr come close to arguing that each judgement of beauty is made up of theoretically quantifiable amounts of culture and biology, which could be expressed on X and Y axes. For Lakoff and Scherr beauty becomes a series of symbolic oppositions, in which symmetry and proportion play key and persistent roles, and those features that set us apart from animals remain cherished. This approach, despite being sensitively handled, is just as positivist as the biological paradigm: biology and culture can, in their account, be teased apart. In other words, if we look deep enough, we will find an essence of nature under the layers of culture. We find this same stubborn biological root retaining its grip even on the extreme relativism of Plekhanov:

The ideal of beauty prevailing at any time in any society or class of society is rooted partly in the biological conditions of mankind’s development - which, incidentally, also produced distinctive racial features - and partly in the historical conditions in which the given society or class arose and exists. It therefore always has a very rich content that is not absolute, not unconditional, but quite specific.28

---

I want to argue that the concept of beauty can never be reduced, in this way, to a simple essence, even where that essence is permitted to cohabit with cultural variables. Beauty is, and can only be, ideological; an enormously complex combination of the cultural factors rejected by sociobiologist as trivial epiphenomena and by some feminists as inventions of an oppressive patriarchy.

***

III: The Mythology of Beauty

The concept of myth often comes up in discussions of beauty, generally as a way of characterising and attacking the position with which one disagrees. For Naomi Wolf, the beauty myth is a 'big lie', a fraudulent series of propositions; for Lakoff and Scherr the concept of beauty is made up of a number of myths and countermyths, both having something of the truth, but equally, both oversatating their claims. For Marwick the belief that beauty is anything other than a simple fact of biology, a fortunate arrangement of features is to fall for a myth. I believe it is correct to describe beauty as a myth, but incorrect to characterise myth as a simple untruth. I will argue that beauty can best be understood in the light of the concept of myth as a second order system of signification as detailed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*.

Beauty and myth have always been closely associated as shown by the stories of Ganymede, Adonis, Helen of Troy and the various beautiful and fatal women in medieval Romance. Beauty, however, as well as forming a major, historical constituent of myth is itself constituted as myth, in the Barthesian sense. The longevity of the concept and its polymorphous power to gratify, or at least to offer the promise of gratification, stems from its metalinguistic, mythic elements, from the cloud of loosely organised, infinitely varied associations which adhere to the word beauty.
For Barthes, myth is the process by which a first order signifying chain culminating in a meaning-rich sign is put to use and made to carry the freight of another layer of meaning. Perhaps the clearest illustration is that of a sentence demonstrating a point of grammar. The sentence has a literal meaning, but once that meaning has become subsumed into the concept of 'grammatical exemplarity' this meaning dissolves: the sentence has become again a signifier. In another well-known known example, Barthes analyses a magazine cover of a black soldier saluting the French flag. At the first level this is simply what it appears to be: this is a real soldier in the French army doing what it is that soldiers do. But at a second level the picture carries a mythic significance, the myth of French Imperiality, of different nations and races living and serving together:

I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination faithfully serve under the one Flag and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal this young black shows in serving his so-called oppressors.\(^{29}\)

I do not wish to follow Barthes slavishly in the theory and practice of his 'science of mythology'. His 1971 essay, 'Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today', indicates that Barthes himself was less than entirely satisfied with the program he initiated in *Mythologies* - in particular, under the influence of Derridean deconstruction, he argued that easy structuralist separation of the signifier and signified has itself become 'in some sort mythical'. The exposure of myths ('demythification') has become a doxa and so the 'science of the signifier' must move on:

It is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols but to challenge the symbolic itself.  

Despite Barthes’s apparent apostasy, it has been persuasively argued that he never abandoned the ‘mythologist’s fascination with second-order meanings’, albeit that myths have become ‘a resource for writing rather than an occasion for taking political positions’. I wish to emphasise just two elements in Barthes’s conception of myth which are of particular relevance to beauty. The first is the nature of mythic ‘knowledge’:

The knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. It is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function.  

The second characteristic of myth I want to mention is that, according to Barthes, it turns reality ‘inside out’ emptying it of ‘history’ and filling it with ‘nature’ (p. 131). As Barthes puts it in ‘Change the Object Itself’, myth ‘consists in overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the ‘natural’’. These two characteristics would seem, when applied to beauty, to pull in opposite directions. The ‘naturalising’ tendency of the biological paradigm wants to cut through the ‘unstable, nebulous condensation’ which is the traditional view of beauty, to get at the true heart of beauty, its simple, biological reality. I would agree,

---

however, with Lakoff and Scherr, who view the biological paradigm as equally mythic, but I would go further in collapsing them together into not the beauty myth, but the myth of beauty. Beauty consists entirely in this cloud of 'shapeless associations' of complementary and conflicting elements. More even than forming a myth, beauty can be seen as a mythology.

The idea of 'the natural' existed as part of the mythology of beauty from classical times. As Pasi Falk has put it, in the course of a discussion of the different traditions of bodily adornment in human cultures:

The Western body-image is dominated by a deep rooted ideal of 'the natural'. This may be traced back to the Greco-Roman body-aesthetics on the one hand, and the Judeo-Christian tradition on the other. The Greco-Roman cult of natural, bodily beauty of both men and women, so richly expressed in the pictorial art of antiquity, was part of a whole 'aesthetic of existence', but it allowed decoration and painting of the body only so far as it served the ideal of 'natural beauty'.

The emphasis on the natural continued into the Christian era, albeit transformed into, on the one hand, a celebration of 'natural man' as created in God's image, and on the other, as an abhorrence of a sexually motivated 'shameless articulation of the flesh', as represented by 'the glaringly painted whore'.

More surprisingly, some feminist accounts cannot resist the appeal to a concept of the natural. Susan Faludi, for example, emphasises the constructed nature of beauty, which she regards as oppressive, in order to postulate that beneath or behind it lies a truer beauty, something that escapes ideology, a

---

pure, femininity, associated with health, vigour and unconfined sexuality. A natural beauty. Here we find ourselves back with nature, back in biology. Both manoeuvres are reductive. Both aspire to a conceptual hygiene. Both are suspicious of religion, ethics, philosophy and art, of culture.\textsuperscript{35}

Whilst acknowledging that the natural has always formed part of the Western myth of beauty, it remains only a part. Throughout the history of Western culture, beauty has been used to convey complex meanings over and above its role as an expression of appreciation. Religious, ethical and philosophical components have found their way into the package, into the 'condensation' that forms around the term beautiful. The meaning of beauty is forever trapped in our history; that meaning can only be the sum total of the elements which make up the mythology of beauty. The accounts of biologists and feminists must take their place in that same cloud of floating associations along with religion, philosophy and art.

In the following section I will elaborate more on the history of beauty, but to conclude this section I will outline some of characteristics of the mythology of beauty, although I emphasise again that the mythology is constituted ultimately by that history. In my analysis, there are two principal ways in which mythology of beauty organises itself - two poles around which beauty 'condenses'. The first of these is the embodiment of beauty in certain archetypal forms; the second, the association of certain concepts, modes of discourse, ethical assumptions and aesthetic principles with the idea of beauty.

It seems perfectly natural to contemplate beauty as personified in the figure of a Venus, an Apollo or an Adonis. The statement, 'she was a Venus in blue jeans' perfectly conveys an idea of beauty, as does, 'he was an Adonis'. Both

statements have a completeness; an image is instantly summoned, an idealised form somehow resolving into itself the countless images of male and female beauty in our culture. And so for Keats, male beauty would take the form of Endymion, and Keats himself would be transformed into Adonais in Shelley’s elegy.

The image of Venus has acquired a position of unique privilege in the family of female beauty-archetypes. Kenneth Clark titles two chapters on images of female beauty in The Nude ‘Venus I’ and ‘Venus II’, and, in what has become, because of Barthes’s brilliant analysis, one of the sacred texts for contemporary theorists of beauty, Balzac’s sculptor, Sarrasine, cannot conceive of his newly discovered image of perfect beauty in any other terms:

La Zambinella displayed to him, united, living, and delicate, those exquisite female forms he so ardently desired, of which a sculptor is at once the severest and the most passionate judge. Her mouth was expressive, her eyes loving, her complexion dazzlingly white. And along with these details, which would have enraptured a painter, were all the wonders of those images of Venus revered and rendered by the chisels of the Greeks.36

In the illustrations to Face Value, Lakoff and Scherr include no less than eleven portraits of Venus, along with two Aphrodites, her Attic equivalent.

No single masculine archetype has gained such an ascendancy. Gregory Woods locates three major forms which have haunted the homoerotic imagination:

Three types of male physique, three distinct ideals, occur in Western art: the adolescent pliancy of Narcissus; Apollo’s firm but graceful maturity and the potency of Heracles, tacitly poised on the verge of deterioration.\(^{37}\)

One of Woods’ sources is de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*, where a group of beautiful boys, including a Cupidon, a Narcisse, an Adonis and a Hyacinthe are paired with a less pretty group of ‘fuckers’ including a Hercules, complete with fearsome club:

_Hercule_, with a body hewn in the image of the God whose name he had been given, was twenty six years of age and was endowed with a member eight and one-quarter inches around by thirteen long. Nothing more beautiful nor more majestic has ever been seen; this tool was almost always upright, and with only eight discharges, so tests revealed, it could fill a pint measure to the brim.\(^{38}\)

If a single male archetype does lead the field, it must be Apollo. As Venus becomes the representative of female beauty for Kenneth Clark, so Apollo stands for male beauty:

The Greeks had no doubt that the god Apollo was like a perfectly beautiful man. He was beautiful because his body conformed to certain laws of proportion and so partook of the divine beauty of mathematics. […] So in the embodiment of Apollo everything must be calm and clear: clear as daylight, for Apollo is the god of light.\(^{39}\)

---


In chapter 4 I will discuss Winckelmann's obsessional interest in the figure of Apollo, and in chapter 8, on James Fenimore Cooper, we will again find the Apollo recurring as an ideal of physical beauty.

I do not intend to suggest that these archetypes represent the unchanging embodiment of any mental or biological phenomena; they are not the reifications of our desires or our 'natural' ideas of what constitutes beauty. They are simply conventional figures who continue to haunt our culture, our literature and our fantasies, because our culture is itself continuous. In this I strongly disagree with Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* which presents a similar cast of characters divided into the essentially male forces of order, culture and restraint, represented by Apollo, and the chthonic, disruptive, paradoxically feminine Dionysus. Underlying the division, for Paglia, is a fundamental division in the nature of humanity and looming over all is the inescapable fact of the violence and indeed the horror of sexual relations: 'sex is daemonic'.

For Winckelmann, the perfect beauty of Apollo is, of necessity, still, self sufficient and untouchable. The archetypes can, however, partake in action, in narratives. They are, in fact, defined by their actions. Apollo slays Python, Cupid and Psyche engage in their restless courtship, Ganymede is caught-up and lifted to Olympus. Helen, although passive, becomes the still centre around which furious battle rages; Achilles himself is the most beautiful, as well as formidable of Greeks. The ceaseless motion of beauty, its endless narrative impetus is wonderfully caught by Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* display beauty forever threatened, pursued and transformed. Robert Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, in some ways a modern retelling of the

---

40 Paglia, p. 3.
Metamorphoses, gives us beauty as both the message and the medium - the gods and men 'communicated through beauty'. It is through these archetypes and their actions, the stories that link them together, that beauty becomes a mythology, rather than simply a myth.

Leaving aside the personifications of beauty, what of the second constituent of the mythology of beauty, the vague ideas which have become associated with the concept? The following chapters will detail some of these associations in the period 1750-1850. I will give particular weight to the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime which dominated the theoretical investigation of beauty in that period. Others will be listed in the brief history of beauty in the next section of this introduction. I wish now only to emphasise some of the ideas grouped as myths and counter-myths by Lakoff and Scherr. The seven pairs they give are:

1. (i) 'Beauty is God-given. It cannot be acquired by deliberate effort.'
   (ii) 'We must labour to be beautiful'. Beauty is an artificial creation, enhanced by cosmetics and fashion.

2. (i) Beauty is objective, universal, biological.
   (ii) Beauty is subjective, changing over time.

3. (i) 'Beauty is allied with innocence and virtue. The beautiful woman is the good one'.
   (ii) 'Beauty is evil and destructive'.

4. (i) 'Great beauty brings its possessor misery'
   (ii) Beauty will make its possessor happy.

5. (i) 'Beauty goes with stupidity'.

---

(ii) 'Beauty goes with brains'.

6. (i) 'Beauty is mentally unsettling'.
   (ii) 'Beauty is serenity'.

7. (i) 'Beauty is powerful'.
   (ii) 'Beauty is worse than powerless'.

Lakoff and Scherr attempt to find the 'truth' behind these myths, which, in each case, is some compromise between them. Extracting the exaggerations, the ideological, and the mythic, leaves a core of reality. I argue that the first part of the endeavour - the collecting of the various myths of beauty is as far as one can legitimately go. There can be no second stage, no sorting of truth from myth. The truth is the myth.

A final aspect I wish to mention is the relationship between beauty and its opposite, ugliness. This is closely connected to the third of the coupled myths listed above. As Castiglione puts it succinctly in *The Book of the Courtier*:

> Therefore for the most part the ugly are also evil, and the beautiful good. And it can be said that beauty is the pleasant, gay, charming and desirable face of the good, and that ugliness is the dark, disagreeable, unpleasant and sorry face of evil.

Ugliness has been associated with as complex a series of associations as beauty throughout the history of Western culture; I would go further in arguing that it forms part of the mythology of beauty. The twisted body, whether it belongs to Leopardi, to Shakespeare's Richard III or to Caliban, that 'freckled

---

42 Lakoff and Scherr, pp. 24-43.
whelp, hag-born - not honoured with/A human shape,\(^4^4\) leads to a twisted view of the world, a moral ugliness to match the physical deformation. Even where there is no moral depravity, the material ugliness of the body has a corrosive effect on the mental and moral faculties, as in the subject of Rilke’s ‘The Dwarf’s Song’:

My soul itself may be straight and good;  
ah, but my heart, my bent-over blood,  
all the distortions that hurt me inside-  
it buckles under these things.  
It has no garden, it has no sun,  
It hangs on my twisted skeleton
and, terrified, flaps its wings.\(^4^5\)

One of the aspects of this aspect of the mythology of beauty is the association of the foreign, the strange and the unfamiliar with ugliness. This takes its most malignant form in relation to race, a subject I will return to in chapters 2, 4, 5 and 8. Perhaps the most moving section of *Face Value* deals with the horror of being black in a culture in which beauty means blond, blue eyed and fair skinned.\(^4^6\)

***


\(^4^6\)Lakoff and Scherr, pp. 245-76.
IV: A Brief History of Beauty

It is not possible here to give a full history of the concept of personal beauty in Western culture. That would be a thesis in itself, and a largely redundant one. Arthur Marwick's *Beauty in History*, whatever the shortcomings of its theoretical foundations, gives a useful survey of the role played by beauty from classical antiquity to the present day. I wish only to emphasise two features of beauty from the origins of Western culture in classical Athens to the eighteenth century - where the body of this thesis takes over - which are of relevance to the following chapters: the wide range of views held on beauty and the involvement of men as images of the beautiful.

Much has been written on conceptions of beauty in classical Greek culture, ranging from works on the fine points of Platonic love to speculations on the most desirable size of penis. In particular, the role of beauty in Plato's philosophy has been studied exhaustively. I will discuss Plato more fully in relation to the writings of Winckelmann in chapter 4, but it is evident that the task of demonstrating that beauty involves more than carnality (and that it extends to the male sex) must undergo a reversal in relation to Plato. The difficulty is to show that Plato could see a positive relationship between beauty and sexual congress, and to show that he did not limit beauty exclusively to men (or boys). The traditional view of physical beauty in Plato is that it forms the first step in the *scala amoris*, encapsulated by Diotoma's speech in *The Symposium*:

---


Starting from individual beauties, the quest for universal beauty must find him ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung - that is, from one to two, and from two to every lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself - until at last he comes to know what beauty is.48

For Plato, this progression would appear only to be possible where procreation is not the aim of the relationship, but rather one in which physical beauty has drawn the lover to a soul 'at once beautiful, distinguished and agreeable' (p. 561). The form of the beautiful is intimately associated with the form of the good, although the precise nature of that association must remain somewhat veiled.49

Clearly this 'Platonic' view of beauty has been enormously influential, and the close ties between the ideas of beauty and virtue has formed a central part of the mythology of beauty since Plato. The rarefied form of Platonism, from which the body is all but expunged was put forward by Plotinus, for whom the physical beauty of the body acts not as a step on the ladder to virtue, but is always a distraction, or, at worst, a contamination:

So, we may justly say, a Soul becomes ugly - by something foisted upon it, by sinking into the alien, by a fall, a descent into body, into matter.50

However, as I argue in chapter 4, and as Price and others have demonstrated, Plato does not himself denigrate sexual relations; sexuality becomes a crucial

---

49 For a discussion see Price, p. 43.
part of the ascent of the soul. If sexual gratification cannot be the end of the
desire fired by beauty, it becomes a means to the end of knowledge of the
good.\textsuperscript{51}

In the \textit{Lysis}, the \textit{Symposium}, the \textit{Phaedrus} and, it must be added, in
Socrates' speeches in Xenophon's \textit{Symposium}, warnings against carnality go
hand in hand with a frankly erotic appreciation of male beauty, an appreciation
which does not exclude a physical consummation, provided that consummation
is not the exclusive goal of the relationship, and does not lead to a wanton
abandonment of reason. We find in Plato, therefore, not just the mythic
association of beauty and goodness, but also the threatening, disconcerting
aspect of beauty which leads to opposed linking of beauty to sin and, in
extreme cases, sickness, madness and death.\textsuperscript{52}

Equally diverse views can be found elsewhere in classical works. The orator
Isocrates (436-338 BC) managed to argue, in true sophistical style, both that
beauty was, when compared to virtue, worthless and ephemeral, 'spent by time
or withered by disease' and that beauty was the greatest of attributes: 'Beauty
is of all things the most venerated, the most precious and the most desired'.
Courage, wisdom and justice are all 'despised' except insofar as they possess
this outward form, beauty', and although we must in general hate those who
excel us, beauty has the ability to make us love those who possess it. Even the
Gods themselves are enslaved by human beauty - male and female.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51}See Price, pp. 84-94.
\textsuperscript{52}Price, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{53}Isocrates' condemnation of beauty comes from his \textit{Address to Demonicus}, in \textit{Collected Works}, trans. by
George Natin, 3 vols (London: Heinemann, 1928), I, p. 7. His praise of beauty comes from \textit{The Encomium
on Helen}, I, pp. 89-93. It should be noted that \textit{The Encomium} was intended as a formal rhetorical exercise, a
demonstration of the correct way to speak about Helen's beauty, which was, one of the standard tests for
oratorical prowess.
The complications involved in the theory and practice of boy-love in Greek culture are well caught by Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure*. It becomes clear that ancient Athens was far from an innocent and easy erotic playground. The behaviour of the boy, and of the lover, the types of intercourse allowed, the roles of restraint and of desire, were all detailed by an intricate code of honour. In all this beauty played an important part, acting both as the proper object of devotion, and also forming an ideal, the 'beautiful form', a relationship that was 'aesthetically and morally valuable' (p. 196). The male body could be beautiful 'well beyond its first bloom', but it was the boy's body, itself unvirile, but promising a future virility, passive and yet resisting, graceful, but not soft and effeminate, that was the primary object of desire (p. 200).

The decline of this idealisation of boy-love and masculine beauty can be observed in Plutarch's dialogue, *Eroticus*, in which the relative merits of homosexual and heterosexual love are discussed. Protogenes, the advocate of boy-love accepts that there is a natural need for men and women to have sex with each other, and he equally accepts that women can be beautiful, but it is only in its masculine form that love 'lays hold of the young, well endowed soul and proceeds by way of friendship to the goal of virtue'. In contrast, the love of women brings at best, 'some pleasure and enjoyment in love and beauty'. Ultimately, however, heterosexual love triumphs and the dialogue concludes with the marriage of the beautiful young man, Bacchon, to the widow, Ismenodora, also beautiful, and, unlike Bacchon, very wealthy. In the dialogue, we see a movement of an idealised, carnality-transcending love on the Platonic

---

model, along with the ideas of naturalness, simplicity and virtue from the realm of all male relationships to that of marriage. As Foucault puts it,

[Plutarch] has borrowed from the erotics of boys its fundamental and traditional features in order to demonstrate that they can be applied, not to all forms of love, but to the conjugal relationship alone.\textsuperscript{56}

One other aspect of the Greek approach to beauty needs to be mentioned. There seems to be a connection between ugliness and non-Greek peoples, particularly in the depiction of genitalia. Kenneth Dover argues that the Greeks found small, delicate, tapering, uncircumcised penises beautiful, and indeed linked facial and genital beauty. Large, club-like penises became associated with ugly old men, satyrs and foreigners, particularly Egyptians and Phoenicians.\textsuperscript{57} This would appear to be the first link between the other and ugliness, to which I will return several times in the following chapters.

I wish to move now from the world of classical antiquity to that of medieval philosophy, Romance and history. According to Umberto Eco, the medieval mind craved beauty 'in all things', the result of a world view in which God has created the world and created it beautifully.\textsuperscript{58} Eco points out that whenever Thomas Aquinas gives an example of beauty, or perfect proportion, or clarity he, 'invariably has recourse to the human body' (p. 125). It at first appears that this beauty is a matter of utility, a matching of form and function:

Each part of the body is beautiful insofar as it reveals its proper functional character; and the whole body is beautiful in virtue of the concurrence of all its parts. (p. 127.)

\textsuperscript{57} Dover, pp. 126-30.
In a sense, this is true - the body is beautiful to the extent that it fits its function, but that function is the comprehension, and worship of God and his creation. Man’s body is perfectly configured so as to facilitate understanding and to promote our reason. Our beautiful upright posture fulfils the need to elevate our senses, particularly vision, which are thus in contradistinction to the brutes, which grovel close to the earth, able to perceive the world with clarity (p. 130).

Arthur Marwick argues that in both classical and medieval cultures, the appreciation of ‘corporeal beauty’, was a male preserve. The change between the two was in the object of that appreciation, the Greek adoration of the male form being transformed via the pan-sexual interests of the Romans into the strictly heterosexual focus of the medieval period. As a result, during the middle ages, the role of women was to be beautiful, and the job of men to impress them with their heroics and charm them with their chivalry. The exquisite beauty of face and figure beloved of the Greeks is ignored in favour of the qualities proper to manly endeavour: ‘the emphasis is on strength, and also upon such personal qualities as nobility and valour, rather than on distinction of feature’.59

For Marwick, this shift of erotic interest from men to women is a crucial step in the emergence of the modern (and, he asserts, correct) view of beauty, as a quality possessed by women and desired by men. Unfortunately it rests on a very narrow reading of medieval texts. A single modern authority, and a solitary medieval text are brought in to support Marwick’s contention. Although he does not refer to it, it may be that Marwick has based his interpretation partly on the best known (late) medieval English work, Malory’s

59 Marwick, p. 67.
Morte D'Arthur, in which it is certainly true that physical descriptions of the male heroes are limited almost exclusively to size and musculature. A wider investigation into medieval literature gives a rather more complex picture.

Danielle Régnier-Bohler, examining conceptions of the self in the medieval period, contradicts Marwick's view that descriptions of male appearance are limited to size and strength. She accepts that the chansons de geste of the eleventh and twelfth centuries 'relied on conventional formulas emphasising muscular development' but points out that the courtly narratives which superseded them, and in which heroism and valour in battle are joined by romantic intrigue, 'did not stint in [the] description of male perfections'. One particularly detailed description comes from the thirteenth-century Roman de Flamenca. The portrait of Flamenca's lover certainly includes (albeit with one or two odd details) plenty of indications of size and vigour:

He was broad in the shoulder, as strong as Atlas in that regard. His muscles were well rounded, his biceps developed, his arms reasonably thick. His hands were large, strong and hard. The joints of his fingers were flat, his chest broad and his waist narrow. As for his hips, he did not limp! They were strong and square; his thighs were shapely, thicker on the inside. His knees were quite smooth; his legs healthy, long, straight, and close together; his feet were arched on top and his instep high.

As well as these indications of physical capability, however, we find some less strenuously masculine qualities:

May's Rose when it blossoms is not so beautiful or vivid as his complexion, which combined creaminess with color wherever it was needed. A more beautiful complexion never existed. He had shapely ears, large, firm, and red; and a lovely, intelligent mouth, loving in all that it said. His teeth were quite regular and whiter than ivory. His chin was strongly etched and, what made it
even more gracious, slightly cleft. His neck was straight, long, and powerful, and no nerve or bone protruded.  

We may wonder at the 'shapely ears, large, firm and red' but it is difficult to see how they might be of assistance in the slaying of dragons or giants or in pursuit of the Questing Beast. However, because these marks of masculine attractiveness are not simply an index of physical might, it does not follow that they constitute 'autonomous' beauty. Régnier-Bohler argues that the complexion was the single most important feature for both men and women, who would yearn equally for the ideal of 'cream slightly tinged with pink'. Yet far from existing independently, a fair complexion was taken to be a sign of a healthy physical constitution, which in turn was defined in terms of contemporary medical/astrological knowledge. The link between character and appearance was intimate. The 'sanguine' temperament, itself a product of the physical constitution, produced a fairer, more attractive and radiantly happy face, in contrast to the sour features and dark complexion produced by the melancholy disposition.

There was, naturally, another side to the praising of a fair complexion. Writing about the uprising by the so called Jacquerie, in 1358, Froissart describes the rebellious peasants, to whom he has attributed a long list of atrocities, as 'small and dark' before gleefully recounting their 'extermination' and the burning of the town which had harboured them, along with all its surviving inhabitants.  

Froissart's translator suggests that there is a racial aspect to this, in the 'natural' contempt of the fair ruling elite, often of Nordic

---

ancestry for the swarthy underclass. (p. 20). If this is true it continues the
tradition of associating other races with physical unattractiveness.

I noted above that Malory never refers to the appearance of his heroes,
beyond admiring their large size. One of his principal sources, however, is
replete with reflections on the beauty of its central character. The thirteenth-
century prose Romance of Tristan emphasises from the first mention of its hero
that he is both a brave and a 'handsome' knight.\(^{62}\) From that first mention we
are constantly reminded of Tristan's captivating good-looks. Merlin prophesies
that, 'such will be his grace on earth [...] you'll be amazed at his beauty and
worth' (p. 9), but, as we might expect, it is principally the women in Tristan's
life who fall under the spell of his beauty. Nor is there any question of a
confusion between beauty and power. Tristan is a mighty warrior, but long
before he reaches the strength of manhood, women find him irresistible:

Tristan was by now already seven years old, and so comely that every lady who
saw him declared him to be the fairest creature on earth. Why should I describe
his looks to you at great length? In a nutshell: he was in every way so beautiful
that there was no young boy in the whole world at this time who could match
his beauty, except Lancelot of the Lake. These two, beyond a doubt, surpassed
all others in beauty. (p. 11.)

Any possible claim that the constant references to Tristan's beauty are
intended as references to his size and strength (and consequently signifiers of
his prowess on the battlefield and tournament) are refuted by a passage in
which Iseut compares the young (and, at this stage sickly) Tristan and his rival,
Palamedes. Iseut, asked by her companion, Brangain, to choose between the
two knights, picks Palamedes because of his courage, nobility and valour. She

adds, however, that if Tristan could equal Palamedes in those virtues, she would prefer him, 'because, once cured, he would undoubtedly be the most handsome knight in the world' (p. 47).

If we turn from early medieval romance to early medieval history, we can detect a similar prominence given to personal appearance. The most lavish descriptions of male beauty occur, unsurprisingly, in that part of the medieval world in which the flame of classical learning was most closely guarded - Byzantium. The courtier and philosopher Michael Psellus (1018-96), writing about his idol, Constantine IX (who ruled from 1042-55), depicts a ruler in whom a mental and moral excellence was married to a physical perfection:

It was a marvel of beauty that Nature brought into being in the person of this man, so justly proportioned, so harmoniously fashioned, that there was no one in our time to compare with him. 63

Constantine's beauty is greater, Psellus contends, than that imagined by the poets in their depictions of Achilles and the other Greek heroes,

for Nature, having formed him in reality and brought him to perfection, with the fine skill of the sculptor shaped him and made him beautiful, surpassing with her own peculiar art the imaginative effort of the poet. (p. 221.)

Again, there is no question that his beauty is simply a function of stature. Constantine's strength, we are told, 'was not manifest in long hands or the great size of his limbs or other parts of his body' but was 'deep in his heart'. The limbs of the Emperor were 'more distinguished for their beauty and proportion than for any unusual size' (p. 220).

Nor does beauty appear to have been irrelevant among the ruling elites in Western Europe. Stephen Runciman’s *A History of the Crusades* relates several occasions where personal beauty played an important role in effecting policy, and even where no practical consequence ensues, the contemporary chroniclers of the crusades were fulsome in their praise for beauty. An example of the former was the disastrous accession of Guy of Lusignan as King of Jerusalem, solely, it would seem as a result of his beauty, which captivated Sibylla, daughter of King Amalric.64

Some of the complications and contradictions inherent in the concept of beauty in the medieval period are illustrated by the role of beauty in the *Divine Comedy*. Beauty appears to serve two opposing functions in Dante’s great summation of medieval learning. Beatrice symbolises all that is virtuous, wise and true. She represents Divine reason, raising Dante above the limits of the human understanding, personified by Virgil. Her radiance and beauty grow ever finer as she leads the pilgrim closer to God. Francesca, on the other hand, in Canto V of *The Inferno*, uses her beauty to tempt the pilgrim into sympathising with adultery and incest.65

Yet Beatrice remains beautiful in an all too human way. She is never totally transformed into a symbol. And Francesca, whatever her function as a symbol of concupiscence and incontinent passion, haunts the imagination and fills both the pilgrim and the reader with pity. However complex the codes involved in understanding beauty are, they are never unintelligible. Decoding, or at least a partial decoding, involves entering into the culture that produced the text in


question, although of course later accretions to the myth contaminate and alter our understanding. Reading the beauty of Beatrice and Francesca takes us into the worlds of medieval philosophy and theology, of the history and politics of Florence. Yet other less 'authentic' images invariably accompany what might be looked on as the legitimate connotations. For example something about Beatrice brings anachronistic images of Botticelli's Venus into mind.

For Arthur Marwick, the Renaissance saw the first real challenge to the traditional view, common to both classical and medieval societies, that beauty points to something beyond itself. In the secular city states of Northern Italy, there occurred the right environment for beauty to flourish - wealth, health and leisure. Artistic practice and the pursuit of pleasure concentrated on physical beauty, leading to a direct read-across from art to life, and the application of aesthetic standards to real, as opposed to painted people.\(^{66}\) Those aesthetic standards must include, although Marwick neglects to mention them, the obsessive search for the true proportions of beauty undertaken by Alberti, Dürer, da Vinci and other artists, which was certainly a continuation of the classical researches into the subject, whether, like Alberti, that search would lead to a single ideal, or like Dürer and da Vinci, to a variety of well proportioned forms.\(^{67}\)

Marwick is a good enough historian to note that the traditional view persisted throughout the Renaissance (and continues, annoyingly, to persist to this day), but he wants to pick out one strand from the complex weave and present it, the autonomy of beauty, as the reality. His treatment of Castiglioni's *The Book of the Courtier*, is typical. One character in the discussion, Federigo Fregoso, dismisses the link between virtue and beauty: there are 'manye

---

\(^{66}\) Marwick, pp. 70-77.  
\(^{67}\) See Pacteau, pp. 81-82.
wicked men that have the comeliness of a beautiful countenance', indeed nature may have made them beautiful, but only so that 'this amiable looke were like a baite that covereth the hooke'. Marwick wants to argue that this is equivalent to his own, value free account of autonomous beauty, and it certainly does contradict the Platonic view of beauty. However, the mythology of beauty, as we have seen above, contains not only the conjoining of beauty and goodness, but also the opposed suspicion of beauty, a linking of beauty with evil, temptation, sin and death. Interestingly, the same metaphor which sees beauty as a baited hook was used in the seventeenth century as a condemnation of beauty on religious grounds.

Both sides of beauty appear in John Ford’s Play, ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, a story of the fatal, incestuous love between Giovanni and his beautiful sister, Annabella. Giovanni is well schooled in the fashionable Platonism:

It is a principle, which you have taught
When I was yet your scholar, that the frame
And composition of the mind doth follow
The frame and composition of body;
So where the body’s furniture is beauty,
The mind’s must needs be virtue.

In the play, however, Annabella’s beauty leads both siblings to destruction, and Giovanni to madness and damnation.

---

68 Quoted in Marwick, p. 72.
I do not wish to dismiss Marwick's view that beauty could sometimes be used as a relatively straightforward expression of approval for the appearance of a woman (or, for Marwick, rarely, a man). I do reject his view that this is the real meaning of beauty and that other views should be shaken off like so much loose soil. The fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show, as Marwick is forced to concede, that the different views of beauty exist side by side. Castiglione's dialogue, whilst giving a place to Fregoso's debunking of beauty, awards victory firmly to the traditional view, and we find not only the explicit linking of moral qualities to beauty, but also an explicitly Platonic account in which corporeal beauty leads us on to its source, a beauty, 'indistinguishable from the highest good, which by its light calls and draws all things to it'.

And as we find the full range of myths associated with beauty in the Renaissance, so we find the second aspect of beauty I wish to emphasise - its application to men. This is perhaps most strikingly obvious in the works of Shakespeare. I referred to the ugliness of Caliban above, but the *Tempest* also contains a celebration of male beauty in Miranda's innocent rapture on beholding the shipwrecked Ferdinand:

**MIRANDA** What is't? - a spirit?  
Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,  
It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit.  
**PROSPERO**  
No wench, it eats and sleeps, and hath such senses  
As we have - such. This gallant which thou seest  
Was in the wreck, and but he's something stained  
With grief - that's beauty's canker - thou mightst call him

---

71 Castiglione, pp. 340-41.
A goodly person. He hath lost his fellows,
And strays about to find 'em.

MIRANDA I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble. (I. ii. 410-19.)

Once again we find that beauty is felt to signify something above and beyond itself. Beauty cannot, Miranda feels, be associated with anything evil:

There's nothing ill can dwell in such a temple.
If the ill spirit have so fair a house,
Good things will strive to dwell with't. (1.2. 457-59.)

In Venus and Adonis and the Sonnets, we find yet more explicit paeans to male beauty. In the course of a violent (and unsuccessful) seduction, the exquisite goddess of love describes the 'Rose-cheek'd' Adonis as 'Thrice fairer than myself'.72 Throughout the poem, Venus plays the active, 'male' role, pursuing the alternately coldly passive, and actively resisting 'feminine' boy. Finally, Adonis is penetrated, although not by Venus: 'And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine/Sheath'd unaware the tusk in his soft groin' (1115-1116). The beautiful, but feminine, boy recurs as the addressee of Sonnets 1-126. His femininity is most clearly stated in Sonnet 20, where we are presented with 'A woman's face' and 'a woman's gentle heart', sharing a body with a man's genitals. The beauty of the youth is emphasised throughout the (one hundred and twenty six) Sonnets, but forms the main theme in the first sequence of seventeen, where Shakespeare begs him to beget an heir, so that

his beauty will not perish with him, a theme summed-up in the concluding couplet to Sonnet 10: ‘Make thee another self, for love of me, / That beauty still may live in thine or thee’. I have no intention of drawing any biographical conclusion from Shakespeare’s references to male beauty; I wish only to show that beauty was a concept which could be applied to men as well as women.

Antonia Fraser has shown how female beauty could signify both virtue and vice in the seventeenth century.73 In the work of Thomas Traherne, we find the beautiful body given a sacred value reminiscent of that invested in it by Aquinas. Traherne is writing in a puritan tradition which condemned the enhancement of ‘natural’ beauty. An Act of Parliament from 1649 imposed the same penalties as for witchcraft on any woman who used ‘scents, paint, cosmetics, washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high-heeled shoes and bolstered hips’ to lure a man into marriage. A contemporary work by John Bulwer defended the ‘Regular Beauty and Honesty of Nature’ against the ‘mad and cruel Gallantry, Foolish Bravery, Ridiculous Beauty, Filthy Fineness, and Loathsome Loveliness of most Nations, Fashioning and altering their Bodies from the mould intended by Nature’.74

Traherne certainly endorses these injunctions against adornment. In ‘The Person’, for example, he writes:

For golden chains and bracelets are
But gilded manacles, whereby
Old Satan doth ensnare,
Allure, bewitch the eye.

73 Fraser, pp. 4, 29 and 112.
The injunction, however, is backed by a sensuous enjoyment of his own, God-given human body:

Thy gifts O God alone I'll prize,
My tongue, my eyes,
My cheeks, my lips, my ears, my hands, my feet,
Their harmony is far more sweet;
Their beauty true. (49-64.)

Echoing Donne's emphatically secular, 'Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee', Traherne advocates not only the redundancy of ornamentation, but also of clothing itself: 'The naked things/Are most sublime, and brightest show,/When they alone are seen' (17-19). Even the body flayed and unfolded for an anatomy lesson remains glorious: 'The Muscles, fibres, arteries, and bones/Are better far than crowns and precious stones' (31-32). The tributes to human beauty continue through 'The Odour' ('What's cinnamon, compar'd to thee?/Thy body is than cedars better far'), and culminate in ‘Admiration’: 'Can human shape so taking be,/That angels come and sip/Ambrosia from a mortal lip!' (1-3).

Surveying the history of beauty from the fifth century BC to the seventeenth century, we find no single quality, no configuration of features, no simple moral association which exhausts what can be meant by the term beautiful. Other strands, other stories from the mythology of beauty could have been singled out: the variety only reinforces my position. Contradiction shows that

like Walt Whitman, beauty is large and contains multitudes.\textsuperscript{77} I conclude this historical account with a survey of the opinions of beauty, male and female, offered by women writers in the eighteenth century. This forms a background to the works examined in chapters 3-8.

Beginning with female beauty, opposed views are expressed by two women when confronting the same calamity - smallpox. Mary Jones's 'After the Small Pox' is a moving, if unconvincing attempt to cheer up a friend disfigured by the disease. It opens with an extended metaphor likening the face to a shop sign, a way of signalling to the world the quality of the merchandise:

For what is beauty but a sign?  
A face hung out, thro' which is seen  
The nature of the goods within.

The intention is clearly to demonstrate that superficial beauty is less important than the goodness or intelligence that it is taken to signify. If this is correct, however, it leaves the ravaged Stella in an unfortunate position - what can her pock-marked face say about her wares? Her answer is that although, 'all her stock of beauty's gone', nature will repair the damage:

A fairer sign you'll soon hang up,  
And with fresh Credit open Shop:  
For nature's pencil soon shall trace,  
And once more finish off your face,  
Which all your neighbours shall out-shine,  
And of your mind remain the sign.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{78}Poems by Eminent Ladies, 2 vols (Dublin: printed by Chamberlain for Sarah Cotter, 1757), I, p. 254.
For Jones, beauty is an indication of virtue, but for the rather grander Lady Mary Wortley Montague, it is power - the only real capital a woman possesses. In ‘The Small-Pox, Flavia’, in place of beauty as a shop-sign, a thing of interest only insofar as it represents ‘internal’ moral and intellectual qualities, we find that ‘Monarchs and Beauties rule with equal sway’. Beauty’s elevated status makes its loss all the more devastating. Jones’s cheerfulness is replaced by a melodramatic self pity:

But oh, how vain, how wretched is the boast
Of beauty faded and of empire lost!
What now is left but weeping to deplore,
My beauty fled, and empire now no more!79

For the tragically short lived, and, by her own account, strikingly unattractive Mary Leapor (1722-46), beauty along with wit and wisdom can avail women nothing in a society in which ‘Unhappy woman’s but a slave at large’:

Woman, a pleasing but short-lived flow’r,
Too soft for business and too weak for pow’r:
A wife in bondage, or neglected maid;
Despised if ugly; if she’s fair, betrayed.80

Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821), in her breezy two-act comedy, Appearance is Against Them, which involves various mistaken judgements of moral worth and physical appearance, finds another way in which beauty can lose its sway.

Set in a London where rakes and Macaroni jostle with country bumpkins and foolish virgins, the jaded appetites of the ‘men of mode’, anticipating Baudelaire, seek ever more unusual stimulants:

Beauty is of little weight here;—of no significance at all!—Beauty in London is so cheap and consequently so common to the men of fashion (who are prodigiously fond of novelty) that they absolutely begin to fall in love with ugly women, by way of change.81

Many of the complex associations of beauty can be found in Camilla by Fanny Burney. Camilla herself, her sister Eugenia and their cousin, Indiana represent three physical types. Indiana is utterly beautiful, used to an admiration which leaves her vain and conceited. Eugenia, although pretty as a child, is ruined by smallpox and lamed by a fall, leaving her crooked and dwarfish. Camilla is naturally attractive, but rendered even more beautiful than Indiana by her intelligence and liveliness. The book is full of contradictory messages. The importance of beauty is frequently down-played: ‘Beauty!—why, we can neither get it when we haven’t it; nor keep it when we have it’.82

One male character states,

I’m not for beauty. A beauty won’t make a good wife. It takes her too much time to put her cap on. That little one, there, with the hump, which I don’t mind, nor the limp, neither, I like vastly. (p. 776.)

One of the recurrent moral lessons of the novel is the foolishness and cruelty of judging people according to appearance. Two paired chapters, ‘Strictures on Deformity’ and ‘Strictures on Beauty’ (pp. 299-311), point out the folly of

---

81 Elizabeth Inchbald, Appearance is Against Them: A Farce in Two Acts (London: Robinson, 1785), I. ii. p. 3.
assuming either that ugliness implies moral or mental incapacity, or that a beautiful face signifies intelligence. And yet for all Burney's emphasis on education and her sentimental celebration of feeling and compassion, beauty remains triumphant. Camilla is lovely, and not simply as a result of her cleverness. More significantly, that beauty is reinforced by her intelligence and virtue, thus re-establishing the link that the author has endeavoured to break. Burney's critique of beauty is limited to two points: it will fade, and without any accompanying moral and intellectual attainments, it is without value.

The emphasis on decorum and restraint made it rather more difficult for women in the eighteenth century to celebrate beauty in men than to criticise it in women. The characteristic attitude was to condemn male vanity when it expressed itself in an overly fastidious attention to appearance. More rarely, an outright disgust is expressed for men's bodies and occasionally the two are combined. There are, however, some works in which male beauty is celebrated.

Attacks on male vanity in the first part of the century followed the familiar Restoration comedy device of ridiculing foppery. A typical portrait is drawn in 'The True Effigies of a Certain Squire: Inscribed to Clemena' (1722) by Elizabeth Thomas (1675-1731):

Next draw the giant-wig of shape profuse,
Larger than Foppington's or Overdo's.
The greasy front pressed down with essence lies,
The spreading elf-locks cover half his eyes;
But when he coughs or bows, what clouds of powder rise!

Enough, O Muse! thou hast described him right,
Th' emetic's strong, I sicken at the sight:
A fop is nauseating, howe'er he's dressed,
But this too fulsome is to be expressed.
Such hideous medley would thy work debase,
Where rake and clown, where ape and knave, appear with open face.\(^{83}\)

By the second half of the century the fop has become the Macaroni, but the distinguishing features of sartorial excess and assumed stupidity remain:

Behold that macaroni Lord!
So gay in clothes - profuse in board,
His fine apparel marks the fool,
And points him out for ridicule.\(^{84}\)

In *The Picture of a Fine Gentleman* (1793) Lady Sophia Burrell gives a fuller description of a 'Macaroni [...] grown bold'. He arrives, 'Elate with pride in beauty's bloom', shining brighter than a comet, the very sight of him breaking hearts as he lashes his 'prancing steeds':

He comes in all the pomp of dress,
And lovely spite of haughtiness;
A *broche* is on his jabot placed,
His finger with a diamond graced,
And to complete the finished Beau,
A giant buckle hides his shoe;
A muff as vast as Ajax' shield,
Behold this modern Paris wield.

---


\(^{84}\) Lady Sophia Burrell (1750?-1802), 'Verses to a Lady, on her saying she preferred Commonality to an Irish Peerage' (1776). In *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, p. 342.
The portrait is completed by a decorative but unused sword, a white feather, the dainty, three-cornered silk hat that was the trademark of the Macaroni, and a golden snuff-box. Despite the mock heroic tone, Burrell’s ‘Florio’ has a certain panache and glamour. It is only when we follow the dashing blade back to his dressing room that we discover the illusory nature of that glamour (which reminds us that the word glamour itself retains some of its archaic meaning of a charm or concealing spell). It transpires that, beneath the fancy dress, Florio is rather less alluring:

Without the aid of powerful art,
How would the pretty misses start,
To see him void of the disguise,
Which fashionable dress supplies!
Florio no longer could be known
The gay Lothario of the town;
But all your sex would spurn the creature,
Nor recollect a single feature
Of him who not an hour before,
Each was ambitious to adore.\(^5\)

The fop/Macaroni/dandy type gets a slightly better press in Burney’s *Camilla*. Sir Sedley Clarendel, despite his conceit and vanity is intelligent and amusing, and the women in his circle find him endlessly fascinating.\(^6\) That mockery and disdain were not the only possible responses to good looks in a man is brought home by Mary Jones in her poem, ‘Of Desire: An Epistle to the

---

\(^{5}\) *Ibid.*, pp. 343-44.

\(^{6}\) *Burney*, pp. 74-75.
Hon Miss Lovelace'. At the head of a list of increasingly unrealisable wishes, she has one character plead, 'O for a husband, handsome and well-bred'.

A more engrossing account of the effect of male beauty is given by the anonymous author of *On meeting ----- -----, Esq. in St James's Park, on the 22nd of March, 1776.* This poem records the staggering and fatal impact of a beautiful man on the poet. Its opening transforms St. James's Park into a strange, dreamy landscape, which mixes bucolic, oriental, classical and Christian images to create a feeling of rapt mystery, while at the same time gently satirising the elaborately dressed and scented belles and beaux. The poet has proved herself immune to love, untouched by the 'fops who there abound' but when confronted by one youth she collapses into instant adoration:

>'Is't human! or an Angel's form!' I cried-
Unnumbered loves and graces round him played,
And won the heart of each admiring maid.
So much his form does other forms excel,
As were an angel to descend in hell,
The fiends with envy would the guest admire;
Thus men with admiration and with envy fire:
Women with nobler flame the youth approve,
Admiring, view his charms, and fondly love!
For all that gazed on beauteous Henry's eyes
Yielded their hearts the willing sacrifice.

There is no pretence that the passion felt by the poet is fired by anything other than the physical beauty of the boy. In that beauty, however, the poet finds

---

87 *Poems by Eminent Ladies,* 1, p. 239.
moral as well as aesthetic qualities, discovering, 'every virtue, every grace,/That heaven has giv'n to the whole human race,/United in this lovely charming youth'. Unfortunately, happiness does not follow the consummation. No details are given of the affair, but its outcome is disastrous:

Learn then, ye fair, to shun the fatal dart.
Elvira has obtained the glorious prize!
Haste, haste away, nor trust your longing eyes:
For, charming as he is, the gazer dies.88

The poet's stated wish to warn young women against attractive men is drastically undermined by the rapture with which she describes the object of her passion. It is a warning the only possible outcome of which is to inspire the reader with romantic ardour.

Perhaps even more poignant is the devotion given by Mary Leapor to the hero of 'The Charms of Anthony'. This young man, fairer than white hawthorn blossom, brighter than daisies, receives his tribute for nothing more than a little common courtesy, a thing unknown to the poor and ugly poet. She recalls the occasion with yearning:

Once we met, 'twas when from yonder Vale,
Each Morn I brought the heavy milking pail:
He took it from my hand, and with a smile
Reach'd out his hand, and helped me o'er the stile.89

Such is the full extent of her contact with the local Adonis. The same yearning and loss characterise Leapor's 'Nature Undone by Art'. Again she

89 Leapor, Poems Upon Several Occasions, p. 251. Leapor was actually in service, rather than being an aristocrat playing at being a milkmaid.
falls in love at her first sight of the ‘charming boy’: ‘When first Alexis bless’d our wand’ring eyes/Like some young De’ty of the pregnant skies’ (I, p. 98-99). Sadly, Alexis is seduced by flattery, corrupted and lost forever.

Not all treatments of the power of male beauty had such a tragic outcome. Hannah Cowley’s *Who’s the Dupe* (1779) is a lively debate on the relative attractions of abstract learning and worldly charm. Initially the comedy is all at the expense of the pedantic, dowdy Gradus. In attempt to discredit him with his prospective, puritanical father-in-law, he is converted, by a rival gallant, from his drab and sober self into a ridiculous coxcomb, complete ‘with satins and tassels and spangles and foils’, looking ‘as brilliant as Chemist’s Shop by Candle-Light’ (p. 127). Gradus ascribes his metamorphosis to the power of beauty: ‘Be not astonished, oh lovely Maiden, at my Sudden Change! Beauty is a talisman which transforms Mankind’ (p. 128). Female beauty, and its equivalent, masculine glamour appear to have the day - we are told that ‘Beauty can work miracles with mankind’ (p. 114) and the gallant gets his girl, the charming, but shallow Miss Doiley. However in a final twist, Gradus finds that his classical scholarship has won the heart of Miss Doiley’s beautiful sister, Charlotte. *Who’s the Dupe* manages to combine sparkling satire with a serious investigation of the power of beauty and the merits of learning. Its conclusion is that a man can neglect neither. A little foolish he may look, but it is only when Gradus is dressed as a fop that Charlotte is able to see him as an object of romantic interest: ‘I am sure he’s a much prettier fellow than he was - his Figure, and his Manner, are quite different’ (pp. 130-31).

***

V: Male Beauty 1750-1850

To conclude this introduction I will explain the reasons behind choosing the period 1750-1850 as my area of investigation, and my reasons for writing about the texts and authors I have selected within that period. Finally, I will explain why I have chosen to focus on male beauty.

Any hundred years out of the past two-and-a-half thousand, with the possible exception of the darkest of the dark ages, could have been studied in depth to uncover the meanings associated with personal beauty. Many of these meanings could be seen to be of continuing relevance to our understanding of beauty in the modern world. Three particular 'themes', however, emerged, or re-emerged in the period investigated here, which give it a particular relevance. Firstly, the art historical writings of Winckelmann re-animated the classical worship of male beauty, giving a respectability to a frank homoeroticism, when combined with the appreciation of art; secondly, the concept of the sublime became one of the fundamental ways in which male attractiveness was portrayed and comprehended; and thirdly, the concept of beauty became entwined with the new racial theories that began to be formulated towards the end of the eighteenth century.

The texts I have investigated have been chosen to illustrate these themes, as well as show how other elements of the mythology of beauty have persisted. A fuller justification for the subject matter will be given in the relevant chapters and I will here give just a brief sketch of the material presented. Chapter 2 extends the critique of sociobiological conceptions of beauty outlined above. Chapter 3 gives a snapshot of the views of beauty in literate British society at the start of my period. Richardson's *Clarissa*, and his other novels were both immensely influential but also, because of Richardson's collaborative method of writing, highly representative. Winckelmann's writings are crucial basic
texts in the history of beauty in this period, and chapter 4 probes their content and influence. His work resonates through the other texts studied, particularly the anthropological writings which form the subject matter of chapter 5. The main field of chapter 5 is, however, the relationship between beauty and race, with particular reference to the work of the Dutch anatomist, Petrus Camper, whose 'discovery' of the 'facial angle' was intended as an aid to artists, but became a tool for later racist theorists. Chapter 6 is a broad survey of the concept of the sublime, as it was formulated by Edmund Burke and incorporated into the work of a number of novelists from Mrs Radcliffe to Charlotte Brontë. The sublime continues as a major theme in chapter 7, on conceptions of beauty in Byron's longer poems and poetic dramas, although the classically inspired homoeroticism of Winckelmann remains a major influence. Chapter 8 examines the 'Leatherstocking' novels of James Fenimore Cooper, in which both the sublime and the classical conceptions of male attractiveness again recur, but which also illustrate the new influence of racial theories on the depiction of characters. I have striven to choose as wide a selection of texts as possible, in order to give a comprehensive picture of the variety of views of beauty which could be found in this period. I have given prominence to authors on the grounds of popularity, influence and theoretical interest.

So why male beauty? The main reason is that male beauty has been neglected as a subject of academic inquiry. The two principal disciplines which have investigated beauty, feminism and sociobiology, have either ignored or marginalized male beauty. For feminists male beauty is an irrelevance, a distraction from the main business of showing how beauty is a patriarchal construct for the oppression of women. For sociobiologists, with very few exceptions, male beauty is equally irrelevant: the 'fact' is that men do the choosing on the basis of appearance and women, to the extent that they choose
at all, do so on the grounds of wealth, success and power. In the works of Wolf and Lakoff and Scherr and, to a lesser extent, Marwick discussed above, and in the sociobiological texts in the following chapter, beauty is, whatever its origins, a quality chiefly ascribed to women. One particularly interesting recent work on the subject, *The Symptom of Beauty* by Francette Pacteau, makes no reference to male beauty whatsoever.⁹¹

In this thesis I attempt to correct what I see as an imbalance. I have shown above that from the classical period, beauty has been seen as a male quality as well as, sometimes even rather than, a female one. More important even than this historical reappraisal is the burgeoning interest in male beauty in contemporary popular culture - an interest which has not, so far, found a proper academic response. The late 1980s and early 1990s have seen an explosion in magazines which devote space to ‘male grooming’, men’s fashions, and men’s bodies. *Arena, GQ, Esquire, FHM, Maxim, Men’s Health, XL* and *Loaded* have all been launched in the United Kingdom since 1986 and offer the same obsessional, body-image oriented mix of articles that *Cosmopolitan, Elle* and *Marie Claire* give to women. I certainly would not claim that this new focus on male narcissism is in any objective sense a ‘good thing’; it might well be argued that it is simply the case that the ‘beauty industry’ attacked by Naomi Wolf has found a new market niche to exploit, and that men can expect the same consequences - anorexia, lacerating self-doubt, cosmetic surgery. It remains a fact, however, that beauty is not limited to women, and, in contradistinction to the sociobiological view of beauty, it is possible to have an

---

⁹¹The same is true, unsurprisingly, of *Ideals of Feminine Beauty: Philosophical, Social and Cultural Dimensions*, ed. by Karen A. Gallagher (London: Greenwood Press, 1994). Although this is a useful expression of the extreme relativist position, it conspicuously fails to engage with recent biological views of beauty.
interest in beauty without having a desire to copulate with it. This thesis is the expression of such an interest.
Chapter 2

THE SCIENCE OF BEAUTY: EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN BEAUTY

[Sexual selection] is the process whereby unserious, even maladaptive, things such as peacock's tails evolve because females fancy them. Have we not all been dismayed to learn that birdsong is only the marking of territory; or that the beauty of the flower is merely a ploy to get its seeds into circulation? The fact is that beauty has evolved because the Eternal Feminine decrees that prettiness is preferable to ugliness.¹

From the earliest moments of what could be called Western civilisation priests, philosophers, mathematicians, musicians and artists have attempted to uncover the 'truth' about beauty, some simple constant lying behind beauty in its many and various manifestations. Francette Pacteau recounts some of those attempts:

For Plato [...] measure is the defining principle of the good and the beautiful. Measure is the determination of appropriate relationships through knowledge of proportion and of the mean; it forms the Ideal standard to which all creation that aspires to beauty must conform, and is the rational ground on which all judgement of beauty must rest. For Aristotle, 'the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness.' For St Augustine, beauty is a product of the unifying principle of number - 'number' here meaning, at once, mathematical proportion, rhythmic organization and fittingness of parts [...]. Ficino finds beauty in the agreement between matter and Idea, as

in 'the appearance and shape of a well-proportioned man'. To see beauty in nature is to recognise a harmonious design.\(^2\)

In the second half of the eighteenth century a younger profession began to take an interest in the illusive quality of human personal beauty. As I show in Chapter 5, the first modern, 'scientific' work on human beauty, was, paradoxically, intended primarily as a guide for artists; the path had, however, been marked and beauty had become a subject for scientific investigation.

