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East and West on the Tension Between *Ars Erotica* and *Ars Vivendi*[1]

Commentary: Richard Shusterman,
Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 436 pages.

Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* is a masterpiece in a number of respects. With its focus on erotic love and the aesthetics of lovemaking, the book is to be admired for having the audacity to broach a topic that tends to be neglected – if not repressed – in contemporary academic scholarship. But *Ars Erotica* is far from being "simply" about sex and different arts of love. In exploring classical erotic theories and ideals in Western, Chinese, Indian, Islamic and Japanese cultures, it reveals an impressive amount of knowledge and erudition when analyzing, documenting, and contextualizing the various *ars erotica* in their different social, cultural, political, philosophical, and religious milieus. Moreover, although Shusterman's guiding thread is the *aesthetic* dimension of classic *ars erotica*, the book also has an important ethical and spiritual dimension, as it compellingly demonstrates how the cultivation of physical beauty and sensual pleasures was – at least in classical ancient traditions – indissociable from a wider concern with the cultivation of one's character and virtue, that is, with an art of living in which sexual practices and attitudes were strongly embedded and from which they ultimately derived their deep symbolic meaning and relevance. In adopting this interpretative trend, Shusterman draws on the pivotal works of Pierre Hadot and especially Michel Foucault

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– whose *History of Sexuality* he discusses and complements at several critical points – enhancing their influential interpretation of Western philosophy as a way of life or an aesthetics of existence, respectively, through fruitful dialogue with the spirituality and somaesthetics of Eastern cultures.

If we read the eight chapters that compose the book with this *fil rouge* in mind, it becomes clear that not only are the several *ars erotica* and corresponding *ars vivendi* very different from each other and even deeply contrasting in many important respects, but the relation between the two varies in strength, intensity, and reciprocal dependency according to the culture at stake – an interesting fact that would perhaps deserve further development in the book. Given the impact of different cultures' philosophical and religious views on their own *ars erotica*, differences in the way philosophies and religions have conceived of the relation between spirituality and eroticism, soul and body, and *askesis* and aesthetics have also shaped differences in the way the arts of love have related to the corresponding arts of living: ranging from almost full identification between the two to the near exclusion of one of the pairs. More concretely, if in some cultures the practice of *ars erotica* could not only "constitute an important mode of self-cultivation" (AE, 2), but even work as its privileged vehicle, in other cultures (as a whole or in particular periods) the requirement of spiritual cultivation instead implied the repression of the body's sexual impulses and practices, while in others still the *ars erotica* seemed to run independently of any relevant spiritual dimension. As such, different cultures also established different relations of subordination between their *ars erotica* and their *ars vivendi*, such that in some cases it is the latter that is a means to the former, even though the inverted relation seems to prevail. When the art of living assumes the leading role, cultures are distinguished by how they solve (or fail to solve) the conflict between sensual desire and ascetic spirituality and how they (more or less) integrate the arts of love into the process of self-cultivation, that is, via the (major or minor, if any) role and relevance they ascribe to practices of lovemaking in the context of the ethical and aesthetic stylization of one's existence.

Particularly impressive – even if not completely surprising – in this regard is the radical clash that we find between the Western and the Asian appreciation of sex, sensual pleasures, and lovemaking practices in their capacity to enhance spirituality and serve the ethical goal of self-cultivation. Foucault underscored this contrast in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* by distinguishing Western *scientia sexualis* from non-Western *ars erotica*.[2] According to Foucault, contrary to Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Arabo-Muslim societies, which developed masterful erotic arts that "are said to transfigure the one fortunate enough to receive its privileges," Western society "in the face of it at least … possesses no *ars erotica*."[3] In this regard, it is also significant that Pierre Hadot, who devoted a good part of his intellectual career to the study of ancient spiritual exercises and practices of self-transformation in the context of the Greco-Roman art of living, is fairly silent about sexual practices and rituals.[4] While Shusterman does a splendid job of adding nuance to this perhaps overly narrow perspective and correcting some of Foucault's assumptions, including the very terms of his classification and his opposition of Western and Asian erotic theories, when it comes to exploring the relations between *ars erotica* and *ars vivendi* the book confirms, rather than dispels, the abovementioned clash.

Indeed, when one looks at the two paradigmatic erotic theories from China and India (complemented by the derivative *ars erotica* of Japan and Islam), one is struck by the impressive blending and intertwining of their

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2) Cf. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 57.

3) Ibid., 58.

