Life from Death

Maya Cabot

Senior Seminar
Thesis Final Draft
24 April 2010

Comparative Literature
"Among the various branches of natural knowledge, that of ANATOMY may be considered as the most curious, as well as the most interesting, with respect to its principal object, Man."¹
—G. Arnaud

"If we can direct the lights we derive from such exalted speculations [as those on Beauty and the Sublime], upon the humbler field of the imagination, whilst we investigate the springs and trace the courses of our passions, [...] we may reflect back on the severer sciences some of the graces and eleganties of taste, without which the greatest proficiency in those sciences will always have the appearance of something illiberal."²—Edmund Burke

In eighteenth-century Britain, dissection and anatomy were inserted into an aesthetic discourse of the sublime. This was not a process orchestrated by any individual or group but rather a natural consequence of the characteristics of anatomy and dissection as well as contemporary representations of science. A growing perception of experimental science as a route to understanding the secrets of the body, and by extension the secrets of human life, coincided with a philosophical and aesthetic discourse surrounding the human capacity for wonder, awe and fancy. At the center of this aesthetic discourse was the sublime, an emotional response said to supercede all other emotional responses and reason. By representing anatomy as sublime, contemporary texts tended to bypass debate about the ethics of destroying the bodies of the dead to pursue a scientific understanding of life. The use of an aesthetic discourse to replace debate about the aesthetics of dissection did not end the expression of concerns about dissection and dissent regarding the ethics of anatomical study. Concerns about

dissection largely revolved around the status of corpses, their acquisition and commodification. Several specific objections to dissection of humans included the religious argument that the preserved body was necessary for resurrection, the difficulty of determining whether supposed corpses were actually dead, and the conversion of corpses into commodities.

Legal and religious codes laid out principles for dealing with the dead based on Christian belief and Roman law; the extensive eighteenth-century corpus of legal and religious writing surrounding the treatment of the dead points to the valuation of the body after death as a complex matter. In *Principles of Penal Law* by William Eden, First Baron Auckland, there exists a section devoted to the specific rights to burial or rites of burial for criminals, significant since the primary legal source for dissection subjects was the bodies of hung criminals. Eden suggests that removal of the dead from the public eye is important because “May it not be doubted, whether a forced familiarity with [displays of the executed] can have any other effect, than to blunt the sentiments, and destroy the benevolent prejudices of the people.” According to Eden, spectacles of death inure the public to violence and death. On the other hand, the preservation of the body after death was a privilege, not a universal right. As Eden writes, “To the dissection of criminals it is impossible to offer any objection.” Here Eden endorses the enactment of violence upon the body as an academic exercise or spectacle. In this passage, he attempts to end any ethical debate over the dismemberment of criminal bodies by asserting the impossibility of dissent. He does not address any objections directly even though he himself posits earlier that displays of death and violence have the effect of numbing the senses. Eden operates on the assumption that established law and practices are

---

4 Ibid.
unquestionable. The law is an established codification of morals rather than an evolving set of strictures subject to shifting morals or ethical debate.

A similar rhetorical strategy of posing an unquestioned, and potentially unquestionable, strong statement appears in a contemporary speech entitled “A Discourse on the Importance of Anatomy” given by an eminent French surgeon, G. Arnaud, to the Amphitheatre of Surgeons in London. Rather than address any objections to the practice of dissection directly, he makes wide-reaching claims about the utility, beauty, intellectual depth and essential nobility of the study of practical anatomy. He begins his lecture by stating, “Among the various branches of natural knowledge, that of ANATOMY may be considered as the most curious, as well as the most interesting.” While Arnaud does not rule out objection to the centrality of anatomy as a field of study as strongly as William Eden rules out dissent regarding the dissection of criminals, Arnaud makes a broad claim, stated in the language of science. He asserts the “curious” and “interesting” nature of the investigation of the human body immediately, but delays any mention of the benefits of such studies beyond satisfying the intellectual cravings of the scientific community. He takes the broadest ideology of pure science, the acquisition of knowledge in the pursuit of truth, as the foundation of his argument without question. Like Eden, Arnaud is constrained by the ideological and historical frameworks in which he writes and thinks.