The anthropologists Camper and Blumenbach used beauty as one criterion for distinguishing (but not ranking) the different races of humanity, and, as Arthur Marwick shows, primitive ideas of sexual selection had, throughout the nineteenth century, been proposed by phrenologists, craniometrists and other racial theorists, culminating in Gobineau's poisonous *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1854).\(^3\) However, as Marwick puts it, 'early 'scientific' writings [...] pointed to no consensus about the nature and evaluation of beauty' (p. 206). Pre-Darwinian theories of beauty remained unsystematic and retained 'non-scientific' notions of the interrelation of physical beauty and moral qualities. The publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and more particularly, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* in 1871 brought order to the confusion.

The Darwinian conception of evolution by natural selection provided science with a superbly flexible tool for investigating the natural world. Beauty, manifest in mankind and other animals, was part of that world, and therefore equally susceptible to an evolutionary explanation. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin posits a near universal aesthetic sense exercised almost exclusively by the females of a species and which is responsible for directing the appearance of that species (hand in hand, of course, with the other

---


\(^3\)Marwick, *Beauty in History*, pp. 203-20.
formative influences of environmental pressures and competition within and between species). For Darwin, the peacock's tail and the different races of humanity were both the product of this preference, expressed over thousands of generations. Nor did he believe that the process had stopped. But prefiguring, as we shall see, the characteristic move of modern biologists, he changes the sex of the active partner when he comes to discuss the continuing relevance of sexual selection in the modern world. After having confined the driving force of selection, in the rest of the animal world, to the whim of the female, he shrinks from the prospect of allowing such a prominent role to women in his own society:

Many persons are convinced, as it appears to me with justice, that the members of our aristocracy, including under this term all wealthy families in which primogeniture has long prevailed, from having chosen during many generations from all classes the more beautiful women as their wives, have become handsomer, according to the European standard of beauty, than the middle classes.4

After Darwin, theorists such as Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton (both of whom had a theoretical interest in the phenomenon of human beauty) applied the principles of natural selection to human social behaviour. Darwin's emphasis on sexual selection, with its pre-adaptive preferences, and troublingly female-oriented selection process was neglected in favour of the struggle for existence and the 'survival of the fittest' (Spencer's term, rather than Darwin's):

Of all Darwin's ideas, female choice proved the least persuasive. Naturalists were quite happy to accept the notion that male weapons, such as antlers,

---

could have arisen to help males in the battle for females, but they
instinctively recoiled at the frivolous idea that a peacock's tail should be
there to seduce peahens.\footnote{Ridley, \textit{The Red Queen}, p. 131.}

Social Darwinism pitted individual against individual, class against class and
race against race in a war from which only the healthiest, the most intelligent
and the most selfish could emerge.\footnote{See Peter Gay, \textit{The Cultivation of Hatred}, pp. 39-68; and Mary Midgeley, \textit{Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears} (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 115-21.} Although this inevitably placed less emphasis on a beauty defined as an arbitrary preference, it made room for a
new definition of beauty as an indicator of fitness. We find this view in the
work of Spencer and Galton\footnote{Knight Dunlop, \textit{Personal Beauty and Racial Betterment} (London: Henry Kimpton, 1920).} but it receives its most forthright statement in two
works published more than fifty years apart, but written with a similar
intention. \textit{Personal Beauty and Racial Betterment} (1920) by Knight Dunlop
(Professor of Experimental Psychology at Johns Hopkins University), is typical
of its period in its strictures against miscegenation, which is seen as the great
threat to the beauty, health and intelligence of the white race.\footnote{Marwick, p. 211 and pp. 265-66.} Perhaps more surprising is a work that remains a standard text-book on its subject, \textit{Race},
(1974) by John R. Baker, an exhaustively detailed, highly complex work aimed
at distinguishing between the races on the grounds of anatomy, physiology,
in his terminology) should be regarded as separate species. The consequence,
spelled out by Baker, is that sex between the races is a form of bestiality.

Baker claims that we (meaning Caucasians) are naturally repelled by other
races. He states, for example, that 'Europids' find the smell of 'Negrids'
repellent - a biological sign of speciation and a discouragement to dangerous
hybridisation. His evidence for this is not based on controlled experiments, or wide samples, but on a small number of anecdotes and in particular he leans on two sources, both dating from 1774. One of these refers to the ‘rank smell’ of negroes and the other to their ‘bestial or fetid smell’. He also quotes Havelock Ellis’s description of the smell of a ‘negroe’ as ‘ammoniacal and rancid [...] like the smell of the he-goat’ (p. 175).

The obvious problem with regarding the different races as discrete species endowed with a necessary and natural repugnance for each other is that sexual contact is in fact quite common, as indicated by the large ‘hybrid’ populations, such as the Cape Coloureds. Baker’s counter to this is extraordinary. Domestication, he claims, reduces the sensitivity of most animals to cross breeding. Outside their normal, ‘natural’ environment, domesticated animals can be induced to abandon their ‘natural’ practices (pp. 91-95). He then argues that man, in his historical condition, is the most domesticated of all animals, a situation which has led to the almost complete breakdown in the natural inhibitions against bestiality, and thus necessitating the stern injunctions of Leviticus and the sanctions of the modern penal code (p. 96). Without the excessive domestication of modern Homo sapiens, Baker doubts that,

any two kinds of animals differing from one another so markedly in morphological characters (and in odour) as, for instance, the Europid and Sanid [the South African Bushmen] and living under natural conditions of wild life, would accept one another as sexual partners. (p. 97.)

Baker’s argument relies on the applicability of the concept of domestication to Homo sapiens, a metaphorical usage which in turn assumes that there is such a thing as a state of nature from which domestication represents a digression. Throughout the work Baker relies on metaphor and the authority of discredited
nineteenth-century theorists whenever he moves from the minute description of skulls and other aspects of anatomy. Not least among his techniques is the reliance on subjective aesthetic judgements to sustain his position. This quality is perfectly caught by what he takes to be a clinching argument in the course of his conclusion:

Emphasis has been laid in this book on the morphological differences between typical members of different races. Any reader who may be inclined to minimize these differences might care to refresh his memory by turning once more to fig. 56. (p. 533.)

When we turn to fig. 56, we find not a detailed table of figures or even photographs, but a series of nineteenth century engravings of Bushwomen showing grotesquely enlarged buttocks and the enormous labia minor, taken by Baker to be the distinguishing mark of this most 'primitive' of races (p. 315). The point of the exercise is clearly to induce disgust and feelings of revulsion, and otherness: these bizarre looking specimens really do appear to be of a different species. What is interesting is that fig. 55 (p. 311), to which Baker makes no reference, actually shows a photograph of two Bushwomen. They look quite different to the grotesques of the later engraving, and only someone blinded by prejudice would imagine them to be of a separate biological species.

***

Baker's work is one of the last attempts to apply classical Darwinism to the subject of sexual attraction in humans. In the year following its publication there appeared a book which has coloured all subsequent investigations of sexual selection: Edward O Wilson's *Sociobiology*, which he followed in 1978.

---

with *On Human Nature*. It is not my intention to address fully the intervention of sociobiology in the interpretation of human nature and human behaviour. The extension of sociobiology (originally proposed by Wilson as an explanation for the apparently altruistic behaviour of social insects) to humans, and, indeed, its use as a blanket explanation for all animal behaviour has been heavily criticised by scientists and philosophers.11 My intention here is to confine my comments to sociobiological interpretations of human beauty. One general point about sociobiology needs to be made. Sociobiology posits the existence of genes which determine specific behaviour patterns - such as (in a list given by Gould) ‘spite, aggression, xenophobia, conformity, homosexuality and the characteristic behaviour differences between men and women’.12 It is not sufficient for sociobiologists to claim that there may be vague tendencies, readily overcome by cultural factors. If that was the extent of its programme it would be neither controversial, nor particularly interesting. In order to establish its credentials it must show that the behaviours it wishes to investigate are under the direct control of specific, heritable and persistent genes. In the case of beauty it must, and, as I show below, does, claim that men and women are genetically determined to find particular body shapes and facial forms attractive.13


Matt Ridley restates the various sociobiological arguments on beauty in *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature*. He employs a technique made familiar by E.O. Wilson, apparently granting culture a crucial role, before negating that role in favour of the greater power of our genetic inheritance:

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that a person's sense of what is beautiful and sexy is subtly educated to prefer the prevailing norms of fashion. Rubens would not have chosen Twiggy as a model. Moreover, beauty is plainly relative as any prisoner who has spent months without seeing a member of the opposite sex can testify.

However hard it might be to avoid this conclusion, avoid it he does:

It is impossible to name a time when women of ten or forty were considered more 'sexy' than women of twenty. It is inconceivable that male paunches were ever actually attractive to women, or that tall men were thought uglier than short ones. It is hard to imagine that weak chins were ever thought beautiful on either sex. If beauty is a matter of fashion, how is it that wrinkled skin, grey hair, hairy backs and Bardolph-like noses have never been 'in fashion'? The more things change, the more they stay the same. (p. 273.)

Importantly, Ridley draws his arguments from 'white Europeans, and from northern Europeans at that'. He nevertheless claims that he is concerned with what 'is universal to all people'. There is clearly a conflict here. Either his standards are universal, and it is irrelevant where he draws his examples from, or he must accept that his generalisations apply only to 'white Europeans'.

Ridley wants to show that the same types of determining factors are at work in the phenomenon of beauty whether it occurs in human cultures or the natural world:
In human beings, when all practical criteria for choosing a mate - wealth, health, compatibility, fertility - are ignored, what is left is the apparently arbitrary criterion of beauty. It is much the same in other species. In species where the females get nothing useful from their mates, they seem to choose on aesthetic criteria alone. (pp. 129-30.)

Ridley outlines what he claims are the two possible explanations for these 'aesthetic' judgements. The first, known after its original proposer as 'Fisher', but which, as we have seen, originates with Darwin's conception of sexual selection, assumes that there is no particular reason for a morphological feature, such as the peacock's flamboyant tail, to be desired by females. However, once that arbitrary preference has become established, it is imperative for any female to choose a mate with the genes for a long tail, so that any offspring will carry those same genes and in turn have the essential feature. Any female that bucks the trend, and chooses a mate with a shorter tail will produce male offspring with shorter tails who will find it more difficult to obtain a female, leading, sooner or later, to the extinction of that genetic line.

The rival, 'Good-gene' theory, postulates that the apparently arbitrary choices made by females are not in fact arbitrary. Features such as the peacock's tail act as a signifier, indicating that the male has other qualities which make it more likely that his genes (and the genes of the female who chooses him) will continue in the population:

The fact that he can sing loudly or grow and look after a long tail proves that he can father healthy and vigorous daughters and sons just as surely as the fishing ability of a tern tells his mate that he can feed a growing family. Ornaments and displays are designed to reveal the quality of genes. (pp. 138-39.)
The fact that neither competing theory has gained ascendancy implies that the experimental evidence is inconclusive. Some experiments and observations support Good-genes, others Fisher; equally, both have to confront apparent refutations. Ridley refers to one recent theory, supported by convincing experimental evidence, suggesting that sexual selection, involving the inheritance of preferences does not exist at all, that neither the Good-gene nor the Fisher hypotheses are correct (p. 159-60). His conclusion, however, ignores this in favour of supporting the idea that at different times, in different species (or simultaneously in the same species) both Good-genes and Fisher operate. This has the advantage of being adaptable enough to offer an explanation for most of the outlandish ornaments exhibited by male birds, whilst offering an extra insulating layer against falsification.

My objection, however, is not to the theory of sexual selection, in its various manifestations. It remains an unproven, but often quite convincing explanation for the seemingly disadvantageous gaudiness exhibited by the males of some bird species. There are two aspects of the theory which are particularly misleading. The first is the ascription of an aesthetic appreciation to birds and the second is the extension of the principle of sexual selection to human beings.

Throughout his book, Ridley uses the term beauty to describe the particular physical attributes preferred by the active sexual selector (invariably the female; in almost every case, a female bird). This leads him into the most blatant of anthropomorphic statements:

We are asking of animals (as we later will of human beings themselves): are they marrying for money, for breeding or for beauty? (p. 130.)

---

The anthropomorphic tendency originates with Darwin himself. In *The Descent of Man* he attributes sophisticated aesthetic appreciation to birds. This appreciation is not limited to sexual selection, but extends to the non-utilitarian decoration of nests.15 Perhaps most surprisingly, Darwin, who was not, by the standards of his time, an extreme racist, thought some bird species were in fact better judges of beauty than some 'savage' humans:

Judging from the hideous ornaments and the equally hideous music admired by most savages, it might be urged that their aesthetic faculty was not so highly developed as in certain animals, for instance, in birds. (vol. I, p.65.)

He concedes that 'no animal would be capable of admiring such scenes as the heavens at night, a beautiful landscape, or refined music', but adds that such things are also beyond 'barbarians' and 'uneducated persons'.

Robin Allott takes the same line on a universal aesthetic sense in an article attempting to place human creativity in the spheres of science and the arts in an evolutionary context. Allott's reason for extending sociobiology into such complex behaviours is interesting. Almost no research has been done on the genetics of human behaviour, and so,

There is thus a gap in evolutionary theory [...] and there seems no reason so far to conclude that the behaviour categorized as "the arts" should be treated as non-evolutionary and non-biological.16

As there is no evidence it seems curious to ascribe *all* human behaviour to genetic determination. Part of Allott's argument is to postulate a continuum from animal to human behaviours. If 'art' is a gene governed activity, it must have its equivalents in the rest of the natural world:

---

If creative and aesthetic behaviour is to be excluded, one wonders how evolutionary theory should account for what might be called the bower-birds' "installations" (the term used by avant-garde artists). Bower birds build towers as much as nine feet high, with internal chambers, in the middle of circular lawns. These they embellish with flowers, which they replace as soon as they are withered. They may dye the walls with the juice of berries, or decorate the bower with snail shells, bits of glass, or spider silk. One bower contained nearly a thousand pebbles, more than a thousand sticks, and more than a thousand strands of grass. (p. 88.)

In case we have failed to understand Allott's point about the affinity between human and avian art, he adds, gratuitously, 'Rather more interesting than some of the exhibits at London's Tate Gallery!' The equating of human and avian creativity necessarily involves the diminishing of the former. It also involves a grotesque misunderstanding of the role, or rather the roles, of art in human cultures. Of more relevance to the point at stake, the importation of the concept of beauty adds nothing to the debate on why female birds prefer certain types of plumage, or elaborate bowers. Such behaviour can be explained perfectly well without recourse to them. Under the Good-genes theory the concept is entirely redundant - particular morphologies signify fitness (whether because of the 'handicap theory', discussed below, or because fancy plumage indicates resistance to disease) and it seems bizarre to choose to call that quality beauty. With the Fisher hypothesis, beauty might seem like as good a name as any to give to the entirely arbitrary (and, as fits a hypothesis, hypothetical) originating preference. This seems particularly appropriate if we are talking about the peacock or the exquisite Lady Amherst pheasant, as is the wont of sociobiologists when discussing sexual selection. These creatures conform to our ideas of beauty and are quite properly so described by us. What must be abundantly clear, however, is that our human conception of beauty cannot be
the same as a peacock’s (or rather a peahen’s). Apart from anything else, we are able to find both the peacock and the pheasant beautiful, as well as the myriad other products of art and nature which appeal to our aesthetic sense.

More tellingly, sociobiologists, in their popular writings, tend to ignore those features which, whilst probably being the product of sexual selection, do not fit our own view of the beautiful such as the comic excess of turkey wattles or the drab gradations of olive that distinguish the different species of warbler, or the uninspiring bars on a godwit’s tail. These features do not readily lend themselves to be integrated into a cross-species understanding of beauty and thereby emphasise the inappropriateness of the concept of beauty, either as a metaphor for sexually selected features, or as a more direct interpretative tool.

To describe the quality sought for by the peahen as ‘beauty’ is to use the term by analogy, and it is a particularly dangerous analogy. A far more useful term would be ‘fit’. The reason beauty is preferred becomes clear with the extension of crude theories of sexual selection to people. Beauty is used by analogy to account for and describe preferences in birds so that the same conclusion - that beauty is the product of sexual selection can then be applied across to account for the phenomenon of beauty in human cultures.

When Matt Ridley comes to identify exactly what constitutes beauty in people, rather than peacocks, swallows or pheasants, he begins to encounter serious problems. He argues that men are searching for, above all else, signs of high fertility, in women. Swollen breasts, a thin waist and large hips are put forward as the male ideal. This view, now a commonplace, was given its first thorough, theoretical statement by Donald Symons in *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (1979). Women have evolved, Symons claims, in an environment in which their only potential form of power comes from their sexual allure. It follows that women will evolve those characteristics desired by men, which in turn will necessarily be those representing a likelihood of high fertility.
Symons does not restrict signs of fertility to the breasts and hips but claims that facial characteristics such as a short lower face, graceful jaw, light, unblemished skin and high cheekbones act as external clues to fertility.\footnote{See Nancy Etcott, 'Beauty and the Beholder', *Nature*, 368 (1994), 186-87.}

Unfortunately this is clearly in conflict with the modern equating of beauty with slimness. How can Ridley’s account square with the facts of the changing ideals of beauty? One potential avenue is to equate beauty with status signals: weight used to be a sign of wealth, now thinness indicates leisure time available to be spent on diet and exercise, ditto complexion and colouring:

A young man growing up today is bombarded with correlations between thinness and wealth, from the fashion industry in particular. His unconscious mind begins to make the connection [...] and, when he is forming his idealized mental preference for a woman, he accordingly makes her slim. (p. 280.)

This route is blocked for Ridley. Firstly, it flatly contradicts the linking of beauty in fertility, and allows too much flexibility, creating a biological lacuna in which cultural determinants could hold sway. Secondly, this pattern of status seeking is precisely that attributed to women in the previous chapter, in which he had argued that women are less swayed by male beauty than by signs of male success.\footnote{Ridley, pp. 257-65. For Ridley, women are genetically determined to be attracted to high status men. It has to be said that his argument for that claim is outstandingly weak. The basis for believing that women seek signs of status is based largely on analogies with bird studies, as indicated by his sub-heading, ‘Emma Bovary and Female Swallows’ (p. 214).} As he writes, ‘Unfortunately, this theory conflicts directly with the conclusions of the last chapter. Something will have to give’ (p. 280).

Rather than retain the plausible theory that beauty in any culture is an arbitrarily arrived at sign of status, culturally determined and liable to change with developments in social organisation, he returns to a version of Fisher: for no very good reason men started to find thin women attractive, and once that
arbitrary preference was established, thinness gained an unassailable evolutionary advantage. It is unsurprising that after such contortions he concludes that he is not fully convinced by his own ideas:

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the fashion for women's fatness cannot have changed adaptively. Either men's preferences shifted spontaneously and for no good reason or men always preferred some ideal shape that was always quite thin. (p. 282.)

In referring to the changes in the fashionable shape over the past few hundred years Ridley states: 'One thing is painfully obvious: there is no preference for the average' (p. 279). When, however, he comes to discuss facial beauty, he uses experiments which use computer image generation to blend a sample of faces together to conclude that the average face is invariably the most beautiful - as suggested by the supposed low distinctiveness of the faces of fashion models (p. 287).

The computer blending of faces is claimed by its practitioners to be a way of measuring beauty objectively. The method adopted is to select a group (generally of women college students) whose faces are scanned into a computer. The computer blends the faces together, creating a composite, which does, indeed, seem to possess an eerie, faultless beauty. The method was pioneered by Francis Galton, who used photographic techniques to achieve the same result.19 The composite and the photographs of the individuals whose images went into constituting it are then shown to a group (normally of male college students) who are asked to rank the images in order of beauty. The blended composite is invariably chosen as the most beautiful. This leads Ridley to conclude that averageness, insofar as it excludes obvious flaws and glaring facial asymmetries equals beauty. One suggested evolutionary explanation for

this supposed preference for the average is that unusual facial features may indicate the existence of aberrant, or defective genes.\textsuperscript{20}

Unfortunately for Ridley, the latest study using these techniques found to the contrary that when certain features were, again using computer technology, exaggerated beyond the normal range, the new, unusual face was preferred to the average. In an experiment reported in \textit{Nature}, Perret, May and Yoshi took a composite generated from the sample group as a whole and tested it against a composite taken from a sub-group of those judged to be the most attractive in the group. This second composite was then assessed by the judges to be more beautiful than the group average. The ways in which the preferred image differed from the group image was then measured and those differences exaggerated. This final image was then judged to be the most beautiful of all. The studies were conducted in the United States and Japan, giving the chance to compare results across two cultures. The authors define the perfect face:

The more attractive shape had higher cheek bones, a thinner jaw and larger eyes relative to the size of the face than the average shape. The attractive shape also had shorter distances between the mouth and the chin and between nose and mouth.\textsuperscript{21}

They claim that similar results were found for men, but no details are given. The authors conclude,

Thus, our results show that highly attractive faces are systematically different in shape from average. The similarity of attractive facial characteristics across two cultures is consistent with the claim that such characteristic are functionally significant. [...] Attractive facial features may

\textsuperscript{20}Jones, pp. 110-11.

signal sexual maturity and fertility, emotional expressiveness or a 'cuteness'
generalised from parental protectiveness towards young. (p. 242.)

This would appear, therefore, to provide evidence that there is such a thing as
an objective standard of beauty, defined in terms of facial geometry. I would
argue that the experiment demonstrates nothing of the kind. All that such
experiments can do is to show that a standard of beauty exists in a given culture
at a particular time: they can never indicate the origin of that preference. It does
not take a scientist to conclude that certain features are regarded as more
attractive than others in Western culture. It is argued by Perrett et al that their
experiment, with its cross-cultural correlations, eludes this objection. It could
plausibly be returned that modern Japan has been subjected to fifty years of
Western cultural imperialism, to American films, American fashions and
American faces which have inevitably influenced indigenous conceptions of
beauty.22

What Perrett et al do do, however, is to add to the list of qualities
supposedly selected by the 'invisible hand' of evolution. Ridley includes large
breasts, thin waists and large hips, although he acknowledges the current
preference for the small breasts and slim hips of the modern fashion model; he
also regards averageness and symmetry as selected-for. He argues that these
qualities are partly due to Good-genes, partly to Fisher.23 From Perrett we add a
variety of disparate facial features indicating either sexual maturity, emotional

---
22See Masao Miyoshi, Off Centre: Power and Culture Relations Between Japan and the United States
23Symmetry has become particularly popular among researchers in the field because of good experimental
evidence that it is selected for by some animal species. There is also some (not entirely convincing)
evidence that women and men prefer symmetrical partners. The evidence, including the remarkable claim
that 'women partnered to men with pleasingly symmetrical bodies have most orgasms', is summarised by
David Concar in 'Sex and the Symmetrical Body' The New Scientist, 22 April 1995, pp. 40-44. The same
author, in the same issue, gives a sympathetic analysis of studies showing a preference for a high breast to
waist ratio at pp. 28-29. Both articles demonstrate the traditional inability of sociobiologists to recognise the
impact of social factors on perceptions of beauty, and Concar emphasises the futility of attempting to escape
from our 'biological destiny': 'What is clear is that more and more women are seeking the help of surgeons
to refashion their bodies. Would that we could refashion the legacy of our evolutionary past instead' (p. 29).
expressiveness or cuteness - which, in any combination, are claimed to draw in a male partner, encourage his protective behaviour, indicate to him that she is ready to conceive and promise him that his children will be fine and strong, and, essentially, possess those same qualities of beauty necessary for acquiring a mate and continuing the dynasty.

***

So far in this section I have concentrated on feminine beauty rather than masculine attractiveness because most biological interpretations of beauty see women as the passively chosen embodiment of beauty. As I have stated, most work on sexual selection has been on birds, with an occasional paper on fish.24 There is a noteworthy gap in research on sexual selection in mammals, and Ridley concedes that from rats up to our closest relatives, chimpanzees, there is no evidence for sexual, as opposed to natural, selection. Sociobiology makes much of correlations in behaviour between humans and other animals, particularly the higher primates, when discussing such issues as aggression, territoriality and gender distinctions.25 As Gould points out, such correlations are a vital first stage in establishing the genetic basis of human behaviour.26 It is odd, therefore, that sexual selection seems to be common to some birds, a very few fish species and Homo sapiens. What is more extraordinary is the gender switch performed by investigators into human sexual selection. Every example of sexual selection cited in the published literature attributes selection to female choice. After accepting the problematic nature of the leap from peacocks to people when discussing sexual selection, Ridley continues:

24See, for example, Houde, A. E. and Endler, J. A., 'Correlated Evolution of Female Mating Preferences and Male Color Patterns in the Guppy Poecilia reticulata', Science, 248 (1990), 1405-8.
26Gould, Ever Since Darwin, pp. 53-57.
But we should pause before dismissing the effects of sexual selection on human beings. People, after all, are universally interested in beauty. Lipstick, jewellery, eye-shadow, perfume, hair dyes, high heels - people are just as willing to exaggerate or lie about their sexually alluring traits as any peacock or bowerbird. And, as the above list makes clear, it seems as if men seek female beauty rather more than women seek male beauty. Mankind, in other words, may be the victim of generations of male choice, even more than female choice.  

Ridley, in this passage manages to use the same highly culture-specific, and eminently challengeable evidence to argue that people are sexual selectors and the selecting sex is male.

Ridley adopts the 'orthodox' sociobiological line that women are more interested in personality and status than beauty in men, with the solitary exception of height (p. 288). He cites a study showing that women seek qualities which will predispose towards worldly success: 'poise, self assurance, optimism, efficiency, perseverance, courage, decisiveness, intelligence, ambition'. As exactly what counts as a status signifier changes from society to society, the best that the sociobiologist can claim is that women are programmed in some vague way to recognise and gravitate to whatever variable indicates success. This is an important retreat from the strongest form of sociobiological argument. Most scientists are agreed that biology is important in setting the parameters of human behaviour. What is at stake is how restrictive those parameters are. The sociobiologist must, if his/her case is to hold, allow as little leeway as possible to the unquantifiable variables of

---

27 Ridley, p. 164.
culture and free will. To allow women to make a rational choice, weighing up several different factors, employing their life experiences and communally acquired wisdom leaves a painfully stunted role for the gene.

It is for this reason, among others, that the sociobiologist focuses on male choice. Male choice seems to offer the possibility of mapping specific preferences, whether for large breasts or healthy looking skin to advantageous genes. If beauty equals fertility and health, then it must follow that genes driving men to mate with beautiful women will spread in a population, and a standard of beauty will have become established.

One problem with this neat schema is that one of the principal indicators of status is clothing. Ridley states the dilemma:

Men should not care less what women wear so long as they are smooth-skinned, slim, young, healthy and generally nubile. Women should care greatly about what men wear, because it tells them a great deal about their background, their wealth, their social status, even their ambitions. So why do women follow clothes fashions more avidly than men? (p. 292.)

He suggests several solutions to the problem. The most obvious one, that the theory of sexual selection might simply be wrong is rejected out of hand. A second possibility is that women's fashions are not about status. This also is not considered - Ridley has already tried to show that male fashion, such as it is, is a way of showing status and so to deny the same function in women would appear contradictory. A third option is to claim that the current female dominated world of fashion is an aberration - throughout most of western history men have been as concerned with appearance and fashion as much, if not more than women. It is only, Ridley suggests, with the Victorians, that fashion becomes a female preserve. The unfortunate consequences of this view are not spelled out by Ridley - he simply moves on to the favoured fourth
option. The third, however, if it was true, would leave the sociobiological cloth in tatters. Such a rapid transformation in patterns of display could not have come about as a result of changes in gene distribution - it must therefore have resulted from historical or cultural factors, banishing the gene to irrelevancy.

Ridley's preferred option is to suppose that men and women make a mistake in believing the opposite sex to value the same things as they do: women are obsessed with fashion and therefore assume that men must share the passion. This argument is glaringly fallacious. The sociobiologist must ascribe a reproductive advantage to every gene expressed phenotypically. A gene which causes men and women systematically to mistake what the opposite sex finds attractive would, it seems to me, have considerable difficulties in being selected for anything other than the waste-bin of evolutionary history.

It is unsurprising that Ridley concludes, 'I am left feeling that this puzzle is, in the present state of evolutionary and sociological thinking, insoluble' (p. 294). Ridley is handicapped by the fact that his work attempts to draw together all of the frequently contradictory research on sexual selection in animals and humans. Before concluding with some further criticisms of the evolutionary approach to beauty I shall outline the more limited but coherent and defensible position adopted by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesdeldt.29

Eibl-Eibesdeldt argues that there are three levels at which humans respond to 'beauty stimuli' whether in art or nature (including human beauty). The first level is a general appreciation of order, pattern and regularity. It is a feeling shared by man with other mammals and birds (p. 49).30 The second level is species specific, although its origins can sometimes be traced in the species'

30Eibl-Eibesdeldt cites as an example of this, Desmond Morris's experiments teaching chimps to paint, recounted in The Biology of Art (London: Methuen, 1962).
philogenic roots. In humans this is manifest in the nurturing tendencies triggered by infantile facial feature and by the erotic interest shown to signs of sexual maturity and fertility, which together constitute beauty in the female. Male beauty is represented by the broad shoulders and large frame, and possibly by the threateningly prominent phallus which Eibl-Eibesdeldt finds accentuated by male costume across all cultures. The final level of aesthetic response is further confined:

I would like to mention a final perceptual bias, a culturally specific one that is learned in early childhood and later used by the culture as a whole to evoke emotions in the service of group bonding, separating it from others, manipulating individual actions, or reinforcing social norms and values. (p. 50.)

Western European culture represents one such ‘style’ as he terms it, forming a general backdrop of shared references and common, or at least linked, historical roots, which at the same time allows for local variation and differentiation. This third level of ‘perceptual bias’ is not restricted to expressions of group feelings:

Style was also used daily by individuals to express features of individual identity and worth, which separated them from similar group members and demonstrated individual interpretations of affiliation with certain groups or other individuals. (p. 50.)

Into this final category Eibl-Eibesdeldt places art and fashion. Eibl-Eibesdeldt’s position is moderate and reasonable. It is also unsustainable. His third category allows for the play of difference, for cultural change and individual choice. Behind it, however, lies a firm biological injunction about what all men and women must find attractive because of our common biological heritage.
Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s feminine ideal is formed by placing a child’s head on a voluptuously developed woman’s body.\(^{31}\) The developed secondary sexual characteristics are, of course, viewed as the common currency of sexual selection, but the infantile facial features are derived from a recent theory of the mechanism behind human evolution. It has been suggested that *Homo sapiens* evolved from its apelike ancestors by retaining juvenile mental (curiosity, the ready assimilation of new information) and physical (relative hairlessness, a flat face with a small nose) characteristics.\(^{32}\) According to M. R. Cunningham, men find women with the juvenile features of big eyes, a small nose and small chin set in a flat facial plane beautiful.\(^{33} 34\) A plausible evolutionary rationale is given for this by John Moreall in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*.\(^{34}\)

Moreall argues that cuteness is a quality represented by a set of features found in some ancestral humans, that happened to be attractive to adults and which triggered caring responses from them. These qualities would necessarily give a survival boost to those infants possessing them. In time these qualities would inevitably become predominant among human infants.

This is an apparently attractive, and, it would seem, harmless enough argument. It shares with other sociobiological explanatory models the quality of being utterly unfalsifiable by the emergence of new evidence - unless, that is, a lost tribe of humans were located in which the children were strikingly

\(^{31}\)At this point it seems appropriate to recall a comment made by Rose, Lewontin and Kamin in *Not in Our Genes*, ‘In reading sociobiology one has the constant feeling of being a voyeur, peeping into the autobiographical memoirs of its proponents’. p. 260.


uncute, but this very universality means that it lacks the divisiveness of other sociobiological claims. This does not mean, however, that it is valid.

John T. Sanders exposes the absurd consequences that follow from this position in a response to Moreall’s paper. Given the contingent nature of evolution, it must be conceivable that infants in general might never have developed cuteness. If cuteness acts as a trigger for the caring response, then it should follow that ‘non-cute’ infants, because of this deficiency, would then not be cared for adequately by their parents. Finally, if some other creature (Sanders suggests baby spiders) had happened to have the abstract general characteristics called cuteness, while human children did not have it, then human adults would have been more inclined to care for baby spiders than baby humans.

Moreall posits a Fisherian, arbitrary preference for cute features. Sanders suggests against this that cuteness is an abstract taken from the way babies happen to look and then applied to a range of other phenomena which remind us of children. Although neither Moreall nor Sanders apply the concept to adult sexuality in the way that Cunningham does, we can readily see the relevance of Moreall’s evolutionary interpretation and Sanders’ refutation. Adult women possessing the quality of cuteness (i.e. infantile features) would, according to the Moreall hypothesis, trigger the caring response in potential mates, increasing their chances of being selected and protected and therefore of passing on their cute genes. It must be equally possible that women would not have developed this quality and would have been at risk of losing their man to any passing creature fortuitously endowed with cuteness.

---

Although, as I have stated, theories of sexual selection in humans have almost exclusively focused on male choice, one version of Good genes has been used as an explanation for some seemingly non-adaptive patterns of masculine behaviour. The handicap principle suggests that certain male birds and other organisms show their fitness by putting up with greatly exaggerated features - huge tails, flamboyant feathers etc. The argument is that they must be outstandingly vigorous, with correspondingly excellent genes, if they can survive with these handicaps. As a consequence they become desirable mates. Steve Jones in *The Language of the Genes* suggests that this may help to account for such self destructive habits as drug addiction and alcohol abuse. Women, the argument goes, often seem to be drawn to alcoholics, smokers and drug addicts. These are clearly activities that take a toll on the physical well-being of the addict. So is this not another example of the handicap principle? Are those with a rock and roll lifestyle just demonstrating their superior fitness, showing how much punishment they can take? As Jones puts it,

Perhaps men take alcohol, tobacco or stronger drugs to demonstrate to women how tough they are, how their constitutions can cope with mistreatment and how they might make excellent fathers as a result.\(^{36}\)

Such an explanation makes several assumptions. It commits itself initially to the view that any aspect of human behaviour can be explained in terms of genetic determinism: even those types of behaviour which, on the surface, appear least likely result in a healthy genetic return.\(^{37}\) It assumes that the specific behaviour under investigation is explicable in this way. It assumes that women *are* in fact drawn preferentially to men with addictions. It downgrades other reasons both for the addiction and the attraction.

\(^{36}\)Jones, p. 111.

Such forms of explanation have been labelled 'Just-so' stories'. As with Kipling's originals, sociobiological 'Just-so' accounts involve the imaginative recreation of originating episodes which explain the existence of modern features, as Rose et al put it:

The theory of sexual selection is a particularly flexible and powerful form of adaptive argument and has been wielded with great ingenuity by sociobiologists [...] sociobiological theory can explain anything, no matter how contradictory, by a little mental gymnastics.

In the first edition of *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins concludes a chapter on sexual selection with a half-hearted attempt to apply the concept to humans. He concedes that the 'astonishing variety' of sexual arrangements in human societies suggests that our behaviour is 'largely determined by culture rather than genes'. Despite this suggestion, Dawkins feels obliged to speculate that, 'human males in general have a tendency towards promiscuity, and females a tendency towards monogamy, as we would predict on evolutionary grounds'. Dawkins, however, encounters the sex reversal of the sexual selector problem outlined above: the apparently aberrant observation that human females make the effort to look beautiful for human males. He is forced to conclude weakly, with a question he finds it impossible to answer:

What has happened in modern western man? Has the male really become the sought-after sex, the one in demand, the sex that can afford to be choosy? If so, why?

---

38See Rose et al, p. 258. As they point out, even the sociobiologist D. P. Barash, refers to the construction of these originating myths as the game of 'Let's Pretend'. D. P. Barash, *Sociobiology and Behaviour* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1977), p. 277.

39Rose et al, p. 259.

The second edition of *The Selfish Gene* does not return directly to this question, but it provides two new examples of what might be cases of male sexual display indicating female choice.

Most male mammals possess a bone in the penis to facilitate penetration during mating. Humans have to rely on the rather less reliable system of hydraulics for a full erection. Why should it be that we have lost such a useful aid in the tricky business of copulation? Dawkins suggests that a good, solid erection could be used by women to assess the physical and mental health of any potential mate. A bone would interfere with the diagnosis, hiding any lack of the tell-tale turgidity. Selection pressure from females has therefore forced men into the honest and revealing display of masculinity represented by the rampant (or melancholic, drooping) phallus.41 Similarly, the apparently disadvantageous habit of male snoring (alerting enemies, infuriating friends) might, Dawkins argues, have evolved as a mechanism by which females could assess the respiratory health of the available males:

The snore is like a radio carrier-frequency, which drones on regardless; it is a clear signal which is *modulated*, in diagnostically sensitive ways, by the condition of the nose and throat. (p. 308.)

Dawkins is being, at best, half serious in these speculations, and he frankly admits that he finds them 'less plausible than pleasing'. It is telling, however, that he feels compelled to attempt an adaptive explanation for such unlikely features of our intimate lives.

In *Signs of the Flesh: An Essay on the Evolution of Hominid Sexuality* Daniel Rancour-Laferrier states eloquently the nature of human sexuality:

---

41Dawkins, pp. 306-308.
The variety and complexity of human reproductive behaviour is one of the subjects of this book, and it has to have an evolutionary history. At some point flexibility of reproductive behaviour within hominid populations has to have developed, and this flexibility gives modern hominids more variable and heterogeneous sexual behaviour than can be observed in any other primate in the wild. This flexibility is in turn just a part of [...] the overall lability and adaptability that characterizes the human primate.42

Human beings have evolved to the point at which, with the massive development of the brain, with its concomitant higher faculties, and the invention of efficient cultural mechanisms for the transmission of knowledge, sexuality has escaped the limiting dictates of our genetic inheritance. This is not an anti-evolutionary position; rather it is one that accepts that we are the products of evolution. Our success is the result of evolution's trump card. Homo sapiens have been able to occupy an unparalleled variety of ecological niches because of our adaptability. The point is well made by Roger Scruton:

Rationality, even when seen in evolutionary terms, is a capacity to invent solutions to problems, to work out individually an answer that may not have been contained in the inheritance of the species. The rational being therefore acquires behaviour and beliefs that are not the common property of the species, and could not be: in particular he acquires a culture, and his self and will are more responsive to this culture than to any species-laden imperative. No doubt evolutionary theory can explain why we have this capacity (that is, why, having acquired it, we were better fitted to survive). By virtue of possessing it, however, we rise above the level of 'species being', and generate a new order of behaviour, the order of history. History is the order

which we make ourselves, and which bears the imprint of our own self-conception.43

Unfortunately, Laferrier, after his statement of our uniquely undetermined nature, proceeds, as a good sociobiologist, to emphasise not the flexibility of human sexual behaviour, but its universal, adaptive and genetically determined aspects, as he presents a sociobiological account of such phenomena as the female orgasm, castration anxiety and prostitution.

Stephen Jay Gould has demonstrated that a perfectly plausible non-adaptive, but still resolutely biological view of the female orgasm (and other features such as male nipples, whose function is not immediately obvious) is possible.44 Gould attacks the 'Just-so' types of explanation which rely on ingenuity, analogy and a devout faith in the universality of adaptation to carry the argument - direct evidence is, because of the nature of the fossil record (which might otherwise reveal the evolutionary history of an adaptation) unavailable. Laferrier defends the 'Just-so' method by claiming that all science, and not just the more speculative tendency in sociobiology, is a matter of constructing plausible narratives, which should be criticised not by castigating the method, but by producing a rival story. Through a type of evolutionary epistemology, the 'fittest' story will survive:

What is a scientific research article, if not a story? The narrative character of the historical sciences is especially indispensable. Anyone who attempts to narrate the evolution of something over geological time is telling a story. For

---

43*Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 188. Scruton's book is particularly good on the phenomenology of the sexual experience, and the inadequacy of scientific accounts. Unfortunately, his conservative socio/political agenda means that he cannot altogether discard 'biology'. Despite having demonstrated that human rationality has negated the 'species being' and freed human sexuality, he brings back the concept of 'nature' in order to define certain practices (promiscuity, homosexuality) as 'unnatural'.

Gould to borrow Kipling's pejorative epithet "just-so" is only to indicate disapproval of certain kinds of stories. But a story is not falsified by scorn. It is falsified by other stories.\(^{45}\)

The position resembles that adopted by Fredric Jameson, for whom narrative is like the Kantian forms of space and time, without which 'the world' or 'reality' would be inconceivable - they come to us only through such stories. For Jameson, physics becomes a matter of telling stories about, for example the behaviour of sub-atomic particles.\(^{46}\) In Roland Barthes's words, 'narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself'.\(^{47}\) Many scientists would be uncomfortable with Laferrier's anti-realist position, but it remains the only possible methodology for applying sexual selection to humans. There remains precious little evidence for the evolution of \textit{Homo sapiens}' sexual preferences. As I hope I have demonstrated, some, at least, of the attempts by sociobiologists to create compelling narratives have something of the dodo, if not the dinosaur, about them and are vulnerable to counter-narratives, which tell the story of human beauty rather more plausibly.

The problem with sociobiology is that it presents itself as what Jean-François Lyotard calls a meta-narrative - a 'theory of everything', such as Marxism or structuralism, that attempts to subordinate all other narratives, or ways of understanding the world.\(^{48}\) Sociobiology cannot tolerate other stories about human beauty. To allow culture anything other than the most insignificant role in framing what we find beautiful in the faces and bodies around us would be to fatally loosen the grip of the gene on our behaviour.

\(^{45}\)Rancour-Laferrier, p. 8.
\(^{47}\)Barthes, \textit{Image Music Text}, p. 79.
In a newspaper article, Colin Tudge, after giving a sociobiological explanation for the likely appearance of Neanderthal Man, based on female sexual selection ("the male's only active role is to sway the female's choice. To this end, he advertises. Beards, tails and antlers all declare: "I am male and I have survived until maturity."), concludes:

I see Neanderthal males as sunflowers at the glacier's edge, with great shocks of yellow and red hair on their long, sloping heads and huge, round, burnished beards glowing in the slanting sun. Here was no Caliban. Here, more likely, was the archetype of Wotan and Thor.49

Tudge's speculatively colourful portrait, with its predictable caricature of what the females of our close relatives might have found irresistible attempts to insinuate sexual selection into the very origins of myth - the Neanderthal becomes the mould from which the great northern gods are cast. It is, in itself, an audacious piece of myth-making. I do not wish to banish such biological myths from the mythology of beauty, but sociobiologists must accept that it is a polytheistic religion. The swollen breasts, the wasp-like waists, the delicate complexions, and the childlike features of the women favoured by sociobiologists, and the flowing beards, broad chests and towering height they prefer in their men-folk have certainly entered into the mythology of beauty I have described in my introduction. The stories they tell of their origins have become almost as familiar as the myths woven around the Graeco-Roman pantheon or the other mythic families. But they remain, despite their aspirations to objectivity, just stories.

At the head of this chapter I quoted a passage from Dudley Young's *Origins of the Sacred* which gave a brief description sexual selection in distinctly non-scientific language. In the *Origins of the Sacred*, Young searches among our

remote ancestors for the roots of the violence and eroticism of modern civilization. Later in the work, Young gives a fuller account of his understanding of what sexual selection entails:

It is always the case that we find beauty in the creature we fall in love with, and the reader will recall that this conjunction does not originate with us but is built into evolution itself in the dynamics of sexual selection. The beautiful tail of the male peacock evolved for no functional reason but simply because the female peacock found it fetching and so, by degrees, through her choice of mate, she called it forth. And it is safe to say that wherever in Nature one finds the male more prettily decorated than the female, this is the reason: where males compete for the female’s favours, the esthetic factor will often decide the issue. In addition to such things as peacock tails and stag antlers, sexual selection can take the credit for the colors and perfumes of flowers and fruits, as well as the beautiful world of birdsong.50

What I take exception to, in this passage, is not the fact that Young believes that there is such a thing as a female peacock; nor is it his belief that flowers and fruits are the product of sexual selection (a view that no biologist would ever hold); nor is it the fact that he shows himself ignorant of any theoretical work on the subject later than Fisher’s ‘arbitrary preference’ theory. Rather, it is that a literary scholar feels it necessary to blind himself to the heterogeneity and complexity of human beauty, with its multiple determinants and endlessly fertile configurations in order to tie himself to an ill-conceived theory he has only half understood.

As a final word on the relationship between biology and beauty, it is helpful to conceive of the issue in Lacanian terms, and particularly in the difference

50Young, p. 147.
between *need* and *desire*. Lacan criticises the tendency among Freudians to reduce the psychical concept of desire to the biological concept of bodily need. For Lacan desire is the 'paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric' excess of want, or demand over need.\(^5^1\) As he puts it,

Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomena of their splitting. (p. 287.)

Desire comes into existence with the acquisition of language, and it forms itself as a demand.\(^5^2\) Biological needs, as appetites, can be satisfied, but there can be no simple object of desire, the attainment of which could satisfy desire, and bring satiation to the desiring subject. I want to argue that beauty properly belongs in the realm of desire - the source of an unquenchable longing, a longing without a unitary object, an achievable end.

In his main theoretical investigation into beauty, the seminar on, 'The Function of the Beautiful', Lacan accepts that, 'there is a certain relationship between beauty and desire', but he sees it as complex and contradictory, as, 'strange and ambiguous'. Beauty seems both to block the workings of desire, and yet to transform it. And so although beauty 'intimidates and stops desire',

That is not to say that on certain occasions beauty cannot be joined to desire, but in a mysterious way and in a form that I can do no better than refer to by the term [... ] outrage. Moreover, it seems that it is in the nature of the

---


beautiful to remain, as they say, insensitive to outrage, and that is by no means one of the least significant elements of its structure.53

As the seminar proceeds, and carries on into the succeeding discussion on 'The Splendour of Antigone', beauty becomes yet more intimately bound to desire:

The beautiful in its strange function with relation to desire [...] keeps us awake and perhaps helps us to adjust to desire in so far as it is itself linked to the structure of the lure. (p. 239.)

Eventually we reach the point at which beauty becomes the catalyst for the intensification of desire. The 'effect of beauty on desire' is 'most strange and most profound', it,

seems to split desire strangely as it continues on its way, for one cannot say that it is completely extinguished by the apprehension of beauty. It continues on its way, but now more than elsewhere, it has a sense of being taken in, and this is manifested by the splendour and magnificence of the zone that draws it on. (p. 248.)

For sociobiologists, beauty is a simple, stable quality. We do not 'desire' it in the perverse superabundance of the Lacanian concept of desire, but rather 'need' it so that it will facilitate the passing on of our own genes, cloak our DNA in its bright attire. It is this simple world that I hope to complicate. In the following chapters I will show that there is no unitary 'truth' about beauty. There is no simple answer to the question, 'what is beauty?' The only sensible question is 'what do we mean by beauty?' and the answer to that involves an investigation not into the supposed genetic roots of our species, but into the realities of our cultural heritage. The following chapters undertake such an investigation.

In the preface to his final novel, *Sir Charles Grandison*, Samuel Richardson cannot help but display before us once again the disinterred corpse of his most alluring character. Shorn of the subtlety, the wit, the quicksilver intelligence and the ravishing good looks with which he charmed his victims, Lovelace appears as a caricatured villain, fated to suffer the punishment appropriate to a scoundrel:

Her cruel Destroyer appears wretched and disappointed, even in the boasted Success of his vile Machinations: But still (buoyed up with Self-conceit and vain Presumption) he goes on, after every short Fit of imperfect, yet terrifying Conviction, hardening himself more and more; till, unreclaimed by the most affecting warnings, and repeated admonitions, he perishes miserably in the Bloom of Life, and sinks into the Grave oppressed with Guilt, Remorse, and Horror. His Letters, it is hoped, afford many useful Lessons to the gay Part of Mankind against that misuse of Wit and Youth, of Rank and Fortune, and of every outward Accomplishment, which turns them into a Curse to the miserable Possessor, as well as all around him.¹

It might seem odd that Richardson felt the need to preface his professed ‘portrait of a good man’ with a thumb-nail sketch of a bad one, but that is

to miss the power that Lovelace held over Richardson’s readers - a power more absolute than any he could hope to hold over the unconquerable virtue of Clarissa Harlowe. Both within and between the texts of Richardson’s novels a debate is conducted on the nature of male sexual attractiveness, and it is the outlines of that debate that will be followed in this chapter.

Recent critical thought has identified the eighteenth century as a crucial period in the development of modern conceptions of sexuality and gender formation, and Richardson’s texts are often given a prominent place in that formative process. Sue Warrick Doederlein, for example, brings in Michel Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Lawrence Stone’s The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800, and continental feminist literary theory to substantiate her view on the importance of Richardson’s Clarissa in the formation of modern conceptions of the feminine:

The theme that unifies such diverse speculations as those of Foucault, Stone, Irigaray, and Kristeva is their shared interest in the centrality of the eighteenth century in creating modern notions of sexuality, in shaping elaborate patterns of thought and feeling that polarize masculine and feminine in profound ways, ways that have permeated our very cells. The imaginative literature which appears in the middle of the eighteenth century is of course the product of the interplay of complex social, economic, philosophical, and religious forces; but perhaps its most hidden and vital undercurrent is the subliminal development of a sexuality that will not merely impose upon biological givens but actually reshape our organic selves.²

From Foucault and Stone, Doederlein derives the view that sexuality and femininity were a product of changing power relations, the emergence of new forms of discourse and institutions and the rise of the nuclear family. For her, Richardson was implicated in all of these developments, and this makes his recasting of male sexual roles as important as his construction of the feminine. In this chapter I am going to examine the portrayal of male characters in Richardson's novels in an attempt to clarify the function of male beauty in what, as Doederlein has shown, was a vitally important period in the development of European culture.

A number of factors make Richardson's texts particularly relevant for understanding beauty in the eighteenth century. Richardson was a member of the bourgeoisie at a crucial, formative stage in its history, which gives his work the status almost of founding, sacred texts, bound up with the origins of modern society as much as with the origins of the novel. Further, he constructed his works in an unusually collaborative manner, canvassing the views of a wide circle of friends and acquaintances (many female) before, during and after the writing process. This makes his work particularly useful for gauging the attitudes of the literate public in the mid-eighteenth century. Finally, his influence and reputation meant that his views and attitudes penetrated almost every aspect of the cultural life of his own and the succeeding period.

Richardson has been seen (despite the unheroic timidity, hypochondria and narrow-mindedness attributed to him by Romantic critics after the publication of his letters in 1804) as symbolising the revolutionary force of the bourgeoisie and as being the most important Gramscian 'organic'
intellectual in English history. Terry Eagleton, in *The Rape of Clarissa*, lists the advantages that such an 'organic' intellectual must have:

He would need to live in close touch with the flourishing economic life of the class he represented. He would seek to share in the framing of its political interests. He would strive to intervene constantly in the everyday culture of his class, forming taste, charting trends and disseminating doctrine. He would require access to its major ideological channels, placing himself at the heart of ethical controversies, educational projects, religious and aesthetic contentions. (p. 7.)

As a printer and phenomenally successful novelist, Richardson was able to satisfy these conditions.

Richardson's literary works are both exemplary products of the bourgeois public sphere, the most important cultural entity in the early to mid-eighteenth century, and play a crucial role in its establishment. The public sphere has been defined as:

a realm of social institutions - clubs, journals, coffee houses, periodicals - in which private individuals assemble for the free, equal interchange of reasonable discourse, thus welding themselves into a relatively cohesive body whose deliberations may assume the form of a powerful political force.

Richardson acted both to form and to circulate the ideology of the public sphere and it is his literary method, above all else, that enabled him to perform this crucial, mediating role. Lennard Davis describes this method in *Factual Fictions*:

---


The method he chose for writing his works was to pass various drafts around to his correspondents and ask for criticism, revisions, and so on. [...] With Richardson, even novel writing had gone public. [...] Writing by committee is not exactly how Richardson composed his work, but his method does seem unusual and new in being so public a composition.\(^5\)

For Eagleton, Richardson’s method is the public sphere in action, involving the,

perpetual circulation of texts among friends and correspondents, with its attendant wranglings, pleadings, revisions, interpretations of interpretations [which] comes to constitute an entire discursive community of its own, a kind of public sphere in miniaturized or domesticated form within which, amidst all the petty frictions and anxieties of hermeneutic intercourse, a powerfully cohesive body of moral thought, a collective sensibility, comes to crystallize.\(^6\)

This extraordinary mode of production makes Richardson’s work uniquely representative. If any author can ever have truly given voice to a class or group, then surely it is Richardson. The very heterogeneity of that group makes Richardson all the more valuable.

Richardson’s popularity among the reading public and influence on literary production have been well documented. Janet Todd, for example, writes:

Richardson’s novels generated an immense quantity of European and British literature - ‘an infinite series of other compositions’ [...] which took the Richardsonian themes and conventions as the basis and precondition of


\(^6\)Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, p. 29.
its art, while their situations and schemes entered the culture as almost mythic events.7

Furthermore, Richardson's influence was not confined to the world of fiction. Madame de Stael incorporated Clarissa's flight into her own memories of childhood and Richardson's 'sensitive' epistolary style found itself copied by 'several generations of young girls'. Todd links this popularity and influence to Richardson's representativeness. His humble origins, his solid bourgeois credentials and his aristocratic connections are clear enough qualifications for representative status. Todd adds two more. Richardson's lack of a classical education, standard equipment for the eighteenth-century gentlemen, 'aligned him with women of any class, since they were similarly deprived'. And secondly, Richardson had strong class and ideological links to the Dissenters. Todd concludes:

Richardson, then, represents a powerful coalescence of trends and interests. While catching something of the individualism of the economically expansive men of the middle class, he also expresses both the domestic-communal concerns of women who have little part in this expansion, and the conduct-book ethics of the old puritan tradition. His extraordinary influence must undoubtedly be due in part to his representativeness, as well as his immense originality. (p. 67.)

To conclude my introductory remarks, Samuel Richardson presents himself as the ideal testing ground for investigating ideas of beauty in the pre-Romantic period. Two of his characters in particular can be seen as embodying rival ideals of masculine attractiveness. Lovelace, in Clarissa, is the paradigmatic rake, a brilliantly seductive male siren with a fatal

---

glamour. Sir Charles Grandison is, in contrast, a deliberate attempt to manufacture the perfect English gentleman, and Richardson’s challenge, as we shall see, is to make his morality, his consideration and his breeding an adequate rival to the lethal charm of Lovelace.

***

Before discussing the later novels, in which male beauty becomes a primary concern, it is worth briefly examining Richardson’s first, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740-41) in which it plays a less significant part. *Pamela* is, in fact, remarkable in that we are never given a clear picture of its villain-cum-hero, Mr B., despite Pamela’s many descriptions of the scenes they enact together. He remains for the reader, if not a shadowy figure, then at least one of indeterminate appearance. There are no detailed descriptions of him and we never find Pamela in raptures over his face or figure in the way that in the later sections of the novel she rhapsodises over the reformed rake’s moral goodness and consideration.

One possible reason for this is the importance of stressing Pamela’s purity. The reader has to be in no doubt as to the heroine’s morals if she is to be distinguished from the characters in erotic fiction and the ‘whore biography’ of the period. Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741) shows how close Richardson’s writings could be to the tradition of erotic and bawdy literature and Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-49) takes the same situation of a servant beset by seducers and turns it into a box of pornographic delights. As Peter Wagner has shown, Pamela’s sighing, fainting and swooning in the presence of Mr B. often have an orgasmic

---

quality, which ‘must have caused chuckles with any reader who had some knowledge of erotic fiction and jargon’ (pp. 308-9).