4) When sex appears in his work, it is mainly in the form of advice against its practice or as techniques designed to control sexual desire. See for example Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault,* ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michal Chase (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 128, 185–86, 284; and Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 117 and 136.

arts of living and their arts of love. China, bearer of the oldest surviving sexual theory, remains distinctive in its celebration of sex not only in its pure immanence, as a powerful natural drive that contributes to physical and mental health, promotes family and social union, and enables the very continuation of life, but also in a cosmic, metaphysical, and religious dimension insofar as male-female copulation is seen as "embodying the essential union of *yin* and *yang* that generates our universe of changing things" (AE, 161). Even though a good part of Chinese sexual theory was concerned with the most appropriate means, conditions, and methods for conceiving healthy offspring, sexual activity was also regarded as fundamental to enhancing the body's vitality, empowering the circulation of energies, and lengthening the lives of love-makers, which is why polygamy was generally accepted and sexual abstinence strongly discouraged. Most importantly for our purposes, besides its cosmic, social, physiological, and procreative relevance, lovemaking was also imbued with a strong ethical and political significance, as part of a wider "project of aesthetic self-cultivation" (AE, 177) based on the core ethical and aesthetic ideal of harmony. Due to the close intertwining of beauty and virtue, aesthetics and ethics, and eroticism and spirituality in Chinese culture, to correctly practice its *ars erotica* was to cultivate the art of living, such that the two arts reciprocally affected and enhanced one another. While cultivating one's self, character, and virtue or excellence (*de*) was essential to attracting a partner and engaging in proper, satisfying, and harmonious lovemaking, China's extremely rich and multifarious *ars erotica* was meant to bring erotic success in order to promote harmony in one's character and intimate relationships, while at the same time giving beauty, pleasure, invigorating energy, and rejuvenating physical and mental health to its practitioners. Since harmony (not only erotic, but also aesthetic and ethical) – together with self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-mastery – was to a great extent learnt and cultivated *through* sex, which provided "a model and training ground for such balance" (AE, 198), China presents the most compelling example of a perfect coupling between its *ars erotica* and its *ars vivendi.*

With a considerably different background, Indian erotic theory has an equally strong aesthetic dimension and a perhaps even deeper commitment to the project of ethical self-cultivation, from which it primarily derives and to which it is ultimately subordinate. As the author underscores, the famous *Kamasutra,* popularly known in the West as a manual of sex positions, was actually written for the purposes of "enhanced knowledge, mastery of the senses, and self-control for general success in the art of living rather than the pursuit of passionate pleasures" (AE, 24). In contrast to China, India's *ars erotica* reveals a tension between erotic desire and ascetic spirituality, which it nevertheless aims to combine, as expressed in Śiva, god of both sexual potency and ascetic meditation. Even though both sexual desire and chaste renunciation are valued for their deeply creative force, a violent and unrestrained sex drive can lead to conflict and instability, while at the same time distracting from one's uplifting spiritual path (AE, 206). The Indian *ars erotica* seeks to resolve this conflict by "reconciling passion and self-restraint" (AE, 209) through aesthetic control and the ascetic discipline of one's senses and desire, together with the cultivation of practices of detached pleasure-taking through the artistic performance of dramatic role-playing. By developing one's capacity for self-knowledge, self-control, and self-mastery, and encouraging lovers to acquire artistic skills in addition to the social and psychological knowledge required for successful seduction and lovemaking, the Indian *ars erotica* might also be said to overlap with its art of living, functioning as an important form of education through the senses and sexual practices. Even if at the final stage of the Indian art of living (*moksha*) one is supposed to embrace a completely ascetic life, renouncing the world and all its turmoil, including family and all kinds of sexual pleasure and sensual delight, it is also through the *ars erotica* that one accomplishes this aim by achieving full sexual satisfaction and satiety in the previous stages of one's life, thus letting oneself be inspired to seek a more divine union. Thus, even if the art of love must ultimately be sacrificed for the sake of the art of living, India is another illuminating example of an almost perfect intermingling of the two.