Anatomists and their students, absorbed in scientific progress and education, employed a variety of illegal means to acquire subjects for dissection. Not only did the scientific discourse lack the capability to deal with the religious or moral consequences of destroying corpses, but because of competition on the part of anatomists to produce more research and

---

5 Further analysis of Arnaud’s speech will be provided later.
6 Arnaud 1.
train more students, there was a strong incentive for anatomists and their students to violate the religious and social codes surrounding the dead.\textsuperscript{7} When anatomists could not acquire subjects through legal means, they stole them or purchased them from grave robbers. Corpses became commodities. Contemporary literary sources suggest this change occurred between 1675 and 1725, largely as the result of an increased demand for corpses on the part of medical schools and collectors of medical specimens.\textsuperscript{8} The commodification of the corpse was seen as a moral scourge causing practices such as grave robbery, the purchase of criminals’ bodies from them before execution and, in extreme cases, the murder of the itinerant poor to obtain corpses to sell.\textsuperscript{9} The questionable methods by which anatomists obtained bodies largely affected the lower classes since most dissected corpses were either hanged criminals or bodies robbed from graves. The bodies of the wealthy were rarely robbed from graves; only the wealthy and some of the middle class could afford protective luxuries such as double or triple coffins and a private burial ground.\textsuperscript{10} Private burial grounds came with protections such as paid guards and traps to catch intruders.\textsuperscript{11}

In spite of the practical and moral hazards of acquiring subjects for anatomical enquiry, there was no shortage of grave robbers in the eighteenth century. Greed triumphed over legal and moral liability when average adult corpses were worth between fourteen and twenty guineas.\textsuperscript{12,13} Medical students desperate for a corpse upon which to practice either robbed

\textsuperscript{7} The popularity of and thus the fees collected by professors of anatomy depended on their ability to provide subjects for dissection to their students.
\textsuperscript{9} Richardson 57.
\textsuperscript{10} Richardson 80.
\textsuperscript{11} Richardson 81.
\textsuperscript{12} Richardson 57.
\textsuperscript{13} 14 guineas was the price for one print of Hogarth’s “Harlots Progress” or approximately a servant’s wage for a year in 1785, the era of the prices for corpses given above. Price given comes from
graves themselves or accompanied professional thieves, presumably to have their pick of the finest specimens. Professors of medicine and anatomists themselves were complicit in these practices and asked few questions about the origins of the bodies and became the targets of criticism for failing to stop the trade in corpses and the crime of "violation of sepulchers" by refusing to buy them. It took until the early nineteen hundreds for the problem of grave robbery to warrant hearings on the subject; for much of the eighteenth century the law and the academic world turned a blind eye to the anatomists' practices.

The fear of grave robbery was based in both an emotional response to the loss of the remains of a loved one and the Christian belief in the soul's need for the body after death. A popular trend of religious thought in the eighteenth century was that the body became heavenly immediately after death and reverted to the state of perfection it enjoyed before the fall of Man. The belief in the need for the body after death raises the question of how a dismembered body can resume such perfection. The most literal interpretation of the promise of restoration of perfection would suggest it couldn't; without all the components of the body intact and in a single location, the body will not be complete and available for restoration. The more conventional view was that soul would need a complete body only on the Day of Judgment. Some eighteenth-century views held that there was a rematerialization of the body on the Day of Judgment, while others believed in direct resurrection from the grave on earth.

---

14 Richardson 54
15 The robbing of graves made for strange class alliances and conflicts. On one hand, the commodification of corpses that lead to the robbery of the graves of the lower and middle classes was largely the result of the demand on the part of academics, who were in the upper class. On the other hand, those who stood to profit financially from this commodification were often from the lower classes.
16 Rosner 27
17 Richardson 53, 57, 68.
and immediate transport to heaven.\textsuperscript{19} The destruction of the body after death was probably only seen as a serious breach of Christian behavior by those who believed in the direct resurrection of the body rather than a rematerialization of the body in heaven.\textsuperscript{20} At the heart of both the belief that the soul needs the body in heaven and the belief that the soul needs the body on the Day of Judgment is the placement of spiritual significance onto the dead body.

The ideological orientation of experimental science and reason, and by extension the language of science, precluded any serious debate within the scientific community over the morality of destroying a corpse.