Wagner argues that in satirical poems, bawdy novels and outrageous caricatures (often based on classical sources such as Juvenal’s scabrously misogynist Sixth Satire⁹) women were attacked and ridiculed for what was seen to be their increasing sexual freedom. Nymphomaniacal young maids, lusty widows and the provocatively dressed fashion victims of the aristocracy all received the attention of the satirists.¹⁰ Richardson, as the defender of the female sex, and with his extended family of female readers, makes all of his heroines, Pamela, Clarissa, Harriet, and even the exotic, Catholic Clementina, paragons of virtue.

Lasciviousness, then, would seem to be the charge against which women most needed to be protected. As the lowliest of his heroines, and the one against whom Richardson’s reader’s suspicions might be most readily roused, Pamela is the one on whom physical attractiveness must be seen to have the least influence. Richardson does, at one point, suggest how we are to respond to gross female lust. Mr B., now Pamela’s devoted husband and protector is challenged by his sister, Lady Davers, to declare how he would feel had she married a ‘beggar’s son’. Her argument seems logically sound: ‘Where can the difference be between a beggar’s son married by a lady, or a beggar’s daughter made a gentleman’s wife?’ Given the conventions of the time, Mr B. has an easy job in dismissing the comparison on the grounds that a wife always takes the status of the husband. He then suggests that there could only ever be one reason for Lady marrying a ‘sordid groom’;

⁹According to Wagner, p. 144. Dryden’s translation of the Sixth Satire had gone through six editions by 1735.
¹⁰See Wagner, chapter 5, ‘Matrimony and the War of the Sexes’.
whose constant train of education, conversation, and opportunities, could possibly give him no other merit, than that which must proceed from the vilest, lowest taste, in his sordid dignifier.\textsuperscript{11}

Female lust is clearly viewed with horror, and so Pamela is never allowed to express her admiration for anything other than Mr B.’s kindness.\textsuperscript{12} If we are not given an insight into Mr B.’s appearance (although we must make the assumption that he is at least passably attractive), there is one telling passage which displays his affinity with the rakes in Richardson’s other fiction, and which conjoins them all with the black heroes of the Gothic novel. Mr B., having carried Pamela off into secluded Lincolnshire, asks her in the course of one of their wrestling matches, ‘Who then am I?’ She replies (‘struggling with him, and in great passion’), ‘to be sure, you are Lucifer himself in the \textit{shape} of my master’. Mr B. then gets into character, and when she asks forlornly, ‘Pray, sir, forgive me’, he replies, ‘rather say, pray, Lucifer forgive me. You have given me a character, Pamela, and blame me not if I act up to it’ (p. 248).

Richardson’s second, and by general consent, greatest novel, might also, at first seem to place physical attractiveness in the background. The conventional references to character, sensibility and feeling in \textit{Clarissa} to a degree mask the movements of physical desire and the equally physical revulsion which operate just beneath the surface of the text, periodically breaking through.

The strength of this desire is perhaps most easily shown through Clarissa’s attitude towards the odious Solmes. Richardson had proved

\textsuperscript{11}Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded, ed. by Peter Sabor (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), p. 440.

\textsuperscript{12}There is another reason for Pamela’s reticence on this issue. Unlike the heroines of Richardson’s other novels, she has no close female confidante. Most of her letters are addressed to her parents, which removes the possibility of the sort of girlish exuberance we find in Harriet’s, or even Clarissa’s letters.
himself to be adept at the grotesque portrait in *Pamela*. One of Mr B.’s servants, Colbrand, acts as one of Pamela’s gaolers and gives her the opportunity to exercise her sharp wit:

He has great staring eyes, like the bull’s that frightened me so; vast jawbones sticking out; eye-brows hanging over his eyes; two great scars upon his forehead, and one on his left cheek; huge whiskers and a monstrous wide mouth; blubber lips, long yellow teeth, which his lips hardly cover, even when he is silent; so that he has always a hideous grin about his mouth. He wears his own frightful long hair, tied up with a great black bag; a black crape neckcloth, about a long ugly neck; and he has something on his throat, that sticks out, as I may say, like a wen. (p. 206.)

Solmes’s character, as he actually appears to us and to Clarissa, is scarcely edifying, but nor is it strikingly repellent. There is no hard evidence for real calumny other than the gossip and tittle-tattle of servants. Nevertheless, in the early sections of the novel, Clarissa confines her criticisms to Solmes’ mental attributes:

He has but a very ordinary share of understanding, is very illiterate, knows nothing but the value of estates and how to improve them, and what belongs to land jobbing and husbandry.\(^\text{13}\)

Clarissa claims that had she been offered ‘a man of sense, of virtue, of generosity’ rather than Solmes, then she would never have revolted against the family’s will, whatever had been the *figure* of the man’ (I, p. 33). And

\(^{13}\text{Clarissa or, The History of a Young Lady (London: Dent, 1932/62), p. 33. I have chosen to use the Everyman edition of Clarissa over the in many ways superior 1983 Penguin edition because the latter, based on the first edition of 1747-48, omits the revisions Richardson incorporated into the second and third editions. The Everyman uses the third edition of 1751 which represents Richardson’s final attempts to extend authorial control over the reader. As I have referred to this process in this chapter, I have decided to use the Everyman throughout, with one exception at note 21 below.}\)
yet she increasingly undermines this contention through her barely concealed loathing for Solmes’ physical appearance. As she begins to realise the implacability of her family, Clarissa’s growing physical revulsion leads her to abandon her rational arguments in favour of hysterical outbursts. After her mother has suggested that Clarissa’s very spirituality and rationality should leave her immune to the physical deficiencies of her unwanted suitor, she writes exasperatedly to Anna Howe.

PERSON in a man is nothing, because I am supposed to be prudent: so my eye is to be disgusted and my reason not convinced. [...] Thus are my good qualities to be made my punishment; and I am to be wedded to a monster. (I, p. 79.)

Thereafter she repeatedly responds with a shudder when she is forced to think about him. Typical is her reaction when told that Solmes adores her and is in raptures: ‘Ugly creature, thought I! He in raptures’ (I, p. 404). Raptures, it would seem, are only for the handsome.

Perhaps the most trenchant statement of the importance of appearance follows one of the interminable, impassioned and tearful disputations with her mother. The wise and tolerant, if misguided, Mrs Harlowe detects that Clarissa’s objections to Solmes rest ultimately on the bedrock of his physical unattractiveness. She attempts an appeal to Clarissa’s higher nature, which ought, she feels, to be able to over-rule a merely physical repulsion. Clarissa’s answer conveys eloquently both her revulsion and the impossibility of overcoming that revulsion, whatever filial, fraternal or social obligations may dictate:

Should the eye be disgusted when the heart is to be engaged? O madam, who can think of marrying when the heart is shocked at the first
appearance, and where the disgust must be confirmed by every conversation afterwards? (I, p. 75.)

The more direct and acerbic Miss Howe proceeds immediately to what she perceives to be the heart of the matter. As usual, ridicule is her weapon; and her scorn takes in Clarissa’s sister, Annabel, damned with faint praise, as well as the hapless Solmes:

Who knows, said I to my mother, but that when the man has thrown aside his yellow full-buckled peruke, and his broad-brimmed beaver (both of which I suppose were Sir Oliver’s best of long standing), he may cut a tolerable figure dangling to church with Miss Bell! The woman, as she observes, should excel the man in features; and where can she match so well a foil. (I, p. 42.)

Elsewhere, Miss Howe describes a gathering at which Lovelace was ‘entertaining the company in his lively gay way’. Among those present is Solmes:

His very smile (you never saw him smile, I believe: never at least gave him cause to smile) is so little natural to his features that it appears in him as hideous as the grin of a man in malice.

She is so struck by his ugliness that she particularly notes his appearance, and with evident relish she relates that she was ‘disgusted, nay shocked at him, even then’. Referring only to the man’s appearance, she comments, ‘What a dreadful thing must even the love of such a husband be!’ Only a splenetic woman, she adds, could tolerate so physically repulsive a husband for the opportunity he would give her to employ her spite. Only after Miss Howe has exercised her own spleen on Solmes’ appearance does she engage with his personality:
So much for his person: as to the other half of him, he is said to be an insinuating, creeping mortal to anybody he hopes to be a gainer by: an insolent, overbearing one, where he has no such views. [...] He is reported to be spiteful and malicious, even to the whole family of any single person who has once disobliged him; and to his own relations most of all. (I, p. 126.)

As I stated above, our experience of Solmes in the novel is exclusively of the insinuator and the creeper. The altogether more damaging charge of malice is conveyed entirely through such ‘reports’ and what amounts to gossip. It is quite clear that in the case of Miss Howe at least some degree of prejudice is operating. Clarissa’s physical loathing is generally more politely masked, but equally powerful. Occasionally she resorts to the sort of satirical portrait we associate more with Miss Howe:

Had the wretch kept his seat, it might have been well enough: but the bent and broad-shouldered creature must needs rise and stalk towards a chair. [...] He took the removed chair and drew it so near mine, squatting with all his ugly weight, that he pressed upon my hoop. (I, p. 68.)

A little later in the same letter the unfortunate man’s splayed feet come in for similar treatment (I, p. 69). More significantly, we also find in this letter, for the first time made explicit, the implicit contrast between Solmes and Lovelace. Increasingly distressed as their discussion continues, Clarissa calls on her mother ‘simply to look upon the man’, and so surely she must concede the ‘disagreeableness of his person’. Her mother replies,

---

14 'My Kitty, from one of his domestics, tells me that his tenants hate him'. Ibid., p. 126.
Now, Clary, do I see whose person you have in your eye! Now is Mr Solmes, I see, but comparatively disagreeable; disagreeable only as another man has a more specious person.

Clarissa answers this dangerous (because so close to the bone) line of attack through the traditional Neo-Platonist inter-relating of moral and physical beauty, interpreted as a kind of physiognomical determinism:

But, madam, are not his manners equally so [disagreeable]? Is not his person the true representative of his mind? (I, p. 73.)

It is not long before Clarissa has herself spelled out the differences between her suitors. She compares Lovelace and Solmes using what we must assume is intended to be a hierarchy of qualities:

Do you, my sister, for one moment, lay aside all prejudice, and compare the two men in their births, their educations, their persons, their understandings, their manners, their air, and their whole deportments and [...] fortunes. (I, p. 140.)

The signification of male attractiveness in Clarissa is imparted through a series of binary divisions or contrasting portraits, with Lovelace always acting as one pole. As well as Solmes, Lovelace finds himself paired with Hickman, with Belton, with the various men in Clarissa’s family, in particular her brother, and with the assorted rogues making up Lovelace’s anti-Spectator club. Clearly Solmes is no match for Lovelace and it is no part of Richardson’s plan to make us believe that he presents a plausible alternative. There is however, one male character of whose worth Richardson does wish to convince us: Miss Howe’s much put-upon suitor, Mr Hickman. The postscript added to the second edition of the novel includes a stout defence of the incorrigibly bourgeois Hickman against those who have ‘objected to his meekness, to the tameness, as they would
have it to be’ of his character (IV, p. 560). And Hickman certainly needs defending. Throughout the novel he is made the butt of Miss Howe’s wit. She happily uses Lovelace as a cudgel to batter the poor man:

Then I have a quarrel against his face, though in his person, for a well thriven man, tolerably genteel—not to his features so much neither; for what, as you have so often observed, are features in a man? But Hickman, with strong lines, and big cheek and chin bones, has not the manliness in his aspect, which Lovelace has with the most regular and agreeable features.

Hickman cannot do anything right, particularly when compared to Lovelace: ‘sometimes he is too gaudy, at other times too plain’ (I, p. 242). Miss Howe is well aware of Hickman’s estimable qualities, his good breeding, his benevolence and generosity, his modesty and virtue. He even loves his horse. He appears, as she admits, to be the perfect husband and yet, ‘to own the truth, I cannot say I love the man: nor, I believe, ever shall’. The reason is that Hickman, like all good men, is a bore:

Strange! that these sober fellows cannot have a decent sprightliness, a modest assurance with them! Something debonair [...] which should show the ardour of their passion, rather than the sheepishness of their nature; for who knows not that love delights in taming the lion-hearted?

It is again clear that Lovelace is the model to which Hickman cannot possibly compare. Miss Howe follows this with a paean to ‘the hero’, the man of courage, fresh from ‘battles fought, and enemies overcome’. For her, every woman yearns for a man of spirit, partly to supply through his surfeit, her deficit of courage, but also because of the pleasure to be had from ‘subduing a heart no man living can appall’(I, p. 243). Later she argues that although a little politeness is necessary at the commencement of a courtship, a man must soon intermingle a little ‘insolence’ as men
'must not let us see that we can make fools of them'. Anna works up something of a lather on the subject of the requisite emotion:

And I think that smooth love; that is to say, a passion without rubs; in other words, a passion without passion; is like a sleepy stream that is hardly seen to give motion to a straw. So that sometimes to make us fear, and even, for a short space, to hate the wretch, is productive of the contrary extreme.

This, of course, fits precisely the behaviour of Lovelace up to this point in the novel. Miss Howe’s warning against excessive good looks in a spouse at this point rings rather hollow:

Your handsome husbands, my dear, make a wife’s heart ache very often; and though you are as fine a person of a woman, at the least, as he is of a man, he will take too much delight in himself to think himself more indebted to your favour than you are to his distinction and preference of you. (II, p. 103.)

That this declaration of indifference to looks is insincere is demonstrated by Miss Howe’s summing up of Lovelace’s attractions, after pressing marriage: ‘You will have a handsome man; a genteel man; he would be a wise man were he not vain of his endowments, and wild and intriguing’. The double meaning of intriguing undermines even the criticism; indeed, ‘wild and intriguing’ could almost be added to the list of endowments of which Lovelace is so vain. The contrast immediately drawn with Hickman is instructive. The note of resignation, even of boredom is unmistakable:

---

15 This attitude is also highly suggestive of the taste for the sublime, the fearfully thrilling, which will be discussed in chapter 6 below.
I believe Mr Hickman treads no crooked paths, but he hobbles ungracefully in a straight one. Yet Mr Hickman, though he *pleases* not my eye, nor *diverts* my ear, will not, I believe, *disgust* the one nor *shock* the other. (II, p. 177.)

As her criticism of Lovelace could just as easily pass for praise, so Miss Howe’s faint praise cannot help but damn Hickman. It is later in this same letter that Anna reveals what up to this point has barely been concealed:

I believe I know which of the two men so prudent a person as you would, at first have chosen; nor doubt I that you can guess which I would have made choice of if I might. (II, p. 178.)

The heroic paradigm of male sexual attractiveness, characterised by Miss Howe, is part of that ideological superstructure challenged by Richardson in his role as champion bourgeois values.16 Eagleton gives Richardson a central role in the feminization of values that took place in the eighteenth century. The aristocratic ideal of masculinity personified by Lovelace, ‘the barbarous values of militarism, naked dominance and male *hauteur*’ is replaced in Richardson’s work by the ‘fashionable virtues of uxoriousness, sensibility, civility and *tendresse*’ (p. 15).

In the postscript Richardson makes his values explicit in the advice he gives to women. After conceding that Hickman could not appeal to women as much as Lovelace or even the reformed rake, Belford (because, rather than in spite of, his ‘goodness of heart, and gentleness of manners, great assiduity, and inviolable and modest love’), he goes on to explain:

But in his character it was designed to shew, that the same man could not be everything; and so intimate to ladies, that in choosing companions for

---

life, they should rather prefer the honest heart of a Hickman, which would be all their own, than to risk the chance of sharing, perhaps with scores [...] the volatile mischievous one of a Lovelace: in short, that they choose, if they wished for durable happiness, for rectitude of mind, and not for speciousness of person or address: nor make a jest of a good man in favour of a bad one, one who would make a jest of them and of all their whole sex. (IV, p. 561.)

Before dealing more fully with Lovelace, one more contrast, or rather set of contrasts must be drawn, this time not with polar opposites but with the aspiring Lovelaces, his cronies, Belton, Mowbray, Tourville and Belford. Clarissa describes them each in turn. Belton is a jester, a drinker and a gambler, whose consumptive cough, Clarissa correctly predicts, is likely to curtail his revelries. He dresses ‘gaily, but not quite foppishly’ and his face ‘is of a fiery red, somewhat bloated and pimply’ (II, p. 226).

Mowbray is an altogether more impressive character, widely travelled, and possessing a ‘romancing air’. His appearance is striking:

- tall and comely in his person: bold and daring in his look: is a large-boned, strong man: has a great scar in his forehead, with a dent as if his scull had been beaten in there, and a seamed scar in his right cheek. (II, p. 227.)

Mowbray is irreligious and although he has ‘high notions of honour’ he ‘seems to have no great regard to morals’.

All of the friends dress ‘very gaily’ but of them all, Tourville is the dandy: ‘in his person and manners, [he is] more of what I call the coxcombe than any of his companions’. Despite the fact that he, ‘dresses richly’ and ‘would be thought elegant in the choice and fashion of what he wears’, Clarissa thinks him ‘rather tawdry than fine’. Tourville’s excessive interest in his ‘outside’ has led to a concomitant neglect of the
'inside'. Clarissa takes particular exception to his excessive flattery and affectation.

Belford, as Lovelace’s main correspondent and later, Clarissa’s champion, is a rather more substantial creation. Clarissa’s first impression is that Belford is a cut-price Lovelace. He is intelligent and eloquent, but not as quick as Lovelace and although he too paid attention to his dress, he ‘has not the advantages of person, nor from his dress, which Mr. Lovelace is too proud of’ (II, p. 228). Belford’s appearance is one of the subjects regularly returned to by Lovelace in his correspondence:

I remember, when I first saw thee, my mind laboured with a strong puzzle, whether I should put thee down for a great fool, or a smatterer in wit. Something I saw was wrong in thee, by thy dress. If this fellow, thought I, delights not so much in ridicule that he will not spare himself, he must be plaguy silly to take so much pains to make his ugliness more conspicuous than it would otherwise be. (III, p. 511.)

And again:

What indeed made me appear to be more wicked than thee was, that I being a handsome fellow, and thou an ugly one, when we started a new game and hunted it down, the poor frightened puss generally threw herself into my paws, rather than into thine: and then, disappointed, hast thou wiped thy blubber-lips, and marched off to start a new game, calling me a wicked fellow all the while. (IV, p. 455.)

In the very last conversation they have before Lovelace leaves on his fatal European tour, the subject is again Belford’s poor taste in clothes and lack of physical distinction. Lovelace offers to ‘bedizen’ Belford to his own taste. In exchange, Belford must administer to Lovelace’s spiritual needs: ‘thou shalt doctor my soul, and I will doctor thy body’ (IV, p. 487).
This group serves Richardson’s didactic purposes well - the rakes either reform or die prematurely. They also help to clarify some of Lovelace’s vices, presenting them to us for condemnation away from the dazzling brilliance of his personality. Yet what they finally achieve is not to point up the vice, but rather to emphasise the brilliance:

and I could not but observe often, how much Mr Lovelace excelled all his four friends in everything they seemed desirous to excel in. [...] All the others gave up to him when his lips began to open. The haughty Mowbray would call upon the prating Tourville for silence, and would elbow the supercilious Belton into attention, when Lovelace was going to speak. And when he had spoken, the words, Charming fellow! with a free word of admiration or envy, fell from every mouth. (II, p. 229.)

It is indicative of the hypnotic spell cast by Lovelace that Clarissa finds herself watching those lips so carefully.

A brief outline of the story of Clarissa leaves little doubt as to the villainy of Lovelace. The abduction and rape of the heroine and the various subterfuges and deceptions employed make the eventual dispatch of Lovelace by the injured party’s cousin seem entirely fitting. Yet such a précis loses the immense charm and attractiveness of the character. In the early stages of the novel Lovelace’s wit and verve outweigh the hints at a darker aspect. Even where Lovelace is censured in the early sections of the novel, it is the sort of criticism that any man might find bearable, or might even court:

You and I have thought him too gay, too inconsiderate too rash, too little an hypocrite to be deep. You see he never would disguise his natural temper (haughty as it certainly is). [...] Where he thinks contempt is due, he pays it to the uttermost.
This follows the special pleading undertaken by Miss Howe on Lovelace’s behalf that, ‘a brave, a learned, and a diligent man, cannot be naturally a bad man’, (I, p. 51) and leaves us in little doubt that one at least of the correspondents is well disposed towards the at this stage still passive participant in the proceedings. Furthermore it is difficult to disagree with Miss Howe that Clarissa’s feelings will ‘come out to be LOVE’, despite her protestation that she neither throbs nor glows (I, pp. 46-47).

In the way that Lovelace escapes his author in capturing an admiration that may not have been fully intended he resembles Milton’s Satan. It is not, however, the splendid, tragic hero of Books 1 and 2 of Paradise Lost that Lovelace calls to mind, but the ingenious tempter of Paradise Regained. Lovelace’s ‘satanic’ aspect is, in the early sections largely concealed. Only occasionally are we allowed glimpses, through slips of the tongue and figures of speech of what might be called his ‘true’ nature (although it has to be emphasised that so protean a character can never be reduced through essentialist manoeuvres to a convincing unity of selfhood). Thus we find Clarissa returning to a letter interrupted by Lovelace with, ‘Talk of the devil is an old saying’ (I, p. 52). Elsewhere, excusing his behaviour with regard to Clarissa’s family, he says that ‘those who act like angels, ought to have angels to deal with’, which leaves open the implication that he is a devil (I, p. 368).

Lovelace’s devilishness is one of the ways in which he resembles Dorimant in Etheredge’s The Man of Mode (1676). Dorimant is called a devil on six separate occasions, generally as an allusion to his persuasive charm. When his abandoned mistress, Loveit says, ‘I know he is a devil, but he has something of the angel yet undefaced in him, which makes him

so charming and agreeable that I must love him, be he never so wicked', the impression is that the devilishness contributes at least something to the attractiveness. Lovelace's wit, linguistic facility, satyriasis, casual elegance and easy charm all find ready parallels in Etheredge's rake. The Man of Mode retained the ability to shock and stimulate an eighteenth-century audience, as demonstrated by the fact that Steele felt the need to attack the play, and particularly the figure of Dorimant in The Spectator in 1711 and the issue was continued in John Dennis's A Defence of Sir Fopling Flutter in 1722. Steele's criticism of Etheredge's unscrupulous and yet irresistible hero might well have been one of the influences on Richardson's portrayal of a brilliant seducer given that his fiction represents, in some ways, the continuation of The Spectator by other means. As Steele's comments on the play may have influenced Richardson's depiction of a bad man, so, as I shall argue below, they may have influenced his creation of a good one.

Although we must take account of the fact that Lovelace is thrown into brilliant relief by the baleful Solmes, Clarissa certainly seems to favour Lovelace up to the point of her flight. She states that she is 'worthy of a better man than Mr. Solmes, both as to person and mind' (I, p. 374). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that better man is Lovelace, for whom she frequently reveals her admiration: 'it is impossible that any disguise can hide the grace of his figure' (I, p. 446). Perhaps the most striking evidence of Clarissa's growing attachment is that she appears to be jealous of 'Rosebud', the serving girl Lovelace decides to patronise. She engages in a paragraph of pure spite - perhaps her only display of malice in the novel - at the expense of a girl of whom she knows nothing (I, p. 352).

Clarissa's (and Miss Howe's) high regard for Lovelace's appearance is at least matched by that gentleman's own self-esteem. Lovelace admits to vanity, but only, paradoxically, with regard to his looks. He combines his admission with an attack on hypocrisy:

I have no notion of playing the hypocrite so egregiously, as to pretend to be blind to qualifications which every one sees and acknowledges. Such praise-begging hypocrisy! Such affectedly disclaimed attributes! Such contemptible praise-traps! But yet, shall my vanity extend only to *personals*, such as the gracefulness of dress, my debonair, and my assurance - self taught, self acquired, these! For my parts, I value not myself upon *them*. (I, p. 146.)

Lovelace's reasoning is paradoxical but not entirely without logical foundation. His appearance is unique and self created, all his own work. Intellectual ideas would not be his own, but part of the intellectual equipment that any educated man ought to have. Lovelace clearly, even accounting for irony and playfulness, has a high estimate not only of his own good looks but also of the importance of appearance. This high value placed on appearance is only justified when the dress is original. The unthinking following of fashion would, we might predict, be frowned upon by Lovelace. Clarissa diagnoses Lovelace's vanity at a very early stage in the novel:

If such a one happens to have genius, it seldom strikes deep into intellectual subjects. His outside usually runs away with him. To adorn, and perhaps, *intending* to adorn, to render ridiculous, that person, takes up all his attention. All he does is personal; that is to say, *for* himself: all he admires, *is* himself. (I, p. 205.)
Lovelace freely admits to a privileging of the external and physical over the internal and spiritual, even where other people are concerned. This is well demonstrated by his eagerness to have Clarissa embalmed after he has brought about her death. He seems close to madness as he writes:

Everything that can be done to preserve the charmer from decay shall also be done. And when she will descend to her original dust, or cannot be kept longer, I will then have her laid in my family vault, between my own father and mother. (IV, p. 375-76.)

Lovelace’s derangement is not limited to believing that Clarissa’s family will allow him to keep her body until it rots. Like a modern psychopathic serial killer, he wants a souvenir:

But her heart, to which I have such unquestionable pretentions, in which I had so large a share, and which I will prize above my own, I will have. I will keep it in spirits. (IV, p. 375-76.)

We are given a plausible psychological background for Lovelace’s character. Over-indulged and spoiled as a child, his first experience of love backfires, as, for the one and only time in his erotic career, he finds himself in the role of the mouse rather than the cat. He then cites revenge against women following this as the reason for his rakery. His continued ‘love’ of women after this is accounted for by a need for novelty and beauty inspired by the works of the poets. It is a need well satisfied by Clarissa’s great physical beauty. Lovelace, taking an unexpected stand on the side of objective value, argues that Clarissa refutes relativist conceptions of beauty. He quotes a Dryden couplet to the effect that the root of love is not in the face of the beloved, but ‘in the lover’s mind’. He then gives a verse by Cowley (which remains an effective statement of the relativism of beauty):
Beauty! thou wild fantastic ape,
Who dost in ev'ry country change thy shape:
Here black; there brown; here tawny; and there white;
Thou flatt'rer! Who comply'st with ev'ry sight!

Who hast no certain what, nor where.

Clarissa’s beauty, Lovelace asserts, would convince these sceptics and they would be compelled to ‘acknowledge the justice of the universal voice in her favour’. The argument is bolstered by an appeal to Shakespeare, which is clearly meant to be decisive (I, p. 150).

Since the first edition of Clarissa, considerable effort has been invested in attempting to ‘correct’ the view that Lovelace is the real hero of the novel. As John Butt puts it, ‘Lovelace appealed to contemporary readers almost as strongly as Clarissa’.20 In the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Angus Ross writes,

Richardson was stung by the wish expressed by many of his contemporaries for a ‘happy ending’ that would show Lovelace to have been good after all, a fit subject for repentance; and he constantly tried by many changes to make Lovelace more consistently wicked.21

As Sue Warrick Doederlein has shown, much criticism of the novel has shared Richardson’s early readers’ partiality to Lovelace, and has had a decidedly anti-Clarissa slant, viewing the rape with a ‘Lovelaceian detachment’, and emphasising Clarissa’s faults and weaknesses in favour of Lovelace’s linguistic brilliance and nihilistic modernity.22

---

20Butt, English Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century, p. 399.
22Doederlein, pp. 402-412.
Richardson's footnotes, postscript and often misleading table of contents have been joined more recently by Eagleton's heroic attempt to emasculate Lovelace. Eagleton's Lacanian analysis makes much of the fact that Clarissa exerts control over meaning, 'sustaining an enviable coherence of sense even through her worst trials', whilst Lovelace, 'lives on the interior of his prose, generating a provisional identity from the folds of his text, luxuriating in multiple modes of being'. This reverses the expected order, in which the transcendentally signifying phallus acts as the ultimate guarantor of the whole system of signs. Thus men 'will tend to view signs as stable and whole, ideal entities, external to the body', whilst women, 'will tend to live a more inward, bodily relationship to script' (p. 52).

Eagleton argues that Lovelace's 'misogyny and infantile sadism' are the results of pathetic oedipal urges, and the fear of Clarissa as reified phallus. The post-rape dream in which he becomes 'mother, father, child, lover', shows his inability to enter into the symbolic order - 'that stable system of gender roles'. Lovelace, for Eagleton, is not the Byronic hero, but an enfeebled rapist, yearning for power, eternally attempting to alleviate his fears of castration by serial seduction.

Eagleton sets himself against readings which emphasise Lovelace's positive qualities at the expense of Clarissa. Dorothy Van Ghent ridicules Clarissa and plays down her rape. She sees Lovelace and Clarissa as equal victims of their own sexuality. William Beatty Warner goes further in celebrating Lovelace as (in Eagleton's words) 'a Derridean jester misunderstood' whose task is to 'undo the matrix of truth and value

---

through which Clarissa would have us see, know and judge’. This Lovelace achieves by ‘winning our laughter and giving us pleasure’. Eagleton counters Warner’s post-structuralist apologetic by rubbing it up against the realities of rape and imprisonment. In doing so he firmly aligns himself with Richardson, or at least the Richardson of the second and subsequent editions.

And yet it is precisely Richardson’s frantic efforts to re-villainise Lovelace and emphasise the virtues of Clarissa and Hickman that alerts us to the futility of the attempt. We must agree that Lovelace is despicable and yet it is almost impossible to despise him. Like Dante’s pilgrim addressed by Francesca in the *Inferno*, we find that it is possible to abhor the sin without abhorring the sinner.

There is a profound, disabling contradiction at the heart of the depiction of male sexual attractiveness in *Clarissa*. We are told several times that superficial glamour and panache are trivial when compared to inner virtue and constancy. There is a loose association in the novel between male beauty and vice (strangely the same does not hold true for women: Clarissa is Lovelace’s equal in beauty). And yet we find that glittering vice retains our admiration more than dull virtue. The plot leaves Lovelace dead, and Hickman, eventually, with the hand of his beloved Anna. The bourgeois values of Hickman may have triumphed historically, but in the battle for hearts and minds fought on the plane of ideology, the aristocrat is victorious, despite the express intentions of the author. It is instructive to remember that nemesis for Lovelace comes not at the hands of Hickman but in the outré, even aristocratic, figure of cousin Morden - a character as

---

26 See Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa*, p. 66.
far removed from the humdrum world of parish council do-goodery as Lovelace himself. In *Clarissa*, therefore, we find the bourgeois novel relying on aristocratic glamour for its portrayal of male sexual attractiveness.

***

Steele’s discussion in *The Spectator* of the unsavoury morals of the leading characters in *The Man of Mode* concludes with a lengthy description of a man rendered elegant and graceful through virtue. He is unaffectedly fashionable and appears at ease in any situation. He has been created deliberately to offer an alternative to the seductive allure of Dorimant and other superficial gallants. Steele’s sketch of the ideal gentleman, ‘inexpressibly Graceful in his Words and Actions’ was filled in with exhaustive detail by Richardson in *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4).

The posthumous blackening of Lovelace we find in the Preface to *Sir Charles Grandison* is only partly a continuation of the attempt by the author to control the meanings of his text that we find in the second and subsequent editions of *Clarissa*. He is also trying to guide our responses to the hero of the new work, through the explicit contrast with the dastardly

---

28 *As Sir Charles Grandison* is less read today than Richardson’s other novels, a brief plot summary may be of use. Harriet Byron is abducted by the handsome and ruthless rake, Sir Hargrave Pollexfen, who attempts to force her into marriage. This fails and she is rescued from a carriage by Sir Charles Grandison. Harriet and Sir Charles fall in love, but he has a prior commitment to a beautiful Italian aristocrat, Clementina. Sir Charles and Clementina had been prevented from marrying because of the conflict between her devout Catholicism and his equally earnest and patriotic Anglicanism. The thwarted passion has, however left Clementina disconsolate and mentally unstable. Her family, therefore, accept a compromise and he travels to Italy to continue the relationship. Ultimately, Sir Charles’s refusal to convert proves too much for Clementina and she rejects him. He returns to England and marries Harriet.
Lovelace. Richardson claims that he has been persuaded by his friends to produce a counterweight to Lovelace, and so,

He has been enabled to obey these his Friends, and to complete his first design: And now, therefore, presents to the Public, in Sir CHARLES GRANDISON, the Example of a Man acting uniformly well thro' a Variety of trying Scenes, because all his Actions are regulated by one steady Principle: A Man of Religion and Virtue; of Liveliness and Spirit; accomplished and agreeable; happy in himself, and a Blessing to others. (p. 4.)

Sir Charles represents Richardson's attempt to rectify what he acknowledged to be the failings in Hickman. He had claimed that 'the same man could not be everything', but in the figure of Sir Charles we have someone who is everything: brave, courteous, ethical, intelligent, witty and breathtakingly beautiful.

In what is in some ways the defining moment of the novel, Harriet, the lovely and ultimately happy heroine, writes of what women require from a man. She describes a gathering at her grandmother's during which Sir Charles has been at his most enchanting. He charms everyone, at one point, in a surprisingly modern gesture, throwing himself on the floor to entertain the guests with amusing stories. Harriet writes that women, although fond of 'respect and observance', do not want men to be 'solemn, formal, grave'. What they most desire is a man who, 'should be a Rake in his address, and a Saint in his heart' (III, p. 93). 29

---

29 Jocelyn Harris's notes inform us that one of Richardson's correspondents, Lady Bradsheigh, had argued that Sir Charles should be given the 'Dress and Address of such a [moderate rake] (without his vices)', since 'sober Men [...] are too often formal, and disagreeable in their Manner, for want of a liberal education' (III, p. 476).
More than *Pamela* or *Clarissa, Grandison* is a novel shimmering with beautiful people. Sir Charles’s is offset by three beautiful women who all love him. As well as Harriet, there is the hauntingly melancholic Clementina, and the fiery Olivia. The principal focus is, however, on Harriet. Like Clarissa, she is very beautiful and accomplished. The second letter in the novel becomes almost comic in the excessive praise heaped on Harriet’s appearance and character. Over several pages of gushing prose the doting Mr. Greville lauds each aspect of her face and figure. Ignoring other expressions of praise, her beauty is mentioned seven times in the one letter. Typical of Greville’s hyperbole is his description of Harriet’s mouth:

> There never was so lovely a mouth. But no wonder; since such rosy Lips, and such ivory Teeth, must give beauty to a mouth less charming than hers. (p. 12.)

The first mention of Sir Charles makes it clear that she has found her match in physical beauty:

> Sir Charles Grandison is indeed a fine figure. He is in the bloom of youth. I don’t know that I have ever seen a handsomer or genteeler man. Well might his sister say, that if he married, he would break half a score hearts. (p. 138.)

Both descriptions are by men (that of Harriet penned by the conceited Greville, who knew that it would be shown to her) and so, as we might expect, the praise for Sir Charles is less ecstatic; nevertheless, Sir Charles is clearly strikingly good-looking. A more fulsome appreciation of Sir Charles’s appearance has to wait until Harriet writes to her cousin and intimate friend, Lucy Selby. As Greville had itemised Harriet’s physical perfection, so she (with considerably less pomposity than Greville) lists
Grandison’s. It is a description that mixes masculine and feminine qualities:

Sir Charles Grandison, in his person, is really, a very fine man. He is tall; rather slender than full: His face is a fine oval: He seems to have florid health; health confirmed by exercise.[...] His complexion seems to have been naturally too fine for a man: But as if he were above being regardful of it, his face is overspread with a manly sunniness.[...] I wonder what business a man has for such fine teeth, and so fine a mouth, as Sir Charles Grandison might boast of, were he vain.[...] Were kings chosen for beauty and majesty of person, Sir Charles Grandison would have few competitors.

Added to Grandison’s physical beauty is an ‘ease and freedom of manners’, the product of his ‘good breeding’ (which as Harriet prosaically puts it, ‘renders him very accessible’) which engender affection as well as reverence in those who meet him. Richardson’s challenge is to make Sir Charles fully desirable (in body as well as in mind) without placing a dangerous emphasis on transitory external features at the expense of social, ethical and intellectual eminence. He accomplishes this by suggesting that he would be desirable to Harriet even if he lacked his evident physical allure:

In a word, he has such an easy, yet manly politeness, as well in his dress, as in his address (no singularity appearing in either) that were he not a fine figure of a man, but were even plain and hard-featured, he would be thought (what is far more eligible in a man, than mere beauty) very agreeable.

In the first edition of the novel, Richardson is anxious to make Grandison as glamorous as possible and to this end he is made, if not a dandy, then certainly a man of fashion:
He dresses to the fashion, rather richly, 'tis true, than gaudily; but still richly: So that he gives his fine person its full consideration. He has a great deal of vivacity in his whole aspect; as well as in his eye. Mrs. Jenny says, that he is a great admirer of handsome women. His equipage is perfectly in taste, tho' not so much to the glare of taste, as if he aimed either to inspire or shew emulation. (pp. 182-83.)

From the alterations he made to the second and subsequent editions of the novel, it is clear that Richardson felt that he had over-done Sir Charles's rakishness. As with Clarissa, Richardson attempted to refine his moral and correct what he saw as improper readings of his text. The heroine, Harriet, was felt by many contemporary readers to be less sympathetic than the exotic Italian Clementina, who has a prior claim, ultimately renounced, over Sir Charles. Richardson in later editions attempted to temper Harriet's annoying combination of forwardness and palpitating weakness. More importantly for my purposes, he extends his revisions to removing some of the barely perceptible flaws in Grandison's near perfect character. Jocelyn Harris lists five ways in which Richardson made alterations between the first and third editions to protect his hero from criticism. His love for Clementina is de-emphasised to explain his apparent equanimity on her ultimate rejection of him (and to partly excuse the anomaly of a good man loving two women simultaneously); his occasional lapses into smugness and conceit are removed to avoid the charge of vanity; his somewhat unmanly priggishness and gullibility are toned down; his unworldly willingness to sacrifice his property to pay his father's debts is removed for a more realistic and sensible financial rectitude; and finally his occasional foppishness and gallantry is amended.

---

30 Jocelyn Harris sets out the revisions to the portrayal of Harriet and Sir Charles in the Introduction to Sir Charles Grandison at pp. xxviii-xxxii.
to remove the possibility of his being seen as a rake. Needless to say, these revisions serve to make Sir Charles a less complex and interesting character, but, in accordance with Richardson’s intentions, a better moral exemplar. The process was the exact reverse of the progressive blackening of Lovelace.

Although Lovelace haunts *Sir Charles Grandison*, the novel has an able villain of its own, in Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. He is a Lovelace shorn of intellectual brilliance and emotional complexity, but he has a certain panache:

Sir Hargrave Pollexfen is handsome and genteel; pretty tall; about twenty eight or thirty. His complexion is a little of the fairest for a man, and a little of the palest. He has remarkable bold eyes; rather approaching to what we would call goggling; and he gives himself airs with them as if he wish’d to have them thought rakish: Perhaps as a recommendation, in his opinion, to the ladies. [...] Lady Betty praising his person, said, Sir Hargrave had the finest eyes she ever saw in a man. They were manly *meaning* ones. (pp. 44-5.)

Like Lovelace, and Sir Charles, he has a degree of vanity in his dress, but he lacks their natural style, and he is given a comic dose of self-consciousness:

The taste of the present age seems to be dress: No wonder, therefore, that such a man as sir Hargrave aims to excel in it. What can be misbestowed by a man on his person, who values it more than his mind? But he would, in my opinion, better become his dress, if the pains he undoubtedly takes before he ventures to come into public, were less apparent: This I judge from his solicitude to preserve all in exact order, when in company; for he forgets not to pay his respects to himself at every glass; yet does it with a
seeming consciousness, as if he would hide a vanity too apparent to be concealed; breaking from it, if he finds himself observed, with a half-careless, yet seemingly dissatisfied air, pretending to have discover'd something amiss in himself. (p. 45.)

Pollexfen proves to be rather more sinister than Harriet suspects, abducting her, attempting a forced marriage and then, having failed, carrying her off into the country. Nevertheless, Pollexfen never quite carries the threat of Lovelace, or even the rampantly libidinous Mr B. of the first part of *Pamela*. Pollexfen is a cartoon villain, as ludicrous in the gothic excess of his wickedness as Grandison is unbelievable in his angelic goodness. When Pollexfen declares, 'your very terror is beautiful; I enjoy your terror' (p. 152) we are clearly in the realms of melodrama.

As with Mr B. and Lovelace, Pollexfen is compared to Satan. At a masquerade, Harriet encounters two men dressed in Lucifer costumes, but, 'the worst, the very worst Lucifer of all, appeared in an Harlequin dress' (I, p. 150). The situation of the masquerade, and the fancy dress again serve to render the figure of Pollexfen more comic than threatening. He is certainly no rival to Sir Charles, and Richardson seems to have taken great care that no impressionable young soul should fall for him in the way that so many fell for the protean charms of Lovelace. Sir Charles is unrivalled, but also in some ways unsatisfactory, particularly after some of his complexities (and one might say his humanity) have been removed by Richardson's endless tampering with his text. He remains, however, an admirable character, and in his sensitivity to women, his careful avoidance of violence and in his wit an unexceptionable ideal. But for all that, the ghost of Lovelace is not exorcised.

In Mr B., Lovelace, Hickman, Belford, Pollexfen and Sir Charles, Richardson created a range of male characters who to a degree both
embody existing ideas of male attractiveness and act as templates for future explorations of the possibilities of male sexual allure. The rake, reformed or otherwise, the satanic anti-hero, the perfect gentleman, all were to reappear endlessly in the succeeding two hundred years. Through the figure of Lovelace the restoration rake was born again to stalk through Romantic literature and he remains today a stock character, preying on innocence and virtue and sending a shiver of pleasure through the readers of women’s magazines and romantic fiction.

Two connected lines of intellectual descent from Lovelace will be traced in chapters 6 and 7 below. Richardson anticipates elements of the gothic - not just in the streak of sentimentality running through much gothic fiction, but also the themes of abduction, imprisonment, rape (or threatened rape), intrigue, and mystery. The Satanic elements in Richardson’s villains are reproduced, albeit in a different form in the gothic anti-heroes of Radcliffe and Lewis.

The second line culminated not in a fictional character, (unless we choose to view this particular adopted persona as fictional) but in a certain ‘super-Dandy [...] regarded as [...] a Satanic seducer of women, very much in the mould of Lovelace’. It is a tribute to Richardson’s art that sixty years after his creation, Lovelace, as Rupert Christiansen has noted, was still a real enough presence in Regency London to act as a rival to the latest literary sensation, Lord Byron.  

32 These two lines, which it has to be said are not completely distinct, became united in another character to be dealt with in depth below: Heathcliff. As Walter L. Reed puts it, ‘The only figure close to Heathcliff in his pre-eminence and passion is Lovelace.’ Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 85.
Chapter 4

WORSHIPPING BODIES: WINCKELMANN AND THE REBIRTH OF CLASSICAL HOMOEROTICISM

From the moment that Aschenbach, the ailing and fractious writer in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* first catches sight of the lovely youth, Tadzio, on the terrace of the Hôtel Excelsior, it is clear not only that his holiday is to acquire an unexpected interest, but also that the description of male beauty requires a particular tone and lexicon:

His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture - pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of godlike serenity.¹

Tadzio is seen with his three sisters, but from the outset it is only the boy who is subjected to the scrutinising gaze and rapt attention of Aschenbach. The girls are dressed alike with ‘an almost disfiguring austerity’ (p. 31). In contrast to their gracelessness, Tadzio appears as the perfect work of art. Repeatedly he is described in terms which conjure up images of classical statuary. His skin is ‘ivory-white against the golden darkness of his clustering locks’ (p. 31) and Aschenbach finds him ‘godlike and inexpressive’ (p. 37). Most explicitly we find the following description, as the writer is at the zenith of his infatuation:

His armpits were still as smooth as a statue’s, smooth the glistening hollows behind the knees, where the blue network of veins suggested that the body was formed of some stuff more transparent than mere flesh. What discipline, what

precision of thought were expressed by the tense youthful perfection of this form. (p. 50.)

Aschenbach seems incapable of seeing the boy as a human being; he has transformed him into an artistic creation, the expression of an artist's will. It is unclear whose thought is being expressed in the 'tense youthful perfection of this form'. Is it Tadzio's? God's? Aschenbach's? Or Thomas Mann's? Whoever is responsible for this supreme work of art, we are told that the same force is at work in Aschenbach as he strives, 'in cold fury to liberate from the marble mass of language the slender forms of his art which he saw with the eye of his mind and would body forth to men as the mirror and image of spiritual beauty' (p. 50).

*Der Tod in Venedig* was first published in 1912 when the explicit treatment of homosexual themes was still dangerous and provocative. Although Aschenbach's passion is explicitly homosexual, and eventually he does render himself ridiculous by his attempts to conceal the signs of his own physical decay, his infatuation is raised above the sordid, or even the mundanely human by the invocation of classical mythology and further exalted by the assimilation of the sacerdotal world of the artist and artistic creation. A third legitimising procedure follows with the seemingly inevitable reference to Platonism and Platonic love. From the fetid air and choking formality of Venice, Aschenbach finds himself transported to 'a hallowed, shady spot, fragrant with willow blossom', outside the walls of Athens:

Here Socrates held forth to youthful Phaedrus upon the nature of virtue and desire, wooing him with insinuating wit and charming turns of phrase. He told him of the shuddering and unwonted heat that comes upon him whose heart is open, when his eye beholds an image of eternal beauty; spoke of the impious and corrupt, who cannot conceive beauty though they see its image, and are capable of awe; and of the fear and reverence felt by the noble soul when he
beholds a godlike face or a form which is a good image of beauty; how as he gazes he worships the beautiful one and scarcely dares look upon him, but would offer sacrifice as to an idol or a god, did he not fear to be thought stark mad. (pp. 51-52.)

In the way that male beauty is foregrounded at the expense of the near exclusion of female beauty, in the conceptualising of that beauty in terms of classical representations of the Greek gods, in the idealising of male relationships based on Plato's dialogues, and perhaps most of all in the rapture that appears as the only true response to beauty, the fictional world of *Death in Venice* is quite clearly one that could not have existed in the same form without the art-historical writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

The influence of Winckelmann on the way that educated Europeans responded to the art of classical antiquity, and through that to representations of beauty (male and female, but most significantly, male) can be seen in two accounts of what, until the middle of the nineteenth century, was generally held to be the greatest ancient work of art: the Apollo Belvedere. Joseph Spence (1699-1768) brought out a work in 1747 which attempted to link descriptions of the gods in Roman poetry to surviving works of classical art. His account is properly respectful, but it cannot be said to be dry or unenthusiastic. There is a full appreciation of the fact that beauty is a quality as appropriate to the description of the male form as the female:

His features are all extremely beautiful, according to our common ideas of beauty; beside which, his face has sometimes an air of divinity diffused over it, (and particularly in the Apollo Belvedere,) of which we should have no idea at

---

*Polymetis: or, an Enquiry concerning the Agreement between the Works of the Roman Poets, and the Remains of the Antient Artists* (London: 1747; second edition 1755). In this and the following extract I have quoted from an anthology of responses to Greek culture, *English Romantic Hellenism 1700-1824*, ed. by Timothy Webb (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982).
all, without the help of the artist. He is always young and beardless; and his
long beautiful hair, when unconfined, falls in natural easy waves, all down his
shoulders; and sometimes over his breast. His stature is free and erect. His
limbs, are exactly proportioned; with as much of softness in all of them, as is
consistent with strength: and with a grace resulting from the whole, which is
more easily felt than described; and which indeed it would be very impertinent
to pretend to describe, to anyone who has seen the Apollo Belvedere. (p. 87.)

It is not that Spence is embarrassed by male beauty: his tone is admiring, but
his interest is primarily in revealing the supposed connections between the
plastic and literary arts of antiquity. When we move on to the response of the
Scottish poet Thomas Campbell to the Apollo Belvedere the difference is
immediately apparent. Campbell visited the Louvre in 1814, after the Apollo
and a number of other works had been acquired by Napoleon on his Italian
campaigns. The decorous appreciation of the scholar is replaced by the
enthusiasm of the Romantic poet:

Oh, how that immortal youth - Apollo! in all his splendour - majesty - divinity -
flashed upon us from the end of the gallery! What a torrent of ideas - classically
associated with this godlike form - rushed upon me at this moment! My heart
palpitated - my eyes filled with tears - I was dumb with emotion. [...] It was
really a day of tremulous ecstasy. The young and glorious Apollo is happily
still white in colour. He seems as if he had just leapt from the sun! All pedantic
knowledge of statuary falls away, when the most ignorant in the arts finds a
divine presence in this great created form! (pp. 227-28.)

Obviously there are differences that one would expect, between a scholarly
work and a personal letter, and even more between a text typical of the mid-
eighteenth century and one belonging firmly to the Romantic period.
Nevertheless, whatever the generic differences between the two texts,
Winckelmann's writings present themselves as the most important single influence on the change in attitude that has occurred.

Perhaps the most startling difference is the shift of focus, which had been exclusively on the work of art in the earlier piece, to the subjective state of the observer in the extract from Campbell. That emphasis on the subjective response, coupled with the religious intensity of the experience, is readily traceable to Winckelmann. Campbell's debt, which is also the debt of every 'sensitive' Englishman of the period finding himself worshipping before the shrine of classical art is made abundantly clear from the following passage. The translation is by Fuseli, and was published in 1765:

Wrapt in astonishment I forget what's around me; and to add dignity to contemplation, fancy myself more than man; my breast dilates to adore that which swells with the spirit of prophecy, Delos rises before me, the Lycian groves, Dodona nod! but my strength forsakes me, art only can describe what art has painted: what I wrote of thee, stupendous image, I lay at thy feet, like the wreaths of those who could not reach the head of the divinities they came to worship!³

By any definition Winckelmann (1717-68) was an extraordinary character. The manifold contradictions of his personality are well caught by Peter Gay in The Science of Freedom:

³English Romantic Hellenism 1700-1824, p. 128-29. I have used Fuseli's partial translation from sections of The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks reprinted in this volume in this case because it was the only available translation at the time Campbell was writing his effusions. The other extracts from The History employ the only complete translation by G. Henry Lodge, published in 1830.
A propagandist on behalf of men’s dignity and artists’ freedom, he abased
himself all his life before his patrons in language that was servile even for the
eighteenth century. A discoverer and enormously influential interpreter of
ancient Greece, he never reached Greek soil; all the Greece he saw was in Italy,
and in his mind. An unbeliever from his schooldays on and a follower of French
philosophes despite his pronounced Francophobia, he allowed himself to be
converted to Roman Catholicism that he might find helpful patronage in Italy:
he turned Catholic without becoming a Christian. An advocate of the classical
theory that beauty is an objective phenomenon, he discovered his own
preferences through the most subjective of all passions - his erotic impulses. A
pioneering historian of ancient art, he judged art as a sovereign and opinionated
judge, dealing out praise and censure in the most unhistoric manner possible;
his conception of style, though a remarkable diagnostic instrument, was at the
same time impregnated with value judgements.4

What might be regarded as the inconsistencies in Winckelmann’s personal
life, which may be seen as symbolising some of the difficulties in his writings,
are brought out in the well-known anecdote of his discovery by Casanova in
the act of buggering a young boy. Winckelmann neither attempted to conceal
what had been happening, nor tried to justify the open adoption of Socratic
love in the contemporary world. Rather he explained it as part of his own
disappointingly unsuccessful attempt to acquire the moral and intellectual
perfection of the ancients, through an education of the senses.

Pater’s account of the passionate friendships with ‘the many young men
more beautiful than Guido’s archangel’ paraphrases Winckelmann’s
explanation:

These friendships, bringing him into contact with the pride of the human form, and staining the thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek culture.\textsuperscript{5}

But try as he might, and no matter how enticingly lovely the youths, he remained incapable of reaching either a fully satisfactory enlightenment or emission. In what sounds like Casanova's own ironic addendum to the story, Winckelmann finally claims that he in fact prefers women, but the risk of scandal prevented him from seeking a mistress.\textsuperscript{6}

The contradictions so evident in Winckelmann's life and work are echoed in the modern disagreements over his status and importance. Denis Sweet, in 'The Personal, the Political and the Aesthetic: Johann Winckelmann's German Enlightenment Life' presents Winckelmann as an advanced, free-thinking liberal, a gay hero and martyr, pioneering the acceptance of Homosexuals by increasing awareness of male beauty and opening the modern mind to the homoeroticism central to Greek culture.\textsuperscript{7}

Sweet's arguments are challenged by Kevin Parker in his article, 'Winckelmann, Historical Difference, and the Problem of the Boy'.\textsuperscript{8} Parker's more critical account of Winckelmann's work takes issue with his use and interpretation of Greek culture. Parker agrees that sexuality is the key to understanding Winckelmann's approach to the Greeks, but it is given a different, and less sympathetic reading:

\textsuperscript{6}The story is translated by Potts, \textit{Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1994), p. 212. It is possible, given Casanova's cavalier attitude to the truth that the whole story is simply an entertaining lie, but Potts certainly credits the account up to the accusation of closet heterosexuality.
It is quite obvious that Winckelmann’s approach to art and history in his work is informed by a certain very stylised homoeroticism. “Male beauty” is held in the highest esteem in the History while “female beauty” is marginalized. (p. 532.)

My analysis of Winckelmann in this section will involve a series of responses to Parker’s broadly critical position, which might be summarised as the view that Winckelmann’s approach to art and beauty is frigid, racist, misogynist and heavily implicated in the reinforcement of an oppressive social structure.

Perhaps the most difficult to refute of the charges against Winckelmann is that of his exclusion of the feminine. As I discuss below, Winckelmann uses powerful female images to represent the inhuman, sexless sublime, thus radically destabilising the traditional dichotomy between the ‘feminine’ beautiful and the ‘masculine’ sublime, but it has to be accepted that Winckelmann’s attention is directed disproportionately towards images of male beauty. Alex Potts, in his sympathetic and insightful study, sees this ‘blanking out of the feminine’ as the pathological symptom, not of homosexuality, but of a more general and widespread misogyny. The great male nudes which elicit Winckelmann’s most ecstatic prose poems are not, Potts argues, ‘androgynous beings’, or objects of bisexual longing, but rather they exist at a level that simply has no place for the feminine:

They are male figures that seem to require no female other, obliterating in their self-sufficient plenitude the psychic landscapes of the feminine. Or if we are to be psychoanalytic, Winckelmann’s antique ideal radically represses the feminine.9

9Potts, p. 131.
Winckelmann’s lack of interest in female beauty is not excused by Potts, but it is depersonalised and made part of a wider problem. More interestingly Potts interprets the fascination with this same male self-sufficiency as part not only of his devotion to male beauty but also as part of Winckelmann’s respect for liberty and his deep personal longing for freedom. Winckelmann believed that great art could only be produced in a ‘free’ society, but beyond that, the art of Classical Greece actually embodied freedom in the form of the male nude:

freedom is not just the condition that makes possible the imaginative creation of an ideal beauty. It is also the subjective state of being figured by that beauty, through its apparent embodiment of a state of unconstrained narcissistic plenitude, which he identifies most immediately with the self-absorbed, free-standing, naked male figure. (p. 4.)

The Apollo Belvedere therefore not only stands as a product of a free society but also stands for that free society; it requires nothing outside itself, craves nothing from the viewer. Autonomous and complete, it represents an ideal state, in contrast to the female figure:

The ideal erotic figure for him is not a feminine object offered up for the delectation and domination of a male gaze. It is rather a finely formed male body. As such it becomes for the male viewer both an object of desire and an ideal subject with which to identify. (p. 5.)