If we now turn to the Western philosophical and religious tradition, we find neither the Chinese medical legitimation of sex, nor the Indian aesthetic edification of lovemaking, nor a metaphysical or cosmic significance that elevates sexual practice from the realm of mere immanence, nor the distinctive "education *through* sex" that Shusterman ascribes to *ars erotica* (AE, 10) that we so clearly recognize in Asian cultures. Despite the richness of Greek mythology in sexually charged gods – including Eros – and the "richly polymorphic eroticism" that we find in the Greco-Roman socio-cultural and artistic atmosphere – with its multiple erotic venues and "instructive models of divine lovemaking inspired by beauty and pursued for pleasure rather than procreation" (AE, 32) –, none of this is reflected in the Greco-Roman philosophical discourse on sex, which is instead distinguished by extreme asceticism, sublimation, and self-repressing restriction, or what Foucault has called "austerity."[5] As Shusterman promptly acknowledges, there is a deep tension between Greek philosophy and eros (AE, 57 ss.), such that when it comes to the theorization of the art of living – as the technical knowledge (including skills, ethical precepts, and spiritual exercises), required to lead a good life – erotic practices are basically excluded, while sexual desire assumes a completely sublimated or spiritualized form. It is true that Greek philosophers were supreme admirers of beauty, including physical beauty as part of the deeply engrained ideal of *kalos kai agathos*, and that eros was praised for its powerful creative force, not only in aesthetic production but also as a "divinely inspired stimulus toward spiritual development" (AE, 61). As such, erotic desire was, as in Asian cultures, an important means of cultivating certain character traits such as self-knowledge, self-mastery, and self-control. But unlike the Asian *ars erotica*, which cultivated these virtues *in* and *through* practices of lovemaking, in the Greco-Roman art(s) of living – from Plato and Aristotle to most of the Hellenistic schools, including Stoicism and Epicureanism, and up to most Neoplatonic philosophers – these were rather shaped through the spiritualization of sexual desire and the strict limitation of – if not full abstention from – its satisfaction. With few exceptions, sensual pleasures and sexual practices have been consistently seen in classical Western philosophical thought as opposed to rationality and virtue, and as conflicting with the pursuit of truth and happiness, such that, unlike the Indian *ars erotica*, Western ancient arts of living could not solve this conflict except by suppressing (or sublimating) sexual desire and its physical manifestations – a tendency that would be reinforced throughout Christianity (and beyond) with its condemnation of "unholy desires and pleasures of the flesh" (AE, 121) and its ideal of celibate or virginal chastity, eventually expressed in forms of asexual divine eroticism.

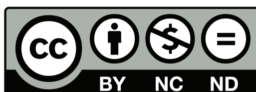
This suggests that the relations between Western classical *ars erotica* and *ars vivendi* are much looser, sparser, and tenser than those found in Asian cultures. On the one hand, Western arts of living are too suspicious of sensual pleasures and too hostile to sexual practices to constitute an *ars erotica* in any comparable way, if by this we mean a set of "skilled methods or styles of lovemaking that are thereby elevated with the honorific term 'art'" (AE, 1). On the other hand, the Western *ars erotica* seems to have no significant role to play among the spiritual exercises and practices of self-cultivation that compose the West's art of living (whether in their philosophical or their religious manifestations), except in the form of techniques of self-restraint devoted to spiritual growth and uplifting through the control, repression, and sublimation of the very source and material of an *ars erotica.*

While this sustained Western spiritualization of eros and beauty confirms Shusterman's claim that there is no essential contradiction between *askesis* and aesthetics (AE, 280), it also casts doubt on the book's concluding "speculative hypothesis" (AE, 391 ss.), according to which Kant's definition of aesthetics as distanced

5) See especially Michael Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, Vintage Books, 1990), 21 ss., and Michael Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 1: Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 254, 261, 270 ss.

and disinterested contemplation marks a turning point in the history of Western philosophy through its unprecedented decoupling of eros from beauty. Even though the book compellingly shows that Western philosophical discourse did consistently establish a close relationship between beauty and eros, its illuminative comparative analysis between Western and Eastern *ars erotica* also makes clear that, unlike Asian cultures, Western thought has always had a tendency to decouple physical from spiritual beauty, love, and desire, unequivocally praising the latter while denigrating the former. Even if "both forms shared a common desire for beauty," erotic love was fundamentally valued only insofar as "there could be an ennobling movement from the carnal to the more spiritual and virtuous love of souls" (AE, 392). This focus on spiritual beauty as the only worthy object and source of noble desire, along with the condemnation of sensual pleasure symbolically expressed in Plato's "chaste gazing" (AE, 61), seems to have paved the way for – rather than standing in sharp opposition to – the modern decoupling of beauty from erotic love and desire, which seems in fact to emerge as one of the multiple manifestations of what Nietzsche called the "ascetic ideal" (with its "irritation and rancor against sensuality")[6] which has dominated our culture for more than twenty-five centuries. Be that as it may, this alternative and equally tentative hypothesis only confirms and reinforces Shusterman's intuition that augmenting our openness to and knowledge of other cultures would fruitfully enhance, enrich, and refine both our art of loving and our art of living. Insofar as it can be fruitfully used to broaden, enrich, and complement the already vast array of Western spiritual exercises and technologies of the self, Shusterman's insightful illustration of the way eroticism and lovemaking practices can equally work as important means of *askesis* and self-cultivation is perhaps one of the book's most beautiful contributions to an art of living (and loving) today.

6) Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 76.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