Although the methods by which anatomists acquired subjects angered many, animus towards anatomists existed in the context of public distrust of surgeons and physicians. Physicians and surgeons, who were perceived as interested only in either money or academic fame, tainted anatomists by association.\textsuperscript{21} Depictions of physicians and surgeons as undignified, greedy and largely interested in self-promotion were common in the eighteenth century. One contemporary satirical illustration, “The Great Doctor Humbugallo Seventh Son of a Seventh Son Healer of Mankind and Philosopher Cures all Infirmities,” by Thomas Rowlandson, depicts a physician acting as a peddler of patent medicine hawking his wares in a clownishly large hat, accompanied by a jester.\textsuperscript{22} Physicians had not always possessed a wide reputation for quackery and predatory behaviors though. The College of Physicians in England obtained their royal charter in 1518,\textsuperscript{23} cementing the propriety of the profession. During the early period of the medical academy in England, there was some satire of physicians, but

\textsuperscript{20} Ironically, grave robbers were referred to as “resurrectionists,” although according to common religious views, they were preventing the resurrection of the body.
\textsuperscript{21} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 132, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Rowlandson, \textit{The Great Doctor Humbugallo} in Roy Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic: Disease, Death and Doctors in Britain, 1650-1900} (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) 100.
\textsuperscript{23} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 22.
writers and humorists satirized physicians as overly book learned rather than as outright quacks.\textsuperscript{24} According to some political factions the Royal College had become corrupted and power consolidated in the hands of a few members by the mid-17\textsuperscript{th} century, was closed to new thought and hanging on to a monopoly over the medical establishment at all costs.\textsuperscript{25} Eventually, in 1704, the courts ruled that the Royal College of Physicians had no monopoly on licensing medical practitioners. With intensification of competition in the medical field came commercialism. Physicians became absorbed in self-promotion to gain patients,\textsuperscript{26} resulting in antics like those seen in the Rowlandson print. The public saw anatomists, like physicians, as primarily interested in reputation and profit. The physicians were interested in wealthy patrons, not patients from the lower and middle classes who had little to contribute to physicians’ wealth or prestige.\textsuperscript{27,28}

The association of anatomy with the sublime as seen in contemporary works, would have largely been relevant to or influenced the attitudes of upper classes, explaining much of the indifference towards reform on the part of the legal and academic communities. I do not mean to imply that the relationship between the sublime and anatomy was one intentionally engineered to influence the views of a certain segment of the population, merely that an exercise of the rhetoric associated with the sublime was more familiar and appealing to the upper classes. The argument that perceptions of the association of the aesthetic with the anatomical were class dependent is not central to the thesis that the discourse of the sublime

\textsuperscript{24} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 29.
\textsuperscript{25} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 22.
\textsuperscript{26} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 139.
\textsuperscript{27} Porter, \textit{Bodies Politic}, 144-145.
\textsuperscript{28} For an account of the way in which physicians used the poor as subjects for medical experimentations see pages 96-105

aided the development of a powerful complex of medicine and science; the class dependence
of the understanding of the sublime implies that acceptance of the association of the sublime
with anatomy was not uniform. Any apparent contemporary agreement about the necessity and
nobility of anatomical studies depends on taking the words of academic and social institutions
as monolithic. There was conflict over the establishment of the growing social and political
power of medicine and science and much of this debate was enacted through discussions of the
practice of anatomy. A resistance to aestheticized depictions of dissection can be found in
contemporary prints and writings, including William Hogarth’s print “The Reward of
Cruelty,” which will be discussed later. Works resisting the elevation of anatomy out of the
gruesome realities of the practice of dissection into the sphere of the aesthetic reveal the
connection between dissection and other violence enacted upon the body including execution
and torture.

Changing understandings of the status of the body within social, legal and scientific
structures became embedded in debate over the limits of science, quietly underpinning
discussions of anatomy and dissection. The commodification of the corpse was the result of
the demand for dissection subjects and, by extension, the recording of systematized knowledge
about the body. Demand for the corpse as object of study and the interest in a systematic
knowledge of how the body functions were inextricably linked. In the dead body were the
secrets of life, and the rules that governed the acquisition of this knowledge were embedded in
a framework of science. In an increasingly rational world, anatomy and dissection became a
locus for the recycling and displacement of affective response normally associated with
religious experience. Instead of the paradigm of life after death, anatomy relies on a
presumption that life comes from death. The study of anatomy is sublime because it is the
study of life even though it is enabled by death. Many eighteenth century texts employ images and rhetoric showing anatomy as a study of life, a sublime study that emerges from death. These texts appeal to a force beyond reason— the sublime— even as they exhibit the framework of rational study, the framework of science. As an aesthetic rather ethical mode of discourse though, the sublime acts to fill a gap in the scientific discourse for which it is unsuited, and there was subtle protest of the substitution of an aesthetic discourse for an ethical one.