If Winckelmann cannot be acquitted of the charge of devaluing the feminine, surely he must be seen as an important early propagandist on behalf of an oppressed and persecuted minority? For Parker the notion that Winckelmann was a homosexual at all in the modern sense is open to question; he helpfully reminds us that the very concept of homosexuality is problematic when applied to the eighteenth century:
Winckelmann’s appropriation of Platonic erotics for art historical discourse was less the result of the grounded referent “homosexuality” than a significant contribution to the modern encoding of the signified “homosexuality”. [...] I am not attempting to put Winckelmann back in the closet, but rather insisting that sexuality does not escape encodation nor historization.¹⁰

Parker sees it as crucial to our understanding of Winckelmann that his analysis was focused on a culture and society that has passed away. The ancient Greeks were superb practitioners, but poor theorists, of art. The modern world, whilst sadly fallen in its artistic productions can, at least, theorise successfully. As Parker writes,

> It is because the Greeks excelled in their art that they did not feel compelled to write about it as well as the moderns, who write about it well because they are poor in art. Winckelmann’s *History* is premised upon the death of the Greeks and with their death the death of the circumstances that gave rise to the highest expression of the beautiful. (p. 528.)

This is the source of Winckelmann’s melancholy, but it is also his protection. Focusing his ‘longing gaze’ on the Greeks gives Winckelmann three layers of insulation from the troubling presence of sexuality: History, Art and Philosophy. The first is the historical distance of the subject (the ancient Greeks are, after all, ancient). Secondly, Winckelmann’s effusions were directed to works of art. The Antinous, of which Winckelmann wrote, ‘I can find nothing that can compare with the face, over which such an expression of voluptuousness is diffused that his whole life seems to be merely a long kiss’,¹¹ is only a statue and even in the eighteenth century pygmalianism, irrespective of orientation, remained outside the penal code. The third protective layer is

---

¹⁰Parker, p. 536
¹¹Quoted by Parker, p. 531
provided by Winckelmann's appropriation of Plato's 'solution' to 'the problem of the boy'. Rather than entangling himself in the elaborate network of moral injunctions surrounding the subject of boy-love in ancient Athens, Plato switches attention to the eternal form of the Beautiful and the transcendent concept of Love. As Parker writes:

The problem of the boy had been initially a question of ethics and the regulation of practices in the lived world. When Plato gets hold of this ethical problem in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Symposium*, it undergoes a crucial change. Plato wishes to win over love as an object of knowledge, rather than as a lived ethical problem. He accomplished this change of register by displacing the boy as the locus of his enquiry, and turns instead to the ontological problem presented by the concept of love itself. [...] With this substitution of the object of love for the contemplation of love itself, the discourse of beauty developed around the adolescent body is transformed into the contemplation of "absolute beauty". (p. 539.)

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato, through the metaphor of the Charioteer, advocates the control of passion as the only way to true wisdom and happiness. Lovers, led to each other by the longing for beauty, must endeavour towards that chaste friendship by which the soul gains its wings and joins the celestial plane:

If the victory be won by the higher elements of mind guiding them into the ordered rule of the philosophical life, their days on earth will be blessed with happiness and concord, for the power of evil in the soul has been subjected, and the power of goodness liberated; they have won self mastery and inward peace.¹³

¹²The problem of the boy is the subject of Part Four of Michel Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*, volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality* (London: Viking, 1986).
Parker's argument is that by elevating ancient beauty, Winckelmann effectively neutralises the immediate effects of desire. What might be termed 'erotic art' for Winckelmann is the extreme opposite of pornography: it does not incite desire, it assists in its sublimation. As Parker puts it, 'The seductive spell of the other's lived body, the body that invites the caress, and whose presence is excessive in the most overwhelming way, has been broken' (p. 543). Winckelmann's work, Parker asserts is 'liberal' only in the most sneering and derogatory sense of the word:

Winckelmann's work is the kind of bourgeois liberalism that champions "democracy" at the expense of women, the uncapitaled and non-Europeans, and which initiates a regime of chaste auto-surveillance with respect to the sensate body in the name of the aesthetic. Winckelmann's revision of Platonic Eros plays a key role in this allegory, insofar as women are excluded from the domain of the true, the economically disenfranchised from a properly leisured relationship to beauty and the non-European from the beneficence of nature. (p. 536-37.)

The free-thinking democrat presented by Sweet undermines his own supposed agenda:

The History accomplished nothing less than a reinscription of the privileges of an oligarchy, in a fictionalized image of a free, Athenian, democratic state. The leisure that allowed the Greeks to pursue their loves at the gymnasium was premised upon a sexist, colonial and slave economy, just as the patronage and leisure that permitted Winckelmann to inspect antique works of art was premised upon the beginning of a newer reification of class in eighteenth century Europe. (p. 537.)

Parker's account contains many insights and is an important corrective to Sweet's enthusiasm. Nevertheless it contains its own misrepresentations and
misreadings. The most surprising of these, given Parker's declared aim of emphasising the importance of 'historical difference' to contemporary art historical discourse,¹⁴ concern his approach to other cultures and historical periods. In particular his uncritical employment of twentieth-century terms ('sexist', 'racist', 'colonial') to describe ancient Athens appears woefully unhistorical. Parker also fails to understand the radicalism of proposing Athens rather than Rome as the example to be followed. Winckelmann was both swimming against the current of Enlightenment thought on the importance of the Ancient world and taking up a dangerously progressive political position.

For the European Enlightenment, Rome was generally regarded as the pre-eminent civilising influence. As Peter Gay puts it, 'the philosophes, like the culture around them, drew their intellectual sustenance from Rome rather than from Greece - from Roman Stoics, Roman Epicureans, and Roman Eclectics'.¹⁵ Moshe Barasch brings out the political implications of Winckelmann's elevation of Athens over Rome:

There could have been many reasons for this implied criticism of the Roman model and its influence on the art and thought of Europe. Winckelmann's work [...] betrays a certain outrage against the despotism of the ancien regime. Now both the regime and its despotism drew their legitimation from a Roman imperial model. The rejection of modern despotism may have affected also the sources of legitimation. Rome was likewise intimately linked with the Christian tradition. It was the Roman Catholic Church that dominated not only the Middle Ages but also the kingdoms of the present.¹⁶

¹⁴As he puts it, 'The topic of difference has been taken up a number of times in recent art historical writing, especially when that writing deals with issues of gender, ethnographic representation, or the ideology of the aesthetic. On the other hand, relatively little effort has been expended in recent art history on historical difference.' (p. 524.)
Parker gives Winckelmann no credit whatsoever for his challenging advocacy of radical Athenian democracy over Roman Imperialism (and for that matter over the authoritarian martial supremacy of the Spartans, so much admired by Rousseau\textsuperscript{17}).

The same lack of historical understanding condemns Winckelmann for making use of established social structures to gain access to works of art and for avoiding explicit references to sexual conduct at a time when homosexual acts still carried the heaviest of penalties. Gay's verdict seems infinitely fairer than Parker's, without being blind to Winckelmann's weaknesses:

Perverse and pitiful, Winckelmann \textit{was} a genius, and his life, though unedifying, sordid, and pathetic, \textit{was} the triumph of that genius over his neuroses. Winckelmann was dominated by a single longing, inadequately sublimated, for male affection, which burst out in repeated, always disappointing, and in the end fatal attachments to men whom he loved more passionately than they loved him. But while his homoerotic inclinations ruined his life, they sharpened, concentrated his perceptions. If masculine friendship and masculine beauty were forever unattainable to him, or at best imperfect, they had existed in pure form in ancient Greece, and it was on ancient Greece that he expended all his imagination, all his hard-won learning, all his abnormally developed sensibility. Had he been rich, it might have mattered little; he would have been a superb dilettante, a greater Caylus. But he was abysmally poor, and thus he begged and lowered himself for the sake of getting the education, the books, the environment he needed.[...] It was an abject life, and he hated it, but it gave him time to read the classics and to see in Potsdam

\textsuperscript{17}In \textit{The Discourse on the Arts and Sciences}, for example, we find the following paean to Spartan virtue: 'Can it be forgotten that at the very heart of Greece there arose a city as famous for the happy ignorance of its inhabitants, as for the wisdom of its laws; a Republic of demi-gods rather than of men, so greatly superior their virtues seemed than those of mere humanity?' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{The Social Contract and Discourses}, trans. by G. D. H. Cole, revised by J. H. Brumfitt and John C. Hall (London: Dent, 1973), p. 10.
and Dresden a good deal of antique and Renaissance art. Little though this was, it permitted him to develop the principles underlying his history of art.\textsuperscript{18}

A more important error stems from Parker's partial reading of the \textit{Phaedrus}. At first reading this dialogue certainly appears to advocate the austerity and chastity so derided by Parker - particularly if we contrast it with the intense eroticism of the \textit{Symposium}, of which Stanley Rosen has written, 'both the content of the speeches and the metaphors of the language are frankly sexual'.\textsuperscript{19} Certainly the ideal is a love of beauty leading the lover and the beloved on to the 'ordered rule of the philosophical life'.\textsuperscript{20} Plato is careful, however to make available a second prize for those who cannot quite gain mastery over their appetites. Far from condemning all sexual congress, Plato grants it a certain glory:

But if they turn to a way of life more ignoble and unphilosophical, yet covetous of honour, then mayhap in a careless hour, or when the wine is flowing, the wanton horses in their two souls will catch them off their guard, bring the pair together, and choosing that part which the multitude account blissful achieve their full desire. And this once done, they continue therein, albeit but rarely, seeing that their minds are not wholly set thereupon. Such a pair as this also are dear friends [...] both in the time of their love and when love is past, for they feel that they have exchanged the most binding pledges, which it were a sin to break by becoming enemies. When death comes they quit the body wingless indeed, yet eager to be winged, and therefore they carry off no mean reward for their lover's madness, for it is ordained that all such as have taken the first steps on the celestial highway shall no more return to the dark pathways beneath the

\textsuperscript{20}Plato, \textit{The Collected Dialogues}, p. 501.
earth, but shall walk together in a life of shining bliss, and be furnished in due time with like plumage the one to the other, because of their love. (p. 502.)

This aspect of Plato's thought is brought out by Iris Murdoch in a useful comparison with Kant:

A difference between Kant and Plato is that Plato insists that approach to the central Idea (pure goodness, the Form of the Good) comes through a difficult disciplined purification of intellect and passion, wherein passion (Eros) becomes a spiritual force. Whereas Kant regards 'feelings' as dangerous to morality, sharply divides (noumenal) reason from (phenomenal) emotion, and stresses that dutiful action is something of which every man is immediately capable.  

Rather than suppressing sexuality, and in particular the homoerotic aspects of sexuality, we find that Winckelmann's texts drip with a heady and intoxicating eroticism. Two linked passages from the *Essay on the Beautiful in Art* illustrate eloquently the close association between Winckelmann's view of beauty and his passionate interest in the male form. In the first Winckelmann describes the growth the sense of beauty in the adolescent. The language is highly suggestive of awakening sexuality. The feeling for beauty comes 'cloaked in dark and confused emotions and appears like a passing itch in the skin which one cannot actually locate when one tries to scratch it.'  

Intriguingly, this feeling, Winckelmann tells us, is found more often in good looking boys than their less fortunate companions, 'since our thinking is usually determined by our constitution'. Why there should be a constitutional link between being beautiful and appreciating beauty is not explained. The

---


second passage is even more revealing. In it we find the clearest statement of
Winckelmann’s homoerotic aesthetic:

I have found that those who are only aware of beauty in the female sex and are
hardly or not at all affected by beauty in our sex, have little innate feeling for
beauty in art in a general and vital sense. The same people have an inadequate
response to the art of the Greeks, since their greatest beauties are more of our
sex than the other. (p. 92.)

Winckelmann makes an appreciation of male beauty (and crucially, we
notice, he means the beauty of living human beings as well as the beauty of
artistic representations of the human form) if not a prerequisite, then at least an
indicator of a true understanding of art. His attempt to penetrate to the heart of
beauty is surely given impetus by his own unconcealed relish for the naked
male form. His metaphors are often laden with the language of sexual congress:
‘Beauty seemed to beckon me, - probably that same beauty which exhibited
herself to the great artists, and allowed herself to be felt, grasped, and
figured.’23

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Winckelmann’s championing of
the Greek world did have a number of implications disconcerting to late
eighteenth-century society. As well as the political aspect, Sweet is correct in
maintaining the disorienting possibilities of Winckelmann’s Hellenistic
homoeroticism. As Potts concludes,

The Greek ideal’s embodiment of desirable manhood threatened to blur the
distinction between an allowable homoerotic feeling and a prohibited sexual

---

23Winckelmann, The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks trans. by G. Henry Lodge (London: John
Chapman, 1850), p. 31.
desire between men, particularly as ancient Greek culture was widely known to have been favourably disposed to homosexuality.\textsuperscript{24}

It is this very approach, the approach of the enraptured gaze and the passionate association with the ideal images of ancient Greece, which Winckelmann claims has granted him a true understanding of beauty. Philosophers before him have failed to comprehend beauty for two reasons. Firstly, and crucially, they have not actually seen any of the works of the ancient masters, which had been either lying undiscovered in inaccessible parts of the Ottoman Empire, or closely guarded by collectors (including the vast hordes kept hidden by the Vatican). Secondly, the practise of aesthetics has been erroneous. Philosophers, have, ‘from reading the works of their gloomy predecessors’,

but little room left for the feelings, over which they have, as it were, drawn an insensible cuticle, and we have consequently been led through a labyrinth of metaphysical subtlety and wordiness, which have principally served the purpose of producing big books, and disgusting the understanding. (p. 29.)

Winckelmann sees his own task as peeling back that cuticle and exposing his soul to the works of antiquity. The same beauty that ‘seemed to beckon’ Winckelmann turns out, however, to be something of a coquette,

For beauty is one of the great mysteries of nature, whose influence we all see and feel; but a general distinct idea of its essential must be classed among the truths yet undiscovered. If its idea were geometrically clear, men would not differ in their opinions upon the beautiful and it would be easy to prove what true beauty is. (pp. 31-32.)

I have avoided so far the vexed question of what exactly it is that Winckelmann meant by beauty. Winckelmann defines it in vague and

\textsuperscript{24}Potts, p. 5.
metaphoric terms; beauty is like ‘the best kind of water, drawn from the spring itself; the less taste it has, the more healthful it is considered, because free from all foreign admixture’. The key concept is ‘unspecificity’:

From unity proceeds another attribute of lofty beauty, unspecificity; that is, the forms of it are described neither by points nor by lines other than those which shape beauty merely, and consequently produce a figure which is neither peculiar to any particular individual, nor yet expresses any one state of the mind or affection of the passions, because these blend with it strange lines, and mar the unity.

Great art (meaning, for the most part, Greek art), for Winckelmann, embodies the mystical Umbezeichnung of the Ideal in a way that nature cannot. Nature incites our passions, gratifying our senses, but art appeals to the mind and to the faculty of reason. One exception, however, is allowed. Greek artists had two great advantages. First, and most obviously, the manifold glories of Greek culture, its philosophers, historians and statesmen, created an environment in which high art could not but flourish. Secondly, and here we find Winckelmann at his most lyrical, nature, for once, supplied models for artists that could hardly be improved upon. In On the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks we read:

The most beautiful body of ours would perhaps be as much inferior to the most beautiful Greek one, as Iphicles was to his brother Hercules. The form of the Greeks, prepared to beauty, by the influence of the mildest and purest sky, became perfectly elegant by their early exercises. Take a Spartan youth, sprung from heroes, undistorted by swaddling-cloths; whose bed, from his seventh year, was the earth, familiar with wrestling and swimming from his infancy; and

25Quoted in Barasch, Modern Theories of Art, p. 114.
26Barasch, p. 115.
27See Barasch, pp. 120-21.
compare him with one of our young sybarites, and then decide which of the two would be deemed worthy, by an artist, to serve for the model of a Theseus, an Achilles, or even a Bacchus. The latter would produce a Theseus fed on roses, the former a Theseus fed on flesh.28

Climate, for Winckelmann, was the single most important factor in generating the perfect physical form of Greek man- (and boy-) hood, and I shall detail his views below. The Greeks, however, retained their natural beauty through exercise and diet and by avoiding 'deforming custom'. Winckelmann gives the example (rather a fey one) of Alcibiades steering clear of flute-playing to avoid those well known disfiguring injuries associated with that hazardous pastime (p. 63).

More importantly, the looseness of Greek dress, and the frequent abandonment of clothing altogether, circumvented the deformities caused by the 'modern stiffening habit' and 'squeezing stays' (p. 63). After noting that 'those diseases which are destructive of beauty, were [...] unknown to the Greeks', by which he meant small-pox and syphilis, Winckelmann concludes:

And must we not then, considering every advantage which nature bestows, or art teaches, for forming, preserving, and improving beauty, enjoyed and applied by the Greeks; must we not then confess, there is the strongest probability that the beauty of their persons excelled all we can have an idea of? (p. 63.)

With the streets of Athens daily teeming with Ganymedes and Narcissi, Winckelmann argues that it was inevitable that the Greeks would value personal beauty highly. As an explanatory hypothesis this is of little use. It could equally be argued that a glut of beauty would undermine the currency - scarcity rather than profusion tends to generate value - but however it was that

28 Winckelmann, Writings on Art, p. 62.
beauty became valued, once it had achieved its status as the most desirable of qualities, those Greeks who had it, flaunted it:

Since therefore beauty was desired and prized by the Greeks nothing was concealed which could enhance it. Every beautiful person sought to become known to the whole nation by this endowment, and especially to please the artists, because they decreed the prize of beauty; and for this very reason they had an opportunity of seeing beauty daily. Beauty was an excellence which led to fame; for we find that the Greek histories make a mention of those who were distinguished for it.29

Personal beauty was not simply an end in itself for Winckelmann: it was the single most important causal factor in the emergence of Greek sculpture, and therefore central to the history of western art. The greatness of the art of the Greeks stems from their worship of personal beauty and the decline in artistic excellence traceable in the Roman art is directly attributed, by Winckelmann, to the waning of that agreeable religion.30

In chapter 2 of The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks, Winckelmann tackles what he sees as the main objection to his Platonic aesthetic, that beauty is always and everywhere the same, and that unity personified by the beauty of the Greeks and it is here that the most incendiary of the accusations made by Parker, that of racism must be addressed. If beauty is an unchanging, ideal form, then how can the fact that other cultures have different standards of (personal) beauty be accommodated? In attempting to put the problem into

29Winckelmann, The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks, p. 7.
30The worship of beauty was not, of course, the only reason given by Winckelmann for the high accomplishments of Greek artists. Other factors listed include: the humanity and gentleness of the Greek character and culture, again contrasted with the Romans and their love of savage entertainments (pp. 8-9); the political independence of the Greek cities; the advantages of early education; the general high regard for wisdom and finally the fact that Greek artists worked not for some small minded patron in a crabbed and tasteless private residence, but for the public, in grand public buildings, and with their sights set firmly on immortality (pp. 17-20).
proportion by ‘domesticating’ it, Winckelmann only succeeds in bringing home its radical challenge to his own position:

It ought not to create surprise that our ideas of beauty are [...] very different from those among the Chinese and Indian nations when we reflect that we ourselves rarely agree in every particular respecting a beautiful face.31

The problem is partly explained away in terms of the physiological differences between individuals: ‘the different ideas of the forms which constitute beauty are probably dependent on the nature of the nerves’ (p. 35). Winckelmann seems to be on unfamiliar ground here and his analogy with the world of horticulture is strained and unconvincing:

This is conceivable from the innumerable kinds of fruit and the innumerable varieties of the same fruit, whose different shape and taste are elaborated through diverse filaments, by the interlacing of which the tubes are woven, within which the sap ascends, is purified and ripens. (p. 35.)

The argument that, as the constitutions of different species of trees produces different types of fruit, so the different arrangements of nerves in people will induce various views on beauty is an example of the biological paradigm in its most, one might say, fruitless form. The analogy is specious and empty: all differences, large and small between people could be explained in such terms. By excluding nothing it explains nothing.

For Winckelmann, however, the differing views of beauty brought about by physiology are unimportant and peripheral and he returns to the larger problem of those

who question the correctness of all conceptions of beauty—[who] found their doubts principally on the notions of the beautiful existing among remote

---

31 Winckelmann, The History of Ancient Art Among the Greeks, p. 32
nations, which must be different from ours in conformity to the differences in
the shape of their faces. (p. 37.)

Winckelmann’s response is to claim both that African and Oriental faces differ
from what can still be maintained as a standard of beauty, and that within other
cultures the same universal laws could be detected, albeit concealed and
primitively expressed.

The norm he maintains is, of course, the standard of beauty to be found in
Europe and in particular in Greece, the area with the most suitable climate. The
further away from that blessed land we explore, the more we find that the
effects of excessive heat or cold have distorted the natural harmony and beauty
of the features:

In proportion as nature gradually draws nigher to her centre in a temperate
climate, her productions are marked by more regularity of shape [...] consequently our ideas and those of the Greeks relative to beauty, being derived
from the most regular conformation, are more correct than those that can possibly be formed by nations which [...] have lost one half of their likeness to
the creator. (p. 39.)

It is interesting that Winckelmann knows what his creator looks like. It must be
assumed that he is basing his opinion on the representations of God in Western
Art. He should, perhaps, have borne in mind the well-known lines by
Xenophanes:

But if cows and horses or lions had hands
or could draw with their hands and make things men can make,
then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses,
cows like cows, and they would make their bodies
Winckelmann examines what exactly it is about certain features found in non-European races that departs from the ideal of beauty, beginning with the eyes:

The more oblique, for example, the eyes, as in cats, so much the more does their direction deviate from the fundamental form of the face, which is a cross, whereby it is divided equally, in length and breadth, from the crown of the head downward, since the perpendicular line passes through the middle of the nose, and the horizontal line through the orbits of the eyes. If the eye is placed obliquely, then the face is divided by a line oblique to the vertical line passing through the nose. This at least must be the true cause of the unseemliness of an obliquely situated mouth; for if, of two lines one deviates from the other without reason, a disagreeable impression is produced. Such eyes, therefore, when found among us, and in Chinese, Japanese, and some Egyptian heads, in profile, are a departure from the standard. (pp. 37-38.)

This is as close as Winckelmann comes to ever actually defining what beauty might mean in terms of facial geometry: a cruciform with axes passing through the eyes horizontally and the nose vertically. This is not particularly helpful: deviations from the norm may be definable in his terms as ugly but Winckelmann would not maintain that beauty consists only in such a regular countenance. Indeed the definition used here seems to be utilised solely for the exclusion of other races from the category of the beautiful. We must note, however, that Winckelmann carefully points out that some, ‘among us’ are

---

32*Early Greek Philosophy,* trans. and ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 95. Another ancient fragment quoting Xenophanes is even more appropriate: ‘The Greeks suppose that the Gods have not only human shapes but also human feelings: just as each race depicts their shapes as similar to their own, as Xenophanes of Colophon says (the Ethiopians making them dark and snub-nosed, the Thracians red-haired and blue-eyed), so too they invent souls for them similar to their own’, Ibid. p. 94. Xenophanes is often thought to be propounding a sceptical view of religion, but as another fragment makes clear, he was merely criticising primitively anthropomorphic views of the Gods: ‘There is one God, greatest among gods and men/similar to mortals neither in shape nor in thought’ (p. 95).
similarly disadvantaged. When he moves on to discuss the nose we encounter what appears to be a faintly disgruntled puzzlement in Winckelmann's prose:

The flattened nose of the Chinese, Calmucks and other distant nations, is also a deviation, for it mars the unity of the forms according to which the other parts of the body have been shaped. There is no reason why the nose should be so much depressed, should not much rather follow the direction of the forehead; just as on the other hand, it would be an exception to the variety displayed in the human conformation, if the forehead and nose were formed by one straight bone, as in beasts. (p. 38.)

It is unclear how exactly a flattened nose can 'mar the unity of the forms to which the other part of the body have been shaped'. It would again appear that Winckelmann has erected an artificial barrier for the purposes of limiting beauty. He scrupulously distinguishes between human and bestial deviations from the norm with respect to the nose, but he is less dainty when it comes to the 'projecting, swollen mouth which the negro has, in common with the monkey of his land' (p. 38). The racism is again tempered by pointing out that the same environmental conditions will tend to have the same effects on European faces: 'among us the lips swell up from heat or a humid and harsh, salt air and in some men, indeed, from violent anger'.

It is the unfortunate effects of climate that cause people to depart from the 'original' pleasing harmony of physiognomy, and not some inherent defect. We sense in these passages that Winckelmann is attempting to establish a humanitarian, anti-racist position from within a fundamentally racist culture. Beneath the apparent differences between individuals and cultures there remains a constant and continuing conception of beauty. One passage is particularly telling, illustrating both Winckelmann's general view of the beautiful and his own, transparent interest:
The handsomest man that I have seen in Italy was not the handsomest in the eyes of all, not even of those who prided themselves on being observant of the beauty of our sex. But those who have regarded and selected beauty as a worthy subject of reflection cannot differ as to the truly beautiful, for it is one only, and not manifold. (p. 39.)

The cultured taste, from whatever culture or race, will always be able to discern true beauty, and will agree as to its 'general form' (p. 40). Colour, the most common criterion for excluding other races from beauty, is regarded by Winckelmann as, if not irrelevant, then at least peripheral, to beauty: 'colour however, should have but little share in our consideration of beauty, because the essence of beauty consists, not in colour, but in shape' (p. 40).

Despite this, whiteness is given a role in heightening the effect of perfect form. A 'rational' reason for this is given, in that white (marble for example) is said to reflect back more light. Nevertheless, Winckelmann leaves the problem of beauty in other cultures with an unequivocal, if somewhat grudging acceptance of the actuality of black beauty:

A negro might be called handsome when the conformation of his face is handsome. A traveller assures us that daily association with negroes diminishes the disagreeableness of their colour, and displays what is beautiful in them; just as the colour of bronze and of the black and greenish basalt does not detract from the beauty of antique heads. (p. 40.)

Martin Bernal, in *Black Athena*, situates Winckelmann as one of the founding fathers of German Hellenism and therefore implicates him in what was to become a racist movement.33 Certainly Winckelmann was important in the movement to oust Egypt as the original heartland of civilisation in favour of

---

Greece. Winckelmann’s position, however, derived from Montesquieu, was that Egyptian (and Etruscan) art was undeveloped and archaic not because of any degree of racial inferiority, but because of despotic government and unsuitable climate.34

Judged by the standards of today Winckelmann may well fall short of ‘correctness’. The fact remains, however, that his struggle was primarily with the forces of reaction and on the side of progress. Irrespective of our unhistorical value judgements, Winckelmann was a writer of originality and influence. His homo-erotic aesthetic insinuated itself into European art and literature in the century and a half after his death and we can trace it from the palely androgynous figures in pre-Raphaelite and Decadent art to the pitiful Classical scaffolding Aschenbach erects for his desire for Tadzio in *Death in Venice*. Winckelmann’s writings also had a rather more immediate and dramatic impact. Alex Potts argues convincingly that Winckelmann’s writings were important to both artistic practice and political theory in the French Revolution.

According to Potts, the nude male body was the only suitable medium to convey the exalted and complex content of revolutionary propagandist art. The female nude had, by the late eighteenth century acquired ‘the relatively simple function as a signifier of sensuous beauty, as the object of desire, uncomplicated by associations with the more austere ideas of freedom and heroism. We therefore find the Winckelmannian ‘image of a beautiful, sensually charged, male body [...] is located at the heart of radical Jacobin utopian images of a politically free and regenerated subjectivity’ (p. 222).

Potts concentrates on the art of Jacques Louis David during the revolutionary period and certainly the examples he uses, *The Intervention of*
the Sabine Women, of 1799 and The Death of Bara painted in 1794, as well as the post-revolutionary Leonidas at the Pass of Thermopylae, are replete with images of male beauty that might have been painted to accord with the principles set out in The History of Ancient Art. The Intervention of the Sabine Women features three figures who between them brilliantly encompass the range of possibilities mapped out by Winckelmann. In it a serenely composed Romulus pauses ready to strike at the stockily muscular figure of Tatius. Both are naked but for their shields, helmets and artfully placed scabbards. Set against the Olympian Romulus and the virile, heavily muscled Tatius is an exquisite youth, holding Tatius’s horse, watching anxiously as the two opponents are buffered by the interceding Sabine women. David’s contemporary, Chaussard says of the figure that it is ‘perhaps the most beautiful of the painting, at least it is the one that best recalls the beautiful antique’ (p. 230). A similarly feminized nude appears in The Death of Bara where a martyr of the revolution is shown in his last moments. For Potts this figure manages, in its sexual ambivalence, to act as both ‘the feminine embodiment of liberty’ and ‘the masculine embodiment of heroic endeavour’:

He simultaneously played the role of passive female victim or helpless martyr and of active male hero struggling against all odds. S/he was an impossible figure representing the ideal revolutionary subject as both masculine and feminine, in a situation where in reality gender distinctions made this confluence quite illegitimate and the feminine was excluded from self-presentation on the stage of political life. (p. 236.)

Potts is persuasive in his attempt to place the seemingly arcane, intensely erotic and sexually ambivalent writings of the art historian at the very hub of revolutionary activity. In his enthusiasm for the significance of the beautiful, naked male figure in the symbolism of the Revolution, he neglects, however, to mention the equally complex symbolism of the (at least partially) clothed
female figure of Liberty. Nevertheless Potts does convince in his attempt to find a meaningful, political role for the erotically charged male nude:

It was only in the representation of an ideally beautiful male body that tensions between the body as a locus of pleasure and desire, and an ethical investment of the body as the sign of an ideal subjectivity, the ideal subjectivity of the virtuous and true republican subject could be played out.

In chapter 6 I will be discussing the important contribution of the concept of the sublime to ideas of male beauty. To conclude this chapter on Winckelmann, I will, however, have to anticipate some of what is to follow, as Winckelmann himself anticipated developments in the Romantic period. One of the paradoxes in Winckelmann’s work is his surprising allocation of gender to the conventional critical categories of the sublime and the beautiful. The figure he uses to represent the ‘sublime style’ - is female - Niobe, and the Laocoon, his embodiment of the beautiful, is male. As I will detail in chapter 6, the sublime was traditionally associated with the masculine and the beautiful with the feminine: a tendency is at its most developed in Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* published in 1757.

In his treatise Burke clearly conceptualises the beautiful in terms of the female body (among other things), as something to be caressed, admired and loved. The sublime, however, despite standing in some relation to the ‘masculine’ attributes of strength, power and destructiveness, is never represented by Burke as embodied in a masculine (human) form. It never becomes a sexually desirable attribute. Potts argues that the unadulterated sublime is, in fact, incapable of being properly embodied in a male figure:

---

36Potts, p. 227.
37Sublimity does, however, acquire a masculine form in the shape of Satan, however, but only as a literary representation.
Would it be possible to envisage a naked male body that was the very antithesis of a beautiful object, was literally nothing other than a terrifying physical power? An aggressive display of hard steely muscles or brute physical violence could all too easily appear ludicrous or repulsive rather than impressive and compelling. And if a viewer found such an image visually appealing [...] would it not thereby become desirable, and in some sense gratifyingly beautiful? (p. 117.)

For Winckelmann, the male figure, if it is to be sexually alluring, cannot simply represent the sublime; it must also incorporate something of the beautiful. Thus fits precisely Winckelmann's descriptions of the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoön. Of the former he writes,

His build is sublimely superhuman, and his stance bears witness to the fullness of his grandeur. An eternal springtime, as if in blissful Elysium, clothes the charming manliness of maturity with graceful youthfulness, and plays with soft tenderness on the proud build of his limbs. (p. 118.)

With the Apollo Belvedere, and the Laocoön we are presented with, in Potts's words, the conjunction 'between violent aggression and graceful beauty, between austere elevation and exquisite sensuality' (p. 123).

The naked male body presents itself as a possible object of desire, and simultaneously as an image of a desiring subject, often suggesting, as in the Belvedere Antinous, that the stirrings of desire on the part of the onlooker are returned. As well as the implication of sexual feelings in our response to the male nude, other human passions and feelings can act to exclude the sublime. It is the horrific realism of the depiction of suffering in the Laocoön that prevents it being a pure representation of the sublime - its dramatic immediacy shatters the distance and detachment necessary to the achievement of the highest
sublime style. For that we must turn to 'the de-sexualised, austerely draped, female figure', whose

role as an image of the sublime is made possible by a double negation - heavily draped, it is removed from the category of an object of desire, and being female, it can better be imagined by the male viewer as entirely untouched by the stirrings of desire. It is absolutely sublime because its delibidinized forms deny the evocative charge that would be carried by a fine nude. (p. 132.)

Winckelmann's subversion of the strict division between the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime through his vision of the sublimely suffering woman and the sensuously beautiful, and yet powerful man had profound consequences for the subsequent depiction of male attractiveness in Gothic and Romantic texts and some of those consequences will be examined in the chapters 6, 7 and 8. In the following chapter, on conceptions of beauty in the anthropology of the eighteenth century, the focus returns to the question of race raised by Winckelmann.
The search for the laws of beauty goes back to the ancient Egyptians, to the Pythagoreans, to Plato, and survived into, and even beyond, the eighteenth century. [...] From the beginning it was evident that these laws were elusive, but the obstacles to discovery only proved to humble searchers that God was secretive, reluctant to reveal his legislation. Pagan and Christian alike believed that God had made everything with numbers, even though the numbers he had used were not known. It was accordingly to mathematics that practitioners and philosophers turned: Egyptians constructed their bas reliefs on a theory of human proportions, St. Augustine found divine harmonies in musical ratios, medieval architects built these same ratios into their cathedrals. Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer all accepted some musical-mathematical theory of proportions; they agreed that the artist does not create beauty but discovers it.¹

This chapter will focus principally on the attempt by a Dutch anatomist, Petrus Camper, to uncover the secret code of beauty - that formula, simple or complex, by the application of which beauty could be generated in works of art or instantly recognised in nature. At issue, however, is not simply the possibility of cracking beauty's code, but also the vexed issue of the relationship between beauty and racism. Camper's work is particularly interesting in that it forms a link between two apparently disparate modes of discourse, both in their infancy: art history and anthropology.

In both the previous chapter on Winckelmann and the following on conceptions of the sublime, I address some of the issues in Enlightenment aesthetics. Before investigating Camper’s views on beauty it is necessary, however, to outline some of the other aspects of the aesthetics, and, indeed, the scientific thought of the period which together form the context in which his work must be understood.

As Peter Gay has pointed out, the Enlightenment was a hotbed of dispute over the possibility of discovering objective laws of beauty. The philosophes’ ‘passion for scientific generalisations and [...] their horror of anarchy’ made such laws desirable. In consequence, objectivist conceptions of beauty, Gay argues, continued to carry the majority. However, the balancing forces of scepticism and relativism, equally as characteristic of the Enlightenment as the yearning for order, ensured that the debate was lively (pp. 290-93).

The subjectivist position was given its most sophisticated treatment by David Hume. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he defines beauty in relation to the pleasure it causes: ‘where any object has a tendency to produce pleasure in its possessor, it is always regarded as beautiful’. That pleasure comes either from ‘primary constitution of our nature, by custom, or by caprice’.² Crucially, he sees beauty not as a quality of any object, but, ‘merely a passion or impression in the soul’ (p. 301). The principal pleasure to be had from beauty derives from its utility, but it is a utilitarianism of a rather complex kind; it is an object’s potentiality for being useful, rather than the extent to which that usefulness is being exercised:

where any object, in all its parts, is fitted to attain any agreeable end, it naturally gives us pleasure, and is esteem’d beautiful, even tho’ some external

---

circumstance be wanting to render it altogether effectual. 'Tis sufficient if everything be compleat in the object itself. (p. 584.)

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume stretches the ideas of pleasure and pain to cover what might seem rather unlikely judgements, such as those governing proportion:

There is no rule in painting or statuary more indispensible than that of balancing the figures, and placing them with the greatest exactness on the proper centre of gravity. A figure, which is not justly balanced is ugly; because it conveys the disagreeable ideas of fall, harm, and pain.³

Hume’s essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ is concerned more with the making of artistic judgements, and the possibility of salvaging critical authority from the apparent wreck of the sceptical, subjectivist position than with actually defining beauty. Hume manages both to accept the fact of the divergence of opinion on beauty and yet uphold the right of the educated, unprejudiced and sensitive critic to make valid judgements. Both the variation and the possibility of correct assessment of aesthetic value can be explained, in true Humean style, by the empirical facts of human nature. The apparent variation in taste, he contends, is not as wide as it might at first seem; there is, in fact, a surprising amount of agreement. This is because the ‘general principles of taste are uniform in human nature’. That agreement can never, however, be total:

But notwithstanding all our endeavours to fix a standard of taste, and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men, there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of

particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country. 

In Hume, therefore, we find both a rejection of objective and eternal laws of beauty and a defence of the public sphere's right to rule on matters of taste.

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* enmeshes our experience of beauty yet more intimately in our physiology. In comparing Hume's essay and Burke's treatise, Gay has argued that the former 'is deep where Burke is shallow, measured where Burke is impetuous', and most modern critics would agree. Nevertheless it was Burke's *Enquiry*, with its dramatic description of the sublime that had the greater influence and impact on both his contemporaries and those who were to follow, and that influence will be the subject of the following chapter.

Some of the complexities of the issue of taste in the eighteenth century are brought out by the fact that what is perhaps the best known and most trenchant statement on the relativism of beauty came from the figure most closely associated with the Neo-classical, order-craving aspect of the Enlightenment, Voltaire:

Ask a toad what beauty is, absolute beauty, the *to kalon*. He will answer that it is his female, with two large round eyes sticking out of her little head, a large and flat snout, a yellow belly, a brown back. Question a negro from Guinea; for him beauty is a black oily skin, sunken eyes, a flat nose.

---


A toad also turns up in one of the more interesting attempts, in the eighteenth century, to locate the key to beauty: Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). After the familiar tribute in the first chapter to fitness as necessary to beauty, Hogarth moves on to his great discovery - the ‘line of beauty’, and its near relation, the ‘line of grace’. The former is a gently waving line, illustrated by, among other things, the stays of a properly made corset. The latter is a similar line performing a twisting, or spiralling movement. That a corset with such a line would fit a woman far better than a man demonstrates ‘how much the form of a woman’s body surpasses in beauty that of a man’. Although women may be the more beautiful sex, humanity in general partakes of beauty by virtue of its bone structure:

> There is scarce a straight bone in the whole body. Almost all of them are not only bent different ways, but have a kind of twist, which in some of them is very graceful; and the muscles annexed to them, tho’ they are of various shapes, appropriated to their particular uses, generally have their component fibres running in these serpentine-lines, surrounding and conforming themselves to the varied shape of the bones they belong to: more especially the limbs. Anatomists are so satisfied of this, that they take a pleasure in distinguishing their several beauties. (p. 74).

In the third of Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses*, delivered in 1770 and in his earlier essay, printed in *The Idler* in 1759, there occur two subtly different accounts of beauty. The third Discourse propounds a thoroughly Platonic aesthetic, in which it is the task of the artist to correct the blemishes which

---


8The two lines are, as Hogarth states, difficult to describe (and in the case of the line of grace, rather difficult even to draw) but they are copiously, if a little confusingly, illustrated in the two engravings which he includes at pp. 1 and 2 (plates 11 and 12 in Eliot and Stern).

9Eliot and Stern, p. 71. In this Hogarth is in agreement with Burke, as I show in the following chapter.
inevitably occur in nature, to construct, 'the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty'. Each category of objects, each species of animal, including man, has a form, 'from which each deviation is deformity' (p. 107). It is possible, he accepts, to have different types of human beauty - from the Herculean to the Apollonian, but we can, Reynolds claims, extract from these disparate exemplars of beauty, an ideal form to which they all aspire:

But I must add further, that though the most perfect forms of each of the general divisions of the human figure are ideal, and superior to any individual form of that class; yet the highest perfection of any human figure is not to be found in any one of them. It is not in the Hercules, nor in the Gladiator, nor in the Apollo; but in that form which is taken from all, and which partakes equally of the activity of the Gladiator, of the delicacy of the Apollo, and of the muscular strength of the Hercules. For perfect beauty in any species must combine all the characters which are beautiful in that species. (p. 109.)

Reynolds' *Idler* essay (the last of the three he wrote for the periodical) is, as we might expect, a more lively and casual affair than a speech to be delivered at the heart of the English art establishment to aspiring students. There is a superficial similarity in that he begins by stating that each species has its ideal. The difference comes in how that ideal is recognized. In place of the rule-following procedure of the *Discourse* (which will, given sufficient study, reveal the truth of beauty, with its high Platonic overtones), we find that beauty is simply what, in any given situation, we have come to expect. Straight noses are more common than any particular concave or convex variation, therefore straight noses become beautiful:

As we are then more accustomed to beauty than deformity, we may conclude that to be the reason why we approve and admire it, as we approve and admire

---

customs and fashions of dress for no other reason than that we are used to them [...] and I have no doubt but that if we were more used to deformity than beauty, deformity would then lose the idea now annexed to it, and take that of beauty: as if the whole world should agree, that yes and no should change their meaning; yes would then deny, and no would affirm. (p. 356.)

When he comes to discuss the ideals of beauty in different races, he does not in the least attempt either to find common ground, or to denigrate one in favour of another:

It is custom alone determines our preference for the colour of the Europeans to the Ethiopians, and they, for the same reason prefer their own colour to ours. I suppose no body will doubt, if one of their Painters were to paint the Goddess of Beauty, but that he would present her black, with thick lips, flat nose, and woolly hair; and it seems to me, he would act very unnaturally if he did not: for by what criterion will any one dispute the propriety of his ideal! We indeed say, that the form and colour of the European is preferably to that of the Ethiopian; but I know of no other reason we have for it, but that we are accustomed to it.11

This rational, sceptical, and apparently unprejudiced view of race and beauty leads us naturally to the discussion of the issue in Enlightenment anthropology. Before that, however, I wish to introduce one further digression. Attempts to discover the secrets of beauty were not confined to philosophers, art critics and scientists. As Arthur Marwick reveals, the nineteenth century may have been the golden age for beauty manuals, with do-it-yourself guides proliferating in

11Ibid. pp. 355-56. Reynolds goes on to add, 'The black and white nations must, in respect of beauty, be considered as of different kinds, at least a different species of the same kind; from one of which to the other [...] no inference can be drawn.' There is an apparent echo here of the polygenism of Hume (discussed below) as Hume’s scepticism is clearly an influence. However it is certainly possible to argue that Reynolds is confining his comments to beauty, and does not mean to imply that the black and white ‘nations’ are different species.
Britain and the continent but the form was far from unknown in the eighteenth century. Marwick dwells on one particular work, The Art of Beauty, from 1760. His reasons for concentrating on The Art of Beauty are stated explicitly:

Since this is a practical work, for use by real people, it does offer a definition of beauty of greater persuasiveness (to me at least) than any we have encountered from philosophers preoccupied with the notion of divinity. It is a definition which, one or two conventions apart, supports the idea of the relative universality of beauty.

Marwick is impatient with the tendency of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers on beauty to incorporate moral, religious and spiritual elements into their works, a view encapsulated by one Reverend author’s stern injunction, ‘Would you be fair? - BE GOOD’. The Art of Beauty seems to offer a common-sense rebuttal of those who seek to undervalue, reject or relativise beauty. Women should ‘cultivate beauty’, because,

If persons be too big, or too little, too fat or too lean, we cannot like them; because there is not a certain resemblance or proportion between them and us, or between the generality of mankind.

The Art of Beauty propounds a conventional line, with proportion as beauty’s ruling concept (‘for what seems more ridiculous than a great head upon a small body, and a small nose upon a large face?’) but it is difficult to see how the

---

13 In the seventeenth century the beauty manual was sufficiently familiar for Etheredge to parody it in The Man of Mode: ‘Then there is The Art of Affectation, written by a late beauty of quality, teaching you how to draw up your breasts, stretch up your neck, to thrust out your breech, to play with your head, to toss up your nose, to bite your lips, to turn up your eyes, to speak in a silly soft tone of voice, and use all the foolish French words that will infallibly make your person and conversation charming, with a short apology at the latter end, in the behalf of young ladies who notoriously wash and paint, though they have naturally good complexions.’ Restoration Plays, ed. by Robert G. Lawrence (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 137. Etheredge had works such as Hannah Wooley’s The Gentlewoman’s Companion of 1675 in mind.
14 Marwick, p. 87.
15 Ibid. p. 86.
beauty manual, devoted to the possibility that beauty can be *cultivated*, with its tips for actively creating beauty, can be dragged in to support Marwick’s view that beauty is based in biology. The quotation above would seem to be making an appeal to the same sense of familiarity that Reynolds finds at the root of beauty, and which represents, for him, its subjectivity and relativism. It seems rather to suggest the artificiality of beauty. The full title of the work, surprisingly omitted by Marwick, gives the game away: *The Art of Beauty, or, A Companion for the Toilet in which the Charms of the Person are Considered and Explained ... To which are Added Easy, Safe and Certain Methods, of Attaining External Beauty.*

It could be argued, however, that the vague parameters laid down in *The Art of Beauty*, that the body should agree in certain proportion, that the skin be unblemished, that the teeth be straight and white, that there be the requisite number of eyes, noses, ears etc., act as universals. Even here there are difficulties, partially acknowledged by Marwick, in the typical pre-twentieth-century prejudice against a dark or sun-tanned skin expressed in *The Art of Beauty.*

Even within the world of the beauty manual, there occurs a wider range of views on beauty than Marwick acknowledges. His argument, that such works counter the unworldly speculations of philosophers and clerics, and give us an insight into the true and unchanging nature of beauty is undermined by a closer look at some of the other, similar beauty guides of the period. The anonymous author of *Hebe or the Art of Preserving Beauty and Correcting Deformity*, written in 1787, takes a rather more sophisticated view than the unlikely sounding ‘Eminent English Physician at the Russian Court’ who penned *The Art of Beauty.*

---

17Marwick, p. 87.
The difference between *Hebe* and *The Art of Beauty* is not that beauty is undervalued in the former, on the contrary, 'Beauty is a kind of idol, which has had its votaries in every age and climate, its empire is perhaps as ancient as any other, and certainly in many respects more despotic.' A degree of vanity is pardoned, and is even presented as a moral quality:

It is certainly not only excusable, but highly commendable to pay attention to personal accomplishments, and the gracefulness of the body.[... We are born for each other; and therefore it is a duty we owe to society, as well as ourselves, to endeavour to be mutually agreeable; and to prevent or correct everything shocking and disgustful. (p. 3.)

We are also given what appears to be a similarly general and vague definition of beauty, which is 'that pleasing effect which arises from the harmony and justness of the whole composition' (p. 11). It is soon clear, however, that no claims about universality are being made. This is a work simply and self-confessedly about the standard of beauty in one society, at a particular time:

We shall take no farther notice of the different tastes which influence mankind in different regions of the world, but without condemning any of them, proceed, and confine ourselves to the consideration of those forms which are generally looked upon as essentials of beauty in our country. (p. 15.)

And even within that one society, it is argued, generalisations aspiring to the status of laws, cannot be found:

In vain do painters and anatomists lay down rules and proportions for beauty: the most charming faces, and most elegant forms frequently, nay generally deviate from these established proportions; while many, in whom such

---

proportions may be most accurately observed, are far from being agreeable, much less beautiful. (p. 11.)

After beginning with what seems an unnecessarily detailed inventory of the parts of the body (we are, for example, usefully informed at p. 4 that the nose is, 'that fleshy eminence or projection in the middle of the face, and is the external organ of smelling') much of the work is taken up not with the active projection of beauty, but with the concealment of deformity. There is both compassion and common sense in the advice on dealing with the range of disfigurements from warts to missing limbs, and a careful distinction is drawn between the 'deformed' and the 'ugly'. The former is a 'want of congruity in the parts, or rather an inability in them to answer their natural design' (p. 13). It has no 'moral' aspect and should inspire only pity in the beholder. Ugliness, on the contrary, 'seems to consist in the appearance of something malevolent to human nature' (p. 14).

Although the author avoids general rules, we are given a snap-shot of what was perceived as beautiful in 1787. Among other things,

The head ought to be rather large than otherwise; of an oval figure, flat on the sides. The face should be longer than it is broad.[...] The eyes large and well set; the nose pretty long, with nostrils of a middling wideness; the cheeks, full, firm, and roundish.[...] The mouth ought to be small.[...] The lips moderately pouting, and their borders of a delicately vermil tincture.[...] The ears ought to be small and neatly joined to the head.[...] The chest, large, full and rising. The belly ought to be higher or more raised in women than in men; and the same may be said of the hips. The waist is more slender in women, and the haunches stand more out. (pp. 11-13.)

The final message of Hebe is that beauty is not ultimately dependent on possessing certain features or proportions but that it requires health and virtue
fully to flower. It is a practical guide for looking pretty, or at least concealing what is least attractive and it makes no claims for wider significance.

***

As we have seen, there were a number of categories of texts circulating in the eighteenth century which featured the discussion of beauty. In addition to works of literature, discussed more fully in the following chapters, there were art-historical texts (such as those by Winckelmann analysed in the preceding chapter), the philosophical treatises and the works of proto-beauticians. Two other types of text featured beauty - the guidebooks for artists, such as that by Hogarth discussed above, but which, as Gombrich has shown,19 were part of an artistic education from the Renaissance down, teaching artists not only how to draw accurately, but how to 'produce' beauty; and secondly, the works by those we would now call anthropologists on the characteristics of the human races. Reynolds touched on these subjects, but he was no anthropologist. One work managed uniquely to combine the two only because Petrus Camper was both a leading scientist and a fine artist. Before finally discussing Camper, it is first necessary to outline the scientific background.

By far the most important and influential of late eighteenth-century racial theorists was Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), whose major work of anthropology, *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa (On the Natural Variety of Mankind)* went through three editions in 1775, 1781 and 1795, and we can only properly understand Camper by first examining his great contemporary. Martin Bernal agrees with Blumenbach’s avowedly racist nineteenth-century followers in ascribing to him a white supremacist position. He argues that Blumenbach

produced 'the first 'academic' work on human racial classification - which naturally put Whites, or to use his new term, 'Caucasians', at the head of the hierarchy' and later he states that according to Blumenbach, 'the white or Caucasian was the first and most beautiful and talented race' (p. 219).

Blumenbach's English editor and translator quotes at length, in his introduction to a collection of his anthropological works, from a mid-nineteenth-century textbook of 'Physical Geography' in an attempt to show him as a conventional upholder of racial inequality:

And if all the five must be considered as natural groups, is it proper to place them in the same rank, and allow them all the same zoological value? Blumenbach himself did not think this.[...] He was more or less aware of [...] the necessity of not placing in the same rank all the divisions of mankind, which bear the common title of races, in spite of the unequal importance of their anatomical, physiological, and let us also add, psychological characteristics.21

A detailed (or even, for that matter, a superficial) reading of Blumenbach's anthropological writings makes claims of this sort seem extraordinary. The 1775 edition of On the Natural Varieties has four main functions. The first is an attempt to distance man from the other animals and particularly the anthropoid apes; the second is to assert the unity of mankind; the third is to describe the differences between the races; and the fourth is to account for those differences in terms of climate and custom.

Man is distinguished from the other animals both by unique aspects of anatomy and, more importantly, by the universal possession of reason.

20Bernal, p. 28.
21The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, trans. and ed. by Thomas Bendyshe (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1865), Introduction, X-XI.
Blumenbach’s approach is perhaps best captured by his treatment of one particular region of female anatomy:

The hymen, the guardian of chastity is adapted to man who is alone endowed with reason; but the clitoris, the obscene organ of brute pleasure, is given to beasts also. (p. 90.)

The sections emphasising the unity of mankind are the most impassioned in the work. He stresses that the different races are in no way distinct, but rather, ‘do so run into one another, and [...] one variety of mankind does so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them’ (p. 99). Those who argue that the different races constitute different species are castigated both for their bad science and their impiety:

Ill feeling, negligence, and the love of novelty have induced persons to take up the latter opinion. The idea of the plurality of human species has found particular favour with those who made it their business to throw doubt on the accuracy of scripture. (p. 98.)

Blumenbach’s famous fivefold division of the races does not occur until the second edition of 1781 and only in 1795 do they acquire the familiar appellations, Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American and Malay, but the three editions are exactly alike in their attribution of all important differences between the races to a combination of climate (affecting skin colour and hair texture), ‘mode of life’ (the disfiguring consequences, for example, of the infant being carried on its mother’s back) and deliberate art. 22

In the eighteenth century there were two principal ways of looking at racial difference, and in particular the origins of the races of mankind. The commonest view, essentially a theological one derived from Biblical exegesis,

22 ‘From what has been said I trust that it is more than sufficiently clear, that almost all the diversity of the form of the head in different nations is to be attributed to the mode of life and to art.’ Ibid. p. 121.
held that all humans of whatever race were descended from Adam and Eve. Morphological variation had arisen since the expulsion from Eden of our common ancestor, and was the result of the different conditions under which people found themselves. Monogenists such as Buffon argued that this meant that all humans were equal and it was frequently used as an argument against slavery.23

The opposed, polygenetic, position postulated a series of quite separate origins for the different racial groups. The consequences of this view are spelled out by Gould: 'as another form of life, blacks need not participate in the "equality of man"'. It was a view consistently used to support slavery and assert the pre-eminence of white Europeans. David Hume, notorious for casting 'doubt on the accuracy of scripture', was a prominent advocate of polygenism, which appealed to him for a number of reasons, not least because it involved the rejection of Biblical accounts of human history. Hume explicitly linked the separate origins of racial groups to the consequent hierarchical ordering of the races and the predictable dominance of whites. His comments on the subject, contained in a footnote to his essay, Of National Characters, are worth quoting in full, as they encapsulate, with Hume's characteristic clarity, the minority, racist position:

I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers among them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in

so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed over EUROPE, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; though low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguished themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly.\textsuperscript{24}

Blumenbach was, as must be clear, a convinced monogenist and at no stage in the first edition is there any implication that the non-Caucasian races are inferior in intellect, morality, or, indeed, civilisation. It is interesting that even within the monogenist camp, it was not universally held that unity of origin implied equality. Blumenbach’s friend, Samuel Thomas Soemmerring in his \textit{Über die Körperliche Verschiedenheit des Mohren vom Europäer} (Concerning the Physical Difference Between the Moor and the Europea) argued for the inferiority of blacks to whites on the basis of their closer affinity with apes and their low intelligence.\textsuperscript{25}

Blumenbach has no truck with this line of thought. He owned a library made up entirely of books written by blacks and was a persistent and dedicated propagandist on their behalf.\textsuperscript{26} Coleridge, who met Blumenbach in Göttingen in 1798, was dissatisfied not only with the extent of the role he allocated to climate in generating racial difference, but also with his apparent failure to distinguish the races ‘in respect of intellectual faculties, and moral dispositions’.\textsuperscript{27} There is, however, one distinction that Blumenbach makes, and it is one that was to take on greater weight with the subsequent editions of his

\textsuperscript{24}Hume, \textit{Selected Essays}, p. 360.
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 399.
work, although in 1775 the point is made only once, as an aside. In describing
the Caucasian inhabitants of Europe, western Asia and North Africa, he
comments, ‘All these nations are white in colour, and if compared with the rest,
beautiful in form’. The only hierarchy Blumenbach allows is this one of
beauty, and that is simply an accident of circumstance, the result not of what we
would term hereditary factors, but of the action of heat, rain, wind and local
custom on the universal, yet endlessly malleable form of humanity.

The almost completely re-written 1795 edition of On the Natural Varieties of
Mankind, although still devoted to the unity of humanity, does incorporate both
an increased emphasis on the aesthetic superiority of the Caucasian race, and a
mechanism for racial differentiation with the unfortunately pejorative name of
degeneration.

In place of the solitary mention of beauty in 1775, we now find six
references to the superior beauty of Caucasians. Despite this, the other races
are never depicted as ‘ugly’, and the beauty of Caucasians is, at one point, put
in a relativist context. After an ‘objective’ description of the Caucasian head
Blumenbach adds, ‘In general that kind of face, which, according to our
opinion of symmetry, we think becoming and beautiful’ (my italics). Confusingly he immediately follows this with an objectivising reason for
regarding the Caucasian as more beautiful:

This same kind of face constitutes a medium which may fall off by
degeneration into exactly opposite extremes, of which the one displays a wide
and the other an elongated face. (pp. 227-28.)

For Blumenbach, the Caucasian, represented in its most perfect form by the
people of Georgia, was the original ‘template’ of mankind, which then

28Blumenbach, pp. 99-100.
‘degenerated’ as a result of environmental factors to form the other races. The process by which this occurred is explained at length in the third edition. Blumenbach envisages the development of the embryo into an adult organism as the product of a teleological force acting upon the seminal fluid. He opposes this to what he (misleadingly from our perspective) calls ‘evolution’, by which he means the belief that,

no animal or plant is generated, but that all individual organic bodies were at the very earliest dawn of creation already formed in the shape of undeveloped germs and are now being successively evolved. (p. 194.)

According to the theory, every person who has ever lived, or will ever live, was created at the same time, tiny homunculi, emplanted, like a set of Russian dolls, one inside the other, in the ovaries of Eve, awaiting emergence.

Blumenbach’s developmental force is dynamically opposed to the static preformationist conception of evolution, and it is this dynamism that accounts for degeneration. One of the meanings of degeneration in English is that of variation from an original form without any implication of decay, or diminution; the principal meaning, however, in both German, English, and Latin (degeneratio) certainly involves the idea of degradation and decline. With the relatively peripheral exception of beauty, Blumenbach’s great concern was to show that the other races were not degraded, that a negro or Malayan was as fully human, as rational and perfectible as a Göttingen professor. The explanation for this apparent inconsistency is that invoking the concept of degeneration was a way of accounting for the obvious differences between groups whilst at the same time reducing those differences to insignificance. Rather than different species, the races simply represent variation within one species. The different varieties of humanity, ‘agree so well in form and
constitution, that those things in which they do differ may have arisen from degeneration’ (p. 189).30

Blumenbach’s avowed intention of demonstrating the unity of mankind could not prevent his work from being used by those fundamentally opposed to his belief in equality and contempt for prejudice. As the founding father of the science of anatomy, Blumenbach had to be transformed from the Enlightenment proponent of a religiously based belief in human unity into a typical, mid-nineteenth century racist, which is why the English translation of his anthropological works was given the elaborate editorial apparatus of three separate introductions. However innocent of prejudice concerning intellect or moral worth, Blumenbach did, albeit incidentally, and without important theoretical consequences for his own position, introduce a hierarchy of beauty which was to play into the hands of those who were to follow.31 As Peter Gay puts it, with Blumenbach

Race theorizing had not yet become racism. That was to be the contribution of nineteenth-century speculative thinkers and social scientists, all too often one and the same.32

30 John R. Baker, not one to fail to identify supporters for his own racist views, concedes, on the issue of degeneration that, ‘there is no perfectly clear statement in Blumenbach’s writings to the effect that degeneration implies inferiority’. Race, p. 26. Coleridge, on the other hand, certainly took degeneration to mean the movement from better to worse. In a letter to the anatomist Joseph Henry Green, he rejects polygenesis and the possibility of evolution from apes, but laments how depravity ‘may sink so deep & diffuse itself thro’ all the acts, affections, faculties, passions and habits of the Man as at length to master the formative principle itself & involve the generative power in it’s sphere of influence. Selected Letters, ed. by H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 260.31 Beauty certainly formed one of the ways in which the historians and racial theorists, Christopher Mieners and Friedrich Tiedemann, both also based at Göttingen, ranked the races; see Bernal, Black Athena, pp. 216-19, and L. Poliakov, The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe trans. by E. Howard (London: Chatto & Windus and Heinemann for Sussex University Press 1974), pp. 178-79. Mieners, for example, refers to the ‘ugly, stupid, and ill-natured Negro’. See Baker, Race, p. 27.32 Peter Gay, The Cultivation of Hatred, p. 72.
Between the 1775 and 1795 editions of Blumenbach’s treatise a text was published that seems to have contributed to the increasing emphasis placed on beauty: Petrus Camper’s *Physical Dissertation* (1791). This work forms an important link between Enlightenment thought on racial difference and the ‘scientific’ racism of the nineteenth century. It also represents an intriguing example of cross fertilisation between aesthetic theory and science.

Beauty, which had been a peripheral feature of Blumenbach’s system of racial classification, takes centre stage in the work of his contemporary, Camper. Petrus Camper was a typical product of the Enlightenment, a professor of anatomy who was also a skilled artist and illustrator; widely travelled and of liberal political views yet solidly successful in his academic career. His

---

33 *Physical dissertation on the real differences that men of different countries and ages display in their facial traits; on the beauty that characterizes the statues and engraved stones of antiquity: followed by the proposition of a new method for drawing human heads with the greatest accuracy*, printed in Utrecht by B. Wild & J. Altheer in 1791. I have used the only available English translation which brings together a number of related texts: *The Works of the Late Professor Camper on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary & c & c in Two Books Containing A Treatise on the Natural Difference of Features in Persons of Different Countries and Periods of Life; and on Beauty, as Exhibited in Ancient Sculpture; With a new Method of Sketching Heads, National Features, and Portraits of Individuals with Accuracy, & c & c*, Translated from the Dutch by T Cogan MD (London: C. Dilly, 1794).

34 As Camper is not now a well-known figure some biographical information may be considered useful. The following details were obtained from the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. by Charles Coulston Gillespie, 18 vols (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1971-90), Volume III. Camper was born in Leiden, in the Netherlands, on 11 May 1722. He was given a wide ranging early education by his minister-father, which included, most usefully for his later investigations into the facial angle (which involved the construction of a frame for securing skulls), a course in carpentry. At the age of twelve he began attending Leiden University where he studied Classics, Natural Sciences and Medicine. After graduating in 1746 he spent two years practising as a physician.

In 1748 he went on a grand tour through Europe, visiting England, France, Switzerland and Germany meeting on his way many prominent figures in the arts and sciences. In England he studied midwifery under William Smellie (whose well-known textbook on the subject he illustrated with great skill) and was accepted into the Painter’s Academy. He was to return to England in 1752 and again in 1785 and became a familiar figure in both artistic and scientific circles in this country.

On 28 April 1751 he entered on a professional academic career which was to take him to the Chairs of Philosophy, Medicine, Surgery and Anatomy at Franeker University in Friesland, the Athenaeum Illustre in Amsterdam and finally Groningen University. After retiring from academic life in 1773 he became embroiled in a series of acrimonious political controversies, acting as an advocate of the House of Orange. He also opposed the extension of land reclamation programs.

His career is summed up by the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*:

‘Camper was highly esteemed in the scientific world, as shown by his membership in most of the learned societies of Western Europe. His comprehensive knowledge, his inquiring mind, his industry in research and in writing, and his skill in graphic arts procured him a well-merited fame attained by few other contemporary scientists.’
historical significance originates with his discovery (or, as he believed, rediscovery) of the 'facial angle'. Camper’s work is illustrated with engravings from his own excellent line drawings which greatly assist in following his definition. I have included a selection of these at the end of this chapter.

The facial angle is a way of measuring the degree to which the face slants forwards or backwards. Camper designed a frame in which he fixed the skulls he wished to analyse: an unspecified species of monkey, an orangutan and representatives of the different human races. The frame enabled him to ensure that each skull was measured and drawn in the same way. Each drawing of a skull was accompanied by another showing the effect of adding flesh to the bare bones. As well as the all-important side view (Camper’s Tables I and II), which gave the facial angle, Camper drew the skulls from the front (Table III). I have included a selection of Camper’s illustrations following p. 203 at the end of this chapter.

The facial angle itself is formed by drawing two lines, one passing horizontally through the ear opening and the base of the nose and a second passing through the most forward section of the skull - usually the tip of the incisor teeth and the most protruding part of the forehead. The facial angle is the intersection of these two lines. As Steven Jay Gould has put it, the facial angle is a way of measuring the relationship between the vault of the cranium and the face.35

Camper himself relates what he then discovered when comparing the resultant angles obtained from the different skulls in his collection:

When in addition to the skull of a negro, I had procured one of a Calmuck, and had placed that of an ape contiguous to them both, I observed that a line drawn along the forehead and the upper lip, indicated this difference in national physiognomy and also pointed out the degree of similarity between a negro and ape. By sketching some of these features upon a horizontal plane, I obtained the lines which mark the countenance, with their different angles. When I made these lines incline forewords, I obtained the face of an antique; backwards, of a negro. Still more backwards, the lines which mark an ape, a dog, a snipe, &c.- This discovery formed the basis of my edifice.

It is important to stress that Camper criticised attempts (such as that by Soemmerring) to link blacks more closely to apes than to Caucasians. Although Camper’s diagrams certainly give the impression that negroes are, at least in their physiognomy, ‘apelike’ these similarities, for Camper, were coincidental and unimportant:

The Proximity of the eyes to each other, the smallness and apparent flatness of the nose, and the projection of the upper lip, constitute the principal points of resemblance, and these are much exaggerated by our modern naturalists, by their heightened descriptions, and embellished plates [...] but they will immediately diminish in our estimation if we give attention to the whole body, or minutely examine any part of the head. (p. 33.)

The facial line was to become central to nineteenth-century craniometry, forming, along with crude measurements of cranial capacity, the focus for distinguishing between, and consequently ranking the races of mankind. Its importance is summed up by John S. Haller, an historian of science, cited by Gould:

36 For a discussion of the Calmucks, who were a byword for ugliness in the eighteenth century, see note 44 below.
37 The Works of the Late Professor Camper, p. 9.
The facial angle was the most extensively elaborated and artlessly abused criterion for racial somatology [the branch of anthropology dealing with the physical characteristics of man].... By 1860 the facial angle had become the most frequent means of explaining the gradation of species. Like the Chain of Being, the races of man consisted of an ordered hierarchy in which the Hottentot, the Kaffir, the Chinaman, and the Indian held a specific position in the order of life.38

Modern critics, swayed by the importance of the facial angle in nineteenth century racial theorizing, tend to interpret Camper as a member of that same racist tradition. Nancy Stepan explicitly contrasts Camper with Blumenbach (who she correctly sees as a humane monogenist), damning Camper for using the facial angle to associate the Negro with the ape.39 Camper is cited on nine separate occasions in Stepan's book, but she entirely fails to mention the subject and purpose of the work in which he introduced the facial angle. Baker, from a quite different position, also gives the impression that Camper's work was part of the tradition of racist anthropology.40

It remains the case, however, that Camper was not interested primarily in the scientific exposition of racial difference and not interested at all in the hierarchical ranking of races. A clue as to Camper's actual purpose comes from the fact that he is given an honourable mention by Ernst Gombrich in the chapter in *Art and Illusion* dealing with artists 'schemata', the books of guidelines, rules and examples artists have used to help them to capture 'beauty' or 'reality'. Camper here finds himself in a different tradition, along with Rubens, Van de Passe, Albrecht Dürer and Hogarth.41 Curiously, Dürer

---


39 Stepan, p. 9.

40 See Baker, pp. 28-32.

turns up in both traditions, Baker mentioning him as one of Camper’s antecedents. Dürer’s profile heads, encased in grids from the Dresden Sketchbook do bear a superficial resemblance to Camper’s drawings, and it is not impossible that Camper was aware of Dürer’s well-known work. Nevertheless, Dürer never exactly anticipated the precise positioning of Camper’s line.

The Physical Dissertation is certainly part anthropological speculation, but it is more explicitly a contribution to aesthetic theory and above all, a drawing manual. It does, of course, employ Camper’s considerable and indeed professional knowledge of human anatomy, but its inspiration is the improvement of the poor standard of representation of certain types: blacks, the very old and very young in western art.

The preface by Camper’s English translator, T. Cogan, is itself an interesting and revealing document of its time. For Cogan, Camper’s work fits in with the Enlightenment programme of uncovering the laws which structure the natural world:

The grand object was to shew, that national differences may be reduced to rules, of which the different directions of the facial line form a fundamental norma or canon.42

Cogan stresses, in true Enlightenment style, the ‘intimate connexion’ between the arts and sciences and argues that to have a proper understanding of one requires at least some knowledge of the other. This interrelationship is particularly marked in the case of painting and sculpture, where a ‘deeper insight into Nature is required’. The depiction of the human figure is the ‘most interesting and sublime department’ but also the ‘most difficult and comprehensive’. It requires ‘historical knowledge’, an ‘intimate acquaintance

42Camper, p. X.
with national characteristics', and the paying of 'great attention to the
diversities of age and sex and the changes wrought by passions upon the human
frame' (p. iii). As well as these forms of understanding, the prospective artist
must steep himself in the science of anatomy. Camper, himself both artist and
scientist, is therefore, for Cogan, particularly suited to the job of teaching artists
the secret laws of beauty and the best way to portray the different races.

An interesting difference between Camper and Blumenbach emerges on the
very first page of his treatise. Blumenbach was concerned mainly with
displaying the similarities between individuals; Camper, on the other hand, is
inspired by difference, by the variety and heterogeneity in the natural world:
'the characteristic differences in men and animals appear to me the most
interesting objects in nature'. The difference that most captures his attention is
racial: 'I was particularly struck with the figure and colour of the Moors; and
with the difference and complexion between the East Indies blacks and the
natives of Africa'. As important as these racial differences, however, was the
discovery of variations within different stages in the history of art. Whenever he
examined and sketched ancient and renaissance statuary he noticed differences
between the facial characteristics depicted and those occurring in the works of
his contemporaries. Furthermore, the faces depicted by the ancients were, 'more
pleasing than any of the figures of the Flemish Schools' (p. 1). Most crucially,
copying a painting by Van Tempel, he was disconcerted by the fact that a black
figure was portrayed with European features.

Camper was impressed by Winckelmann's pioneering work on Classical art,
but criticised his conception of ideal beauty. A scientist before he was an artist,
Camper impatiently rejects Winckelmann's Platonism, preferring the tough
realities of modern science to the airy speculations of philosophy: 'What this
penetrating observer terms ideal, is in fact founded upon the rules of optics' (p.
4). Camper believed that the glories of Classical art could only be emulated
once the underlying laws embodied by ancient works were uncovered, and that requires the rationalistic and enquiring intelligence of an analytic mind: 'So difficult is it to catch the spirit of the ancients, as long as the causes of their excellences are not investigated, and reduced to principles' (p. 5).

Camper's method for recapturing the beauty of classical art, a beauty only ever approached subsequently by the masters of the Renaissance, certainly did not involve the mere mechanical copying of nature. Following principles established by classical theorists, nature had to be manipulated:

In order to succeed it is also necessary to attend to the excellent rule of Lysipus; i.e. to make the head somewhat less, the body more slender and delicate than they really are, and they will be represented to greater advantage than by the most sumptuous exactitude. (pp. 6-7.)

The emphasis on theory did not mean that empirical inquiry could be neglected: there is still much to be learned from the close study of anatomy and we find Camper attempting to penetrate the mysteries of ideal beauty with the aid of the surgeon’s tool-kit: 'I sawed several heads, both men and animals, perpendicularly through the middle' (p. 7). It was through this sort of detailed scientific investigation that Camper first came to formulate his ideas on the facial angle, and more particularly on the relationships between the facial angles of different races and species.

The first part of Camper's treatise follows Blumenbach closely. The external differences between the races of mankind are self-evident and easily observed. If we look at any crowd of people, Camper tells us, we can readily distinguish not merely whites from negroes, but Jews from Christians and even the different European national groups (p. 13). For Camper, however, like Blumenbach, these differences are the result not of inheritance, but rather of a range of cultural and environmental factors. Camper was a convinced
monogenist and, for all its celebration of racial variation, his treatise remains a monument to the underlying unity of human kind. He clearly echoes Blumenbach when he writes,

No man who contemplates the whole human race as it is now spread over the face of the earth [...] can doubt of its having descended from a single pair, that were formed by the immediate hand of God. (p. 16.)

The evident morphological differences between the races are predominantly the result of the action of climate, diet and local manners and customs. For Camper, skin colour is a trivial matter, dependent on geographical location, and certainly not indicative of racial superiority, or of a special relationship with the creator - the original couple, he asserts, could just as easily be black as white (p. 16). The structure of the skin - more important, Camper contends, than its hue - does not differ:

Black, tawny, and white men are simply varieties; they do not constitute essential differences. Our skin is precisely the same contexture with that of the negro, but it is not of so deep a dye. (p. 28.)

Ascribing the determination of skin colour to climate is, given Camper's environmentalist preconceptions, predictable enough, but, more surprisingly, Camper gives the forces of sun, wind and rain wider powers to determine anatomical structures: 'The peculiar forms of the eyes, cheeks, maxillary bones, and particularly the nose, may safely be attributed to the influence of climate' (p. 28).

Diet is a less significant factor. Without giving any reasoning, Camper curiously limits its effects to coiffure: 'It is probable that the hair becomes long and straight, or curled or frizzled, according to food, chiefly.' (p. 28-9.) Social

43In this he is even more egalitarian than Blumenbach, for whom, as we have seen, Adam and Eve would have been white, and the original form from which other races 'degenerated'. 
customs such as foot binding and the wearing of stays (which are treated as equally barbaric practices in the text) were, for Camper, more important than either climate or diet in forming racial characteristics. Less specific cultural practises also significantly affect appearance:

A particular manner of sitting, of lying, of standing, and walking; various corporeal defects and other circumstances of the like nature give a particular cast to the whole body. [...] A polished education renders the whole figure elegant. [...] Education, employments, and a suitable mode of living add a beauty both to the features and to the limbs. They render the whole body more elegant. (p. 29.)

Although he rejects the idea that any moral or intellectual order is consequent upon racial difference, Camper, again like Blumenbach, is prepared to retain at least one hierarchy. All men may be equal in the realms of moral worth and intellectual potential, but they are not, Camper contends, equally beautiful. Inevitably, Caucasians, albeit widely defined, are deemed the prettiest people:

The inhabitants of the northern parts of the Mogol empire and of Persia, the Armenians, the Turks, Georgians, Mingrelians, Circassians, and the inhabitants of Europe in general are not only the fairest, but possess greater elegance of form than any other people. (p. 19.)

Below the exquisite white race come Asians and Africans, but propping up the rest, and judged least handsome are the hapless Calmucks, who, ‘compared to ourselves, and more particularly the celebrated figures of antiquity are deemed ugliest of all the inhabitants of the earth’ (p. 19). 44 If the Calmucks

44 The Calmucks, Kalmucks or Kalmyks were (and remain) a Mongoloid people originating in North Eastern China who migrated to the Caspian Sea in the Seventeenth Century. Among the many detractors of the Calmucks was Gibbon, who writes of a portrait of Attila that it ‘exhibits the genuine deformity of a modern Calmuck’, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. by David Womersley, 3 vols (London: Allen Lane, 1994), p. 296. Blumenbach, in the 1775 edition of On the Natural Varieties of Mankind, acts as the defender of this much maligned group: ‘J. B. Fischer has published a drawing of a Calmuck’s skull, and it is
represent the nadir of beauty, it was, for Camper, a point beyond dispute that
the Gods of the Ancient Greeks, as depicted in surviving works of sculpture,
represent its zenith.

Having attributed causes to the characteristic appearance of the various races
he proceeds in chapter III, 'Physiological Observations Concerning the
Difference of Faces in Profile; From Apes, Ourangs, Negroes, and Other
Classes of People, up to the Antique' to employ the facial angle to define those
differences precisely. Camper gives a detailed description of a number of
simian and human skulls with the conclusion that the average facial angle for
Calmucks and negroes is 70 degrees and for Europeans, 80 degrees.

It follows from hence, that the angle of the facial line has in nature a maximum
and a minimum from 70 to 80 degrees, which describe its greatest or smallest
degree of elevation. When the maximum of 80 degrees is exceeded by the
facial line, it is formed by the rules of Art alone: and when it does not rise to
70 degrees, the face begins to resemble some species of monkies. (p. 40.)

Camper then demonstrates what happens when, by 'the rules of art alone', he
extends the angle beyond 80 degrees, increasing the forward projection of the
top half of the face (illustrated in Table II, figs II-IV). He finds that the most
that the angle can be increased to without the face becoming 'monstrous' is 100
degrees. His measurements of ancient statues showed that that was precisely the
angle employed by Greek sculptors. The Greeks pushed the facial angle, and
therefore 'beauty' to the very limit: any further and the results would be
ugliness, any less and optimal beauty would not have been achieved. The less

ugly, and nearly approaches a square in shape, and in many ways testifies to barbarism. But this single
example shows how unfair it is to draw conclusions as to the conformation of a whole race from one or two
specimens. For Pallas describes the Calmucks as men of a symmetrical, beautiful and even round
appearance, so that he says their girls would find admirers in cultivated Europe. Nor do the said skulls
answer to the two very accurate representations of the Calmuck, a boy of eleven years old, who lately came
from Russia with the Count of Darmstadt, drawings of whom I received from Carlsruhe. They represent a
young man of handsome shape.' Blumenbach, pp. 116-17.
adventurous artists of Rome lacked the courage to push the facial line as far as their Greek forbears, restricting the angle to 95 degrees - further than ever achieved by nature, but sufficiently modest to explain the superiority of the Greeks.

Increasing the angle of the facial line, with the lesser craniometrical differences conditioned by that, lead us from the lower animals through monkeys, apes, negroes, Europeans through to the Greek Gods as represented in the art of Ancient Athens.

In the first two sections of his work Camper has clearly and elegantly, if not completely persuasively argued that differences in physiognomy are mainly the result of environmental factors and that the result of those factors is a hierarchy of beauty, based on resemblance to the optimally beautiful art of the ancient Greeks. The final section of the treatise is an altogether less coherent, if rather more conventional and traditional analysis of beauty.

Like most of those who have ventured into the field of aesthetic enquiry he begins by stating both the problematic nature of the enterprise ('No definition is more difficult than the definition of beauty') and his dissatisfaction with those who have gone before. Longinus, Horace, Boileau and Pope are of little help, having 'dealt mainly with poetry, neglecting the visual'; nor do they 'arrive at abstract principles'. More 'modern' theorists such as Hutcheson and Father Andre also fail to tell us what it is that constitutes the beauty of a painting, of a statue, or a building (p. 78).

Camper distinguishes, albeit with no great clarity, between three different fields of beauty. 'Poetic', or 'inventive' beauty is that which is 'subject to laws'. Camper seems to have in mind the Aristotelian rules underpinning classical and neo-classical art, the principles of musical harmony and rhyme and metre in poetry. 'Physical' or 'natural' beauty, 'respects the forms of things, the beauty of which is not easy to reduce to any particular rules.'
Camper here means those beauties in nature, including human physical beauty which evade precise definition but which nevertheless are universally recognised. Finally, mechanic or operative beauty consists in the technical skill of the artist, the quality of any particular skill which 'can only be acquired through practice' (p. 79.)

In these three categories Camper believes that he has codified what in practice we find beautiful, but this clearly begs the question why such qualities are deemed to be beautiful:

Philosophers have proceeded farther: they have enquired, what is it that renders us susceptible to the impression of beauty? What renders beauty the decided object of our choice? (p. 79.)

There follows a series of reflections on the familiar hypothesis that beauty is a function of proportion. The debate within the text is never finally resolved, and indeed continually fluctuates, with almost every statement qualified, and each qualification disputed. It begins by profoundly limiting any possible jurisdiction for proportion:

The celebrated Mr Burke has clearly demonstrated, in his excellent Treatise on the sublime that whatever, both in nature and art excites apprehension or wonder, may partake of its [i.e. the sublime's] nature. In this species no rules of proportion can be proposed as the cause of beauty. (p. 79.)

Camper has clearly misread Burke on this point, showing himself incapable of recognising the distinction on which Burke’s *Enquiry* is based. Far from arguing that the sublime is a subset of the beautiful, Burke’s treatise is devoted to carefully distinguishing between the two. In addition it is not only the sublime that escapes a definition based on proportion, but also the beautiful.
However, given that the sublime is not susceptible to a definition based on proportion, it still leaves the other focus of aesthetic interest open to such an approach:

Why is a person whose height is equal to eight heads, deemed a finer figure than one who is only six or less than six heads in height? A Laplander is universally considered a less pleasing figure than a Persian or a Georgian. Is it because the stature of the one will measure eight heads and the other merely six? (pp. 80-81.)

Camper seems to be heading towards a simple proportionist position, but he retreats almost immediately, pointing out that, 'a child whose height is merely equal to four or five heads is thought as beautiful as an adult equal to eight'. The perceived difference cannot, therefore, be straight-forwardly ascribed to 'any determinate proportion of the parts, simply and abstractly considered'.

This apparent refutation is promptly and heavily qualified, albeit it in a notably confused and self-contradictory manner. Camper introduces a distinction between the 'pleasing' and the 'beautiful' clearly indicating that children fall into the former category. He then surprisingly argues that our 'instinctive fondness for children', prevents us from seeing that the actual figure of the child 'has nothing pleasing in it' (p. 81). Laying aside the question of whether or not children are pleasing, Camper's argument at this stage achieves a perfect circularity. The proposition that proportion governs beauty is apparently qualified by the 'disproportionate' beauty of children and this qualification is then rejected on the grounds that we do not in fact find children beautiful - we only think we do. We cannot find them beautiful because they are out of proportion!

After having 'overcome' some of the problems associated with the hypothesis, Camper goes on to suggest tentatively that the 'idea of beauty is
sometimes excited by a certain conformity or proportion of component parts with each other' (p. 81). Camper has certainly not proved the importance of proportion, but seems content to admit it as the main source of our admiration for certain body shapes:

We see with pleasure that the lower extremities, measuring from the pubis to the feet, are precisely the half of our bodies in length, that the head is one eighth, the face one tenth, and the foot one sixth. (p. 81.)

The same principles are then applied to the face:

The head of an Apollo, a Venus, a Laocoon, is universally allowed to be fairer, or more beautiful, than the heads of our best proportioned men and women [...] perhaps it is because, in antiques, the eyes are placed exactly in the centre of the head, which is never the case with us. When the breadth of the cheek, from the nose to the ear, is exactly equal to the breadth of two noses (which proportion was observed by the ancients) it is most pleasing to us, and we prefer those models to others which make the distance greater. (p. 81.)

Camper then delivers a detailed and convincing analysis of the way classical artists took the height at which statues were positioned into account in their modelling, thus maintaining, through illusion and knowledge of perspective, the appearance of perfect proportion (pp. 83-86).

Camper never gives a satisfactory explanation of why proportion as opposed to any other property of bodies should be so appealing. His attempts lead him into webs of analogy and metaphor:

The proportion of eight heads pleases us, because this is twice the length of the trunk. A door is not pleasing unless it be twice as high as it is broad. The French make the doors of their houses more lofty; which adds dignity, without destroying the effect of symmetry. For a similar reason [we] hold the
Corinthian column to be more graceful than the Ionic. Considering the capital, as in place of a head, the whole length of a Corinthian pillar is eight heads and a half. (p. 86.)

We here find human beauty being explained by analogy with architecture and yet Camper envisages Greek architecture as advancing towards the proportions of the human body. Camper’s final word on proportion leaves us even more confused. After establishing that proportion is fundamental to beauty, he continues:

The pleasing effect, should always be our primary object; and in some cases it is better to deviate a little from the strict rules of proportion, in order to increase the beauty of a piece, than render it less pleasing by a servile conformity. (p. 104.)

This leads inevitably to the conclusion that some other principle than proportion is involved in beauty. Camper’s problems with proportion are entwined with his difficulties over public opinion. He constantly has recourse to claims about what we all find beautiful contending, for example, that natural beauty is accessible to all, requiring no explanation: we simply perceive the beauty of a calm sea or a starry sky. But concerning beauty in art, we find that that is ‘less [...] discernible to the vulgar’. Taste must be educated if more complex aesthetic experiences are to be sought: ‘It is alone by study, by contemplating the best productions of artists, and by forming comparisons, that a genuine knowledge of [...] beauty is to be obtained’ (p. 79).

These problems are unresolved in Camper’s work, but we must recall that his principal purpose was not to write a treatise on aesthetics, but to improve artistic practice. Camper analyses with precision and skill those characteristics of ancient art which contribute most to our appreciation of their formal beauty. His formula for beauty is a simple, easy-to-follow rule for artists:
If it be now asked, what is meant by a fine countenance? we may now answer, that in which the facial line [...] makes an angle of 100 degrees with the horizon. (p. 99.)

After having earlier apparently rejected Winckelmann’s idealism, Camper is at pains to stress the ideality of this figure. Neither modern Europeans nor ‘realistic’ depictions of ancient Greeks on coins (see figs I-IV of the final illustration following p. 203 below) ever display facial angles of 100 degrees: ‘This antique beauty therefore is not in nature; but to use the term of Winckelmann, it is an ideal beauty’ (p. 99).

This takes us to the crux of the problem. There is a tension throughout Camper’s text between empirical, scientific observation and measurement and the perception that the beauty of ancient statuary is not based on the simple copying of nature. As we have seen from the works of Hogarth, Reynolds and the other theorists discussed earlier in this chapter, this puts Camper squarely in the middle of one of the crucial aesthetic debates of the eighteenth century. That debate is conducted with considerable brilliance within the work of Denis Diderot and it is there that we find the most illuminating parallels with Camper.

Diderot’s writings on art display at different times a demand for greater realism, and a contempt for the mere copying of nature. The Salon de 1767 contains Diderot’s most intense and excited discussion of how an artist should go about his job of creating beauty. The direct copying of nature, the assembling of an ideal form from numerous examples of limited perfection taken from nature (after Zeuxis) and the simple-minded following of classical artists are all rejected. The first path leads only to portraiture, in which beauty is lost to realism; the second is impossible without an ideal to act as a guide to what is selected and the third clearly could not have been how the ancients themselves proceeded.
In the place of these, Diderot gives us the genius, who, through a combination of innate ability and immense effort, working on experience and observation manages to correct the flaws and deformities to which the human frame is subject and to ‘raise man up above his condition and imprint on him a divine form’. This ideal of beauty, ‘existed nowhere except in the head’ of great artists. The ‘true line’ of beauty cannot be copied either from nature or from other artists but must be ‘earned’ by those ‘convinced of their ignorance’ who ‘can apply themselves to the slow process of trial and error’ (p. 175).

This aesthetic certainly seems to clash with the earnest realism of Diderot’s early plays, such as *Fils naturel*, which, as Peter Gay has put it, is an ‘experiment in trompe l’oeil’. It is not the case, however, that Diderot’s writings on art demonstrate a simple progression from a realist to non-realist aesthetic. Diderot’s position remained confused and confusing, as John Hope Mason concludes:

In these pages [the *Salon de 1767*] Diderot took a decisive step away from the concept of art as imitation. It was not a complete break, nor was it final. It was not complete because there lingered in his mind the idea that although the work of art was created by the artist nevertheless the criterion of its efficacy was truth to ‘original’ or ‘unspoilt’ nature; the artist did not so much create an imaginary world as glimpse the hidden order of the existing world. [...] It was not a final break because although the idea occurs again in [...] several later writings, we find the earlier concepts in use in the *Pensées détachées sur la peinture* as if there had been no development away from them. (p. 176.)

Diderot was a far more original and profound thinker than Camper and it is therefore unfair to expect the latter to resolve problems that remain perplexing

---


to the former. It is certainly true to say that the aesthetic speculation at the end of Camper's treatise is the least satisfactory part of the work. Its greatest error lies in the failure to integrate his discovery of the facial angle as an index of beauty into his proportionist aesthetic: at no stage does Camper try to show how the bulging forehead of the antique statue shows greater proportion than the receding line of the negro head.

Camper's influence on nineteenth-century racial theory, primarily through his description of the facial angle, has been well documented. By concocting an apparently scientific tool for distinguishing between races, he involuntarily provided ammunition to those who would reject his own enlightened and humane views on race. It is, unfortunately, an influence that has extended to the second half of the twentieth century. John R. Baker (whose views on race have been discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis), cites Camper only to employ his facial angle as an 'objective' way of distinguishing between the races, suppressing the fact that Camper saw differences in physiognomy as the result of climate and custom. Blumenbach is similarly treated, used only for his work on racial difference, without mentioning his belief in racial equality.\(^{47}\)

Camper's influence can be traced in a more direct and benign form in one British writer, D. R. Hay who attempts to account for the same phenomena as Camper (the beauty of Classical statuary) using similar techniques (the measurement of angles) with similar aims (the improvement of artistic standards). In place of Camper's relative simplicity, however, we find a dazzling complexity as Hay attempts to capture beauty in an intricate geometric web.

\(^{47}\)Baker, pp. 24-29.
As with Camper, Hay argues that the Greeks were supreme artists not because of an abundance of natural ability, but because of the possession of hard-gained knowledge:

The long period of universal artistic excellence throughout Greece could only be the result of an early inculcation of some well-digested system of correct elementary principles, by which the ordinary amount of genius allotted to mankind was properly nurtured and cultivated.48

Hay’s system is built on an analogy with music. The Western tonal system (in which the octave is divided into intervals according to the frequency ratios of small whole numbers - 2:1; 3:2; 4:3 and 5:4 - which produce the sensation of ‘beauty’ in music) is used as the basis for producing beauty in geometric figures:

Thus the eye is capable of appreciating the exact subdivision of spaces, just as the ear is capable of appreciating the exact subdivision of intervals of time; so that the division of space into an exact number of equal parts will aesthetically affect the mind through the medium of the eye, in the same way that the division of time of vibration in music into an exact number of equal parts, aesthetically affects the mind through the medium of the ear. (p. 11.)

Sound and vision are linked together in a unified, ‘scientific’ account of beauty as a function of proportion. Building a theory of aesthetics on proportion was, of course, hardly revolutionary, but Hay distinguishes his account by the fact that it concerns the relation of angles, rather than lines. In his use of angles, he clearly borrows from Camper.

48D. R. Hay, The Geometric Beauty of the Human Figure Defined to which is prefixed A System of Proportion Applicable to Architecture and the Other Formative Arts (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1851), p. x.
Hay's figures do have an arresting quality, but in a later book in which he attempts to simplify his system and test it experimentally he encounters the unfortunate fact that flesh-and-blood beauties do not correspond to his artificially constructed, ideal templates. The artist's models he chose had heads rather too large, and bodies too short.49

Both Camper and Hay can be seen as precursors of the current sociobiological obsession with finding beauty in terms of facial geometry which I have discussed in chapter 2. The fundamental difference between Camper and the sociobiologists is that he never attaches consequences to the beauty he finds in certain types of face. They are an index neither of intelligence, nor 'fitness', they remain simply objects of pleasure which he hopes he has enabled artists to reproduce with greater accuracy. Camper may not have come any closer to discovering the unitary 'truth' of beauty than Pythagoras, St. Augustine or Dürer but nor was it fair that he should become, to use Gould's expression, the 'semiofficial grandpappy of scientific racism'.50

Gould argues that Camper has been appropriated by those who have not properly understood the lost world of Enlightenment scientific thinking on racial difference, with its commitment to the concept of a universal human nature and the malleability of the human form. That way of thinking was, however, explicitly rejected by those who fully understood it, as part of what Isaiah Berlin terms the 'counter Enlightenment'. Berlin identifies Hamann, Herder, Jacobi and Möser, followed by the Sturm und Drängers and Schiller as the main German warriors in the fight against the high-Enlightenment ideal of reason.51 More directly relevant to Camper were the professors of Göttingen,

49 D. R. Hay, The Natural Principles of Beauty As Developed in the Human Figure (Edinburgh: William Blackwoods and Sons, 1852)
one of the most distinguished among whom was Blumenbach. It was there between 1775 and 1800 that racism and Eurocentricism, in Martin Bernal’s account, became professionalised.\(^5\)

Berlin has argued that David Hume’s attack on the logical foundations of knowledge placed an emphasis on belief, or faith, that was seized on by Hamann, and made central to the counter Enlightenment, in a way that the sceptical and rational Hume would have found quite mystifying.\(^5\) In the same way, the ‘innocent’ racial typography of Camper and Blumenbach, with its ‘innocuous’ hierarchies of beauty became fundamental to the Romantic racism of the nineteenth century.\(^5\)

\(^{52}\)Bernal, pp. 215-53.  
\(^{54}\)That ‘Romantic’ racism, with its attendant contemporary criticisms is well caught by Peter Gay in *The Cultivation of Hatred*, pp. 68-95.
PETRUS CAMPER.
Table I

Fig. 1. The head of a monkey (profile)

Fig. 2. The head of an ape (profile)
Table I

Fig. 3. The head of a negro (profile)

Fig. 4. The head of a Calmuck (profile)
Table II

Fig. 1. The head of a modern European (profile)

Fig. 2. A head with a facial angle of 90% (profile)
Table II

Fig. 3. A 'Roman' head (profile)

Fig. 4. A 'Greek' head (profile)
Table III

Fig. 2. The head of a negro (front view)

Fig. 3. The head of a Calmuck (front view)
Table III

Fig. 4. A 'Roman' head (front view)

Fig. 5. A 'Greek' head (front view)
Table IV

Figs. 1-4. Greek and Roman coins showing realistic portraits of rulers
Chapter 6

SEXING THE SUBLIME: THE PERSONIFICATION OF THE SUBLIME
FROM BURKE TO CHARLOTTE BRONTÉ

I: The Return of the Sublime

One of the more surprising developments in recent critical debates has been the reappearance of what was one of the primary interpretative paradigms of the eighteenth century.\(^1\) Searching for a concept capable of capturing adequately the peculiar nexus of pleasure and pain, of ease and disease brought about by the lighting of a cigarette, Richard Klein hits on the once ubiquitous but long forgotten concept of the sublime:

Cigarettes are not positively beautiful, but they are sublime by virtue of their charming power to propose what Kant would call "a negative pleasure": a darkly beautiful, inevitably painful pleasure that arises from some intimation of eternity; the taste of infinity in a cigarette resides precisely in the "bad" taste the smoker quickly learns to love. Being sublime, cigarettes, in principle, resist all arguments directed against them from the perspective of health and utility. Warning smokers or neophytes of the dangers entices them more powerfully to the edge of the abyss, where, like travellers in a Swiss landscape, they can be thrilled by the subtle grandeur of the perspectives on mortality opened by the little terrors

---

\(^1\)It is not my intention to give a history of the sublime in the eighteenth century. That has been exhaustively covered in such works as Samuel H. Monk's *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).
in every puff. Cigarettes are bad. That is why they are good - not good, not beautiful, but sublime.²

From Boileau's translation of Longinus's *On the Sublime* in 1674, which introduced the term into the critical vocabulary, to the end of the eighteenth century, the sublime was consistently invoked to convey the thrilling, the spectacular and the terrifying in literature, art and nature. According to Jean François Lyotard, the sublime was born at the same time as classical poetics (with, in Boileau, the same midwife) and was implicated in its death:

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, this contradictory feeling - pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression - was christened or re-christened by the name of the *sublime*. It is around this name that the destiny of classical poetics was hazarded and lost; it is in this name that aesthetics asserted its critical rights over art, and that romanticism, in other words, modernity, triumphed.³

According to Clifford Siskin, the sublime drifted from the centre of critical debate and popular consciousness at the same time as another concept - culture - began to emerge, taking over the 'new forms of knowledge' which had been 'legitimated' by the sublime:

---
²Richard Klein, *Cigarettes are Sublime* (London: Picador, 1995), p. 2. Klein's view of the cigarette as sublime slides over one major distinction: for the eighteenth century theorists of the sublime, its danger existed only in the imagination, or as an unrealised potential. Cigarettes, unfortunately, have all too real consequences. Klein's thesis also contains a subtly concealed political agenda: he argues that the mixed and confused nature of the sublime pleasure offered by cigarettes is the reason behind the contradictory government policies on smoking - offering subsidies to tobacco producers whilst supporting health campaigns against smoking. This 'aesthetic' justification ignores the more obvious revenue benefits enjoyed by governments as a result of tobacco consumption.
If [...] you have wondered, as I have, where the sublime went, or struggled to recreate the eighteenth-century fascination with it for students left only with its Freudian poor cousin, sublimation, culture is the culprit. 4

The renaissance of the sublime is perhaps most clearly shown by the prominence given to the concept by Lyotard. For Lyotard, the sublime is both a central aesthetic concept, 'the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterise the modern'5 and, through its involvement with the différend (the 'différend is to be found at the heart of sublime feeling'6), an important feature of the wider postmodern condition. As Christopher Norris puts it, 'the sublime comes to figure, for Lyotard, as an index of the radical heterogeneity that inhabits our discourses of truth and value'.7

Similarly, Peter Fenves accounts for the 'renewal of the interest in the sublime during the past twenty years' by reference to the post-modernist flight from metaphysics:

The feeling of sublimity is only a feeling, not a secure basis for knowledge, not even knowledge of the self [...] the dilemmas and difficulties in which various versions of rationalism and positivism have found themselves can either give rise to a revival of metaphysics, or they can issue into a resurgence and reassessment of the sublime. Because every major philosophical undertaking of the twentieth century has set out to 'overcome' - or at least to discredit the very project of metaphysics, the

---

4Clifford Siskin, 'Gender, Sublimity, Culture: Retheorising Disciplinary Desire', Eighteenth-Century Studies, 28 (1994) 37-50 (p. 45). It should be noted that the sublime never entirely disappeared. It recurs in its Kantian form periodically throughout the nineteenth century in such works as Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation (1818) and Santayana's The Sense of Beauty (1896).

5Lyotard, The Inhuman, p. 93. In the same work he emphasises the what he sees as the triumph of the sublime over its traditional antagonist: 'For the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime.' (p. 135.)


first option is clearly unavailable, and so a revival of interest in the sublime comes as no surprise.8

What is perhaps lacking in the contemporary discussion of the sublime is the disturbing sexual quality which, as I will demonstrate, was a fundamental part of its allure for the eighteenth century.9 That quality is caught by Diderot in the celebrated image with which he encapsulates the sublime in a letter to his mistress, Sophie Volland, in 1762:

Powerful effects always come from a mixture of the voluptuous and the terrible; for instance half naked women offering us delicious potions in the bloody skulls of our enemies. That is the model for everything that is sublime. It is subjects like that which make the soul melt with pleasure and shudder with fear. The combination of these feelings plunges it into an extraordinary state, and it is the mark of the sublime that it moves us in a quite exceptional way.10

The progressive dehumanising and 'unsexing' of the concept can be seen in the development of Kant's thinking on the sublime. In the pre-critical Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime the sublime can be embodied in the human, and specifically the male form.11 Section Two of the work, Of the Attributes of the Beautiful and Sublime in Man in General, makes it clear that sublimity is a quality as applicable to humanity as beauty:

---

9It is telling that the special edition of Eighteenth-Century Studies, in which the articles by Siskin and Fenves (cited above) appear, includes nothing on sexuality. In its place we find the role of the sublime in politics, theatre, metaphysics and ethics, and in the origin of modern academic disciplines.
11It should be stressed, of course, that in the Observations, as in the Critique of Judgement, the sublime is a 'feeling' which is aroused by the objects properly called 'sublime'. See Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 47.
The figure of persons who please by their outward appearance falls sometimes into one, sometimes into the other sort of feeling. A large stature gains regard and esteem, a small one rather familiarity. In fact, dark coloring and black eyes are more closely related to the sublime, blue eyes and blonde coloring to the beautiful. (p. 53-54.)

Kant follows this with what can only be described as a series of fashion-tips, suggesting the correct sort of attire for promoting an appearance of sublimity or beauty. In the Observations, Kant distinguishes between three types of sublimity:

Its feeling is sometimes accompanied with a certain dread, or melancholy; in some cases merely with quiet wonder; and in still others with a beauty completely pervading a sublime plan. The first I shall call the terrifying sublime, the second the noble, and the third the splendid. (pp. 47-48.)

Each of these types can be embodied in an individual, but Kant posits the noble as the ideal of masculinity, and the perfect, most natural relationship marries the sublimely noble man to the beautiful woman (p. 93).

In contrast, in the Critique of Judgement the sublime (as opposed to the beautiful) is never represented by or embodied in the human form. Indeed it resists the restrictions of form altogether:

For the sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason. (p. 93.)

In the Critique of Judgement the experience of the sublime is generated by those colossal forces of nature (mountains, oceans, forests etc.), in the contemplation of which, the mind abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason placed, though quite apart from any definite end, in conjunction therewith, and merely
broadening its view, and it feels itself elevated in its own estimate of itself on finding all the might of imagination still unequal to its ideas. (p. 105.)

Given the fecundity and complexity of Kant’s later conceptualising of the sublime it is unsurprising that the *Critique of Judgement* has been the focus for the modern resurgence of interest in the subject; and, as the title of Lyotard’s *The Inhuman* suggests, this modern interest has ignored the contribution of the concept of the sublime to the presentation and understanding of sexuality.

In this chapter I will illustrate some of the ways in which the sublime infiltrated the discourse of the novel from the second half of the eighteenth century and came to be the most important way in which male attractiveness was conveyed.

II: Two Sublime Landscapes

James Macpherson, in his largely bogus and yet still strangely powerful ‘Ossian’ poems, places his assorted bards, madwomen and warriors in one of the quintessentially ‘sublime’ landscapes:

I sit by the mossy fountain; on the top of the hill of winds. One tree is rustling above me. Dark waves roll over the heath. [...] Didst thou but appear, O my love, a wanderer on the heath! thy hair floating behind thee. [...] But is it she that there appears, like a beam of light on the heath? bright as the moon in autumn, as the sun in summer storm?- she speaks: but how weak her voice! like the breeze in the reeds of the pool. [...] Yes my fair, I return; but alone of my race. Thou shalt see them no more: their graves I
raised upon the plain. But why art thou on the desart hill? why on the heath, alone.¹²

Later in the century, Coleridge in ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ used the heath as an image of freedom. Prevented from rambling by an accident, he sadly contrasts his confinement with his friends’ freedom to wander ‘Silent with swimming sense’ on the ‘springy heath’.¹³

The young genius in James Beattie’s ‘The Minstrel’ (1771) favours a different habitat, but one no less alluring to emerging Romantic sensibilities:

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,
When all in mist the world below was lost.
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime.¹⁴

Anne Radcliffe’s novels, The Romance of the Forest, The Mysteries of Udolpho, and The Italian (to be discussed below), all feature precipitous cliffs, looming over, imprisoning, and threatening their plucky heroines.¹⁵ The same landscape forms the backdrop for many of the far greater horrors suffered by de Sade’s victims and with de Sade there is no escape, no rescuing Chevalier, no protecting deity and no contrasting area of cultivation to offer refuge.¹⁶

Perhaps the most memorable of the looming precipices so associated with the concept of the sublime occurs in *The Prelude*:

When from behind that craggy Steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Uprear’d its head. I struck and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measur’d motion, like a living thing,
Strode after me.¹⁷

Between the 1750’s, when the cult was beginning to gather momentum, and the 1840’s, by which time it had become a stale cliché, the towering cliff and the desolate heath, rivalled only by endless tracts of forest, or the stormy oceans, became the ubiquitous signifiers of the sublime. Inevitably, both can be found, as images of terror and power in Shakespeare, with *Hamlet*’s ‘dreadful summit of the cliff/That beetles o’er his base into the sea’¹⁸ and *Macbeth*’s blasted heath. Given the evocative power of the precipitous cliff face and wild, windswept heathland it is not perhaps particularly surprising that the greatest personification of the sublime in English literature should go by the name of Heathcliff.

I will argue in this chapter that the aesthetic category of the sublime is of crucial importance in the function of male beauty in the Romantic movement, and in particular, it gives the key to the understanding of

masculinity in two texts I will be examining in some detail, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. That is not to say that any kind of total reading of either text is possible, or even desirable, from that admittedly limited perspective. It is rather the case that these two texts, and the other works discussed below, demonstrate the way in which the discourse of aesthetics infiltrated literary fiction, and through fiction gained a foothold in the wider culture. Before discussing *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* I will rather more succinctly examine the influence of the sublime on the depiction of male characters in three key Gothic texts. In the following chapter I will extend this reading to a number of Byron's longer poetic works.

***

**III: Burke and the Sublime**

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was the most influential pre-Romantic aesthetic work on the nature of the sublime. For my present purposes I will simply outline, as briefly as possible, the fundamentals of Burke's argument before showing how they find expression first in the Gothic fiction of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis and then more fully in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. It is not my intention to prove conclusively that there was any kind of explicit intention to incorporate any particular aesthetic theory in these texts, although they do show a close knowledge of the terminology and concepts employed by Burke; but rather to demonstrate that such concepts had become part of the mental structure through which the world was perceived and organised.

Burke's account of beauty is generally found inadequate today, and it is, indeed, easy to ridicule. For Burke, to be beautiful is to cause love; to cause love an object must display certain qualities:
to be comparatively small [...] to be smooth [...] to have a variety in the
direction of the parts [...] but [...] to have those parts not angular, but
melted as it were into each other [...] to be of a delicate frame, without any
remarkable appearance of strength.  

Although it might seem from such a list that what Burke has in mind is
something resembling a hamster, it is clear from very early in the *Enquiry*
that Burke’s paradigm for the beautiful is the female form:

> The object therefore of this mixed passion we call love, is the beauty of the
sex. Men are carried to the sex in general by [...] the common law of
nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal beauty. (p. 39.)

The nature of the pleasures offered by ‘beauty’ are also hard to mistake;
under the heading ‘Why SMOOTHNESS is beautiful’ we are advised that,

> The application of smooth bodies relax; gentle stroking with a smooth hand
allays violent pains and cramps, and relaxes the suffering parts from their
unnatural tension; and it has therefore very often no mean effect in
removing swellings and obstructions. The sense of feeling is highly
gratified with smooth bodies. A bed smoothly laid, and soft [...] is a great
luxury. (p. 137.)

For Burke, beauty is a socialising force; beautiful women (and men) ‘give
us a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them’, which ‘inspires us with
sentiments of tenderness and affection’ and thus we ‘enter willingly into a
kind of relation with them’ (p. 39).

Burke’s position is easily criticised, and it is certainly open to many of
the objections he raises to the rival theories that beauty is a function of

---

proportion, utility or perfection. All account for some cases of the beautiful - some beautiful objects are small and soft, some are well-proportioned, some particularly suited to their ends, and others in their own way quite possibly perfect. Nevertheless each is inadequate in that they are all absent in some objects generally considered beautiful and yet present in others not so considered.

If Burke’s conceptualisation of the beautiful appears trivial, we must remember that this is the quite deliberate result of a restructuring of the aesthetic, in which the beautiful is made to play the role of the homely and beneficent Dr. Jekyll to an altogether more impressive, if sinister, Mr Hyde in the category of the sublime.

Burke defines the sublime as, ‘the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’. Its ‘source’ is:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror. (p. 36.)

Pain and danger, then, are at the heart of the sublime; but it is only ‘at certain distances, and with certain modifications’, that ‘they may be, and they are delightful’ (p. 37). The havoc wrought by the sublime gives us pleasure only to the extent to which we are observers and not victims. Burke’s explanation for the strange fact that we should feel any delight at all in what is potentially destructive and always fearful again integrates the aesthetic into the world of social relations: when we behold other sentient beings submitted to the destructive power of the sublime, we feel pleasure. This is not a simple case of sadism: we are so framed as to take an interest in suffering so that we might alleviate it through pity:
Our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distress of others. (p. 42.)

In addition to this social/humanitarian function, the sublime also acts as a kind of mental decongestant. As the body needs physical exercise, so do the ‘finer organs’:

If the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person [...] these emotions clear the parts, whether fine, or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome incumbrance.

This mental cleansing produces the distinctive feelings always associated with the perception of the sublime, ‘a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror’ (p. 123).

As with beauty, we are offered a list of qualities productive of the sublime, and it is here that those aspects of aesthetic experience so conspicuously absent from Burke’s account of beauty enter into his discourse. For Burke, the ‘ruling principle of the sublime’ (p. 54) is terror; those things held to be truly fearful are necessarily sublime. Chief among these are obscurity, power, privation, and vastness or infinity.

Obscurity is necessary to real terror: knowledge banishes fear. Ghosts and goblins, despotic rulers and pagan religions all gain their power through darkness and obscurity. In literature and art, obscurity is also productive of the sublime - the more obscure the idea, the stronger the emotion: ‘dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those which are more clear and determinate’ (p. 58).
Whenever we apprehend a person, or animal of great strength, we fear it. Power is therefore a source of the sublime. But to come within the sublime, power must not be harnessed and useful in the manner of oxen, but wild and dangerous like a bull. For example,

Wolves have not more natural strength than several species of dogs; but on account of their unmanageable fierceness, the idea of a wolf is not [in contradistinction to that of a dog] despicable; it is not excluded from grand descriptions and similitudes. (p. 61.)

We also note here that ‘such sounds as imitate the natural inarticulate voices of men, or any animals in pain or danger, are capable of conveying great ideas’. Burke then quotes a passage from Virgil, which translates as ‘the roaring and fury of the lions fighting rope and chains and bars can be heard through the night; wild boars and bears rage in their caves and the shadows of huge wolves howl’ (p. 77).

According to Burke, ‘All general privations are great, because they are all terrible; Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence. The only evidence he presents in active support of this is that these ideas are associated by Virgil with hell and its environs, ‘those black realms of darkness’ (p. 65) but it is taken as self evident that they are, in themselves, terrifying, and not simply frightening through association.

For Burke it is equally self evident that great size is sublime, and he links this to the effect of succession and uniformity on the imagination. In attempting to invoke the sublime Burke several times turns to Milton. From *Paradise Lost* we find Death: ‘black he stood as night; Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell’ (p. 55). And of course there is Satan himself, in the

---

portrait of whom Burke finds 'power, terror, infinity, eternity, obscurity and nobility; in short, We do not any where meet a more sublime description than this justly celebrated one of Milton' (p. 57).

It has been frequently observed that the sublime and the beautiful translate themselves perfectly into the masculine and the feminine; into the authoritarian figure of the patriarch, feared but not loved and the mother, loveable but enfeebled. As Terry Eagleton puts it, the sublime is a 'phallic 'swelling' arising from our confrontation of danger.'

One further aspect of the sublime needs to be emphasised here: 'the sublime is on the side of enterprise, rivalry and individuation'. The mercantile capitalist, exploitative, energetic and blind to older conceptions of social responsibility partakes as much in the sublime as the Miltonic figures of Death and Satan, or the windswept heath, or the vertiginous cliff-face.

***

IV: Three Sublime Villains

Of all the literary texts discussed in this thesis, the novels of Anne Radcliffe are those in which philosophical, and particularly aesthetic, theory is most clearly manifest, or, it might be said, least artfully disguised. Radcliffe's debt to Burke and the discourse of sublime has frequently been

---

21 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 54-55. Lionel Trilling points out the gender relatedness of the sublime and the beautiful in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 95. The gendering of the sublime is even more explicit in Kant's *Observations* where the sublime and the beautiful play both prescriptive and descriptive roles. Men and women naturally tend respectively towards the sublime and the beautiful (pp. 76-96), and wherever a man, particularly a mature man, attempts to usurp the trappings of beauty, he earns the title of 'the most contemptible creature in nature' (p. 55). The 'masculinity' of the sublime is questioned by Camille Paglia, and her account is discussed below.

noted. Radcliffe’s writings on landscape and architecture are the most strikingly clear embodiments of the sublime. As Coral Ann Howells writes, for example:

The description of Udolpho is very much a late eighteenth-century set piece appealing to the reader’s love of the sublime and the picturesque. The idiom, with its emphasis on emotional and imaginative response to scenery and architecture, would be familiar to contemporary readers from landscape painting, poetry and Burke’s aesthetic theory.