The rise of the sublime to a central status in the aesthetic discourse of the eighteenth century coincided with an intense interest in anatomy. Historical coincidence was far from the only reason that the sublime became inserted in the anatomical discourse. Eighteenth-century writings about the sublime incorporated contemporary theories of power, rhetoric, reason and emotion. Because theories of the sublime covered a variety of topics, contemporary authors and intellectuals referred to them constantly. The sublime was peculiarly suited to the scientific discourse though because of its association with discovery, awe, novelty and the pursuit of truth. Discussions of the sublime did not begin in the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century conception of the sublime was a revival of an idea present Classical times. A translation of Longinus's *On the Sublime* into French by Nicolas Boileau in 1672 was a factor in the revived popularity of the Sublime as a topic in aesthetics. Following this translation, Joseph Addison wrote on this topic in *The Spectator* during the early eighteenth century and the young Edmund Burke produced his own treatise on the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, first published in 1757. Burke and

---

29 Unless otherwise specified, by "sublime" I mean an overwhelming experience of awe. In other words, I intend present the sublime as an experience or effect, not an objective attribute. Where I write "the experience of the sublime," I do so to clarify and emphasize that it is an effect, a strong emotional experience contingent on the presence of a provocation for the experience. There are a variety of component emotions and effects, the most important of which is fear, that make up the sublime.

Addison offer differing but not incompatible visions of the sublime. Burke's theory of the sublime is intensely systematized and incorporates analyses of both texts and situations in nature and human society. Burke also focuses on the sublime as an experience that is both physiological— a response to fear— and produced by the physical— that which is physically threatening, but not so near or immediate as to present an actual danger. Addison, while not in disagreement with Burke, tends to see the sublime as an experience largely internal, created in the mind, and works to untangle the relationship between the sublime and the imagination. Addison, like Longinus, also refers to the power of rhetoric to evoke the sublime.

To understand the sublime as a powerful experience evoked by rhetoric and used to overcome dissent, it is important to examine the Classical origins of the theory of the sublime. The exact attribution of On the Sublime is ambiguous, though the author was almost certainly a first century Greek philosopher. On the Sublime focuses primarily on ways of creating the sublime in speech or writing. Longinus enumerates specific rhetorical techniques, including metaphor, hyperbole, simile and polyptoton, and how they produce the sublime. The text is particularly concerned with how an orator may use the sublime to persuade the listener of a moral or political viewpoint. Longinus casts the sublime as a force that can move an argument out of the rational realm and into a space in which the sublime compels a listener or reader to a certain viewpoint. Longinus writes, “these sublime passages exert an irresistible force, and get the upper hand with every reader.” In the sense that politics or political oration involves rational debate then, the sublime bypasses the political because there is no possible resistance. On the other hand, if one considers the political to be anything that involves a struggle for or

---

shift in the balance of power,\textsuperscript{33} the sublime is the consummate political tool because it bypasses all controlled response and requires only the production of strong emotion. Since Longinus writes these particular words in reference to passages by "the greatest poets and historians,"\textsuperscript{34} one may infer the application to oration, and by extension politics.