The application of the theory of the sublime to descriptions of dramatic scenery and to a lesser extent, massive architectural forms is clearly sanctioned by Burke. Archibald Alison in an influential and popular work on the sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque, describes architecture as ‘The Sublimest of all the Mechanical Arts’ and the Gothic castle as ‘more sublime than all’.

In Radcliffe’s early novels and in most subsequent Romantic literature the sublime remains the realm of the inhuman. In his youthful journal, written in 1804, Schopenhauer, for example, contrasts the ‘sublime grand view’ of a glacier, with its ‘huge masses of ice, the booming crashes, the roaring torrents’ to ‘the laughing valley far below’. The beautiful, for Burke, although not confined to the human, reaches its height in the

---

23 See, for example, M. Ware, *Sublimity in the Novels of Ann Radcliffe* (Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln, 1963). Also particularly useful are the notes for the World’s Classics edition of *The Romance of the Forest* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986), ed. by Chloe Chard, which demonstrate the intimate links between the language of Burke’s *Enquiry* and Radcliffe’s fiction.


25 As, for example, in his description of the sublimity of obscurity, which draws on pagan temples and ‘darkest woods’, pp. 54-55.


human, and most particularly (although again not exclusively) in the female, form. In the section on physiognomy, he writes:

The *physiognomy* has a considerable share in beauty, especially in that of our own species. The manners give a certain determination to the countenance, which being observed to correspond pretty regularly with them, is capable of joining the effect of certain agreeable qualities of the mind to those of the body. So that to form a finished human beauty, and to give it its full influence, the face must be expressive of such gentle and amiable qualities, as correspond with the softness, smoothness, and delicacy of the outward form. (p. 107.)

A face, therefore, becomes beautiful by its association with the civilised (and feminine) virtues and becomes a signifier of them. The discourse of the sublime and the beautiful, up to this point, has supplied us with two of the major ingredients of the Gothic novel: the sublime landscape and the beautiful heroine. A third element, the Gothic villain, would seem to be the most difficult to realise. In the *Enquiry* the sublime is never personified; it is, however, as argued above, *demonified*.

Mario Praz traces the ‘Metamorphosis of Satan’ (as he titles the second chapter of *The Romantic Agony*) from the grotesque medieval monster of Tasso to the seductive heroes of Byron’s narrative poems. The most important figure in this transformation is, of course, Milton’s magnificent fallen angel. For Praz, not the least of Satan’s attributes is the beauty which still clings to his fallen state:

---

28 An important intermediary between the devil of the mystery plays and the Satan of Milton is that of Marino (1569-1625) depicted in his *Strage degli Innocenti*, described by Praz as ‘a sooty Narcissus, a Phaethon of the abyss’. Milton knew of this work both in the *original* and in Crashaw’s translation, which asks, ‘how hath one bold sinne cost/Thee all the Beauties of thy once bright eyes?’ See Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 56.
With Milton, the Evil one definitely assumes an aspect of fallen beauty, of splendour shadowed by sadness and death; he is 'majestic though in ruin'. The Adversary becomes strangely beautiful, but not in the manner of the witches Alcina and Lamia, whose loveliness is a work of sorcery, an empty illusion which turns to dust like the apples of Sodom. Accursed beauty is a permanent attribute of Satan; the thunder and stink of Mongibello, the last traces of the gloomy figure of the medieval Fiend, have now disappeared. (p. 58.)

Praz traces the familiar aesthetic Satanism of Blake, Shelley and Byron, but he sees three particular characters as prefiguring the satanic heroes of Romanticism and it is through those three characters that the sublime takes corporeal, rather than architectural or scenic form. The first of these is the villain of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Montoni. Praz writes that Montoni, 'takes pleasure in the violent exercise of his passions' and that, 'the difficulties and storms of life which ruin the happiness of others stimulate and strengthen all the energies of his mind' (p. 60). In his own way Montoni is an attractively sinister character:

This Signor Montoni had an air of conscious superiority, animated by spirit, and strengthened by talents, to which every person seemed involuntarily to yield. The quickness of his perceptions was strikingly expressed on his countenance, yet that countenance could submit implicitly to occasion; and, more than once in this day, the triumph of art over nature might have been discerned in it. His visage was long, and rather narrow, yet he was called handsome; and it was, perhaps, the spirit and vigour of his soul, sparkling through his features, that triumphed for him. Emily felt
admiration, but not the admiration that leads to esteem; for it was mixed
with a degree of fear she knew not exactly wherefore.29

This description, with its ‘spirit and vigour’ resembles the Romantic view
of Milton’s Satan, prefiguring the ‘energy and magnificence’ lauded by
Shelley in the Defence of Poesy and Blake’s assertions that ‘Evil is the
active springing from Energy’ and ‘Energy is eternal delight’ in The
Marriage of Heaven and Hell.30 Montoni has a definite, if largely
unrealised, sexual power. As Howells writes of the relationship between
the Montoni and the heroine, Emily:

Certainly the antagonism between Montoni and Emily has a sexual
resonance as well, all the more neurotic for being treated so evasively and
indirectly. All the time Emily is under Montoni’s protection she is obsessed
by ideas of vice, rape and murder, though Montoni himself hardly seems to
be aware of her except as an object to be exploited economically. Sexuality
comes to the surface only on one extraordinary occasion, with Count
Morano’s jealous accusation that Emily has refused him because she is in
love with Montoni.31

Nevertheless, despite the energy, the suggestions of evil, and the sexual
threat, there is something unsatisfactory in the picture of Montoni as a
toweringly sublime hero/villain. For David Punter, Montoni represents a
peculiarly equivocal and lacklustre portrait of evil:

The novel requires that he be depicted, at least potentially, as evil incarnate,
but he constantly becomes assimilated to a less extreme model of the adult
male, and even his dubious behaviour cannot prevent Radcliffe from also

30William Blake, Blake’s Poetry and Designs, ed. by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New
31Howells, p. 52.
showing him as a protective and stable figure. His wickedness comes over not as a positive force but as a kind of unfeelingness, laziness or irresponsibility.\textsuperscript{32}

It must be observed, however, that the concept of the sublime does contain suggestions of the 'protective' and the 'stable', alongside the threateningly violent. In \textit{The Italian}, among the many passages which deliberately paint the contrast between the terrifying sublime and the beautiful, where dramatic nature rubs up against cultivation and charm, we also find an image of the sublime as guardian:

‘Mark too,’ said Elena, ‘how sweetly the banks and undulating plains repose at the feet of the mountains; what an image of beauty and elegance they oppose to the awful grandeur that overlooks and guards them!’\textsuperscript{33}

Despite this it is difficult to argue with Punter's memorable description of Montoni as, 'a rather tame wicked uncle' whose 'fire and splutter are much more impressive than his actual capacity for violence' (p. 89). From the opening scenes of Matthew Lewis's \textit{The Monk}, it is apparent that we are in the presence of a rather more formidable character:

He was a man of noble port and commanding presence. His stature was lofty, and his features uncommonly handsome. His Nose was aquiline, his eyes large and black and sparkling, and his dark brows almost joined together. His complexion was of a deep but clear Brown; Study and watching had entirely deprived his cheek of colour. [...] He bowed himself


\footnote{\textit{Radcliffe, The Italian}, p. 158. The idea of the sublime as guardian recurs in several of Scott's novels. In \textit{Waverley} and \textit{Rob Roy}, the same rough and violent highlanders act as aggressive warriors and benevolent protectors and, in \textit{Ivanhoe}, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert, is both the sublime villain of the piece, and yet, at one point, he acts as the rescuer and protector of the beautiful Jewess, Rebecca. See Walter Scott, \textit{Ivanhoe}, ed. by A. N. Wilson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 341-44.}
with humility to the audience: Still there was a certain severity in his look and manner that inspired universal awe, and few could sustain the glance of his eye at once fiery and penetrating.\textsuperscript{34}

Ambrosio is to become a hypocrite, a murderer and a rapist, but his fall is not principally as a result of his innate character. On the contrary he has many fine and noble qualities:

\begin{quote}
He was naturally enterprising, firm, and fearless: He had a Warrior's heart, and He might have shone with splendour at the head of an Army. There was no want of generosity in his nature: The Wretched never failed to find in him a compassionate Auditor: His abilities were quick and shining, and his judgement vast, solid, and decisive. (p. 236.)
\end{quote}

But Ambrosio's upbringing at the hands of the religious order to which he was given on the death of his parents has brought about an unfortunate transformation:

\begin{quote}
While the Monks were busied in rooting out his virtues, and narrowing his sentiments, they allowed every vice which had fallen to his share, to arrive at full perfection. He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful: He was jealous of his Equals, and despised all merit but his own: He was implacable when offended, and cruel in his revenge. (p. 237.)
\end{quote}

Nevertheless, Ambrosio remains, at the beginning of the novel, an impressive and in some ways attractive character, with a charismatic personality and resolute will. And the women of the town find him irresistible: 'Above all the Women sang forth his praises loudly, less influenced by devotion than by his noble countenance, majestic air, and well-turned graceful figure' (p. 239).

Ambrosio’s fall is precipitated by the androgynous novice, Rosario. We are alerted to the possibility that Rosario is not what he appears to be from the first descriptions of the novice: he habitually keeps his head covered and avoids the company of the monks, but when glimpsed, his features appear ‘most beautiful and noble’ (p. 42). It is not particularly surprising when it transpires that Rosario is really Matilda, a young woman who has fallen in love with the charismatic preacher. The drawn-out seduction is intensely erotic and provides a convincing context, given the conventions of Gothic fiction, for Ambrosio’s corruption. The scene in which Matilda holds a dagger to her naked breast (‘She had torn open her habit, and her bosom was half exposed. The weapon’s point rested upon her left breast: And Oh! that was such a breast! The Moon-beams darting full upon it, enabled the Monk to observe its dazzling whiteness’ p. 65) and then sucks the poison from a potentially fatal sting Ambrosio has incurred from a ‘Cientipedoro’ is among the finest in the novel. The implication is clear: it is not Ambrosio’s wholly natural susceptibility to female beauty and self-sacrifice that is at fault, but the stultifying sexual morality of the religious order.

The seduction, however, marks the beginning of Ambrosio’s descent into the maelstrom. The final revelation that Rosario/Matilda was a male demon, intent from the outset on leading Ambrosio to destruction, renders much of the earlier scenes between the two meaningless or incomprehensible. Camille Paglia nevertheless argues that it is a deliberate attempt on Lewis’s part to disorientate the reader:

Our first and psychologically primary reading of the novel has been in complete error. The meltingly delicious sex between Ambrosio and Matilda - all pantings, twinings, and obscure refinements - has been homosexual
and daemonic, not heterosexual. Our own sexual perceptions have been seduced.35

Whatever the true gender of Matilda, Lewis shows throughout the novel a fascination with male beauty. When Matilda first summons Satan in Ambrosio's presence, he appears in all the glory of his original condition, more a glittering Eros than Lord of the Flies:

He beheld a Figure more beautiful, than Fancy's pencil ever drew. It was a Youth seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled. He was perfectly naked: A bright Star sparkled upon his fore-head; Two crimson wings extended themselves from his shoulders; many-coloured fires, which played round his head, formed themselves into a variety of figures, and shone with a brilliance far surpassing that of precious Stones. (p. 277.)

Beauty and pleasure, however, in *The Monk*, are unstable and constantly teeter on the edge of an abyss of horror, death and corruption. Thus we find Agnes clinging to her dead, 'lovely Child' as it slowly rots (p. 412), and Ambrosio encounters Antonia, a 'sleeping beauty' lying beside three 'putrid half-corrupted Bodies' (p. 378). The most dramatic transformation of beauty occurs with Ambrosio's second encounter with Satan:

He appeared in all that ugliness, which since his fall from heaven had been his portion: His blasted limbs still bore marks of the Almighty's thunder: A swarthy darkness spread itself over his gigantic form: his hands and feet were armed with long Talons: Fury glared in his eyes, which might have struck the bravest heart with terror: Over his huge shoulders waved two

---

35Paglia, p. 266. It may perhaps more convincingly be argued that the nineteen year old Lewis simply lost track of his narrative. It is not a requirement of the story that Matilda should turn out to have been demonic from the outset. The 'first reading' account of a mutual slide into corruption might well be considered more plausible.
enormous sable wings; and his hair was supplied by living snakes, which
twined themselves round his brows with frightful hissings. (p. 433.)

Beside such a spectre, Ambrosio cannot but be diminished. He remains,
however, the dominant human presence in the novel, both a 'Romantic
rebel fighting against the forces of repression to seek fulfilment of the
infinite possibilities within himself' and 'a crippled hero'.36

The third of the 'transitional' hero/villains nominated by Praz is
Schedoni in Radcliffe's *The Italian*. The relationship between Montoni,
Ambrosio and Schedoni has been frequently noted.37 Lewis was strongly
affected by *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and wrote *The Monk* under that
influence. Radcliffe then responded with *The Italian*, as Frederick Garber
argues, 'in protest and as a self vindication after her reading of Lewis'.38
The fully realised, as opposed to vaguely suggested, Gothic crimes and the
atmosphere of carnal, and charnel excess (Lewis is known to have bought a
copy of de Sade's *Justine* in 179239) could not have been to her taste, but,
as Garber goes on to add, 'The Monk, in its turn, inspired her to produce a
better book than any she had written'.40

As with Montoni and Ambrosio, Schedoni is in some ways an
impressive and forceful character. Physically he had, in his youth, been
good-looking. We are told that a miniature of him, 'displayed a young man
rather handsome, of a gay and smiling countenance' (p. 238). At the time
of the novel, his youthful attractiveness has been replaced by something
very much more imposing:

37See Praz, pp. 62-63.
38See Howard Anderson's introduction to *The Monk*, xi-xii.
40Introduction to *The Monk*, xii.
His figure was striking, but not so from grace; it was tall, and, though extremely thin, his limbs were large and uncouth, and as he stalked along, wrapt in the black garments of his order, there was something terrible in its air; something almost super-human.

Again, as with Ambrosio, it is Schedoni's eyes that most capture the attention:

His cowl, too, as it threw a shade over the livid paleness of his face, increased its severe character, and gave an effect to his large melancholy eye, which approached to horror. [...] There was something in his physiognomy extremely singular, and that can not easily be defined. It bore the traces of many passions, which seemed to have fixed the features they no longer animated. An habitual gloom and severity prevailed over the deep lines of his countenance; and his eyes were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men, and to read their most secret thoughts; few persons could support their scrutiny, or even endure to meet them twice. (p. 35.)

Along with Ambrosio, Schedoni, as Punter points out, 'owes a vast debt to Milton’s portrayal of Satan' (p. 63). He acts as tempter in his conspiracy with the Marchesa to destroy Ellena and, in case we have missed the resemblance, a guide, who may or may not know the truth about Schedoni, commentates on a puppet show they are watching:

---

**41** Terrifying eyes are one of the most distinctive features of the Gothic hero/villain. The most impressive and fearsome eye in Gothic fiction belongs to William Beckford's Vathek, ninth Caliph of the race of Abassides: 'His figure was pleasing and majestic; but when he was angry, one of his eyes became so terrible, that no person could bear to behold it; and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired.' *Three Gothic Novels*, ed. by Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 151.
'And look there, Signor! there is a juggler! O! good Signor, stop one minute, to look at his tricks. See! he has turned a monk into a devil already, in the twinkling of an eye!' (p. 274.)

And as with Ambrosio (and Satan) something of his former glory clings to Schedoni:

There were circumstances [...] which appeared to be a man of birth and of fallen fortune; his spirit, as it had sometimes looked forth from under the disguise of his manners, seemed lofty. (p. 34.)

The crimes variously attributed to, and contemplated by Schedoni are in excess of anything we know of Montoni, or even the rapist and murderer, Ambrosio, but he also has a side, which if not benevolent, is at least patriarchally protective. As soon as he becomes convinced that Ellena is his daughter, he begins to formulate plans for an alliance with Vivaldi. Even before the discovery of their supposed relationship, he has been unusually troubled by conscience, and he cannot look upon 'the innocent, the wretched Ellena', without 'yielding to the momentary weakness, as he termed it, of compassion' (p. 223).

Sublimity, in these three novels, in both its personification as the hero/villain and as expressed through landscape and architecture encompasses a range of feelings, from terror to an almost religious awe. The positive aspects of the sublime in Burke's *Enquiry* were of a physical and a social nature (and both beauty and sublimity have a demonstrable sexual component), but for Radcliffe, the utilitarian benefits of terror are replaced by the reverence appropriate to religion:

It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works. (p. 63.)
Religion also serves as the medium through which the sublime and the beautiful can be brought together:

When she spoke of religion, it appeared so interesting, so beautiful, that her attentive auditors revered and loved it as a friend, a refiner of the heart, a sublime consoler. (p. 300.)

Through religion, the inhuman scale of the sublime becomes a conduit for good, and takes the form of a valuable moral lesson:

Here, gazing upon the stupendous imagery around her, looking, as it were, beyond the awful veil which obscures the features of the Deity, and conceals Him from the eyes of his creatures, dwelling as with a present God in the midst of his sublime works; with a mind thus elevated, how insignificant would appear to her the transactions, and the sufferings of this world! [...] Thus man, the giant who now held her in captivity, would shrink to the diminutiveness of a fairy; and she would experience, that his utmost force was unable to enchain her soul, or compel her to fear him, while he was destitute of virtue. (pp. 90-92.)

Radcliffe has transformed sublimity, in this passage, from the source of fear, to a well of consolation, both a defence against the forces confronting the victim, and a reminder of the relative unimportance of the trials she must undergo. It is when sublimity becomes embodied in mankind and its institutions (such as the Inquisition) that it becomes pernicious. It is a view shared, as Punter points out, by both Radcliffe and Lewis:

42 An interesting link between the Satanic and Christian sublimes can be found in James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner. Already well on the path to corruption and damnation, Robert Wringham, the justified sinner of the title, is told of a sermon preached by a ‘sublime stranger’. Within two pages the preacher and his sermon are described as sublime six times: ‘It was a true, sterling, gospel sermon - it was striking, sublime, and awful in the extreme.’ It transpires that the preacher is the Devil in disguise, and his sublime sermon nothing but casuistry. The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, ed. by John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 197-203.
That sublimity is a major feature of Radcliffe’s works is obvious: all her
descriptive material, and her notion of the relations between individual and
landscape, hinge on the concept of the sublime as a peak of emotional
experience. But it is also a significant element in *The Monk*: Ambrosio’s
voice, we are told, contains ‘all the terrors of the tempest’ [...] and Lewis
devotes much space to the exposure of this false sublimity, finally, in a
beautiful and extravagant irony, transporting the monk to meet his fate in
the Sierra Morena, surrounded by precisely those sublime delights from
which he had alienated himself by his duplicity. Ambrosio is a character
with sublime potential, cheated of his heritage by his own weaknesses and,
inseparably, by the distortions of conventual life. (pp. 85-86.)

This distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ sublimity is misleading. What
Ambrosio certainly lacks is the ‘sensibility’ of a Gothic heroine, which
deprives him of the ability to stand in awe before cliffs, mountains, stormy
seas and the like, in the manner of Emily St Aubert or Ellena. The whole
point of the sublime is, however, that it includes the malign, the corrupt
and the destructive. Sensibility and the sublime feed off each other but are
not coextensive and sensibility is far from a universal attribute. The various
servants and menials in Radcliffe’s novels are invariably incapable of
appreciating the sublime, even when they are virtuous, such as Vivaldi’s
faithful servant, Paulo, in *The Italian*, for whom the only interesting scene
is that of his own beloved Naples.

Before moving on to discuss *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, one
further group of characters deserves a brief mention - the conventional
heroes of the Gothic text. Lorenzo in *The Monk*, Valencourt in *The
Mysteries of Udolpho* and Vivaldi in *The Italian* are all physically
attractive, brave and noble and yet all ineffectual and peripheral. Each
appears formless, indistinct and in some ways feminized when compared to
the 'sublime' figures they oppose. Their rescue attempts invariably fail leaving their respective beloveds to confront evil with little but their prayer books and faith to protect them.

Vivaldi, in particular, is given a hard time. He spends the entire novel pursuing phantoms, in failing to protect Ellena, or helplessly incarcerated by the Inquisition. At one point he spends an evening serenading an empty house with his exquisitely 'delicate' voice (p. 17). Crucially it is not Vivaldi who defeats Schedoni, but the equally sublime, sinister and mysterious Nicola, in alliance with the power of the Inquisition.

The ineffectuality of the male heroes of Gothic fiction is cited by Paglia as evidence against the correspondence of the sublime and masculinity:

Burke's locutions clearly demonstrate the passive self subordination of male devotees of the sublime. [...] The sublime, a mode of pagan vision, is one of the first historical signs of the Romantic withdrawal from masculine action.43

Paglia's argument is seriously flawed. Simply because men abase themselves before the sublime does not preclude the possibility that the sublime is itself masculine, any more than the male worship of Zeus raises questions over his gender. Paglia has allowed her fascination with the 'chthonic' force of female energy (which she opposes to the Apollonian, masculine desire for order and clarity) to blind her to the possibility that the masculine can assume a form equally as disruptive and ungovernable.

***

43 Paglia, p. 269.
V: Heathcliff

It’s as dark almost as if it came from the devil. That Heathcliff owes something to the hero villains of Gothic fiction has long been recognised. What is less often acknowledged is the role played by the concept of the sublime in that debt. In the ‘intensive totality’ of the world she creates, that, ‘apparently timeless, highly integrated, mysteriously autonomous symbolic universe’, Emily Brontë allots a dominating centrality to the sublime. In the relationships between the Heights and the Grange, and Heathcliff and Linton, we find a paradigmatic metaphorisation of the opposition of the sublime and the beautiful.

Our first look at the Heights shows a residence nicely fitted to be the proper abode of the sublime. In correspondence to Burke’s views that to ‘the sublime in building, greatness of dimension seems requisite’ and that such buildings ought to be ‘dark and gloomy’, we find massive walls, ‘large jutting stones’, a ‘vast oak dresser’ and heavy black chairs, ‘lurking in the shade’. Clearly the ‘narrow windows [...] deeply set in the wall’, admit but little light. From the grotesque carving around the doorway to the significantly huge fire-place we are clearly in the realm of the Gothic. The very name, ‘Wuthering Heights’ invokes the sublime; we are told that

45See for example, Walter L. Reed, Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), who writes of the generic ‘figure of evil whose fatal effect is most often felt by the beautiful women he seduces and by the good families whose inheritance he usurps’ p. 88. Reed also details the contribution of the Shakespearean hero and Walter Scott’s fiction (as well as the obvious influence of Byron I outline below) to Heathcliff’s creation. Winifred Gérin points out that Emily enjoyed Mrs Radcliffe’s novels, Emily Brontë: A Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 58. Gérin also outlines the complex relationship between Wuthering Heights, Radcliffe’s fiction and the ‘horror school’ of Mary Shelley, Hoffman and James Hogg, ibid. pp. 215-20. As I have shown above at note 36, Hogg, in particular, makes frequent reference to the sublime.
47Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, p. 74.
48Wuthering Heights, pp. 2-3.
wuthering is a ‘significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather’ (p. 2).

The first vision of Thrushcroft Grange is, in perfect counterpoint, beatific:

ah! It was beautiful [relates the young Heathcliff] - a splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers. [...] We should have thought ourselves in heaven! (p. 46.)

Moving from the buildings in the story to the characters who dwell there, it must be said of Heathcliff that, although he undoubtedly does much more than embody the sublime, embody the sublime he emphatically does. His mysterious origins, his dark and brooding appearance, his intermittent frenzied animality and his frequently cited Satanic nature all reinforce the idea of the sublimity of his character. Twice Heathcliff is compared to the beast considered most sublime by Burke. He is,

an unreclaimed creature, without refinement - without cultivation; an arid wilderness of furze and whinstone. [...] He’s not a rough diamond - a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic; he’s a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man. (p. 102.)

And later, in what must be the single most sublime image in the novel (in either the aesthetic or commonplace usages), Nelly describes how the fraught Heathcliff, ‘dashed his head against the knotted trunk, and, lifting up his eyes, howled - not like a man but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears’ (p. 167). True to the sublime, the scene does not inspire pity but horror. Nelly goes on,
I observed several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead were both stained; probably the scene I witnessed was a repetition of others acted during the night. It hardly moved my compassion - it appalled me.

Elsewhere Heathcliff's aspect is less clearly wolfish but simply wild and bestial. Nelly describes how, after holding Cathy in an embrace from which 'I thought my mistress would never be released alive', Heathcliff, 'gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog' and adds 'I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species' (p. 160). Later, she describes to Hindley how Heathcliff assaulted the unconscious Hindley: 'He trampled on, and Kicked you, and dashed you on the ground. [...] And his mouth watered to tear you with his teeth; because he's only half a man' (p. 180).

There is something reminiscent here, in the watering mouth and tearing teeth, of the fashion for vampires that was beginning to gather force. *Varney the Vampire*, by James Malcolm Rhymer, the most popular pre-Dracula vampire story was published in the same year as *Wuthering Heights*. Vampires had been all the rage since John Polidori's short story, *The Vampyre*, had been mistaken for Byron's coded confession on its publication in 1819. The mistake was understandable, given that Polidori was Byron's personal physician, and his story was conceived during the famous evening at the Villa Diodati in 1816 when Mary Shelley first concocted *Frankenstein*.

Prior to Polidori's tale, which concerns the rapacious appetite for society ladies of Lord Ruthven, the vampire had generally taken the form of a

---

50 Mary Shelley tells the outline of the events of that evening in the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*.
peasant rather than an aristocrat, and there is no suggestion of the fatal charm that was to become part of the vampire myth. Polidori’s Ruthven added the decadent, predatory English Lord to the classical and folkloric elements that had hitherto constituted the myth. Ruthven does seem to be modelled on Byron, or at least on the public perception of Byron, combining fascination with the thrill of the illicit and perverse. The success of Polidori’s story was due, at least in part, to (and indeed the literature of Vampirism gained its initial popularity from) its associations with Byron. Frayling sums up the enthusiasm of the period:

In Paris at the time Polidori’s The Vampyre was first published, boulevard gossips were unwittingly contributing to the sales of the book (which canny editors insinuated was the work of Byron rather than his physician) by spreading the rumour that the English Milord had murdered his mistress and ‘enjoyed drinking her blood, from a cup made of her cranium’. Goethe is on record as having suggested offhandedly that ‘there were probably one or two dead bodies in that man’s past’, and he thought that The Vampyre was ‘the English poet’s finest work’. The phenomenal sales in Paris of Lady Caroline Lamb’s Glenarvon [...] with an introduction which made

---

51In The Literature of Terror, David Punter entirely misunderstands the relationship between the central European peasant-vampire and Ruthven. He writes, ‘The most important of his [Ruthven’s] particular attributes is that he is, like the vampires of central European legend, an aristocrat, and it would be foolish to overlook the obvious connexion between this feature and his sexual potential. What Ruthven exercises over his victims is a kind of droit de seigneur, that kind of absolute sexual privilege which is a concomitant of absolute power, and which is at the same time a predictable object of middle-class fantasies. Ruthven is indeed modelled in some ways on Byron, but this is less important; Ruthven is the representation not of a mythologised individual but of a mythologised class. He is dead yet not dead, as the power of the aristocracy in the early nineteenth century was dead and not dead; he requires blood because blood is the business of an aristocracy, the blood of warfare and the blood of the family’ (p. 119). In fact, as Frayling well illustrates, the folkloric vampire was solidly peasant in nature. It would appear that Punter has incorrectly assumed that the character of Stoker’s Count Dracula has more of a basis in folklore than is actually the case, which he then sees as being part of a tradition of aristocratic vampires that in fact only began with Polidori.
explicit the association between the Satanic Clarence de Ruthven, Lord Glenarvon and Lord Byron ... simply reinforced such rumours.\textsuperscript{52}

The ‘Satanic Lord’ strain of Vampire proliferated in literary and theatrical form up to 1847, when, as Frayling puts it, he ‘gorged himself to death in \textit{Varney the Vampire}'. Obviously Heathcliff has only a limited consanguinity with Ruthven and his successors: for all his physical and mental superiority he is hardly an aristocrat. The connection is perhaps, once again, through the sublime. Frayling argues that Burke’s account of the delight to be had ‘when we have an idea of pain and danger’ legitimised the association of sexual attractiveness, rapacious appetite, and horror to be found in the vampire.

A short quotation from \textit{Dracula} itself should suffice to illustrate that there is a degree of affinity between Heathcliff and the Transylvanian Count:

You think to baffle me, you - with your pale faces all in a row, like sheep in a butcher’s. You shall be sorry yet, each one of you! You think you have left me without a place to rest; but I have more. My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries and time is on my side! Your girls that you all love are mine already: and through them you and others shall yet be mine - my creatures, to do my bidding and be my jackals when I want to feed.\textsuperscript{53}

We are reminded of Heathcliff’s equally grim pronouncement:

I have no pity! I have no pity! The more the worms writhe, the more I yearn to crush out their entrails! It is a moral teething; and I grind with greater energy in proportion to the increase of pain. (p. 151.)

\textsuperscript{52}Frayling, pp. 6-7.
One critic has described *Dracula* as 'a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match',\(^5^4\) which is not a bad thumb-nail sketch of *Wuthering Heights*. There are even clearer suggestions of vampirism in the novel. Speaking of the restraining influence of Cathy on his violent impulses towards Edgar, he says, ‘The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood!’ (p. 148). And in case we have missed the point, Nelly asks towards the end of the novel, ‘Is he a ghoul, or a vampire?’ (p.330).

The vampire, from Polidori to Bram Stoker (and on into the films and novels of the twentieth century) was and is clearly an overwhelmingly sexual, as well as a terrifying figure.\(^5^5\) Typically, the horrified victim finds herself rendered immobilised and mute before the supernatural power of the vampire, which is precisely the psychological response called for by the spectacle of the sublime. In *Varney the Vampire*, we find,

A tall figure is standing on the ledge immediately outside the long window.

It is its finger-nails upon the glass that produces the sound so like the hail, now that the hail has ceased. Intense fear paralyses the limbs of that beautiful girl. The one shriek is all she can utter - with hands clasped, a face of marble, a heart beating so wildly in her bosom, that each moment it seems as if it would break its confines, eyes distended and fixed upon the window, she waits, frozen with horror.\(^5^6\)

---

54Maurice Richardson, ‘The Psychoanalysis of Count Dracula’ in Frayling, pp. 418-19.
55The complex of emotions and ideas contained in the mythology of vampirism is well brought out in Ernest Jones’s Essay, ‘On the Vampire’, in Frayling’s collection noted above. Jones sees vampirism as fundamentally an attempt to regain the presence of the departed: ‘several different emotions - love, guilt and hate - impel us towards a belief in the idea of reunion with the dead [...] and of the return of the dead from the grave. The simplest case of all is where someone longs for the return of a dear lost one’ (p. 399). In this and several other statements in the essay we can see clear pointers to *Wuthering Heights*.
56Frayling, p. 149.
In the final sections of the novel Heathcliff appears increasingly vampire-like, as he refuses to eat and goes ‘Night-walking’ (p. 327). Rather than the sleek count of modern vampire films, Heathcliff resembles the faintly seedy Varney:

After an hour he re-entered, when the room was clear, in no degree calmer - the same unnatural - it was unnatural - appearance of joy under his black brows; the same bloodless hue, and his teeth visible, now and then in a kind of smile; his frame shivering, not as one shivers with chill or weakness, but as a tight-stretched cord vibrates - a strong thrilling, rather than trembling. (p. 328.)

The figure of the vampire, a being able to transform itself from a wolf into a ghoul, serves as a suitable link between the lupine and the Satanic aspects of Heathcliff’s nature. We are also reminded of Chapter 10 of *Das Kapital* in which Marx writes, ‘Capital is dead labour, that, Vampire like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’

In the vampire the harsh landlord and capitalist schemer become consubstantial with the wolf and the devil in a most unholy and emphatically sublime trinity. Of the three it is the image of Heathcliff as Satan, or at least as one of Satan’s lieutenants that makes the strongest impact. We are frequently reminded of Heathcliff’s demoniacal nature. As a child he is described by Hindley Earnshaw, admittedly a less than impartial observer, as ‘an imp of Satan’ (p. 38); and to the next generation of the Earnshaw family he is to become ‘Devil daddy’ (p. 109).

Cathy describes the prospect of Isabella marrying Heathcliff as being like ‘offering Satan a lost soul’ (p. 112). She extends the analogy to their

---

favoured pastimes: 'Your bliss lies, like his, in inflicting misery' After the predictably disastrous union, Isabella writes to Nelly Dean: 'Is Mr Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil?' (p. 136). Heathcliff himself, in a particularly sinister moment, with his own son grovelling in terror at his feet, jokes about his Satanic nature to Catherine: 'You would imagine I was the devil himself, Miss Linton, to excite such horror' (p. 269).\(^{58}\)

Winifred Gérin points out that Milton had been Patrick Brontë’s favourite poet, and that he knew *Paradise Lost* by heart. Inevitably, the glamour of Milton’s hero would have profoundly influenced Emily:

> On Emily, the impact of the figure of Satan was deep and lasting. The sense of thwarted power in the fallen angel, conscious of his lost rights, stirred her to admiration and sympathy. The very magnitude of Satan’s demands and losses made her his champion [...] it suited the boldness of her mind to conceive heroes in Satan’s image.\(^{59}\)

Despite his coarseness, his bestiality and his manic destructiveness, Heathcliff is undeniably placed at the erotic heart of the novel. At the beginning of the novel he is described as having 'an erect and handsome figure' (p. 4). It is made quite clear by the author that Heathcliff is attractive, and particularly so when compared to the superficially more appealing Linton:

> He had grown a tall, athletic, well-formed man, beside whom my master seemed quite slender and youth-like. His upright carriage suggested the idea of his having been in the army. His countenance was much older in

\(^{58}\)It has been argued by some critics that Heathcliff actually is a demon, a malicious supernatural being, bent on evil. See Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 93.

expression and decision of feature than Mr. Linton's; it looked intelligent and retained no marks of former degradation. A half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire, but it was subdued; and his manner was even dignified, quite divested of roughness though too stern for grace. (p. 94.)

Heathcliff's sexual attractiveness is one of the principle indicators of the most obvious and dominant influence on his formation:

What is paramount in Byron's heroes that is generally lacking in Shakespeare's tragic heroes and Milton's Satan is the primary interest in romantic love. Heathcliff's heroism is inseparable from his love for Catherine.60

The Brontë children were steeped in both the writings and the myth of Byron. His influence was 'an instant contagion that spread through everything they did and wrote during their formative years'.61 As I will show in the following chapter, Byron's heroes make explicit the implicit sexual allure of their Gothic-sublime precursors. The fated, mysterious and violent heroes of The Giouar, The Corsair, Lara and the other narrative and dramatic works, with their heady combination of Satanic daring and ravishing good looks are the raw material from which Heathcliff was fashioned. As Gérin puts it, 'Heathcliff is the Byronic hero par excellence'. (p. 45.)

Byron's character was as important as Byron's characters. It has been noted that a famous incident in Byron's life, related in Moore's biography, where he overhears Mary Chaworth (an early infatuation) saying to a maid, 'Do you think I could care for that lame boy?', was recreated when

60Reed, p. 90.
61Winifred Gérin, Emily Brontë: A Biography, p. 44.
Heathcliff hears Cathy tell Nelly Dean that it would degrade her to marry him. It has been argued that *Wuthering Heights* was planned as an 'intertwining' of Byron's poem 'The Dream' which tells of the doomed relationship between a young couple who love each other as brother and sister, and Byron's own, well publicised, indeed notorious, relationship with his half sister.

However great the influence, there is no doubt that Heathcliff transcends anything Byron was able to create. As Reed puts it, 'There is a force and a substance in Heathcliff that reveals the passivity and hollowness of Byron's heroes by contrast' (p. 92). Heathcliff is both more fully realised than Byron's heroes, and placed in a world of greater social complexity, and at the same time, he exists on a higher plane of mythic intensity.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the same way that Lorenzo and Vivaldi are overwhelmed by the power of their sublime opponents, Linton's feminine good looks, amounting almost to beauty, cannot compete against Heathcliff's towering masculinity. Lockwood describes a portrait of Linton that explains to him how Cathy could have forsaken her 'first friend':

> I discerned a soft-featured face, exceedingly resembling the young lady at the Heights, but more pensive and amiable in expression. It formed a sweet picture. The long hair curled slightly on the temples; the eyes were large and serious; the figure almost too graceful. (p. 66.)

---

62 The resemblance is mentioned by Gérin, ibid. p. 45-6.
63 Reed, p. 91.
64 Both aspects of Heathcliff are detailed by Eagleton in chapter 6 of *Myths of Power*.
65 Or again, no more than the 'little birds [...] and smaller kinds of beasts' favoured by Burke can match the dramatic force of the lions, wild boars, bears and wolves conjured up by Virgil. *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 103
The portrait could as easily be of a woman as a man, and his voice, his 'sweet, low manner of speaking' (p. 69) is equally feminine. The first explicit contrast between Heathcliff and Linton employs the terminology of the sublime and the beautiful, familiar from Radcliffe. The difference, 'resembled what you see in exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley.'

And yet in the only physical confrontation between the two, the outcome is far from clear-cut. Heathcliff is full of menace and bluster, and free with degrading insults. Linton is a 'lamb' (p. 114) and a 'milk-blooded coward' (p. 115), and Heathcliff threatens to 'crush his ribs in like a rotten hazelnut' (p. 116). Even Cathy adds to the humiliation, emphasising the superiority of Heathcliff, who, 'would as soon lift a finger at you as the king would march his army against a colony of mice' (p. 115). However it is Linton who delivers a disabling punch to the throat of Heathcliff, and Heathcliff who beats a retreat, albeit persuaded by the presence of a couple of servants with the aid of a little deception by Nelly. Nevertheless there is little doubt that when focused, Heathcliff's masculinity and energy give him an extraordinary sexual hold. As well as Cathy's life-long, if complex involvement, Isabella succumbs fatally to his charisma.

Camille Paglia claims improbably that Heathcliff, in fact, embodies elements of the feminine, or at least a possesses a debilitating infertility. She argues that Heathcliff is the result of an hermaphroditic fusing of Emily Brontë with Byron:

There is some impediment to the transmission of virile energy in Heathcliff. He is seminally vitiated. His power flows not into heterosexual generation but into incestuous passion for his double. [...] Like Byron and Elvis Presley, Heathcliff suffers internal self-impairment. Appearances and
reputation to the contrary, Heathcliff as a sexual persona is not conventionally masculine.\textsuperscript{66}

Paglia bases her argument partly on Heathcliff's semi-incestuous, but unconsummated attachment to Cathy, and on the weak and pathetic nature of the product of his marriage to Isabella. Her main supporting evidence is, however, biographical: the well testified 'masculine' qualities apparent in Emily's character. It is obvious, however, that Paglia's claim that Heathcliff has a feminine aspect is the result of an unwarranted distorting of the facts to fit a voracious, totalising theory. As she puts it, 'Emily Brontë's Romantic self-portrait is an example of my principle of sexual metathesis, an artistic sex change'. Paglia argues in \textit{Sexual Personae} that androgyny and hermaphrodisism are at the heart of all creative acts and individuals. She selects a small number of dubious sounding biographical 'facts' ('The word "masculine" recurs in local memories of Emily. Her family nickname was "the major"') and one patent fantasy (that Emily had a lesbian infatuation with a 'teen siren' whilst away at boarding school in 1835) and concludes that Emily is in fact writing about her own 'submerged lesbian incest' and that Heathcliff is 'a woman with a man's energy but without a man's potency' (pp. 454-57).

I suggest that Heathcliff's relative sterility, which does indeed require some explanation given his animal qualities and abundant energy, can again be attributed, at least in part, to the concept of the sublime. As we have seen above, it is Linton who is seen as the 'beautiful, fertile valley', whilst Heathcliff is the 'bleak, hilly, coal country'. Vampires may have wives, but they never have children.

\textsuperscript{66}Paglia, p. 453.
Heathcliff is an astonishing creation, but it would be naive to imagine that he was created out of the ether, or, as Paglia would have it from the chthonic, or Dionysian sexual confusion of a 'woman of Romantic genius' (p. 454). I have attempted to show that certain fundamental aspects of the way Heathcliff is presented are ultimately derived from Burke's aesthetics, and the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful in the second half of the eighteenth century. As I have stated before, this is not intended as a total reading (to usurp that of Paglia) of Wuthering Heights or even of Heathcliff. It does, however, indicate some of the factors that have to be taken into account in the understanding of the role of male sexual attractiveness in the Romantic period. Finally, I fully concur with Frank Kermode who sees Wuthering Heights as being susceptible to a variety of interpretations. His view of Heathcliff is perhaps the most balanced:

Heathcliff [...] fluctuates between poverty and riches; also between virility and impotence. To Catherine he is between brother and lover; he slept with her as a child, and again in death, but not between latency and extinction. He has much force, yet fathers an exceptionally puny child. Domestic yet savage like the dogs, bleak yet full of fire like the house, he bestrides the great opposites: love and death (the necrophiliac confession), culture and nature ('half-civilized ferocity') in a posture that certainly cannot be explained by any generic formula ('Byronic' or 'Gothic').

***

VI: Rochester

Your eyes dwell on a Vulcan - a real blacksmith, brown, broad-shouldered; and blind and lame into the bargain.  

The initial impressions of Lockwood and Isabella, that Heathcliff was a rough diamond, concealing 'depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior' would have been far more suitably applied to Rochester. Charlotte Brontë's ameliorating and moderating intelligence could never have produced a pure vision of the sublime to match Heathcliff; and yet Rochester can also be seen as representing the sublime, rather than the beautiful aspects of human attractiveness.

Our first look at Rochester finds that he, like Heathcliff, is dark and swarthy, and possessed of a considerable presence:

His figure was enveloped in a riding cloak, fur collared, and steel clasped; its details were not apparent, but I traced the general points of middle height, and considerable breadth of chest. He had a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow; his eyes and gathered eyebrows looked ireful and thwarted just now; he was past first youth, but had not yet reached middle age: perhaps he was thirty five. (p. 114.)

That first meeting in the dark lane, with the 'great dog [...] a lion-like creature with long hair and a huge head' (p. 113); and the galloping horse, summoning images of the terrifying Gytrash is as dramatic, and indeed

---

69 Wuthering Heights, p. 102.
70 As Eagleton puts it, 'Where Charlotte Brontë differs from Emily is [...] in this impulse to negotiate passionate self-fulfilment on terms which preserve the social and moral conventions intact, and so preserve the submissive, enduring, everyday self which adheres to them.' Myths of Power, p. 16.
sublime, as the deliberately cool and distancing narration can make it. A fuller description of Rochester follows a little later when Jane has had a chance to study her new master:

I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognized his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw - yes all three very grim, and no mistake. His shape divested of cloak, I perceived harmonized in squareness with his physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic sense of the term - broad chested and thin flanked; though neither tall nor graceful. (p. 121.)

There are clear differences between Heathcliff and Rochester, but the parallels are marked as we recall of the former that 'the cheeks were sallow and half covered with black whiskers, the brows lowering, the eyes deep set and singular.' It is a similarity of mood and feeling rather than strict physical correspondence; both are black, inelegant and powerfully built. The difference is one of intensity, and, indeed, malignity. Rochester frequently threatens, but the threat is never realised: his power remains chained. The taming of the sublime in Rochester is most clearly illustrated when Jane returns to him after the fire in which he has been blinded and mutilated. Rochester is still impressively massive:

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair still raven-black; nor were his features altered or sunk: not in one year's space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled, or his vigorous prime blighted.

⁷¹Wuthering Heights, p. 92.
One image recurs several times in this chapter - that of Rochester as an eagle: 'your hair reminds me of eagle feathers' (p. 441), claims Jane. It would be difficult to describe Jane herself as beautiful, but in these passages, she performs the role of the opposite to the sublime. She is a 'skylark' and a 'sparrow' to Rochester's eagle, echoing Burke's distinction between the powerful animals representing the sublime and the 'little birds' embodying the beautiful. However in this case, the eagle is 'caged' (p. 436) or 'chained to a perch', and 'forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor' (p. 444). The combination of majestic strength, with pathetic incapacity fills Jane with pity and love (she herself has been empowered by the acquisition of her own fortune, £5000 inherited from an uncle): 'the powerlessness of the strong man touched my heart to the quick' (p. 444).

In *Wuthering Heights* we are offered a contrast between the strong and wildly destructive force of the sublime, and an effeminate, domesticated view of male beauty. In *Jane Eyre* there is also a contrast and an explicit choice to be made. Again, the sublime and the beautiful, in purely physical terms, are opposed, an opposition pointedly emphasised by Rochester himself:

> Your words have delineated very prettily a graceful Apollo: he is present to your imagination,- "tall, fair, blue-eyed, and with a Grecian profile". Your eyes dwell on a Vulcan,- a real blacksmith, brown, broad-shouldered; and blind into the bargain. (pp. 446-47.)

---

72 According to Eagleton, the choice is between the 'Romantic' and the 'rationalist', although he qualifies this division by pointing out that 'The roles themselves are considerably less clear cut: both men combine 'Romance' and 'rationalism' in differently proportioned measures'. *Myths of Power*, p. 83. In my view the Romanticism-rationalism debate is less fruitful than the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful in understanding the relative functions of Rochester and Rivers. However, as I have stressed, my reading is not intended to exclude other interpretations.
The representative of the beautiful in Jane Eyre is, however, no milksop. Rochester comes to learn of the stature of his 'rival' (although Jane has, as the reader knows, already rejected St. John Rivers' invitation to join in his self-sacrifice) in the course of a protracted, teasing interview. I quote at length, as it represents the most protracted investigation into the nature of male attractiveness in the works of the Brontës:

'You have spoken of him often: did you like him?'
'He was a very good man, sir; I could not help liking him.'
'A good man? Does that mean a respectable, well-conducted man of fifty? Or what does it mean?'
'St. John was only twenty-nine, sir.'
'Jeune encore,' as the French say. 'Is he a person of low stature, phlegmatic and plain? A person whose goodness consists rather in his guiltlessness of vice, than in his prowess of virtue?'
'He is untiringly active. Great and exalted deeds are what he lives to perform.'
'But his brain? That is probably rather soft? He means well: but you shrug your shoulders to hear him talk?'
'He talks little, sir: what he does say is ever to the point. His brain is first rate, I should think: not impressionable but vigorous.'
'Is he an able man, then?'
'Truly able.'
'A thoroughly educated man?'
'St. John is an accomplished and profound scholar.'
'His manners, I think you said, are not to your taste? - priggish and parsonic?'
'I never mentioned his manners; but unless I had a very bad taste, they must suit it: they are polished, calm, and gentlemanlike.'
'His appearance, - I forget what description you gave of his appearance; - a sort of raw curate, half strangled with his white neckcloth, and stilted up on his thick-soled high-lows, eh?'
'St. John dresses well. He is a handsome man: tall, fair, with blue eyes, and a Grecian profile.' (pp. 445-46.)
Rochester’s jealousy is doubly misplaced. Not only has Jane already rejected St John, but it is clear that he represents an alternative tradition of the sublime that precludes any possibility of erotic attachment. It is a tradition that takes its cue not from the torrid, sexual sublime of Burke, but from Winckelmann’s desexualised counterpoint to the invitingly sensual beauty of the naked male form. For Winckelmann, the sublime could only be truly suggested by the draped female figure, beyond the reach of human sympathy, understanding or lust.\(^3\) The Apollo Belvedere displays, for Winckelmann, some sublime qualities, but its grace and beauty, laid open to us by its inviting nakedness, bring it within the range of desire (p. 118). Potts sums up the difference between the two forms of representation in terms of the ‘high’ and the ‘beautiful’:

> Greek art, as an art that seeks to convey abstract ideas by way of beautiful figurations of the human body, does so in two complimentary modes, each of their very essence complete: a high mode that suggests the presence of an immaterial idea through a comparative absence of sensual refinement of form, and a beautiful mode, characterised by a fullness of sensuality and grace, which is more immediately attractive. (p. 68.)

St. John is certainly ‘beautiful’, and that beauty is invariably suggested by Jane by summoning the spirit of antique art (indeed she seems incapable of describing him without suggesting the classical):

> He was young - perhaps from twenty-eight to thirty - tall, slender; his face riveted the eye: it was like a Greek face, very pure in outline; quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. It is seldom, indeed, an English face comes so near the antique models as did his. (p. 349.)

\(^3\)See Potts, \textit{Flesh and the Ideal}, p. 137.
But as with Winckelmann's 'high' style, St John's beauty is cold, impersonal and resolutely asexual: 'I looked at his features, beautiful in their harmony, but strangely formidable in their still severity' (p. 412). In the 'beautiful' style, statuary aspires to the condition of flesh, but St John's case the transubstantiation goes the other way: 'To me, he was in reality become no longer flesh, but marble' (p. 416). This metamorphosis replicates that undergone by Niobe, for Winckelmann, the epitome of the sublime. Punished for her pride by the death of her children under the arrows of Apollo and Artemis, Niobe is herself turned into a statue:

Her hair no breezes can stir; her cheeks are drained
And bloodless; in her doleful face her eyes
Stare fixed and hard - a likeness without life.
So too inside; that tongue of hers congeals;
Her palate's hard; no pulse beats in her veins;
No way for neck to bend nor arms to wave
Nor feet to walk; and all within is stone.

It is unsurprising that, despite his many estimable qualities, Jane finds the idea of a life spent with St John unappealing:

St John was a good man; but I began to feel he had spoken truth of himself, when he said he was hard and cold. The humanities and amenities of life had no attraction for him - its peaceful enjoyments no charm. Literally he lived only to aspire - after what was good and great, certainly; but still he would never rest; nor approve of others resting round him. As I looked at

74 Potts stresses that the high style does not preclude beauty: 'In Winckelmann's scheme of things, the relative hardness of contour in the high style should be the positive manifestation of an austere kind of beauty, as distinct from the hardness of the archaic style that is the trace of a lack of mastery of beautiful form.' It is sensuality, not beauty which is excluded by the high or the sublime. *Flesh and the Ideal*, pp. 68-9.

his lofty forehead, still and pale as a white stone - at his fine lineaments fixed in study - I comprehended all at once that he would hardly make a good husband: that it would be trying to be his wife. (p. 397.)

Rochester, therefore had little to fear from his rival. What has been played out before us, however, is an intriguing conflict between the Gothic sublime, rich with powerful, sexual undercurrents, and the sexless, majestic sublime of Winckelmann’s interpretation of the classic high style. For Charlotte Brontë, brought up, along with her sister, on the Gothic excess of Byron and the heirs of Mrs Radcliffe, the outcome could not be long in doubt.

I will now turn to what was perhaps the greatest influence on the creation of the sublime heroes of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre, the works of Byron; or perhaps it ought to be said, the Byronic hero; or if we refine yet further, Byron. Winifred Gérin has traced Rochester’s Byronic lineage, incorporating all the expected Satanic and sublime elements.76 I conclude this chapter with a description of Rochester’s ‘Glass Town’ precursor, Zamorna, written by the eighteen-year-old Charlotte, which embodies those Satanic and Byronic qualities in a more explicit form than was possible with the relatively realistic later portrait:

What eyes those are glancing under the deep shadow of that raven crest! They bode no good. Man nor woman could ever gather more than a troubled fitful happiness from their kindest light. Satan gave them their glory to deepen the midnight gloom that always follows where their lustre has fallen most lovingly. [...] All here is passion and fire unquenchable. Impetuous sin, stormy pride, diving and soaring enthusiasm, war and

poetry, are kindling their fires in all his veins and his wild blood boils from his heart and back again like a torrent of new-sprung larva. Young Duke? Young demon?77

---

77. 'A Peep into a Picture Book', 1834, in ibid., p. 90.
Chapter 7

HARRYS, LARRYS, PILGRIMS AND PIRATES: THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL IN BYRON’S HEROES

It was one of those faces which, having once beheld, we never afterwards forget. It seemed as if the soul of passion had been stamped and printed upon every feature. The eye beamed into life as it threw up its dark ardent gaze, with a look nearly of inspiration, while the proud curl of the upper lip expressed hautiness and bitter contempt; yet even mixed with these fierce feelings, an air of melancholy and dejection shaded and softened every harsher expression.¹

Goethe’s Faust is a play saturated with images of beauty. Female beauty is clearly one of the principal themes and plot drivers in both parts of Faust. In Part One it is the vision of womanly beauty granted in the witches’ kitchen that overcomes Faust’s revulsion at the sordid antics of Mephistopheles and his acolytes and impels him on his path to near-damnation.² More fatefully it is Gretchen’s beauty (along with her innocence) that leads inexorably to her seduction, corruption and eventual death. In Part Two, we have the appearance of Helen of Troy whose presence brings the ever restless Faust to exclaim, ‘My fearful quest has reached a glorious goal’.³

Although in some ways more peripheral, male beauty also occupies a critical position in the symbolic structure of the play. In particular three men, or rather boys, of great beauty feature in the metaphysical and allegorical complexities of Part Two. The first is the Boy Charioteer, representing the 'soul of Poesy'. The Herald describes him:

Deep lightning in dark eyes, black midnight curls
All heightened by a jewelled circlet’s beam [...]  
A visage bright as moon, I see, the flower
Of health, the mouth superb, the cheeks a-bloom,
Shining beneath the turban, beauty’s plume. (p. 54.)

The Boy Charioteer has an unnerving, exotic allure, his splendour appreciated more by the Herald than by 'the ladies' who would rather see the 'Half boy, half man', 'fully grown' (p. 53). He distributes gifts of bright jewels that turn to insects as they are grasped.

The next beautiful boy encountered is the conjured image of Paris, drooled over by 'The ladies' at the Emperor's court, each part of his anatomy falling under their lascivious gaze (p. 86). Even the entrance of Helen seems anti-climactic with Faust's rapture counterbalanced by the (admittedly jealous) courtesans' coolness (p. 87).

---

4The importance of male beauty in Faust is well highlighted by the exchange in which Faust asks Chiron which was the greatest of the Greek heroes. The centaur replies by listing the Argonauts, each of whom contributed some particular quality or skill to Jason's expedition. The very first mentioned are the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux) who, 'bore away the palm/Where beauty counted most and youthful charm' (p. 119). During the same encounter, Chiron extols Hercules' physical beauty above all his other qualities. Another telling example of the prominence of male beauty comes at the very end of Part Two, when Mephistopheles loses his grip on the soul of Faust because he is distracted by the beauty of the angelic host. In particular, Faust gets feverishly exited when the angels turn their backs on him.
The most captivating of the youthful beauties, however, is Euphorion, the child of Faust and Helen. In the original myth, Euphorion, the son of the shades of Helen and Achilles, is loved by Zeus who kills him for rejecting his advances. Goethe retains the wings and the ravishing beauty of the original (Achilles is as celebrated for his almost feminine beauty as for his courage and martial prowess) but transforms the extraordinarily precocious child into what would seem to be the second personification of poetry in the play. We first see Euphorion through the eyes of Phorkyas (Mephistopheles in drag):

Flowered he stands in broidered raiment  
Worn with grace and majesty.  
Tassels swing from his fair shoulders, at his bosom ribbons flutter,  
In his hands the golden lyre, boyish image of Apollo  
Strides he on the beetling cliff-top, blithely to the brink; we marvel,  
And in thankful joy the parents turn to seek each other's arms.  
What strange glory gilds his forehead? Scarce we dare to name that gleaming,  
Is it jewelled gold, or is it fire of genius nobly gifted?  
Thus his bearing and his gesture, even as a boy, proclaim him  
Future master of all beauty. (p. 199.)

Camille Paglia describes the two personifications of poetry in Sexual Personae:

The two characters in Faust symbolising poetry are double-sexed. The girlish Boy Charioteer is fancily decked out with jewels and tinsel. Euphorion [...] is a classical beautiful boy, part Apollo, part Icarus. He wears feminine adornments of Asiatic opulence. Like Homer's Athena, he
is the androgyne as symbol of human intelligence. Poetry, Goethe implies, attains universality.⁵

It seems a little strange that Goethe should have included two personifications of poetry in *Faust*, particularly two with such similar attributes. The solution to this enigma (and one not, it would seem, known to Paglia) is that there are not two personifications of poetry in *Faust*, but one: Euphorion and the Boy Charioteer are the same character.⁶

Euphorion is not a languid beauty like Paris, whom we see as the passive object of others’ (Helen’s, the court ladies’) adoration. He is decked out in tassels and ribbons but his energy and giddying aspiration capture our attention as much as his good-looks:

CHORUS. Lifting your arms so fair,  
Gracefully swaying,  
Shaking your shining hair,  
Where lights are playing,  
When with a foot so light  
Scarce touching earth, you skim,  
And in alternate flight  
Hovers each lovely limb,  
Then have you reached your goal,  
Beautiful youth:

⁶The following conversation between Goethe and Eckerman seems conclusive: ‘That Faust is concealed under the mask of Plutus, and Mephistopheles under that of Avarice, you will have already perceived. But who is the Boy Lenker [Charioteer]?
I hesitated, and could not answer.
‘It is Euphorion,’ said Goethe [...] Euphorion [...] is not a human, but an allegorical being. In him is personified poetry; which is bound to neither time, place, nor person. The same spirit who afterwards chooses to be Euphorion appears here as the boy Lenker, and is so far like a spectre that he can be present everywhere and at all times.’ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe* (London: Dent, 1930), pp. 337-38.
All of us then in truth
Yours heart and soul. (p. 203-4.)

Two more related qualities must be added to beauty and energy. Euphorion shares his mythical father’s penchant for abduction and rape:

Here I drag the little courser,
And to joy of mine will force her;
Now with rapture and with zest
Press I her unwilling breast,
Kiss her rebel mouth, that so
She my will and strength may know. (p. 205.)

Erotomania cannot drain Euphorion’s energies; his nature craves further excitements: ‘War! Send the password round,/Victory the answering sound’ (p. 206). Euphorion welcomes the horror and tumult of war:

Hear you not thunder on the ocean,
And echoed thunder, vale on vale?
In dust and foam comes war’s commotion,
With storm and stress and clash of mail.
The agony
Is death’s decree;
So it runs, and who shall quail? (pp. 207-8.)

Euphorion perishes after aspiring too high. His body falls dead at the feet of Faust and Helen before vanishing, leaving only his ‘Robe, mantle and lyre’ for the hideous Phorkyas/Mephistopheles to paw over.

Euphorion then is a product of the gothic North and classical South; he has elements of both the beautiful (his feminine good looks and dress) and the sublime (rape, war, love of destructively towering heights); he dies
young but gloriously. He is a symbol of the Romantic poetic imagination but he is also, as Goethe made clear, a portrait of Byron:

I could not [...] make use of any man as a representative of the modern political era except him, who undoubtedly is the greatest genius of our century. Again Byron is neither antique nor romantic, but like the present day itself. This was the sort of man I required. Then he suited me on account of his unsatisfied nature and his warlike tendency, which led to his death at Missolonghi. 7

***

In this chapter I am going to illustrate Byron’s depiction of male beauty, giving particular emphasis to his incorporation of elements derived from the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful. In the first section I discuss a selection of Byron’s early verse tales, with their violent and melancholy heroes. I then move on to Byron’s finest work, and his most beautiful male character, Don Juan. Finally I look at two of Byron’s verse dramas, Sardanapalus and The Deformed Transformed, in which male beauty features strongly. I must stress once again that I am not attempting a total reading of these texts, but am rather plundering them for what they can tell us about male beauty in the period in which they were written. Byron not only incorporated his wide reading into his creation of his characters, thus making them representative of contemporary intellectual movements (particularly the continuing theoretical work on the theme of the sublime), but was, perhaps, the most widely read and famous author of his period. In

---

a real sense, the Byronic hero was to become, and remain, the Romantic hero.

Several critics have argued that Byron's major poems involve the recurrent pattern of an Edenic happiness disrupted by external, destructive forces. Bernard Beatty argues that the concept of the fall of man, symbolised by the original expulsion from Eden, is central to Byron's poetic project. So not only do we find such obvious responses as Cain, but casual references recur, such as, in Don Juan, 'We have/Souls to save, since Eve's slip and Adam's fall/Which tumbled all mankind into the grave'. George Ridenour, writing on Don Juan, comments,

as violence and disorder lurk behind the most winning manifestations of tranquillity and harmony, the tranquil and harmonious are fated inevitably to dissolve again in the violent and chaotic. This is an apparently immutable law of Byron's world.

Robert F. Gleckner, in Byron and the Ruins of Paradise, extends this analysis to all of Byron's longer poems and verse dramas:

the most revealing commentary on the poems is the poetry itself, and particularly the evaluation therein of the poet as a crucial, central character, whose prophetic view of the past and of his own time develops gradually into the myth of man's eternal fall and damnation in the hell of human

---

8See, for example, 'Fictions Limit and Eden's Door', in Byron and the Limits of Fiction, ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988).
9Byron, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980-1993), Don Juan, IX. 146. All the following references to Don Juan are to the canto and stanza numbers.
existence, the myth of what I choose to call the ruins of paradise and the consequent human condition.11

Gleckner tentatively traces Byron’s pessimism to the well known facts of his life - his relationship with his mother and his half sister, Augusta, and his lameness. Most importantly he concurs with Leslie Marchand’s line, that Byron’s precocious sexual activity resulted in the unholy coupling of an idealisation of beauty and innocence with a revulsion at the squalor of real sexual experience.12

Although I find Marchand’s arguments persuasive as a biographical explanation I contend that the movement between the Edenic moments of lightness, peace and harmony and the lurking forces of violence and darkness owes much to the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful discussed in the previous chapter. The debt that Byron owes to the concept of the sublime becomes clear when we consider Kant’s early contribution to the debate. Some passages could almost be seen as a philosophical justification for Byron’s narratives:

Even depravities and moral failings often bear [...] some features of the sublime or beautiful, at least so far as they appear to our sensory feeling without being tested by reason.[...] Open bold revenge, following a great offence, bears something of the great about it; and as unlawful as it may be, nevertheless its telling moves one with both horror and gratification.[...] Resolute audacity in a rogue is of the greatest danger, but it moves in the telling, and even if he is dragged to a disgraceful death he nevertheless ennobles it to some extent by going to it quietly and with disdain.13

13Kant, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime, p. 53. I do not, of course, mean to imply that Byron read, or even knew of Kant’s treatise - I mean only to demonstrate the ideas that
More specifically, the key to understanding Byron’s portrayal of male attractiveness is in the conventional distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.\(^14\)

The division between the two qualities manifests itself in a number of distinct ways. The most obvious is where the hero represents the sublime and the heroine the beautiful, as in *The Giaour*. A second type is where the hero possesses qualities associated with the beautiful and the villain(s) personifies the sublime. *Don Juan* and *Sardanapalus* are the clearest examples of this. In a third group the hero embodies both the sublime and the beautiful as in *The Bride of Abydos*. However these divisions, as we shall see, were frequently undercut and subverted.

Byron’s portraits of women are, despite the frequent lapses into romantic stereotypes, equally varied. As Caroline Franklin writes:

Byron’s female characters range from the eroticized passive victim of patriarchal force to the masculinized woman-warrior, from the romantic heroine of sentiment to the sexually voracious virago or the chaste republican matron.\(^15\)

In the so-called Turkish tales, the male heroes are, for the most part, sublime and the females beautiful, in an all too conventional way. We first encounter the Giaour ‘thundering’ towards us on ‘blackest steed’. It is as overtly an image of the sublime as could be imagined:

---

\(^{14}\) I also find William Marshall’s schemata, in which the plots of the tales involve the ‘interaction of the elemental themes of Love and Death’ persuasive. *The Structure of Byron’s Major Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962), p. 40. However, as Gleckner points out, such ‘allegorising’ has the tendency to oversimplify the works, and draw attention away from Byron’s experimental structures and daring themes. My own account is open to a similar critique, which is why I have emphasised that my reading is limited to the personal attractiveness of the central characters of the poems and is not an attempt at a total reading.

The foam that streaks the courser's side,
Seems gather'd from the ocean-tide:
Though weary waves are sunk to rest,
There's none within his rider's breast,
And though to-morrow's tempest lower,
'Tis calmer than thy heart, young Giaour!
I know thee not, I loathe thy race,
But in thy lineaments I trace
What time shall strengthen, not efface;
Though young and pale, that sallow front
Is scath'd by fiery passion's brunt,
Though bent on earth thine evil eye
As meteor-like thou glidest by,
Right well I view, and deem thee one
Whom Othman's sons should slay or shun. *(The Giaour, 185.)*

Each further description confirms the impression of the sublime:

He stood - some dread was on his face-
Soon hatred settled in its place-
It rose not with the reddening flush
Of transient Anger's hasty blush,
But pale as marble o'er the tomb,
Whose ghastly whiteness aids its gloom. *(234.)*

In the previous chapter I have argued for the heavy debt owed by the
Gothic novels of Radcliffe and Lewis to the discourse of the sublime and
the beautiful and Byron eagerly employs the conventions of the gothic
romance in the Turkish tales. The Giaour shows his affinity with the monkish villains of *The Italian* and *The Monk*, Schedoni and Ambrosio: 'Dark and unearthly is the scowl/That glares beneath his dusky cowl' (832). In his monastic retreat the Giaour, is a haunted and haunting spectral presence:

Not oft to smile descendeth he,
And when he doth 'tis sad to see
That he but mocks at Misery.
How that pale lip will curl and quiver!
Then fix once more as if for ever-
As if his sorrow or disdain
Forbade him e'er to smile again.-
Well were it so - such ghastly mirth
From joyaunce ne'er deriv'd its birth. (850.)

Like the 'tower by war or tempest bent', the Giaour's present condition is one of fallen glory: they are both gothic ruins:

But sadder still it were to trace
What once were feelings in that face-
Time hath not yet the features fixed,
But brighter traits with evil mixed,
And there are hues not always faded,
Which speak a mind not all degraded
Even by the crimes through which it waded-
The common crowd but see the gloom
Of wayward deeds - and fitting doom-
The close observer can espy
A noble soul, and lineage high. (859.)

Ruined or not, we are left in no doubt that the Giaour still cuts a striking figure, and a distinctly vain one:

See - by the half illumin'd wall
His hood fly back - his dark hair fall-
That pale brow wildly wreathing round,
As if the Gorgon there had bound
The sablest of the serpent-braid
That o'er her fearful forehead strayed.
For he declines the convent oath,
And leaves those locks unhallowed growth. (893.)

The Gorgon Medusa with her 'tempestuous loveliness of terror' was, according to Mario Praz, one of the key symbolic images in Romantic aesthetics. Another, if anything more towering and ubiquitous figure was, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Satan, and in the same passage as the reference to the Gorgon, we find:

If ever evil angel bore
The form of mortal, such he wore-
By all my hope of sins forgiven
Such looks are not of earth nor heaven! (912.)

I have outlined Praz's uncovering of the genealogy of the Satanic figure in literature from Milton through to the Gothic villains in the previous

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{16}}\text{Praz, writing about Shelley's poem on the Medusa adds, 'In these lines pleasure and pain are combined in one single impression. The very objects which should induce a shudder - the livid face of the severed head, the squirming mass of vipers, the rigidity of death, the sinister light, the repulsive animals, the lizard, the bat - all these give rise to a new sense of beauty, a beauty imperilled and contaminated, a new thrill' (p. 26).}\]
chapter. Praz continues the line up to Byron, who ‘brought to perfection the rebel type, remote descendant of Satan’s Milton’.

Praz argues persuasively for the strong influence of Radcliffe on the heroes of the tales:

The pale face furrowed by an ancient grief, the rare Satanic smile, the traces of obscured nobility [...] worthy of a better fate - Byron might be said to have derived all these characteristics, by an almost slavish imitation, from Mrs Radcliffe. (p. 68.)

The Giaour’s mortal enemy, Hassan, is also an impressively ‘sublime’ character, as unrelenting, violent and brave as the Giaour himself. They are bound by the same codes of revenge and honour - the Giaour concedes that in drowning his adulterous wife, Hassan acted only as he would have done in the same circumstances (‘Yet did he but what I had done/Had she been false to more than one’). Leila, the object of their rivalry, is by comparison an ill-defined and vaguely realised figure. She is, of course, beautiful, in the familiar, Gazelle-eyed Byronic manner (see lines 473-519). Byron chivalrously dismisses the Muslim belief that women lacked souls, but whatever the role of woman in the afterlife, in The Giaour, her function is to die. Franklin argues that

Femininity for Byron represented the extension into adult life of the unworldliness, subjectivity, and sentiment of childhood, which the male child must perforce reject when entering into adulthood and public life.

This ‘unworldliness’ and childlike simplicity certainly appears as an ideal in the tales and, as I describe below, its abandonment by a female character fatally destroys her charms. Women are characterised by beauty, men by

17 Praz, p. 63.
18 Franklin, p. 59.
the sublime; when the two collide, there can be little doubt which is to be sacrificed, even if the encounter leaves the man profoundly damaged.

Byron illustrates the fatal consequences of the clash between masculine acquisitiveness and feminine beauty through an extended metaphor:

As rising on its purple wing
The insect-queen of eastern spring,
O’er emerald meadows of Kasmeer
Invites the young pursuer near,
And leads him on from flower to flower
A weary chase and wasted hour,
Then leaves him, as it soars on high
With panting heart and tearful eye. (388.)

Thus beauty ‘lures the full grown child’ on a ‘chase of idle hopes and fears,/Begun in folly, closed in tears’. But once acquired, the beautiful loses its attraction:

For every touch that wooed its stay
Has brush’d the brightest hues away
Till charm, and hue, and beauty gone,
‘Tis left to fly or fall alone. (406.)

Primo Levi wrote in an essay that butterflies, with their colourful symmetry, have formed a pattern for the concept of beauty. He identifies other elements in their attractiveness:

We would not think them so beautiful if they did not fly, or if they flew straight and briskly like bees, or if they stung, or above all if they did not
enact the perturbing mystery of metamorphosis: the latter assumes in our eyes the value of a badly decoded message, a symbol and a sign.\(^{19}\)

Levi leaves out another of the qualities which contribute to our perception of the beauty of butterflies: their fragility (although he does see them as a potential symbol for death).\(^ {20}\) In the tales, the beauty of the butterfly is there to be crushed by the power of the male sublime.

***

The two linked tales, *The Corsair* and *Lara*, show the sublime Byronic hero in sharpest focus perhaps because of their lack of subtlety, in turn a product of their somewhat slap-dash production.\(^ {21}\) *The Corsair* clearly owes much to Byron’s reading of Florentine political history and to his radical disillusionment with regency society.\(^ {22}\) However perhaps the most glaring debt is to the figure of Karl Moor, the bandit hero of Schiller’s *The Robbers*. And as Praz emphasises, through Schiller, Byron is linked again to Milton. The similarities are brought out in a passage on Milton suppressed by Schiller, quoted by Praz:

> He who could not endure that another should be above him, and who dared to challenge the Almighty to a duel, was he not an extraordinary genius? He had encountered the Invincible One, and although in defeat he exhausted all his forces, he was not humiliated. [...]

An intelligent mind,  

\(^{20}\)Levi quotes from the last page of Hermann Hesse’s diary in which a butterfly alights on his hand: ‘Slowly, with the rhythm of calm breathing, the beauty opened and shut and opened its velvet wings, clinging to the back of my hand with six, hair-like legs; and after a short instant disappeared, without my realising its departure, in the great warm light.’ p. 9.  
\(^{21}\)As Gleckner has pointed out, it is no longer possible to accept Byron’s own lowly estimation of the early tales, and in particular his assertions about the rapidity of production and lack of revision. (*Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*, xi-xii). But even he, whilst praising *The Corsair* concedes that *Lara* is a careless piece of work (p. 154).  
\(^{22}\)These and other sources are listed in *The Complete Poetical Works*, pp. 445-46.
which neglects mean duties for a more exalted purpose, will be eternally unhappy, whereas the knave who has betrayed his friend and fled before his enemy ascends to Heaven, thanks to an opportune little sigh of repentance. Who would not prefer to roast in the furnace of Belial with Borgia and Catiline rather than sit up above at table with that vulgar ass? It is he whose name our gossips make the sign of the cross.\textsuperscript{23}

The portrait fits closely both Byron's rebel-heroes and, of course, Byron's own carefully stage-managed public image. As well as the distinguishing features of the hero, Byron also may have derived his characteristic theme and atmosphere from \textit{The Robbers}, summed up by T. J. Reed as 'the strange blend of rebellion with remorse, and the melancholy poetic broodings on human imperfection and the lost Elysium of innocent childhood'.\textsuperscript{24}

Conrad, in \textit{The Corsair}, is, in his combination of charismatic leadership, brooding melancholy and reckless courage, the definitive Byronic hero. Unlike the Giaour, who we only glimpse briefly, in shadows, or illuminated, as it were, by flashes of lightning, Conrad is given a full description:

\begin{quote}
Unlike the heroes of each ancient race,
Demons in act, but Gods at least in face,
In Conrad's form seems little to admire,
Though his dark eye-brow shades a glance of fire;
Robust but not Herculean - to the sight
No giant frame sets forth his common height;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23}Praz, pp. 59-60.
Yet, in the whole, who paused to look again,
Saw more than marks the crowd of vulgar men [...] 
Sun-burnt his cheek, his forehead high and pale 
The sable curls in wild profusion veil; 
And oft perforce his rising lip reveals 
The haughtier thought it curbs, but scarce conceals. 
Though smooth his voice, and calm his general mien, 
Still seems there something he would not have seen: 
His features’ deepening lines and varying hue 
At times attracted yet perplexed the view, 
As if within that murkiness of mind 
Worked feelings fearful, and yet undefined. (The Corsair, I, 193.)

Conrad is both unbeautiful (unlike the heroes of Greek mythology) and yet charismatic and compelling. It is this very combination of the attractive and the repulsive that can only be described as the sublime. Fittingly for the sublime, Conrad has his satanic aspect: ‘There was a laughing devil in his sneer’ (I, 223). And equally fittingly he stands outside the sphere of the domestic, ‘Lone, wild, and strange, he stood exempt/From all affection and from all contempt (I, 271-72).

Conrad is no Robin Hood figure: he seems actively to enjoy the death and destruction caused by his exploits. Unlike the Giaour (or, for that matter, Karl Moor), he has no apparent reason for his ferocity, other than the restless craving for adventure that constitutes his character. We are told of some veiled early ‘disappointments’ by which his native nobility became warped but there seems little to justify his abandonment of civilised values. Nevertheless he retains some vestiges of humanity:
None are all evil - quickening round his heart,
One softer feeling would not yet depart;
Oft could he sneer at others as beguiled
By passions worthy of a fool or child;
Yet 'gainst that passion vainly still he strove,
And even in him it asks the name of love! (I, 281.)

This residual emotionalism manifests itself chiefly in his feelings for the beautiful and passive Medora, the still centre of his turning world. He makes a point of never bringing his piratical work home - however tempestuous his moods, however badly his murder and pillage have been going, he never vents on her 'one murmur of his discontent'. Medora remains then, aloof from the mayhem of Conrad's life, spending her hours waiting for him alone in a tower, singing plaintively to herself.

In his lengthy and in many ways perceptive review of The Corsair and The Bride of Abydos, for the Edinburgh Review, Francis Jeffrey makes much of the incongruity of giving a ruthless pirate the manners of an English gentleman. Jeffrey argues in the course of his review that literature has passed through a number of phases from barbarity to decadence, mirroring changes in the state of civilisation. The 'modern' age, for Jeffrey, was marked by a reaction against the excessive politeness and order of the eighteenth century, a reaction manifesting itself in the search for strong feeling, heroic deeds and exotic locations; in essence a return to the pre-civilised world of Homer - or to times and lands where the same warrior ethos prevailed - 'to the ages when strong passions were indulged, or at least displayed without control, by persons in the better ranks of society'.25 Such periods provide 'perfect models of muscular force and

beauty' which Scott, Southey and Byron have all employed. Byron, for Jeffrey, has been most fortunate in his choice of setting, placing as it does the 'ruffians and desperadoes' of the contemporary, or near contemporary Mediterranean, within the 'enchanted circle of antient Greece' (p. 57).

Jeffrey takes issue not with the barbarity of the setting or the extreme passion and violence of Byron’s (and Southey’s) heroes, but with the improbability of the coupling of primitive energy with the 'softness, decorum, and pretty behaviour of Sir Charles Grandison' (p. 59). Whatever its historical and psychological realism, Jeffrey is well aware that the combination of the 'reckless valour of a Buccaneer or Corsair of any age, with the refined gallantry and sentimental generosity of an English gentleman' was irresistible to the poetry reading (and buying) public. The Byronic hero delivers both action and tenderness - opposites that may sit uneasily together in flesh and blood men but which remain essential to the hero of romantic fiction.

Conrad’s gentlemanly instincts awaken just after we have seen him at his most destructive during the assault on Coron, the stronghold of the villain of the tale, Seyd. We see Conrad surrounded by 'groaning victims', and his fellow pirates find him, 'grim and lonely there,/A glutted tyger mangling in his lair!' (II, 190). After victory appears to be his, however, he breaks-off the attack in order to save the women of the harem threatened by the inferno he has unleashed, and by which act of charity he is captured by the wily and vicious Seyd.

Seyd is another of the sublime villains necessary to counterbalance the sublime hero. Again hero and villain share the same codes: as the Giaour would have acted in the same ruthless way as Hassan, so Conrad, awaiting torture and death, 'fettered in the Pacha's power' concedes that he would
have been equally vindictive: 'His foe, if vanquished, had but shared the same' (II, 371).

In The Corsair there is a third character possessing qualities associated with the sublime. One of the harem slaves Conrad rescues is Gulnare, and his chivalry has captured her heart. She returns the favour and rescues him but in the course of the escape she kills the sleeping Seyd. This act of murder sickens Conrad:

He had seen battle - he had brooded lone
O'er promised pangs to sentenced guilt foreshown;
He had been tempted - chastened - and the chain
Yet on his arms might ever there remain:
But ne'er from strife - captivity - remorse-
From all his feelings in their inmost force-
So thrilled - so shuddered every creeping vein,
As now that spot of blood, that light but guilty streak,
Had banished all the beauty from her cheek!
Blood he had viewed - could view unmoved - but then
It flowed in combat, or was shed by men! (III, 418.)

Clearly female beauty is incompatible with the bloodshed that is an everyday aspect of the Corsair's existence; beauty cannot mingle with horror without losing itself. The contrast with the beautiful, but passive Medora, is glaring: 'He thought on her afar, his lonely bride:/He turned and saw - Gulnare, the homicide!' (III, 463). On his return to his island base, Conrad finds that Medora has done the decent thing and died (as we suppose) of a broken heart, believing her lover lost. The message seems clear: the woman's role is to die for her mate, not to kill for him.
Conrad disappears from *The Corsair*, abandoning the pirate’s existence, only to reappear as the eponymous feudal lord in *Lara*. As Gleckner has argued, *Lara* adds nothing of interest in terms of structure, style or plotting to the earlier tales. What we certainly do not expect and do not get is any development in the character of the hero. Lara is as brooding, tortured and unfathomable as his earlier incarnation as Conrad (or for that matter the Giaour), a demeanour summed up memorably as that ‘chilling mystery of mien’ (*Lara*, I, 361). Again we are told of youthful promise wasted or misdirected:

With more capacity for love than earth
Bestows on most of mortal mould and birth,
His early dreams of good outstripped the truth
And troubled manhood followed baffled youth. (I, 321.)

Nothing is added to the physical description given in *The Corsair*, but his singularity and distance is re-emphasised. An explicit comparison to Satan is drawn:

He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurled;
A thing of dark imaginings. (I, 315.)

Although it is difficult to say categorically that Lara is more disillusioned than Conrad (a development one would expect given the extinction of the only thing he has ever loved) there does seem to be an increased cynicism. Writing about Napoleon and Byron (and to an extent about the Goethe of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus*, comments gloomily:
Vain truly is the hope of your swiftest Runner to escape “from his own Shadow!” Nevertheless, in these sick days, when the Born of Heaven first describes himself (about the age of twenty) in a world such as ours, richer than usual in two things, in Truths grown obsolete, and Trades grown obsolete,—what can the fool think but that it is all a Den of Lies, wherein whoso will not speak Lies and act Lies, must stand idle and despair?26

Lara has come to reject everything considered beautiful. Even the beauty of a starry night is intolerable to his tortured soul:

All was so still, so soft in earth and air,  
You scarce would start to meet a spirit there;  
Secure that nought of evil could delight  
To walk in such a scene, on such a night!  
It was a moment only for the good:  
So Lara deemed, nor longer there he stood,  
But turned in silence to his castle-gate;  
Such a scene his soul no more could contemplate:  
Such a scene reminded him of other days,  
Of skies more cloudless, moons of purer blaze,  
Of nights more soft and frequent, hearts that now—  
No - no - the storm may beat upon his brow,  
Unfelt - unsparing - but a night like this,  
A night of beauty mock’d such a breast as his. (I, 167)

Perhaps the most interesting element in the poem is the mystery surrounding Lara’s page, Kaled. Kaled combines feminine features - beautifully smooth hands and cheeks - with masculine dress and something

in his gaze, 'More wild and high than woman's eye betrays' (I, 579). The page is clearly devoted to his master, and occasional clues are dropped indicating that the emotion felt by Kaled is something more than that proper to his position and sex. Clearly the situation was one that Byron found titillating. In the rebellion fomented by Lara for largely personal reasons, the one genuinely touching element in the otherwise rather shoddy proceedings is the faithfulness the master and servant show for each other, symbolised by the moment when, in the heat of battle, the two hold hands:

He turned his eye on Kaled, ever near,
And still too faithful to betray one fear;
Perchance 'twas but the moon's dim twilight threw
Along his aspect an unwanted hue
Of mournful paleness, whose deep tint expressed
The truth, and not the terror of his breast.
This Lara mark'd, and laid his hand on his:
It trembled not in such an hour as this;
His lip was silent, scarcely beat his heart,
His eye alone proclaim'd, 'We will not part!' (II, 348.)

Lara is mortally wounded and lies dying under a lime tree, attended only by Kaled. Again they join hands, and both Kaled's devotion and Lara's affection are plainly demonstrated:

---

27 'For hours on Lara he would fix his glance' (544). As Paglia puts it, 'Until the end of Lara Byron teasingly implies that the effeminate pageboy, Kaled, is homosexually attached to the chieftain Lara.' Sexual Personae, p. 349.
28 Paglia sums up the known biographical facts: 'After leaving Cambridge Byron had an affair with a girl whom he dressed as a boy and called his brother. [...] Lady Caroline Lamb masqueraded as a pageboy to rekindle the poet's fading passion. Byron probably models Kaled's service to Lord Lara on that of the transvestite Viola to Duke Orsino in Twelfth Night. Byron's responses are as bisexual as Shakespeare's. He is equally and even simultaneously aroused by an effeminate boy and a bold cross dressing woman.' Sexual Personae, p. 350.
He clasps the hand [...]  
And sadly smiles his thanks to that dark page  
Who nothing fears, nor feels, nor heeds nor sees,  
Save the damp brow which rests upon his knees;  
Save that pale aspect, which the eye, though dim,  
Held all the light that shone on earth for him. (II, 426.)

Finally, Lara dies and in despair, Kaled collapses. His clothes part and he is revealed as a woman, the Gulnare, in case we had not already realised it, of The Corsair. The figure of Kaled had seemed to offer an alternative to the sublime hero - the beautiful boy. Paglia captures the erotic charge of the transformation perfectly:

Byron’s rippling poetry makes sexual metamorphosis happen before our eyes. First we are admiring “the glossy tendrils” of a beautiful boy’s “raven hair.” Suddenly, he swoons into sensuous passivity. Now we join the voyeuristic marvelling at public exposure of a woman’s breasts, as she lies unconscious. Homosexual and heterosexual responses have been successively induced or extorted from the reader.29

The page’s masculine and feminine qualities had seemed to co-exist, and, to a certain extent, they still do, but their order is reversed. Rather than the feminine boy, we have the masculine woman, a figure already rejected as unnatural and repellent in The Corsair.

With their brutal energy, dark origins and violent ends, the male heroes of The Giaour, The Corsair and Lara embody the sublime in relatively unproblematic ways. True, they display surprisingly sophisticated manners whenever they encounter a damsel in distress but nevertheless they

29Paglia, p. 349.
strongly resemble the sublime villains with whom they struggle. When it appears that the pattern of male sublimity and female beauty is to be disrupted, the result is either catastrophe or it transpires that the traditional order has not really been subverted.

A similar retreat from an apparently subversive position occurs in *The Bride of Abydos*. The poem has the familiar sublime villain and meltingly lovely heroine. Its hero, Selim, however, was brought up with the women of the harem, he has the long eyelashes of a girl, and he is constantly taunted by his adopted father for his effeminacy:

Vain were a father's hope to see
Ought that beseems a man in thee [...]
Go - let thy less than woman's hand
Assume the distaff - not the brand. (I, 83, 99.)

There are intimations of troublingly incestuous feelings between Selim and his half-sister, Zuleika, but she shares her father’s view of him as a weak and passive character. She refers to him as ‘gentle Selim’ and offers him a rose to soothe his melancholy. Byron, however, draws back both from the incest theme and from the idea of an effeminate hero. It transpires that Zuleika is a cousin rather than a half sister; and Selim has been leading a double life, masquerading as a creature of the harem whilst venturing out by night to play at banditry and prepare for the violent overthrow of the man who has murdered his father and brought him up in dishonour. Selim’s rebellion comes to the expected violent and tragic end as he is shot down in the surf as he turns from escape to look for Zuleika.

---

30The parallels with Byron’s own private life seem almost too obvious to mention at this point.
Despite this, Selim remains an exception to the heroes of the Turkish Tales. He is in some ways gentle and effeminate and he suggests one alternative available to the gloomier central figures of the other tales. It is an alternative taken with gusto by Byron in what is now generally regarded as his greatest work, *Don Juan*.

***

The Don Juan Tenorio of Tirso Da Molina’s *El burlador de Sevilla* has some qualities that might have made him a suitable model for a Byronic hero: his good looks, his mordant humour, his reckless courage and his grisly end. But Tirso’s Don Juan, like the Don Giovanni of Molière and Mozart, remains indisputably a cad, a ruthless, one-dimensional seducer and destroyer of women. Of Molière’s version of the Don, George Steiner has written,

Don Juan is not a complete dramatic character. He can neither change nor mature. His responses are utterly predictable, and there is about him something of an eloquent, vivacious marionette. Few dramatic personages of comparable fascination show so little trace of any life outside their stage presence. He lives for the theatrical moment, as does always the most brilliant of puppets.³¹

Byron’s inspiration was to take the great seducer and transform him into the great seduced. In contradistinction to the tales in which the hero is active (albeit intermittently becalmed or trapped by melancholy) and the female characters passive (or condemned for unnaturally usurping male qualities) Juan is forever acted upon, the passive plaything of, by turns,

women and fate. In this he recalls, to a limited extent, the one-dimensional Don Juan of Tirso and Molière. In the earlier cantos, Juan is little more than a pretty boy, the mere occasion for picaresque and amorous adventures. Juan’s passivity might seem to be contradicted by his restless movement, but his travels are always dictated by others, and those others are usually women.

We first find him described at the age of six, a ‘charming child’. By eleven he has acquired, ‘all the promise of as fine a face/As e’er to man’s maturer growth was given’ (I, 49). At sixteen he is ‘Tall, handsome, slender’ and ready to begin his romantic career. It is unfair to say that young Juan is entirely without ‘depth’: he is thrown into turmoil by his awakening emotions. Byron, however, gently mocks not only Juan but surely both himself and his earlier creations:

In thoughts like these true wisdom may discern
Longings sublime and aspirations high,
Which some are born with, but the most part learn
To plague themselves withal, they know not why.
'Twas strange that one so young should thus concern
His brain about the action of the sky.
If you think 'twas philosophy that this did,
I can’t help thinking puberty assisted. (I, 93.)

Lacking any malice, Juan nevertheless manages to be almost as destructive in his loves as the heartless original: Cupid’s darts metamorphose into the arrows of Apollo. His first love, Julia, is disgraced and left to live out her remaining, miserable years in a convent from where she writes prophetically to her young lover, ‘You will proceed in beauty and in pride, Beloved and loving many’ (I, 195).
Juan’s next major adventure, the shipwreck on Haidée’s island, is the one most often cited as Edenic, with its associated fall and expulsion from paradise. It certainly seems to fit well into the scheme. Juan’s time with Haidée is blissfully happy, and it is a happiness described as ‘another Eden’ (IV, 10). However, I contend that the episode corresponds equally well to a battle between the sublime and the beautiful.

The relationship is initiated by the violent storm that shipwrecks Juan and kills everybody on board except the fortunate passenger. Storms are, of course, definitively sublime. Haidée finds Juan on the beach and cares for him as he sleeps like Endymion:

And she bent o’er him, and he lay beneath,
Hushed as the babe upon its mother’s breast,
Drooped as the willow when no winds can breathe,
Lulled like the depth of ocean when at rest,
Fair as the crowning rose of the whole wreath,
Soft as the callow cygnet in its nest.
In short he was a very pretty fellow,
Although his woes had turned him rather yellow. (II, 148.)

The young couple are undeniably beautiful; there is no division here between masculine and feminine ideals of physical perfection. The passage above compares Juan successively to a child, to the sea at rest, to a rose and to a cygnet, all either neutral or feminine images. We expect the Byronic heroine to be lovely, but Haidée finds her beauty reflected back. They are described together, both ‘so young, so beautiful, so lonely, loving, helpless’ (II, 192). They naturally compose themselves into a

32See Gleckner, pp. 340-47.
tableau, although the setting owes more to the decadent sensuality of the Hellenic or Roman periods than to classical Athens:

She sits upon his knee and drinks his sighs,
He hers, until they end in broken gasps;
And thus they form a group that’s quite antique,
Half naked, loving, natural, and Greek. (II, 194.)

When they finally kiss (and it must surely be one of the finest literary kisses since John Donne), the two become blended in one intense, undifferentiated point of beauty:

A long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love
And beauty, all concentrating like rays
Into one focus, kindled from above. (II, 186.)

Juan is clearly supposed to retain our sympathy, as well as our admiration for his beauty and this presents something of a problem, given the evident fickleness of his behaviour. He has sworn undying love to Julia and left her forsaken and now he is enjoying every variety of bliss with Haidée. The narrator confronts the problem head-on: ‘But Juan, had he quite forgotten Julia?/And should he have forgotten her so soon?’ (II, 208). He (the narrator) hates ‘inconstancy’ and yet he finds himself tempted by a pretty face and requires a sternly personified ‘Philosophy’ to come to his virtue’s rescue. In an audacious move he then employs a little philosophy of his own to justify that same inconstancy. The tendency of mankind to find himself tempted by physical attractiveness is simply that admiration,
due where Nature's rich
Profusion with young beauty covers o'er
Some favoured object; (II, 211.)

Finding his stride with this theme, he continues:

'Tis the perception of the beautiful,
A fine extension of the faculties,
Platonic, universal, wonderful,
Drawn from the stars and filtered through the skies,
Without which life would be extremely dull. (II, 212.)

He does concede that it would be better ('for the heart, as well as liver!') if it were possible for mankind to fulfil his need for beauty in one person, unfortunately, although the heart, 'is like the sky, a part of heaven', it 'changes night and day too, like the sky' (II, 214). Juan's serial infidelity therefore finds itself buttressed by philosophy and the realities of human nature.

Juan and Haidée's idyll is shattered, as we might have expected, by the intrusion of the sublime in the shape of her father Lambro, another in the mould of Seyd and Hassan and Giaffir. Lambro is a Greek pirate, utterly ruthless and calculating. In the tales the hero and villain, as I have argued above, share common values and character traits, but in Don Juan the effect is one of pure contrast (and conflict); and as beauty invariably suffers at the hands of the sublime in the tales, so in Don Juan the young lovers are doomed.

Lambro is somewhat unusual in possessing surprisingly cultured habits, and he is described as 'the mildest man/ That ever scuttled ship or slit a throat' (III, 41). And he has some nobility in that his 'war with every nation' is waged to avenge the 'degradation' of Greece. (III, 55). He nevertheless represents the sublime in his ruthlessness, his savage moods and indeed his explicitly stated taste for 'scenes sublime' (III, 56).
Lambro, presumed dead, returns during a feast, emphasising the happiness and sensual pleasure about to be lost. Juan, reminding us of Sardanapalus (discussed below), is as gorgeously dressed as Haidée. Once again there is something feminine about his attire. Juan wears a shawl of black and gold,

But a white baracan, and so transparent
The sparkling gems beneath you might behold,
Like small stars through the milky way apparent. (Ill, 77.)

Even as he is cut down, we are reminded of Juan’s beauty: ‘His blood was running on the very floor/Where late he trod, her beautiful, her own’ (IV, 58). Juan is sold into slavery and Haidée dies mad, another victim of his fatal charm. Slavery, however is not the ultimate indignity to be suffered by Juan. The one thing more passive than a slave is a female slave, and after catching the eye of the Sultana Gulbeyaz, he is dressed up as a woman by an eunuch:

And now being femininely all arrayed,
With some small aid from scissors, paint, and tweezers,
He looked in almost all respects a maid. (V, 80.)

We again find ourselves in the territory of androgynous sexuality, marked out by Kaled in Lara. In the figure of Gulbeyaz, there is something quite new. Paglia dwells on the contrast between the feminised Juan and the dauntingly powerful sultana:

Juan’s tenuous manhood is near-obliterated by female drag. Now Byron shoves him next to an Amazonian dominatrix. Juan in petticoats is a trembling pawn upon whom the raging queen bears down. Gulbeyaz [...] is
the androgene as virago, luxuriously female in body but harshly male in
spirit.\textsuperscript{34}

Juan never properly recovers his vestigial masculinity until he becomes
involved in the Russian siege of Ismail. For the remainder of his time in the
harem he becomes Juanna and is consistently referred to as ‘she’ and ‘her’.
As Paglia points out, there is a reversal of expectations in which we would
suppose a young man let loose in a harem full of bored and frustrated
women to indulge himself happily. Juan, however maintains his passivity
and becomes the object of lesbian attentions and desires, with three of the
harem women, Lolah, Katinka and Dudù fighting over who is to sleep with
the new ‘girl’.

Juan escapes the harem and joins the bloody battle for Ismail, and here
he acquits himself well, bravely leading assaults, and, as we would expect,
saving innocents from murder. However feminine his appearance might be,
Juan must retain the martial virtues of courage and disdain for personal
safety if he is to avoid becoming ridiculous. Juan’s undoubted fascination
lies in exactly this combination of bravery and fragility:

\begin{quote}
The thirst

Of glory, which so pierces through and through one,

Pervaded him, although a generous creature,

As warm in heart as feminine in feature. (VIII, 52.)
\end{quote}

Juan’s courage is rewarded and he is sent with the dispatches back to St
Petersburgh and the awaiting Catherine. She is another of the extraordinary
women who proliferate in the poem.\textsuperscript{35} Her greed, her lust for conquest and

\textsuperscript{34}Paglia, p. 353.

\textsuperscript{35}Franklin has rightly pointed out that the poem is far more concerned with the affairs of women (and
not just affairs \textit{with} women) than men. \textit{Byron’s Heroines}, p. 99.
her nymphomania are all stressed and yet she remains strangely impressive. She is certainly impressed, all too predictably, by her new recruit, who appears as 'Love turned a Lieutenant of Artillery' (IX, 44). Catherine's well attested taste for strapping guardsmen ('they were mostly six foot fellows') does admit of some variation ('the Empress sometimes liked a boy') and Juan soon becomes a favourite. His amorous duties are a 'little hard' but, 'Young people at his time of life should be able/To come off handsomely in that regard' (X, 22). As a reward for his services he is sent on a diplomatic mission to England and the poem concludes with Juan exercising his particular combination of beauty and boyish charm on regency society.

Juan is the antithesis of the Byronic hero as he appears in the tales. Despite the occasional nod at a passing Childe Harold melancholy, Juan is all lightness, movement and gaiety. For their sublime gloominess, pessimism and secret pain he substitutes an irrepressible optimism. It cannot help but manifest itself as a certain lack of substance, a weightlessness: what we remember about Don Juan is not his character, but his beauty. In this he could not be more different to the Harrys and Larrys, Pilgrims and Pirates, who may capture us with their dark, gimlet eyes and pale foreheads, but whose precise physical lineaments remain indistinct.

***

I am going to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of two of Byron's dramatic works, Sardanapalus and The Deformed Transformed. I am concentrating on these works not because they are Byron's most interesting texts in that genre, but because they both revolve around conceptions of male attractiveness or beauty.
Sardanapalus is one of Byron's most appealingly modern works: it could almost be a creation of Oscar Wilde in its combination of outrageous camp posturing, incestuous and homosexual themes, epigrammatic wit and humanist, anti-war sentiments. Sardanapalus is the King of Assyria, a hedonist determined to promote peace in his kingdom by his liberal and forgiving actions. His brother-in-law, Salemenes, continually tries to alert Sardanapalus to the dangers of rebellion, fired by his loyalty to the line of Nimrod and Semiramis rather than to the man who has abandoned his sister for the more exotic charms of the Greek slave, Myrrha.

According to Byron's main source for the play, Diodorus Siculus, Sardanapalus was an effeminate transvestite homosexual. Byron underplays the explicit homosexual aspects of the historical Sardanapalus, but the clues are there for anyone who cares to look. He is described as 'scarce less female' than the crowd of women that surround him at his first appearance (I. ii. 42) and Byron's syntax makes it unclear if it is Semiramis or Sardanapalus who is described as the 'man-queen' in the next line. The more obvious failings of the king are his love of festivities and his treatment of his wife.

Sardanapalus is certainly a faintly ridiculous figure, particularly when compared to the two strong and dignified women in the play - the estranged queen, Zarina, and Myrrha. Both are courageous, beautiful and devoted and act as the perfect counterbalance to the wilting women of the tales. And yet it is impossible not to admire a monarch whose proudest boast is not of conquest but of having brought his people 'peace and

---

36 The full literary background to the play is given at pages 607-11 of The Complete Poetical Works, vol. VI. The details of Sardanapalus's sexual tastes are on pp. 612-13, where Diodorus Siculus is quoted: 'he had assumed the feminine garb and so covered his face and indeed his entire body with whitening cosmetics and the other unguents used by courtesans, that he rendered it more delicate than that of any luxury-loving woman. He also took care to make his voice to be like a woman's, and at his carousels not only to indulge regularly in those drinks and viands which could offer the greatest pleasure, but also to pursue the delights of love with men as well as women'.

pastime, and the licence/To revel and to rail’ (I. ii. 336-37). His policy is simply to make life as easy as possible for suffering humanity:

I hate all pain,

Given or received; we have enough within us,
The meanest vassal as the loftiest monarch,
Not to add to each other’s natural burthen
Of mortal misery, but rather lessen,
By mild reciprocal alleviation,
The fatal penalties imposed on life. (I. ii. 348.)

Too forgiving for his own good, Sardanapalus finds himself beset by enemies. Roused by the fearless Myrrha, we find him at his most impressive and his most vain as he prepares for battle. A variety of arms and armour are tried out to be dismissed as too heavy, or too ugly. He finally checks himself in a mirror in a scene of high comedy:

This cuirass fits me well, the baldric better
And the helm not at all. Methinks, I seem

[Flings away the helm after trying it again]

Passing well in these toys; and now to prove them. (III. ii. 163.) Like the effeminate Don Juan, Sardanapalus turns out to be a brave and noble warrior. Whatever hopes Byron may have placed in his kindness, generosity and sensuality, Sardanapalus would have remained simply ridiculous had he proved to be a coward as well as a transvestite.

Sardanapalus loses the battle for his kingdom and immolates himself (along with Myrrha, who throws herself onto his pyre) but it is the image
of the beautiful king, fighting helmet-less that lingers in the mind rather than the fiery climax:

He fights till now bare-headed, and by far  
Too much exposed. The soldiers knew his face,  
And the foe too; and in the moon's broad light,  
His silk tiara and his flowing hair  
Make him a mark too royal. Every arrow  
Is pointed at the fair hair and fair features,  
And the broad fillet which crowns both. (III. ii. 202.)

I opened this chapter with a discussion of beauty and the figure of Euphorion in Goethe's *Faust*, and I will conclude it by looking at the second (after *Manfred*) of Byron's dramas strongly influenced by the Faust legend. In *Sardanapalus* beauty, although ever present, is in some sense marginal. Beauty is simply one aspect of the effeminacy of Sardanapalus himself: it is not a fundamental theme of the play. In *The Deformed Transformed*, on the other hand, the meaning and value of beauty, and specifically male beauty, forms the very subject of the drama. The Faustian pact is not to secure knowledge or power, but beauty. Again it is difficult to avoid biographical interpretations. In this case the parallels are less dangerous, but if anything more painful.

The play opens with Arnold, a hunchback, being mercilessly scolded by his mother. He is an 'incubus' a 'nightmare' and a 'monstrous sport of nature'. Arnold is the extreme opposite of Sardanapalus. His ugliness has made him mean spirited, ignoble and surly, in response to the mockery he must daily endure.
The contamination of moral worth by physical imperfection has been, as I have shown in the introduction to this thesis, a familiar theme in Western culture from its roots in classical Greece. Ugliness has persistently been seen as in some way a punishment for moral failings. It is a sentiment that permeates Baltasar Gracian’s Spanish classic, *El criticon*, a sentiment summed up by Paul Julian Smith (discussing Chapter 9 of Part I; *The Moral anatomy of Man*), ‘Hunchbacks have twisted minds: the one eyed are easily blinded by passion; the lame stumble on the path to virtue; and the one eyed are lacking in good works.’ It is a mood that permeates the lyrics of Leopardi, Byron’s younger contemporary, where the twisted body is seen as giving a twisted view of the world.

Arnold is a complex and in many ways a sympathetic character. He could have become something worthwhile despite his deformity, had not his mother so detested him:

I would have done the best which Spirit may, to make
Its way, with all Deformity’s dull, deadly,
Discouraging weight upon me, like a mountain,
In feeling, on my heart as on my shoulders-
An hateful and unsightly molehill to
The eyes of happier men. (I. i. 328.)

In an ironic variation of the myth of Narcissus, Arnold catches a glimpse of his frightful countenance in a spring:

---

38 See ‘Leopardi and the Knowledge of the Body’, by Michael Caesar in *Romance Studies*, 19 (1993), ‘Leopardi’s creed has been encapsulated by Tommaseo: There is no God because I am a hunchback, I am a hunchback because there is no God’ p. 22.
Hideous wretch
That I am! The very waters mock me with
My horrid shadow-like a demon placed
Deep in the fountain to scare back the cattle
From drinking therein. (I. i. 48)

Rather than fall in love with his reflection Arnold opts for suicide. He is dissuaded by a Mephistophelean stranger who offers to transmute his crooked body into the most perfect of forms, chosen from history and myth. There follows an extraordinary beauty contest in which celebrated heroes are summoned to ‘Walk lovely and pliant/From the depths of this fountain’. Julius Caesar, on account of his baldness, is the first to be rejected. Alcibiades is more promising: ‘He is/More lovely than the last. How beautiful!’ But Arnold has developed a taste for the parade and refuses to decide before he sees who else might be summoned. Socrates, despite being, ‘The earth’s perfection of all mental beauty’ is sent on his way as is the Herculean ‘manly aspect’ of Mark Antony.

Next comes Demetrius (one of the most attractive of the heroes in Plutarch’s Lives) who,

truly looketh like a demigod,

Blooming and bright, with golden hair, and stature,

If not more high than mortal, yet immortal

In all that nameless bearing of the limbs,

Which he wears as the Sun his rays—a something

Which shines from him, and yet is but the flashing

Emanation of a thing more glorious still. (I. i. 246)

What is interesting about this display of beauty is that it is in no way opposed to martial qualities. Alcibiades and Demetrius were as valiant as
they were beautiful, but neither the conquering Caesar, the exquisite Alcibiades, the swarthy Antony nor the golden Demetrius quite fit the bill. Arnold has become particular in his choice of body (to which the stranger wryly comments, ‘Glorious ambition!/I love thee most in dwarfs!’). The next spirit, however, cannot help but suffice:

The god-like son of the Sea-goddess,
The unshorn boy of Peleus, with his locks
As beautiful and clear as the amber waves
Of rich Pactolus rolled o’er sands of gold,
Softened by intervening chrystal. (I. i. 266)

Arnold is then transmogrified into Achilles, the stranger taking over the hunchback’s body (and taking on the name of Caesar).

The new, beautiful Arnold leaves to find fame and fortune fighting with Charles, Duc de Bourbon during the sack of Rome. His new form really has given him courage and nobility, and with them success. Throughout the rest of the unfinished drama Byron freely applies the epithets beautiful, fair, and lovely to the male characters. Arnold is described by Bourbon as, ‘The beauty of our host, and brave as beauteous,/And generous as lovely’ (II. ii. 220).

During the battle, Arnold rescues the beautiful Olimpia. Whatever expectations we might have had about happy endings are soon dashed. The fragmentary final part finds Arnold disconsolate. Olimpia is cold to his advances and seems fascinated by Caesar. George Steiner speculates that had he completed the play, Byron would have had Arnold endeavour to regain his former body, shedding his newly acquired beauty which had not
brought him happiness. It would certainly be in tone with the rest of the piece with its mixture, as Steiner puts it, of 'lyric fantasy, wit, and melodrama' (p. 212).

***

In Byron's work we find all the elements that I have argued form the myth of beauty. Theological, philosophical and sexual mythemes proliferate, giving his characters their polymorphous attractiveness. It makes little sense to talk of a single 'Byronic hero', if by that we mean a useful category which can be employed to analyse Byron's poems. Certainly the heroes of the Turkish tales are all broadly similar, with their dark eyes, pale cheeks and melancholy air, but Don Juan's mercurial romancing, the camp exuberance of Sardanapalus and the mordant play of glittering beauty and repellent ugliness in The Deformed Transformed, subvert any easy simplifications.

There is a sense, however, in which it is impossible not to refer to the Byronic hero. In the popular imagination, the tortured melancholic, brooding over past horrors, pale, pensive, beautiful, remains as an ideal of masculine attractiveness. Blending together not only Byron's fictional creations, but also Byron's own projected image, the Byronic hero is as recognisable in romantic novels produced today as he is in Caroline Lamb's contemporary 'portrait':

---

39Steiner, pp. 211-12.
Calantha felt the power, not then alone, but evermore. She felt the empire, the charm, the peculiar charm of those features - that being must have for her. She could have knelt and prayed to heaven to realise the dreams, to bless the fallen angel in whose presence she at that moment stood, to give peace to that soul, upon which was plainly stamped the heavenly image of sensibility and genius.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40}Lamb, p. 120. A full discussion of Byron's role as a fictional character in the nineteenth century novel can be found in Samuel Chew's \textit{Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame} (London: John Murray, 1924), pp. 141-68.
The American artist Benjamin West's most famous painting, *The Death of General Wolfe*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, has been called a 'grandiloquent lie' because of its creation of a wholly fictitious death scene for the famous conqueror of Quebec. In place of the 'reality' of a tawdry death, beneath a bush, witnessed only by a surgeon and one other soldier, West created a tableau featuring more than a dozen characters clustering around the artfully languishing general, with the battle raging about them. The result was

a stupendous piece of drama: brilliance and gloom, victory and inconsolable sorrow set side by side, the sunlit sky of the imperial future banishing the grim clouds of past dissatisfactions. (pp. 21-2.)

Among the idealised figures surrounding Wolfe (for the most part regular army officers) are a 'Ranger' wearing what appears to be leather stockings. Next to the Ranger, is a muscular, superbly proportioned Indian, decorated with intricate tattoos, his hand supporting his chin in the traditional pose of deep and profound thought. This figure, horribly out of place in a battle in which the Indians fought only for the French, is, for Simon Schama, 'the most startling fiction of all', the careful classical allusion of its pose a direct challenge to the view of the Savage most commonly held by Wolfe's own society. Schama adds that Wolfe himself

---

considered the Indians to be, ‘irredeemable barbarians, cruel and depraved.’ West had a quite different view of the Indian:

What the Augustans saw as repellent barbarity, the devotees of sensibility thought virile, natural and uncorrupted. West had already painted a genre scene of a Mohawk family, and in his history of Penn’s treaty with the Indians would reiterate this essentially benign view of the relations between the races. So if Wolf’s death were to be designed as a tragic history of antique grandeur, how better to reinforce it than by making the Indian embody the essence of natural aristocracy in his Michelangelesque torso and noble, even Roman profile? (p. 31.)

West’s enlightened view had, of course, become a commonplace by 1771, at least among philosophers and radicals. West’s heroic presentation of two aspects of the New World - the buckskin-clad tracker and the noble savage was, however, to disseminate such ideas among a far wider circle. The Death of General Wolfe was a sensational success at the Royal Academy Exhibition and was to become one of the first genuinely popular prints, selling, despite its relatively high price, in ‘phenomenal quantities’ and earning both its engraver and publisher considerable fortunes (p. 34).

The image of a white hunter and his wise and noble companion was to find its most moving (and extended) treatment in the works of West’s fellow American, James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper’s two most famous characters fought in the same conflict and bear a marked physical resemblance to West’s symbols of the New World. Cooper’s view of race relations was, however, as I shall describe, far less optimistic than West’s.

***

---

²The idea of the noble savage had a long history, going back, as Peter Gay shows, at least to Tacitus, with his idealised Germans, carrying on through Montaigne to Voltaire, Diderot, and, most notoriously, Rousseau. See The Science of Freedom, pp. 92-98.
In Cooper’s frontier novels, and in particular in the five so-called ‘Leatherstocking tales’ centred on the infallibly heroic figure of Natty Bumppo, the relationship between race and beauty finds a complicated and intriguing expression. For the purposes of my arguments in this chapter I have generally followed the ‘mythic’ interpretation of the Leatherstocking novels found in the work of Richard Slotkin and Marius Bewley. The mythic approach, however, has severe limitations as a total interpretative paradigm for the work of Cooper, who was a highly politically engaged novelist. A more fruitful approach, taking the mythic aspects into account but giving greater emphasis to the socio-political background to the series can be found in Geoffrey Rans, Cooper’s Leatherstocking Novels: A Secular Reading. Nevertheless the mythic interpretation, initiated by D. H Lawrence in his Studies of Classic American Literature (1933) remains the most suitable for revealing the value and importance of beauty in these works.

For the most part I have ranged across these novels without regard to their order of composition. In terms of narrative sequence, the series begins with The Deerslayer, in which the hero has barely reached manhood and is on his first active mission, the recovery of his friend Chingachgook’s betrothed from a marauding party of Iroquois. The plot involves Harry March, a huge and handsome frontiersman and a family of lake dwellers,

---

3Natty is more often referred to by a variety of rather less prosaic sobriquets or nom de theatres, e.g. the Deerslayer, Hawkeye Leatherstocking and Pathfinder. I will, however use his Christian name throughout.
one of whom, the beautiful Judith Hutter, falls in love with Natty. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty has reached his prime, and has already achieved renown as a hunter and warrior. In *The Pathfinder*, which follows closely from the events in its predecessor, Natty falls in love and is rejected. These three novels all take place against a background of the series of conflicts between the French and English, and their respective native allies, in the 1750s.

With *The Pioneers*, the narrative moves on to the 1790s. Natty, an old but still sprightly figure, has become semi-domesticated and lives with John Mohegan (an equally aged and now somewhat pathetic Chingachgook) in a cabin close to a settlement. At the close of *The Pioneers*, Natty, alone after the death of Chingachgook, flees the encroaching tide of civilisation for the scene of the final act of the tragedy, narrated in *The Prairie*. Natty, now into his eighties, helps a family of settlers in their Indian troubles and at long last dies.