Although Addison frequently wrote on political issues, his thoughts on the sublime are largely detached from its potential political purpose; he focuses on the sublime as it is manifested in art. In his letters for \textit{The Spectator} relating to the sublime, Addison frequently refers to the creative power of the imagination as necessary to a sublime effect.\textsuperscript{35} While Burke discusses only the most general causes of the Sublime with forays into literary examples, Addison derives the bulk of his analysis of the sublime from extensive close readings of both visual and literary examples.\textsuperscript{36} Addison also mentions Longinus and his theories explicitly, and proceeds to find them borne out in his analysis of Milton.\textsuperscript{37} Like Longinus, Addison interests himself in particular literary mechanisms of creating the sublime, including allusion,\textsuperscript{38} but he takes the view that a subject evocative of the sublime imbues any work about that subject with an air of sublimity. That is to say, the works most evocative of the sublime have subjects that are naturally productive of the sublime; rhetoric alone cannot produce the sublime. In his analysis of Milton, Addison finds that "Milton’s genius which was so great in itself... appears in [\textit{Paradise Lost}] every way equal to his subject, which was the most sublime

\textsuperscript{33} The latter definition is the one I will be using.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Addison wrote many letters for \textit{The Spectator} regarding the sublime and applying aesthetic theory to literary text. He also wrote extensively on the imagination. I provide this brief summary of Addison only to show that there was a diversity of views on the sublime in the eighteenth century, but there were often consistencies as well.
\textsuperscript{36} Direct responses to Addison's views on the sublime are present in \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry}, but it is beyond the scope of this work to examine them.
\textsuperscript{38} Addison, "Letter 339," 131.
that could enter into the thoughts of a poet.”\textsuperscript{39} Addison is interested in both the nature of the subject itself and how it is portrayed as potential factors in the production of the sublime. According to Addison, it takes a particular kind of genius to create a work that evokes the sublime and, like Burke, he sees this sort of genius in Milton and Homer. The sublime as produced by literature is the result of appropriate rhetoric, sublime subject matter, and authorial genius in combination.

Apart from the aesthetic and responsive qualities of the sublime as seen by Addison and Burke, the term “sublime” also had the everyday colloquial meaning of elevated or noble. This seemingly less complex meaning must certainly be considered when evaluating the use of “sublime in eighteenth century documents. To define the contemporary usage, one may refer to Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, which gives the second definition of sublime as “high in excellence, exalted by nature,” and the fourth as “elevated by joy.”\textsuperscript{40} Nowhere is there anything in Johnson’s definition of “sublime” to connect terror with the sublime as seen in Burke’s work. The second and fourth definitions as seen in Johnson’s entry, as well as other contemporary definitions, seem to suggest a quasi-celestial state associated with beauty. The contemporary colloquial use was different then from the term as used in a specifically aesthetic situation. Both the colloquial and aesthetic definitions of the word contain the idea of elevation, although the elevation comes from very different sources in both cases.

The aesthetic definition of the sublime shows an affective state far more complex than that of mere elevation or joy. According to Burke, the sublime “that sort of delightful horror,


which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. The sublime, while a result of fear modified by other effects, is not an unpleasant sensation. There is no motivation to resist the power of the sublime since it is has a "delightful" aspect. Elsewhere in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke characterizes the Sublime as "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" and states that during a experience of the sublime "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it." As an emotion or effect then, the sublime has the ability to supercede all other considerations. The state Burke describes seems to be nearly mystical as the mind is entirely focused, "filled with its object," and undistracted by any other emotion.

According to Burke, the fundamental component emotion of the sublime is a physiological and imaginative response founded fear or terror. He writes, "Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime." Regardless of other criteria for the production of the sublime, fear must be present. Terror derives its original power because it is the fearful anticipation of injury and thus "operates in a manner that resembles actual pain," which is the key imaginative aspect of the sublime. Fear occurs when one experiences something resembling actual injury or death. For the resemblance of fear of pain to actual pain to be fully realized and evoke the experience of the sublime, the imagination must make the perceived threat of injury or death seem real. The experience of the sublime is composed terror as an involuntary physiological response converted by the imagination into a powerful aesthetic experience.