The order of composition was quite different. *The Pioneers*, Cooper's third published novel, appeared in 1823 to be followed by *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826 and *The Prairie* in 1827. The last marked the pinnacle of Cooper's critical and popular success. After a number of years of foreign travel, political controversy and falling sales, Cooper resurrected his hero for *The Pathfinder* in 1840 and *The Deerslayer* in 1841.

Natty Bumppo himself, as his name suggests, is not the stuff of romance. His 'love-life' does play a role in *The Deerslayer* and is of central importance in *The Pathfinder*, but whatever it is that he contemplates as he

---

*Intriguingly, one of the incidents in the novel is prefigured by another of Benjamin West's paintings, commissioned, according to Schama, for George III. In the course of the Punic wars the Roman Regulus was captured and released for a short time to carry a message to Rome. Having given his word, he returned to the Carthaginians, and to certain death. (See Dead Certainties, p. 24.) Natty does exactly the same in *The Deerslayer*, returning, much to the astonishment of his white companions, to face his Mingo captors after being allowed out on a 'furlough'.*
sits facing the setting sun awaiting death at the end of *The Prairie*, we can be fairly certain that it is not his list of sexual conquests: as far as we are aware, Natty dies a virgin.7

Natty does have a certain rough, physical attractiveness, honed by hardship:

The frame of the white man, judging by such parts as were not concealed by his clothes, was like that of one who had known hardship and exertion from his earliest youth. His person, though muscular, was rather attenuated than full; but every nerve and muscle, appeared strung and indurated, by unremitted exposure and toil8

His only claim to physiognomical attractiveness stems from his forthright, honest gaze: 'there was an open honesty, a total absence of guile, in his face, . . . which . . . otherwise would not have been thought handsome'9

Even in the flush of youth/early manhood it is this honesty of expression that distinguishes the scout. The most detailed description we have of Natty comes at the beginning of *The Deerslayer*:

In stature, he stood about six feet in his moccasins, but his frame was comparatively light and slender, showing muscles, however, that promised unusual agility, if not unusual strength. His face would have little to recommend it except youth, were it not for an expression that seldom failed to win upon those who had leisure to examine it, and to yield to the feeling of confidence it created. This expression was simply that of guileless truth, sustained by an earnestness of purpose, and a sincerity of feeling, that rendered it remarkable. At times this air of integrity seemed to be so simple

---

as to awaken the suspicion of a want of the usual means to discriminate between artifice and truth, but few came in serious contact with the man, without losing this distrust in respect for his opinions and motives.¹⁰

Natty sees his plainness as one of the principal obstacles to his marriage to the beautiful Mabel Dunham in The Pathfinder. Vanity is certainly not one of the scout’s failings: “I knew you was too young and beautiful for one of middle age, like myself, and who never was comely to look at even in youth.”¹¹ When Mabel’s father, Sergeant Dunham, advises Natty to ‘pay a little more attention to the outside’ in order to secure the girl’s affections, his reply is doubly significant, indicating both his amusing naivety and his investment of libidinal energy in his all powerful rifle:

“Nay, nay, Sargeant, I’ve forgotten nothing that you have told me, and grudge no reasonable pains to make myself as pleasant in the eyes of Mabel as she is getting to be in mine. I cleaned and brightened up Killdeer this morning as soon as the sun rose; and, in my judgement, the piece never looked better than it does at this very moment.”¹²

D. H. Lawrence interpreted the Leather-stocking tales as pure escapism - for Cooper as well as reader, in which his hotel becomes the wigwam, Chingachgook takes the place of his wife and he (Lawrence, the reader, Cooper) is, naturally enough, Natty Bumppo.¹³ Lawrence’s conception of Natty, Chingachgook and Uncas as the ideal nuclear family living in the wilderness is not as fanciful as it might seem. Cooper describes Uncas as Natty’s adopted child.¹⁴ Given that Chingachgook is certainly his natural father it confirms Natty in the slightly undignified position of wife and

---

¹¹Ibid., p. 250.
¹²Ibid., p. 115-16.
¹³D. H Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature, p. 52.
¹⁴The Last of the Mohicans, p. 265.
mother. But the strangeness of this particular family does not end with the confusion over parent gender. In a paragraph replete with *double entendres*, Natty’s feelings for Uncas are obliquely compared to those of a lover for his beloved, of the ever eager Major Heyward for his sickly-sweet Alice:

“I have heard,” he said, “that there is a feeling in youth, which binds man to woman, closer than the father is tied to the son. It may be so. I have seldom been where women of my colour dwell, but such may be the gifts of natur in the settlements! You have risked life, and all that is dear to you, to bring off this gentle one, and I suppose that some such disposition is at bottom of it all. As for me, I taught the lad the real character of a rifle: and well has he payed me for it! I have fou’t at his side in many a bloody skrimmage; and so long as I could hear the crack of his piece in one ear, and that of the Segamore in the other, I knew no enemy was on my back. Winters and summers, nights and days, have we roved the wilderness in company, eating of the same dish, one sleeping while the other watched; and afore it shall be said that Uncas was taken to the torment, and I at hand [...] before the Mohican boy shall perish for the want of a friend, good faith shall depart the arth, and ‘kill-deer’ become as harmless as the tooting we’pon of the singer!” (p. 265.)

At the risk of spelling out the obvious, the rifles sported by the three companions have a considerable phallic significance. It surely would require the most fanatical of anti-Freudians to deny that ‘weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male organ’\(^{15}\) and in particular, ‘all sharp and elongated weapons’.\(^{16}\) Gregory Woods details the history of the phallus-as-weapon imagery, from Shakespeare’s darts, lances, pikes, poll-axes and


\(^{16}\)Ibid. p. 336.
swords, through to the invention of fire-arms, with which, 'the ballistics of sexual intercourse soon increases in deadliness'.\textsuperscript{17} Woods points out that heterosexual rape has always been 'an institutionalised aspect of wars' (p. 53), through which the penis makes the transformation from symbolic to actual weapon (without losing its symbolic value). Woods, however, demonstrates that an historic link exists between a specifically homosexual desire and warfare, a view encapsulated by André Gide in \textit{Corydon}: 'I'm sure that periods of martial fervour are essentially uranian periods, just as one finds warlike races to be particularly prone to homosexuality' (p. 53).

Of more relevance to Natty and his Indian companions is the classical tradition of homoerotic soldiering, most poignantly demonstrated by the Sacred Band of Thebans. Another Classical example of the association of love and valour, from the \textit{Symposium}, recalls the unfailing friendship between Natty, Chingachgook and Uncas:

If only, then, a city or an army could be composed of none but lover and beloved, how could they deserve better of their country than by shunning all that is base, in mutual emulation? And men like these fighting shoulder to shoulder, few as they were, might conquer - I had almost said - the whole world in arms. For the lover would rather anyone than his beloved should see him leave the ranks or throw away his arms in flight - nay he would rather die a thousand deaths. Nor is there any lover so faint of heart that he could desert his beloved or fail to help him in the hour of peril, for the very presence of Love kindles the same flame of valour in the faintest heart that burns in those whose courage is innate.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18}Plato, \textit{The Complete Dialogues}, p. 533.
Natty is known metonymically to the Hurons as ‘La Longue Carabine’ after his gun. It is something he is proud for both its excellence and its difficulty of use:

Of all we'pons [...] the long barrelled, true grooved, soft metalled rifle, is the most dangerous in skilful hands, though it wants a strong arm, a quick eye, and great judgement in charging to bring forth all its beauties.19

He clearly feels that his manhood has been insulted when he is forced to leave his rifle behind after the battle at the rapids20 - a view confirmed by the evident glee of the Indians when they discover the ‘trophy’ (p. 85). Again, after the first kidnap and rescue cycle, Natty's main satisfaction would seem to be in the recovery of the gun: “I have got back my old companion, ‘kill-deer’,” he added, striking his hand on the breech of his rifle, “and that in itself is a victory” (p. 116). In The Deerslayer, we learn that Natty's trusty rifle was originally given to him by the exquisite but tainted Judith Hutter, who is tragically in love with the young hunter. It is therefore invested with the additional erotic significance of the love-gift.

In The Pathfinder there occurs perhaps the most obvious example of the masculine flaunting of prowess in the handling of weapons as the three suitors for Mabel's hand engage in a shooting match. Natty's superiority in this respect is emphasised by the fact that even without his usual rifle, he is still the best shot and further enforced by the magnanimity of his allowing Jasper to win the prize.21

At moments of intense pressure or uncertainty we often we find Natty clinging to killdeer for reassurance. Standing by Mabel as she prays affectingly over her dying father, his 'sinewy fingers grasped the barrel with

19 Last of the Mohicans, p. 70.
20 Ibid., p. 79.
21 The Pathfinder, pp. 152-71.
a force that seemed to compress the weapon' (p. 411). As Mabel leaves with Jasper after having made her choice and therefore destroying forever (as it turns out) the scout's prospects of married bliss, she looks back to find him clinging to the rifle, standing as still as if he were 'a statue set up in that solitary place' (p. 429).

Natty's preference for weaponry over women almost causes an argument with Chingachgook, in *The Deerslayer*, as the white man urges his Indian companion to value Killdeer more than his own wife should the gun ever come into his possession:

> So, look well to it, Delaware, and remember that you've now to watch over a thing that has all the value of a creatur', without its failin's. Hist may be, and should be precious to you, but Killdeer will have the love and veneration of your whole people. (pp. 441-442.)

Chingachgook's response shows the scout, for once, being out commonsensed: 'One rifle like another, Deerslayer ... All kill; all wood and iron. Wife dear to heart; rifle good to shoot' (p. 442).

Even towards the end of his career, Natty continues to invest masculine pride in 'kill-deer'. In the opening events of *The Pioneers*, the aged Natty is still inordinately proud of his prowess with the gun and regards it as a mark of his superiority over Judge Temple:

> You burnt your powder, only to warm your nose this cold evening. Did ye think to stop a full grown buck ... with that pop-gun in your hand? There's plenty of pheasants among the swamps; and the snow birds are flying round your own door, where you may feed them with crumbs, and shoot them at pleasure, any day; but if you're for a buck, or a little bear's meat, Judge,
you'll have to take the long rifle, with a greased wadding, or you'll waste more powder than you'll fill stomachs, I'm thinking.\textsuperscript{22}

We can deduce, therefore, that Natty's masculinity is intimately bound to his rifle. By extension the other central characters' armaments must be seen as representative. It is interesting to note that the 'piece' nuzzling so reassuringly to Natty's ear in the passage cited above, could also, in the slang of the period, refer to the penis.\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps most tellingly we find Natty enforcing his own masculine superiority over the sexless, neutered David Gamut, by emphasising the difference between his own magnificent rifle and the 'harmless...tooting we'pon of the singer.\textsuperscript{24}

At one point in \textit{The Pathfinder}, we are told that Natty's conception of love and human nature leads inevitably to what we can only construe to mean homosexuality. Sergeant Dunham is pressing Natty to continue his pursuit of Mabel, suggesting that his valour and reliability on the field of battle must convince her of his worth. Natty is doubtful. His campaigns have only widened the gap between himself and the civilised world of women such as Mabel: 'Like loves like, I tell you, Sergeant; and my gifts are not altogether the gifts of Mabel Dunham.'\textsuperscript{25} The Sergeant answers that if, 'like loved like, women would love one another, and men also'. Natty does not respond to that point, and an old age, spent in what can only be

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{The Last of the Moheicans}, p. 224.
\textsuperscript{25}\textit{The Pathfinder}, p. 279.
described as a state of domestic harmony with John Mohegan in the cabin by Lake Otsego seems to imply that the scout had the greater insight into his own character.

Natty's one and only rejection, in *The Pathfinder*, leaves him convinced (correctly so, as it transpires) that he will never come close to a woman again:

"I do not - I shall never think in that way again, Mabel," gasped forth the Pathfinder, who appeared to utter his words like one just raised above the pressure of some suffocating substance, "No, no, I shall never think of you, or anyone else, again in that way."26

For all the intensity of his masculine pride, and the almost supernatural superiority of his abilities, Natty, then, remains less than successful as a romantic lead. His dual failure, first in rejecting Judith Hutter at the climax of *The Deerslayer*, on the suspicion of past misconduct and secondly the more poignant rejection by Mabel Dunham who prefers the younger and more handsome Jasper in *The Pathfinder*, leave him with little choice other than to become a mythic, frontier hero, an object of veneration to white and Indian alike, perpetually virtuous and innocent and indeed as sexless as David Gamut or the other oddball characters who wander haplessly in and out of these narratives (such as Dr Obed Bat in *The Prairie*).

***

If we seek 'glamour' in Cooper's novels we must look elsewhere. Possible candidates might well be the younger white companions Natty helps to educate into the ways of the wilderness. These can generally be

26Ibid., p. 270.
divided into two groups, drawn respectively from the rough and ready frontiersmen and the more refined and educated class. Hurry Harry, in The Deerslayer; Jasper Western in The Pathfinder; Billy Kirby, in The Pioneers and Paul Hover in The Prairie belong to the first group and Oliver Edwards, in The Pioneers, Major Heywood, in The Last of the Mohicans, and Duncan Middleton in The Prairie to the second.

George Dekker has called the first group 'the handsome, healthy, handy young males' who supplied America with the 'energy, brawn, and skills necessary to a developing country in the nineteenth century'.

Of these, Hurry Harry, or Henry March, is, perhaps, the most interesting and certainly the most immediately attractive. We first meet him ploughing through the forest with Natty, his overwhelming physicality overshadowing the less obvious attractions of his sinewy companion:

It would not have been easy to find a more noble specimen of vigorous manhood, than was offered in the person of him who called himself Hurry Harry.... The stature of Hurry Harry exceeded six feet four, and being unusually well proportioned, his strength fully realised the idea created by his gigantic frame. The face did no discredit to the rest of the man, for it was both good-humoured and handsome. His air was free, and though his manner necessarily partook of the rudeness of a border life, the grandeur that pervaded so noble a physique prevented it from becoming altogether vulgar.

If Cooper ever intended Hurry Harry to live up to this opening description he did not sustain the attempt for long; Harry soon shows himself to be an Indian-hating thug, happy to murder his way through the wilderness. For

---

28 The Deerslayer, p. 20.
him the Indians are simply animals ripe for exploitation: 'As for scalping or even skinning a savage, I look upon them, pretty much the same as cutting off the ears of wolves for the bounty, or stripping a bear of its hide'. For Natty such behaviour is unnatural and unchristian, fitting the gifts of the Indian, but not at all the way for a white man to behave:

A white man's gifts are christianized, while a red skin's are more for the wilderness. Thus it would be a great offence for a white man to scalp the dead, whereas it's a signal virtue in an Indian. Then again a white man cannot ambush women and children in war, while a red skin may. 'Tis cruel work I'll allow, but for them it's lawful work, while for us it would be a grievous sin (p. 50.)

Even in his own specialised field, the 'heroic' exercising of brute strength, March is a bit of a flop, a 'nearly' man. After a long and exhausting fight against overwhelming odds he comes close to achieving 'a victory that would have been renowned for ages, by means of traditions, throughout all that region' (p. 341). Cooper, however, deprives March of his unlikely victory when Natty would surely have triumphed. As Dekker puts it,

realism and probability are applied in this novel only when they suit Cooper's convenience; apparently it is not convenient to suspend them in the case of Hurry Harry, who must on no account be allowed to rival Deerslayer—even as a man of action.29

Nevertheless in The Deerslayer, Cooper returns almost obsessively to the theme of beauty, and in particular, male beauty. This is at least partly explained by Judith Hutter's character. After one particularly narrow

29Dekker, James Fenimore Cooper the Novelist, p. 180.
escape, she laughingly remarks to Natty, 'He was a good looking savage'. The authorial comment seems superfluous - 'the girl always dwelt on personal beauty as a sort of merit'.

Earlier, Hurry Harry teases Natty about the difference in attractiveness between them, finally succeeding in getting a rise out of the usually imperturbable scout. He is distinctly un-amused and his rather sullen response is to argue that superficial good looks may hide character defects and that anyway, there are plenty worse off. It is worth quoting at length as it is the most direct consideration of beauty in Cooper's novels:

It's easy for them that natur' has favoured to jest about such matters, Hurry, though it is sometimes hard for others. I'll not deny but I've had my cravings towards good looks; yes I have; but then I've always been able to get them down by considering how many I've known with fair outsiders, who have had nothing to boast of inwardly. I'll not deny, Hurry that I often wish I'd been created more comely to the eye, and more like such a one as yourself, in them particulars, but then I get the feelin' under by remembering how much better off I am in a great many respects, than some fellow mortals, I might have been born lame, and onfit even for a squirrel hunt; or, blind, which would have made me a burthen on myself, as well as on my fri'nds, or, without hearing, which would have totally onqualified me for ever campaigning, or scouting, which I look forward to, as part of a man's duty in troublesome times. Yes - yes; it's not pleasant, I will allow, to see them that's more comely, and more sought a'ter, and honoured than yourself; but it may all be borne, if a man looks the evil in the face, and don't mistake his gifts and his obligations.
This extraordinary speech, combining compassion, stoicism and a little self-pity gains an extra layer of pathos if the Leather-stockling novels are read in order of composition, rather than chronologically. *The Deerslayer* was the last to be written but the first in the narrative sequence. The year before Cooper had published *The Pathfinder*, in which his lack of attractiveness lost him the chance of happiness with Mabel Dunham.

But of course the events of *The Deerslayer* bear out Natty's hierarchy of qualities. Harry proves to be a man of little substance. Judith Hutter, despite her predilection for a handsome face, has enough intelligence and discernment to fall in love with Natty, leaving Harry to her half-witted sister, Hetty.

The second group of rather more refined male characters are little more successful in establishing and holding the reader's sympathy. Heywood and Middleton, for all their chivalry and courage, find themselves helpless without the greater wisdom and knowledge of Natty. Their stiffness and formality are completely out of place in the demanding environments of forest and prairie. Heywood in particular is ineffectual and foolish. His grandson, Middleton, brought up on the tales of the exploits of Natty and his Indian companions, and possessing himself the middle name of Uncas, is less a source or ridicule. He is conventionally good-looking, and is described as having a 'manly beauty', but as with his grandfather his destiny is back with civilisation. He leaves the wilderness to the more vigorous and energetic muscularity of Ishmael Bush and his gruesome family of brawny, stupid, but vigorous refugees.

Natty's young rivals then are, for the most part, too immature, too one-dimensional and too clearly inferior to Natty himself to constitute true

---

32 *The Prairie*, p. 158
romantic heroes. The erotic appeal of their youthful good looks is compromised by their lack of nobility (Hurry Harry), by their stupidity (Paul Hover) or by a failure to understand the sensual potential of tragic self-sacrifice (Jasper Western). For a deeper aesthetic pleasure touched with the aching pathos of premature death we must turn to Cooper's Indians.

Before that, however, there is one character who does transcend the limitations placed on Natty's companions. Oliver Edwards in *The Pioneers* is the most fully realised and complex of the supporting characters in the series. He manages to combine both cultivation and the skills of the woodsman. Although dressed in the customary rough garb of the hunter, he has only to remove his hat to reveal his true nature:

> On entering the apartment he had mechanically lifted his cap, and exposed a head, covered with hair that rivalled in colour and gloss the locks of Elizabeth. Nothing could have wrought a greater transformation, than the single act of removing the rough fox-skin cap. If there was much that was prepossessing in the countenance of the young hunter, there was something even noble in the rounded outlines of his head and brow. The very air and manner with which the member hautily maintained itself over the coarse, and even wild attire, in which the rest of his frame was clad, bespoke not only familiarity with a splendour that in those new settlements was thought to be unequalled, but something very like contempt also. (p. 67.)

Edwards, and his story of stolen inheritance, is at the heart of the novel. This is not because he has in some way displaced Natty, but rather because in this, the first of the series to be written, Cooper has yet to invest Natty with the mythic significance he was later to embody. Without Edward's dashing melancholia there would be a vacuum at the centre of this deliberately unromantic, and un-idealised picture of settler life. Natty is
alternatively comic and pathetic, with his 'skinny' face, his 'shaggy brows',
his 'scraggy neck' and with a drop perpetually hanging from his nose. The
portrait of Mohegan is equally unflattering:

His hand seemed to make a fruitless effort to release his tomahawk, which
was confined by its handle to its belt, while his eyes gradually became
vacant. Richard at that instant thrusting a mug before him, his features
changed to the grin of idiocy, and seizing the vessel with both hands, he
sunk backward on the bench, and drunk until satiated, when he made an
effort to lay aside the mug, with the helplessness of total inebriety. (p. 166.)

Mohegan is not without nobility, but his drunkenness his enfeebled
condition and his Christianity make it clear that he is very far from
traditional noble savage. But we are granted a vision of what he has been
and through this we receive an inkling of what is to be a major theme in the
rest of the Leatherstocking novels: the clash of the advancing white man
not merely with the wilderness, as in The Pioneers but with the aboriginal
inhabitants of that wilderness:

"Old John and Chingachgook were very different men to look on," returned
the hunter, shaking his head at his melancholy recollections. "In the 'fifty-
eight war,' he was in the middle of manhood, and taller than now by three
inches. If you had seen him, as I did, the morning we beat Dieskau, from
behind our log walls, you would have called him as comely a red-skin as ye
ever set eyes on. He was naked, all to his breech-cloth and leggens; and you
never seed a creater so handsomely painted. (p. 155.)

But even in the description of Chingachgook in his pomp, at this early
stage of Cooper's epic, there is no idealisation, and no invocation of the
classical world which was to colour the portrayal of the Indian in the later
novels. The idealisation and 'sensualising' of the Indians (or at least the
'good' Indians) is the mythologising counterpart to what happens to Natty himself, in his transformation from loquacious, comic dodderer to symbolic father of the nation.

The complexity of the views on the nature of the Indians current when Cooper was writing the Leather-stocking novels is stressed by John P. McWilliams.³³ Cadwallader Colden's History of the Five Nations (1727) had invoked the heroes of both the Iliad and the Roman Republic to describe their courage and eloquence. Chateaubriand's Atala, (1802), Renée (1803) and Les Natchez (1826), had furthered the image of Indians as 'gentle dissaffected philosophers'.³⁴ The classical legacy alone admitted widely varying interpretations:

To imagine the Indian as hard, solitary, unyielding, ageing and doomed (Hector, Achilles, Turnus, Satan) would prompt romancers and historians to create the Big Serpent, Magua, Mahtoree, Sanutee and Pontiac. To imagine the Indian as graceful, generous, pliable, young and equally doomed (Apollo, Patroclus, Achates, Chactas) would lead the same writers to create Uncas, Hard Heart and Occonestoga. (p. 143)

The mention of Satan brings in a further element, that of the sublime. Cooper's writings are as influenced by the discourse of the sublime as those of Radcliffe, Byron and the Brontës, an influence signalled by the opening sentences of The Pathfinder:

The sublimity connected with vastness, is familiar to every eye. The most abstruse, the most far-reaching, perhaps the most chastened of the poet's thoughts, crowd on the imagination as he gazes into the depths of the

³⁴Ibid., p. 144.
illimitable void; the expanse of the ocean is seldom seen by the novice, with indifference, and the mind, even in the obscurity of night, finds a parallel to that grandeur, which seems inseparable from images that the senses cannot compass. With feelings akin to this admiration and awe, the offspring of sublimity, were the different characters with which the action of this tale must open, gazing on that scene before them.35

As with the writers discussed in the previous two chapters, the concept of the sublime in Cooper's novels extends beyond landscape and colours his characters, and again the sublime is used to terrorise, threaten, and often destroy, the beautiful.

Without doubt the two most memorable characters in *The Last of the Mohicans* are the Indians Uncas and Magua. Uncas, the exquisitely athletic and honourable son of Natty Bumppo's long-time companion, Chingachgook, has been identified as Apollonian from the first reviews of the novel:

Uncas is an Indian Apollo; a living personification of those active and gracious forms, which an Indian's fancy might dream of, as bounding over the hunting ground of his Elysium, lighter than the air he seemed to tread, with eye, and limb and thought alike untiring.36

In captivity, Uncas takes on a further Apollonian resonance as he is twice portrayed as possessing the stillness and serenity of antique art. As his fate is debated by his captors, he has 'more the air of some finely moulded statue, than of a man having life and volition' (p. 245). And later,

35 *The Pathfinder*, p. 7.
after a tomahawk has sailed close enough to 'cut the war-plume from the scalping tuft',

Uncas stood, still looking his enemy in the eye, with features that seemed superior to emotion. Marble could not be colder, calmer, or steadier, than the countenance he put upon this sudden and vindictive attack. (p. 251.)

The beauty of Uncas has the power to enrapture even those intent on its destruction. Having escaped from the malevolent Iroquois, Uncas has to undergo a trial (of sorts) by a faction of his own people allied to the French. The aged prophet Tamenund, bent and desiccated but still possessed of a formidable gravitas has just spoken when Uncas appears:

All those eyes, which had been curiously studying the lineaments of the sage, as the source of their own intelligence, turned on the instant, and were now bent in secret admiration on the erect, agile and faultless person of the captive. (p. 307.)

D.H. Lawrence recognises the romanticising, anti-realistic tendency of this conception of the Indian:

As if any Indian was ever like Apollo. The Indians, with their curious female quality, their archaic figures, with high shoulders and deep, archaic waists, like a sort of woman! And their natural devilishness, their natural insidiousness.37

Cooper's positive stereotyping is, however, confined to a particular pure racial group, the 'good' Indians. As we shall discuss below an entirely different model is used to characterise those other, 'savage' Indians.

37 Lawrence, p. 53.
Although Uncas's physical perfection is most often conceived as Apollonian, aspects of his function in the plot of *The Last of the Mohicans* bring another mythical figure to mind. Lawrence accurately describes Uncas, the 'beautiful son' as 'Adonis rather than Apollo'. Adonis began as a Babylonian and Phoenician deity, worshipped as Tammuz, the spouse or lover of Ishtar. By the seventh century BC the Greeks had acquired the cult, probably through contact with the Semitic peoples of Cyprus. The Greeks misapplied the honorific title *Adon*, the Semitic for Lord, to the deity, and with Ishtar's translation into Aphrodite, we arrive at the traditional form of the Myth.

According to the story, Adonis was born of an incestuous liaison between King Cinyras and his daughter, Smyrna. Cinyras' wife had boasted that Smyrna was more beautiful than Aphrodite and the Goddess had punished her by inciting Smyrna's illicit passion. She secreted herself in her father's bed, without his knowledge and conceived a son. When he eventually discovered the truth of his daughter's pregnancy, he tried to kill her with his sword. Aphrodite, regretting the consequences of her revenge, turned Smyrna into a Myrrh tree as the sword fell. The sword split the tree and the infant Adonis emerged.

To protect the child, Aphrodite hid him in a casket and gave it to Persephone for safe keeping in the Underworld. Persephone was overcome with curiosity and opened the chest to discover the beautiful youth, with whom she fell in love. When Aphrodite came to collect Adonis, Persephone refused to part with her new lover. The Muse Calliope was then called upon to make a judgement and she ruled that Adonis must

---

38 Ibid. p. 61.
spend a third of the year with each Goddess and a third on his own. Aphrodite, however, had worn her love-compelling magic girdle at the judgement and Adonis not only spent his own third with Aphrodite but lamented the time he had to spend with Persephone. Persephone then informed her rival's principal consort, Ares, the God of War, about the arrangement. Ares, showing his customary restraint, transformed himself into a wild boar and gored Adonis to death. Anemones sprang from his blood and red roses from the blood that flowed from Aphrodite's foot, pierced by a thorn as she rushes to his side. The story has a partially happy ending as Aphrodite appealed successfully to Zeus to allow Adonis to spend the summer months with her.

Adonis is associated with forests. He is the last of a royal line. He is physically beautiful. He perishes in the mountains at the hands of a jealous personification of war. Schematised we can see the genetic relationship between Adonis and Uncas. Uncas also is a child of the forest, and like Adonis, a hunter. At his elaborate funeral rites (shared with Cora) flowers proliferate, and, as with Adonis and Aphrodite, a rich after-life together is foretold for the couple.

It is not, however, the structural similarities alone that make Uncas an Amerindian Adonis, but rather the atmosphere of love tragically thwarted by bloody death; of the beautiful Prince of the Forest dying fruitlessly and yet embodying fertility. It is at least partly the exotic appeal of the Uncas-Cora relationship that explains the abiding popularity of The Last of the Mohicans above and beyond that of the other Leather-stocking tales, despite its relatively lowly critical standing.

Uncas' death and funeral are at pp. 337-49.
Frazer was the first to note, albeit tentatively, the similarities between Adonis (and the other 'dying gods') and the Christ figure. Several aspects of Uncas's trial and scourging carry echoes of the Passion and when asked who he is by Tamenund after revealing a small tortoise tattoo on his breast, he replies that he is a son of the supreme deity of their tribe, the Great Unamis. Uncas is greeted as the Messiah, come to free the chosen people and ultimately, in a Christ-like gesture, he lays down his life.

If Uncas is a composite Apollo/Adonis/Christ, Magua appears at first reading to be pure Satan. As Lawrence puts it, 'there is also a "wicked" Indian, Magua, handsome and injured incarnation of evil.' Uncas's elevation to near Christian Saviour figure accentuates Magua's glowing evil. Geoffrey Rans writes, 'he is a peculiarly intensified incarnation of one half of a generically determined romance polarity, his satanic majesty opposed to the idealised Apollonian characterisation of Uncas.'

Like Satan, Magua combines bravery with treacherous cunning. He is physically superb but facially fiercely repellent. We first see him through the inquisitive and innocent eyes of David Gammut:

The colours of the war-paint had blended in dark confusion about his fierce countenance, and rendered his swarthy lineaments still more savage and repulsive, than if art had attempted an effect, which had been thus produced

---

42 The Last of the Mohicans, p. 310.
43 There is another, non-Christian specifically racial aspect to Uncas' role. Along with Cora he is to invigorate the Delaware people, of whom the Mohicans form the purest part. As Richard Slotkin writes in the Introduction (p. xxiv) to the Penguin edition of the novel, 'He is not merely to be a new leader and lawgiver, but a genetic renewer, founder and perpetuator of a dynasty that will drive away the white men and restore the ancient dominion of the Red Man.'
44 Lawrence, p. 61.
by chance. His eye, alone, which glistened like a fiery star amid lowering clouds, was to be seen in a state of native wildness. For a single instant, his searching, and yet wary glance, met the wondering look of the other, and then changing its direction, partly in cunning, partly in disdain, it remained fixed as if penetrating the distant air.46

Magua then catches the attention of Cora and Alice:

a slight exclamation proceeded from the younger of the females, as the Indian runner glided by her, unexpectedly, and led the way along the military road in her front. Though this sudden and startling movement of the Indian, produced no sound from the other, in the surprise, her veil also was allowed to open its folds, and betrayed an indescribable look of pity, admiration and horror as her dark eye followed the easy motions of the savage. (p. 19.)

The powerfully sexual image of the veil opening its folds draws one irresistibly to conclusions on the nature of the 'admiration' felt by Cora. A more obvious and conventional account of this incident would have described the veil as falling down or slipping; the inviting, labial folds give the passage a queasy, erotic charge. Richard Slotkin has pointed out that it is Cora's admixture of 'tainted' negro blood acquired through her mother (and tellingly lacking in her 'pure' half sister) that leaves her 'susceptible to erotic appeals'. This becomes one of the central themes of the novel:

She is spontaneously fascinated by Magua and later by Uncas, and the novel is enlivened by the persistent erotic tension generated among these three: the darkened beauty, a potential rapist, and a potential lover.47

Magua, however, is not as straightforwardly evil as he might appear. As Rans points out, his story, 'is one of lost glory, dispossession, relentless

46The Last of the Mohicans, pp. 17-18.
47Ibid., Introduction by Richard Slotkin, xvi.
pursuit and harassment, liquor, decadence, and, eventually, the humiliation of the flogging for which he will exact vengeance. Such a history, if it does not salvage Magua, at least puts him in the position of victim as well as murderer. Rans again:

His complaints align him with almost every other Indian in the series, including, in this novel, Tamenund; more specifically, the reader, remembering *The Pioneers*, underlays Magua's words with Mohegan's eloquent complaints after his drunkenness at the Bold Dragoon and when he is close to death and only too sober at Mount Vision. As a result, it is impossible fully to gratify the romance polarity; Magua is aligned with his virtuous antagonist Chingachgook as well.

Cooper deconstructs the binary division between good and bad Indian by making it clear that all Indians have been the victims of white greed. We might go on to assume, therefore, that Cooper's portrayal of Indians is favourable. Chingachgook and Uncas in *The Last of the Mohicans* and Hard-Heart, the Pawnee Chief in *The Prairie*, are brave and noble and embody a physical grace and beauty beyond any white man, not excluding Natty himself. The fact remains, however, that Cooper has set up that binary division himself. For all his attempts to re-humanise individual 'bad' Indians by supplying a motive for their villainy, he was still responsible for dehumanising them in the first place.

---

49 Hard-Heart represents a slightly lower level of perfection than Uncas: he is a Roman hero rather than a Greek god:
'The Indian in question was in every particular a warrior of fine stature and admirable proportions. As he cast aside his mask, composed of such party-coloured leaves, as he had hurriedly collected, his countenance appeared in all the gravity, the dignity, and, it may be added, in the terror of his profession. The outlines of his lineaments were strikingly noble and nearly approaching to Roman, though the secondary features of his face were slightly marked with the well-known traces of his Asiatic origin.' *The Prairie* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 186.
Cooper’s enlightenment is only skin deep. The Indians, treated as groups, are strictly divided between good (Mohican, Delaware, Pawnee) and bad (Huron, Tuscarora, Sioux). The good Indians are always seen as a fading race, betrayed by their own honesty. The bad Indians are cunning and ruthless - crossbreeds, traitors and rebels, congenitally incapable of keeping a treaty or saving a scalp. Even the good Indians have savage characteristics. When, in *The Pathfinder* Jasper slights Natty for placing prudence before reckless courage, the older scout laughs it off:

I bear no ill will, nor shall any one on my behalf. My natur is that of a white man, and that is to bear no malice. It might have been ticklish work to have said half as much to the Sarpent here, though he is a Delaware, for color will have its way.51

The emphasis Cooper lays on 'blood', (to the point of tedium in Natty's constant refrain that he 'does not have a cross') is picked up by the anonymous reviewer for the *United States Literary Gazette* for May 1826:

Uncas would have made a good match for Cora, particularly as she had a little of the blood of the darker race in her veins, and still more, as this sort of arrangement is coming into fashion, in real life, as well as in fiction.52

It has become something of a critical cliché to see miscegenation as the real theme of *The Last of the Mohicans*.53 Cooper's view is that intermarriage must lead to tragedy. It is a view that combines compassion

---

50One gets a rather different view of the Pawnees from reading Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1971). In Brown’s account, the Pawnees are not only the cowardly instruments of the white men’s policy, but ruthless murderers of women and children. See pp. 111-13.

51*The Pathfinder*, p. 52.

52*Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*, p. 100.

53I agree with Dekker that the miscegenation theme is not secret, as Lawrence states, but explicit. Cooper uses the Uncas-Cora-Magua triangle to address 'the relations between the three main races then inhabiting North America', and to test 'the possibility of their being brought together in an harmonious union'. *James Fenimore Cooper the Novelist*, p. 68.
with the rigid advocation of racial separation. It is the familiar Cooper line of racism tempered by humanity. This theme's most telling moment comes in Chapter 16 when Heyward asks Munro for the hand of Alice. Munro assumes that racial prejudice lies at heart of Heyward's preference for Alice over the 'contaminated' Cora: 'You scorn to mingle the blood of the Heywards, with one so degraded - lovely and virtuous though she be?'

Heyward's reply is genuinely touching. He is aware of his racism and at least has the decency to be embarrassed by it:

"Heaven protect me from a prejudice so unworthy of my reason!" returned Duncan, at the same time conscious of such a feeling, and that as deeply rooted as if it had been engrafted in his nature.

As Dekker puts it, 'prejudice is cruel and irrational - and inevitable wherever different racial or ethnic groups are brought together'. The only successful inter-racial relationship is that between Natty and Chingachgook, and however close the two might be it is necessarily a relationship without progeny.

Cooper is not a novelist of neat endings, of organic unity or formal perfection. The ideological differences, racial hatreds and economic conflicts of early Republican America are never glibly resolved but rather honestly reflected in his fiction. We would not expect, therefore, to find a particularly coherent or consistent view of beauty in his work, if for no other reason, because nothing is particularly coherent or consistent, not excluding the character of Natty Bumppo himself. What we do find is a number of different, broadly aesthetic, conceptions of the role and value of beauty.

54 *The Last of the Mohicans*, p. 159.

55 Ibid., p. 159.
Cooper's women are all physically attractive, whether feisty (Mabel Dunham), courageous (Cora Munro) or cretinous (Hetty Hutter). Since Lawrence, it has been traditional to see Cooper's women as falling into one of two camps, the sensual and the saintly, the 'good old division, the dark sensual woman and the clinging, submissive little blonde, who is so "pure"'. Of *The Deerslayer* he writes:

The two girls are the inevitable dark and light. Judith, dark, fearless, passionate, a little lurid with sin, is the scarlet-and-black blossom. Hetty, the younger, blonde, frail and innocent, is the white lily again. But also, the lily has begun to fester [...] Thomas Hardy's inevitable division of women into dark and fair, sinful and innocent, sensual and pure, is Cooper's division too. It is indicative of the desire in man. He wants sensuality and sin, and he wants purity and 'innocence'. If the innocence goes a little rotten, slightly imbecile, bad luck!57

Although this scheme seems to fit well with *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Deerslayer*, it really cannot be made to fit the other novels in the series. Even with these two, there is no simple moral to be drawn. Cora's taint of negro blood carries with it no implication of moral incapacity. She is brave, self sacrificing and resourceful, as well as beautiful and sensual. Judith Hutter may have a 'history', but she is comfortably the most attractive person in the novel. Our sympathies are fully engaged and it is impossible not to feel a flicker of contempt for Natty in his humiliating refusal of her. When we learn that Judith ends up as an officer's mistress, thus in some way justifying Natty's actions, the blame falls inevitably, whatever the author's intentions might have been, on the man rather than

---

56 Lawrence, p. 61.
57 Ibid., p. 64.
the woman. Whatever formal benefits that might have been gained by uniting Cora and Uncas, or Natty and Judith, would have been lost by the shattering of historical probability and psychological truth, and Cooper is to be praised for avoiding the glib and the sentimental in favour of the difficult, the morally ambiguous and the tragic.

Nevertheless, we must accept that there is a loose correlation between dark female beauty and sensuality and between lightness of complexion and innocence. And, as Jane Tompkins has pointed out, such 'conjunctions of opposed terms' are the hallmarks of a system of classification whereby 'race is distinguished from race, nation from nation, tribe from tribe, human from animal, male from female'. This urge to classify, so central to nineteenth-century racist theorising, has been considered in the chapter on Petrus Camper.

If we return to male beauty we find the same tension between simplifying binary divisions and the complexities of American social life as translated into fiction. There are two competing paradigms of beauty at work in these novels. The first contrasts Natty's moral worthiness, courage and frontier expertise with the brashness and vigour of his handsome young companions. It is a conflict that Natty wins by losing. Jasper Western may get Mabel Dunham, but Natty gains not only our sympathy but also the iconic status necessary for his eventual metamorphosis into myth.

The second paradigm involves the cluster of images surrounding the Indian characters. Uncas and Magua may well represent Apollo and Satan, but they both partake in the glamour and sensuality of the (noble or

58 The Deeslayer, p. 548.
otherwise) savage. In the same way, Mahtoree, the 'bad' Indian in *The Prairie* is a magnificent creation, hardly inferior to the 'good' Hard-Heart. Amid a gathering of chiefs, all distinguished by bravery, intelligence and imposing stature, he stands alone:

Mind as well as matter had contributed to establishing his authority. His scars were as numerous and deep, as those of the whitest head in his nation; his limbs were in their greatest vigor; his courage at its greatest height. Endowed with this rare combination of moral and physical influence, the keenest eye in that assembly was wont to lower before his threatening glance. Courage and cunning had established his ascendancy, and it had been rendered, in some degree sacred by time. He knew so well how to unite the powers of reason and force, that in a state of society which admitted of a greater display of his energies, the Teton would in all probability have been both a conqueror and a despot.60

Cooper's approach to the racial conflicts of his country was to present them as ultimately irresolvable. Hard-Heart and his warriors side with the settlers against the Sioux, but we are never in any doubt that he is assisting in the process that will mean extermination for his own people and their way of life. In the debate before their final, fatal combat, it is Mahtoree who speaks with the greater prescience:

If a Red-skin strikes a Red-skin forever, who will be masters of the prairies, when no warriors are left to say 'they are mine.' Hear the voice of the old men. They tell us that in their days many Indians have come out of the woods under the rising sun, and that they have filled the prairies with their complaints of the robberies of the Long-knives. Where a Pale face comes, a

---

60 *The Prairie*, p. 273.
red-man cannot stay. The land is too small. They are always hungry. See, they are here already!\textsuperscript{61}

Beautiful they may be, but doomed they certainly are. Physical perfection is no defence against the onrush of civilisation that will, by the time Cooper completed \textit{The Deerslayer} in 1841, have swept away the Frontier world of Hawkeye and his Indians. Cooper, however, was far from convinced that the end of the Indians would mean the end of racial conflict in America. Another race, that appears only occasionally in his fiction poses a greater threat to white hegemony:

American slavery is distinguished from that of most other parts of the world, by the circumstance that the slave is a variety of the human species, and is marked by physical peculiarities so different from his master as to render future amalgamation improbable. In ancient Rome, in modern Europe generally, and, in most other countries, the slave not being thus distinguished, on obtaining his freedom, was soon lost in the mass around him; but nature has made a stamp on the American slave that is likely to prevent this consummation, and which menaces much future ill to the country. The time must come when American slavery shall cease, and when that day shall arrive, (unless early and effectual means are devised to obviate it), two races will exist in the same region, whose feelings will be embittered by inextinguishable hatred, and who carry on their faces, the respective stamps of their factions. The struggle that will follow, will necessarily be a war of extermination. The evil day may be delayed, but can scarcely be averted.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 334-335.
It is significant that the main barrier to the successful unification of the people of America is aesthetic: the same differences of colour and physiognomy between the races that Blumenbach and Camper had traced so minutely.
CONCLUSION:

ARMS AND THE BOY

The texts discussed in this thesis were chosen to illustrate the variety of meanings associated with male physical attractiveness in the period 1750-1850. My intention was to show that beauty could only be understood as a mythology, as a family of characters, a series of linked narratives, into which new elements - the sublime, racial theory, classical images - were periodically incorporated. By its nature, such a research programme can never be 'closed'. This programme could be extended in at least four ways. Perhaps the most obvious, though not necessarily the most illuminating, would be to analyse more texts in the same categories (literary, philosophical, art-historical, scientific) from the same period.

One of the most fertile areas to be explored would be the conceptions of male beauty in the works of the first and second generation of Romantic poets, particularly Blake, Keats and Shelley. The novels of Walter Scott, mentioned above only in passing, present themselves as equally rich and varied in their portrayals of male attractiveness, in chivalrous, if weak heroes, such as Edward Waverly or Francis Osbaldistone, or even Ivanhoe (who spends most of the narrative that bears his name as an invalid); in thunderingly sublime villains such as Ivanhoe's Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert and Front de Boeuf; or in figures who combine the fierceness of the sublime with an essential virtue, such as Rob Roy MacGregor or the King Richard of The Talisman. Even the modish racial theories of Blumenbach would seem to have made an appearance in Scott's work - the depiction of Saladin in The Talisman shows the influence of Blumenbach's view that Caucasia, Armenia
and the Middle East in general harboured the human race at its most beautiful.¹

Jane Austen's male characters offer a range of attractive types to tempt further investigation. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Bingley is 'good looking and gentlemanlike' with a 'pleasant countenance'. The imperious Darcy is something of a contrast with his 'fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien.'² It is Wickham, however, who, at least initially, is taken to have 'all the best part of beauty' (p. 116). In *Northanger Abbey*, we again find beauty applied to male characters, albeit somewhat negatively, as the fickle and manipulative Isabella Thorpe describes Captain Tilney (with her customary lack of candour): 'he is not at all in my style of beauty'.³ *Emma* gives us the usual cast of handsome (and less handsome) characters, such as Frank Churchill (a *very* good looking young man') but also one curious description of the faintly ridiculous Mr Elton by Mr Woodhouse as 'a very pretty young man, to be sure'.⁴

What might be more useful, however, than the endless pursuit of male beauty through the period's literary and other published texts, would be to attempt to uncover the opinions of 'ordinary' men and women, as revealed in letters, diaries and other unpublished documents. Such an investigation would inevitably be biased towards the literate classes, but it would at least help to show the extent to which the ideas discussed in this thesis filtered into the wider culture. I have taken it as axiomatic that views of beauty present in literary texts at least to some extent reflect ideas current in society, and even

---

went some way to forming those ideas, but such assumptions cannot replace a serious historical investigation into the surviving primary sources. A model for such an investigation is provided by Lawrence Stone's work on the family and the institution of marriage from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. The case studies gathered together in *Uncertain Unions and Broken Lives* give an occasional insight into the objects of female desire from glamorous aristocrats to muscular young grooms. Such social history is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this thesis.

The first two extensions to this research programme fill in some of the spaces left in the period covered by this thesis. The third and fourth would, respectively, push back the study into the centuries preceding the current study and pull it forward into the present. The former would certainly help in giving a more complete background to the analysis attempted in this thesis than was possible in the historical sketch undertaken in the introduction. I argued in that introduction that almost any period in the past 2500 years (with the possible exception of the period between the collapse of the Roman world and the rebirth of European civilization in the eleventh century) could provide the cultural historian with ample material for research into the meanings associated with personal beauty. Those meanings acquire a particular density in the seventeenth century, in which libertinism and Puritanism interacted to produce the variety of contradictory and confusing conceptions of beauty noted by Antonia Fraser in *The Weaker Vessel*. Robert

---


6Perhaps the most moving of the stories of marital break-up told by Stone is that of Middleton v. Middleton, which relates the havoc wrought by the infatuation of Clara Louisa for the handsome groom John Rose. She is first titillated by stories she hears about Rose's sexual prowess, and gives away her fascination by her inability to refrain from 'ogling' him 'across the table' when he fills-in as footman. The affair, possibly un consummated, destroyed the lives of both Middletons, ruined John Rose and threw the local community into turmoil for several years. See *Uncertain Unions and Broken Lives*, pp. 428-513.
Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621-51), in itself provides sufficient material for a major work on seventeenth-century views of beauty. In Section 2, Subsection II, 'Other causes of Love-Melancholy, Sight, Beauty from the face, eyes, other parts, and how it pierceth', Burton traces the impact and power of (male as well as female) beauty through mythology and history, never closing his argument, adding endlessly to its richness with humorous anecdotes, scientific speculation, philosophical enquiry and tragic tales. He never excludes either the physical or spiritual dimensions of beauty:

As other objects vary and are diverse so they diversely affect our eyes, ears, and Soul itself; which gives occasion to some to make so many several kinds of love as there be objects: one beauty ariseth from God [...] another from His creatures: there is a beauty of body, a beauty of the Soul, a beauty from virtue.\(^7\)

Although Burton does tend to emphasise the spiritual aspects of love, he is far from unappreciative of the carnal, as is evident from the following story he relates:

A company of young philosophers on a time fell at variance, which part of a woman was most desirable and pleased best? Some said the forehead, some the teeth, some the eyes, cheeks, lips, neck, chin etc.; the controversy was referred to Lais of Corinth to decide; but she, smiling said they were a company of fools; for suppose they had her where they wished, what would they first seek? (III, p. 82.)

Despite the richness of meanings we can find in earlier centuries, the most appealing continuation of this research would be to carry the analysis of beauty forward to the present flowering of interest in the beautiful male form,

exploited in advertising, in print journalism and in film. I will conclude this thesis with a brief examination of one stage in that continuation, the great confrontation between the beautiful and sublime in the trenches on the Western front in the First World War. Paul Fussell’s magnificent work on the literature of the First World War, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, gives many examples of poetry and prose, where the beauty of the young soldiers, often conceived in classical terms, is faced by the crushing might of modern, industrialised warfare. Fussell links the tender love for the doomed and dying youths in the works of Sassoon, Owen, Graves, and the other war poets, to the pre-war explicitly homosexual ‘Uranians’ (‘a body of enthusiastic paedophiles who since the late eighties had sent forth from Oxford and London a stream of pamphlets, poems, drawings, paintings, and photographic “art studies” arguing the attractions - and usually the impeccable morality - of boy-love’), and to the less intense homoeroticism of Housman and Hopkins.8 The Uranians’ ideal of ‘Greek love’ was linked, via Pater, to Winckelmann thus forming a clear connection with the subject matter of this thesis. The second connection is with the sublime, the terrifying, impersonal ‘masculine’ force that perpetually threatens to engulf and destroy the beautiful. One prose passage from 1916 encapsulates the confrontation:

A little way off a naked Tommy was standing under a spout of water. [...] and the beauty of that tiny frail fair thing, vividly white in the sunshine upon that enormous background of emptiness and dun-colored monotony of moorland was something so enormous in itself, that it went straight through

---

me like a violent lance of pain.[...]

All those complicated bedevilments of iron and dynamite, got together at so vast an expense of thought and money and labour, to destroy just - that.⁹

It is, perhaps, in the work of Wilfred Owen that the most moving union of the beautiful and sublime occurs. One fragment, entitled ‘Beauty’ outlines some of the conventional views of what constitutes the beautiful: ‘The beautiful, the fair, the elegant,/Is that which pleases us, says Kant’. Sunsets, horses, women are mentioned before the poet comes to the point - beauty is a ‘Blighty’ wound:

A Shrapnel ball
Just where the wet skin glistened when he swam.
Like a full-opened sea anemone.
We both said ‘What a beauty! What a beauty, lad!’¹⁰

Inevitably, the wound poisons - ‘A canker worked into that crimson flower’ - and the boy is dumped overboard, before ever reaching home, to lay his wound with the other ‘anemones off Dover’. In several of his poems, Owen juxtaposes the hard metallic horror of war with the fragility and beauty of human flesh, but nowhere is the hopeless contest between the sublime and the beautiful caught so heartrendingly as in ‘Arms and the Boy’:

Let the boy try along the bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman’s flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

⁹Reginald Farrer, quoted by Fussell, p. 301.
¹⁰The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen ed. by C. Day Lewis (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p. 140. Day Lewis has had to reconstruct these lines from Owen’s notes.
Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

***

I have argued that beauty can best be understood as a mythology, as a network of linked narratives, archetypes and associations, mutable but coherent, into which new ideas and themes will merge while others fall away or become dormant. This view has been maintained against the position that beauty is a simple, stable essence, a quality of faces and bodies that has only to be seen to be recognised. This ‘biological paradigm’ seeks to banish the ethical, religious and historical associations which have, for centuries, been bound to the concept of beauty, a process by which they hope to reveal beauty in all its simplicity. In most cases, the biological paradigm restricts the use of the term beautiful to women, the passive objects of male choice.

It should now be considered how far my contentions that beauty is complex and that men have always been counted among the beautiful, are born out by the case studies presented in chapters 3-8 of this thesis.

Taking the second contention first, I take it as demonstrated that beauty has been ascribed to men throughout the period I have investigated. This is
not simply to say that they are depicted as the objects of desire, but to assert further that the terms ‘beauty’ and ‘beautiful’ have been used directly to describe them. From the theoretical works of Winckelmann and Camper, to the fictional characters of the novelists and poets from Richardson to Cooper and beyond, men partake in beauty. Although it may be correct to say that in many texts male beauty is subordinate to female beauty, in others it is clearly dominant (Camper, Winckelmann) and in yet more broadly equivalent (Richardson, Byron).

I claim equally that the first contention is demonstrated. The texts I have chosen show beauty to be endlessly complex, incorporating conflicting ideas of good and evil, of concupiscence and innocence. It can signify either intelligence or stupidity; it can be a blessing or a curse. I have argued that, in the period studied, the concept of male beauty became further complicated by elements drawn from the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful and by the re-emergence of a classically inspired homoeroticism.

It might be contended that I have chosen to focus only on those texts which support my hypothesis. Against this I would argue that I have selected a representative and wide-ranging set of texts and authors, drawn from a variety of disciplines and working within very different traditions. I maintain that the same heterogeneity of associations will be found in any other sample of writings taken from this period. But even if a number of texts were presented which seem to confirm the view that beauty is simple, and everywhere the same, the mass of material I have gathered would offer a substantial rebuttal to the argument that they represented the ‘true’ or even majority view on the nature of beauty.

It is impossible to predict exactly how the myth of beauty will develop in the future. But develop it will. It may well be the case that beauty will come to be seen increasingly as an aspect of human evolution - the promise
that sociobiology offers is an alluring one - the answer to some of the profoundest questions concerning human nature. But science can never account for the superabundance and malleability of the concept of beauty and beauty will always escape from the enveloping grip of the sociobiologist. Beauty remains a cultural phenomena and the variety, fertility and inexhaustibility of human culture mean that the concept of beauty will remain varied, fertile and inexhaustible.


*The Art of Beauty, or, A Companion for the Toilet in which the Charms of the Person are Considered and Explained ... To which are Added Easy, Safe and Certain Methods, of Attaining External Beauty ... Written by a Late Eminent English Physician at the Russian Court* (London: J. Williams, 1760)


Camper, Petrus, *The Works of the Late Professor Camper on the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary & c & c in Two Books Containing A Treatise on the Natural Difference of Features in Persons of Different Countries and Periods of Life; and on Beauty, as Exhibited in Ancient Sculpture; With a new Method of Sketching Heads, National Features, and Portraits of Individuals with Accuracy, &c &c, trans. by T. Cogan (London: Dilly, 1794).


Chew, Samuel, *Byron in England: His Fame and After-Fame* (London: John Murray, 1924)


Dekker, George and McWilliams, John P. eds., *Fenimore Cooper; The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973)


Doederlin, Sue Warrick, ‘Clarissa in the Hands of the Critics’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 16 (1995), 401-14


Dunlop, Knight *Personal Beauty and Racial Betterment* (London: Henry Kimpton, 1920)


Eckermann, Johann Peter, *Conversations with Goethe* (London: Dent, 1930)


Ford, John, *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, ed. by Derek Roper (London: Methuen, 1976)


Frayling, Christopher, *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (London: Faber, 1991)


Hay, D. R., *The Geometric Beauty of the Human Figure Defined to which is prefixed A System of Proportion Applicable to Architecture and the Other Formative Arts* (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1851)

Hay, D. R., *The Natural Principles of Beauty As Developed in the Human Figure* (Edinburgh: William Blackwoods and Sons, 1852)

*Hebe or the Art of Preserving Beauty and Correcting Deformity* (London: Walker, 1787)


Hogarth, William, *The Analysis of Beauty, written with a view of fixing the Fluctuating IDEAS of TASTE* (London: 1753)


Inchbald, Elizabeth Appearance is Against Them: A Farce in Two Acts (London: Robinson, 1785)


Isocrates, Collected Works, trans. by George Natin, 3 vols (London: Heinemann, 1928)


*Poems by Eminent Ladies*, 2 vols (Dublin: printed by Chamberlain for Sarah Cotter, 1757)


Richardson, Samuel, *Clarissa or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)


Richardson, Samuel, *Clarissa or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985)


Steiner, George, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber, 1961)


Ware, Mary, *Sublimity in the Novels of Ann Radcliffe* (Uppsala: Lundequistka Bokhandeln, 1963)