---

41 Burke 67.
42 Burke 36.
43 Burke 53.
44 Burke 54.
45 Burke 53.
While terror the key element of the sublime experience, there are other effects that modulate terror so that it becomes sublime. Burke enumerates attributes of an object likely to produce the sublime rather than a series of rhetorical moves on the part of an author. An author may emphasize aspects of an object to evoke the effects of the sublime in the reader, but the object must first possess some potential to be sublime. Burke lists numerous components of the sublime; the ones most relevant to the discussion of the texts at hand include “Terror, Obscurity, Power, Privation, Infinity, Succession and Uniformity, Light, Suddenness,” and “Feeling Pain.” For the purposes of my analysis, one of the most important of these causes is “obscurity.” Burke believes that obscurity helps form the sublime by preventing the observer from knowing or recognizing an object, and hence the source of the threat. Burke writes, “When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it a great deal of the apprehension vanishes.” He does not detail the exact limits of visibility that may allow us to comprehend an object; Burke instead applies the criterion of familiarity. The familiar cannot produce the necessary apprehension to elicit an experience of the sublime. Burke recognizes that the production of an air of mystery leading to the sublime is a social tool, and cites the ways in which “despotic governments” hide their leaders and pagans hide idols in “the barbarous temples of the Americas.” The unknown is more able to affect fear than the familiar because a lack of information about an object provokes the imagination, not the rational mind, and thus has a greater tendency to evoke the sublime. The imagination generates a much larger threat or sense of danger than may actually be present, provoking

46 Burke 8-9
47 Ibid.
48 Burke 55.
intense fear without the existence of any immediate threat to the person in the presence of the awful and obscure object.

Fear, the force at the heart of the sublime, is an apprehension of pain and death, and that which is powerful may inflict pain and death.\textsuperscript{49} Power is thus, rather indirectly, a cause of the sublime. As in the case of obscurity, Burke uses the examples of kings and God as forces capable of evoking the sublime. After showing the ways in which the power of nature may inspire the sublime, Burke cites the phrase “dread majesty;”\textsuperscript{50} the common turn of phrase is an indication of the way in which the connection between fear and power is engrained in our consciousness and manifested in our language. The ultimate fear-inspiring, source of the sublime is not the King but God. Where rulers can affect this power, Burke traces it back to the divine, to God’s absolute powers of destruction and creation. According to Burke, perceiving the infinite power of God obliterates our sense of self and our importance in the world. The literary example Burke uses in this case is from the Bible and shows the effect of perceiving God’s creative forces; Burke cites David’s writing, “fearfully and wonderfully am I made.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{52} The citation Burke chooses emphasizes the abilities of God’s creative, rather than destructive, powers to produce the sublime and seems to suggest a reading of the sublime as predicated on the wonders of creation, particularly of the human body.

The body is a primary source of awe and the location of the experience of awe. Burke engages with the connection between scientific investigations, like those into the body, and the experience of the sublime in the body as a way of explaining one purpose or use of his study. As David wonders at his body and creation, Burke hopes that his own study will reflect some

\textsuperscript{49} Burke 58.
\textsuperscript{50} Burke 62.
\textsuperscript{51} Psalms 139:14 (misquote) in Burke, 63.
\textsuperscript{52} Although Burke misquotes here, the difference is not substantive. The King James Version reads, “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.”
awe from the philosophical and aesthetic discourse back to the physical sciences. At the end of
his preface, composed for the second edition, Burke writes,

If we can direct the lights we derive from such exalted speculations, upon the
humbler field of the imagination, whilst we investigate the springs and trace the
courses of our passions, we may not only communicate to the taste a sort of
philosophical solidity, but we may reflect back on the severer sciences some of the
graces and elegancies of taste, without which the greatest proficiency in those
sciences will have the appearance of something illiberal.53

Burke sees his enquiry into the nature of the imaginative qualities of the human mind as
“exalted,” or in a sense sublime in and of itself. By applying “philosophical solidity,” a logical
approach, to his elevated study, Burke hopes that his enquiries into the obscure regions of
human emotion will be treated with seriousness. At the same time, he wishes to bring “the
graces and elegancies of taste” back onto the physical sciences and their practitioners. While
one might see these “graces” as something subjective, Burke is in favor of objective standards
of taste that cannot be referred to just a greater sense of subjectivity. What Burke wants for
physical scientists is wonder. Without a sense of wonder arising from an appreciation for grace
and elegance, accomplishment in the physical sciences “will have the appearance of something
illiberal.” Based on a contemporary definition of liberal as “not low in mind” and “becoming
[to] a gentleman,”54 one may deduce that Burke fears that science will take knowledge out of
the sphere of an elevated pursuit of truth, and into a trap of low-mindedness, seeking only
materialism or physical facts. Without liberal qualities, and qualities associated with the
Liberal Arts, science lacks imagination, grace, elegance and the ability to find wonder in the
pursuit of knowledge both inside the body and in the world around us.

53 Burke 6.
Eighteenth Century Collections Online) http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/.
When we attend to all the life and life forms that are visible and invisible in the world around us, we venture into the experience of the sublime. In his chapter entitled “Vastness,” Burke writes, “When we attend to the infinite divisibility of matter, when we pursue animal life into these excessively small, yet organized beings, [...] we become amazed and confounded at the wonders of minuteness.” In this explanation of the wonder of the microscopic world, Burke presents an ideal union of science and the sublime. Through the pursuit of information about “the divisibility of matter,” a highly scientific and physical topic, the learner becomes “amazed and confounded.” By noting the proper or expected reaction as amazement, Burke tacitly marks those who do not experience this reaction with the fault of being illiberal, mentioned in the preface. The impetus for scientific work becomes the accumulation of knowledge as a means to prestige or financial success. Stripped of its emotional and creative elements, scientific investigation becomes tied primarily to the production of political power rather than the powerful experience of the sublime.

In the works of both Longinus and Burke, power is both an essential component and attribute of the sublime. According to both, the experience of the sublime is powerful enough to supercede all emotion and reason. While Longinus contextualizes the sublime in terms of politics or rhetoric, Burke finds the sublime primarily in terms of art, literature and the natural world. For Burke, the sublime is connected to an affective response of awe or wonder, sometimes in response to power. Longinus sees the sublime as exercising power by taking an argument out of the rational realm into the affective realm. In each, the relationship between the sublime, affect, reason and power is complex. Rather than try to untangle and reconcile

55 Burke 66.
56 In Burke, power is defined by the ability to inflict pain or death. In Longinus, power is the ability to perform political persuasion. The general definition of power I am employing encompasses both of these and is the possibility of performance.
these relationships in the works of Longinus and Burke, I will apply the theories of Michel Foucault who offers knowledge, sublime knowledge for the purposes of my work, as both the creator and consequence of power. Knowledge may be affective or rational, either way, it has the ability to produce power and be produced by power.

Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* helps to explain how aesthetics became entangled in politics by providing an explanation for the evolving relationship between scientific knowledge and state power. According to Foucault, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a shift in the operation of the judicial system; the state began imposing order by controlling the body and remolding the soul rather than imprinting the body through torture and execution.\(^{57}\) The emphasis of the judicial system became supervision and rehabilitation, or reconditioning. Control over the body and mind required knowledge about the body and mind. The outgrowth of power and control from scientific knowledge led to the development of what Foucault calls the “scientifico-juridical complex.”\(^{58}\) The state exercised power through the accumulation and consolidation of knowledge about the body and mind. According to Foucault, “power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”\(^{59}\) If knowledge is always associated with power, the production of knowledge must always be associated with the dynamics of power. The mutual dependence of knowledge and power relationship is

\(^{57}\) Foucault is mostly interested in the French situation, but is crucial of my reading because he develops the idea of the power of knowledge derived from the body and the effects of exercised knowledge of the body. While Foucault frequently refers to “the state,” my argument is not primarily about the exercise or accumulation of power in a governmental structure. There was certainly an alliance of nobility with the academy in England, granting the academy political power, but I am more interested in the knowledge-power of science as accumulated in the academy itself.


\(^{59}\) Foucault 27.
necessary, not optional, and on Foucault's view, there is no escape from the relations of power that accompany research, the pursuit of truth, or just the pursuit of knowledge. The interaction between power and knowledge is cyclical in addition to being mandatory; power produces knowledge, and knowledge facilitates the circulation of power.

To extend Foucault's ideas, scientific research must also be political, in the sense that it is subject to concerns of the state and becomes attached to struggles of power. The politicization of scientific knowledge is more apparent in *Discipline and Punish* than the politicization of philosophical knowledge, including aesthetics. There is nothing in *Discipline and Punish*, however, to preclude the assertion that philosophical knowledge or aesthetics are both subject to politics and power and generative of their own political spheres. In the close readings that follow, I will examine the politicization of the aesthetic discourse of the sublime as used in relation to the study of anatomy. The argument that aesthetics is fundamentally political is not new, even in relation to the eighteenth-century situation, however the particular intersections and interactions of aesthetics, anatomy and politics have not been widely examined in recent scholarship. By examining a diverse group of texts, I wish to trace allusion to the sublime according to the definitions of Burke and Addison as explained in the preceding pages within the anatomical discourse.

Eighteenth-century texts offer a conflicted landscape of attitudes toward the growing field of anatomy. What they have in common is a tendency towards allusion to the discourse of the sublime. Printed depictions of anatomy and dissection, both the illustrations and type, depict anatomy and dissection in a variety of modes, as an exploration of life, an expression of

---

60 For an brilliant explanation of the politics of aesthetics in the eighteenth century see Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). In his chapter on the eighteenth century Eagleton concludes from an Adam Smith passage, “The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart. If it is inexplicable, beyond all rational debate, it is because our fellowship with others is likewise beyond all reason” (38).
love for God’s creation, an opportunity to understand disease, a way for criminals to make themselves useful after death, and a kind of post-mortem torture. While these depictions may seem disparate, they all have allusions to the sublime or elements tending to evoke the sublime at their core. The conflicts and intersections of the presentation of anatomy, dissection, the body and the sublime in all these texts may provide some conclusions about anatomy and the aesthetic in the eighteenth century.

To build a connection between the sublime and the opening of the body, I will discuss the births of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*. In both birth scenes, bodies are torn asunder to generate new life, literalizing the idea that a violent opening of the flesh, a kind of dissection, can generate life. The emphasis on anatomical study as generative of a vital connection to life or an experience of the sublime is also present in G. Arnaud’s speech, “A Discourse on the Importance of Anatomy.” Arnaud also focuses largely on theories, goals and abstract qualities of anatomy, rather than the practice of dissection. William Hogarth, on the other hand, exposes the process of dissection as gruesome and fundamentally reliant on death in “The Reward of Cruelty.” Hogarth presents an unaestheticized view of the *practice* of anatomy. The anatomy texts of John and Charles Bell attempt to unite anatomical theory and practice in a textual form supplemented by plates that are both physiologically accurate and aesthetically pleasing. Although the Bell texts unite the theoretical and practical for the student of anatomy, they do not tie what is learned about the body in death through dissection to knowledge of the body in life. Two main threads run through all of the texts I will present. First, the evocation of the sublime in many texts served as a way of elevating anatomy and the practice of dissection as well as avoiding any ethical discussion of the problematic aspects of dissection. Second, texts
offer anatomy as the study of life, rather than death, to varying degrees. When anatomy is tied to death, there is resistance, not always intentional, to an understanding of anatomy as sublime.

In *Paradise Lost*, the births of Sin from Satan and of Death from Sin require the rupture of the bodies that are not human and thus beyond life or death. The birth of Sin and Death are also instances of the sublime according to Burke’s criteria. As Satan goes on a winged tour of his territories, he encounters his cast-off daughter, Sin. She rebukes Satan for his absence and reminds him that she is his daughter, grown from his head, and the mother of his son. Both her birth and the birth of her son, Death, are unnatural. Sin’s birth though, is marked by fear followed by love. Sin recounts, “back they recoiled afraid/ At first, and called me Sin, and for a sign/ Portentous held me; but familiar grown, I pleased, and with attractive graces won/ The most averse.” The initial reaction of the conspiring heavenly host to the emergence of sin from the head of Satan is fear. Sin has broken forth from his head in a burst of flame, a foreshadowing of what the environs of hell will be like. This disgusting, yet somehow miraculous birth, in a never changing world is terrifying. Yet the product of this grotesque event is beautiful, at least according to her own assessment. Sin wins the admiration of the heavenly host with this beauty, but only after she has become familiar and lost her power to produce the sublime. Her birth is a sublime event; it is unprecedented and unfamiliar, terrifying and is connected with pain, the pain of Satan’s head splitting. Sin’s birth is a revelation that comes from the splitting of a body. She is a physical manifestation of Satan’s desire for free action and thought and his “bold conspiracy” to acquire these. In the same

---

61 Admittedly, the application of Burke to Milton is somewhat internally referential since Burke frequently cites Milton’s work to provide examples of the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry*.


63 Milton, II.751
manner that dissection, a more methodical splitting of the body, produces scientific knowledge, the sublime birth of Sin produces moral knowledge. While the practice of dissection in the scientific sense is not at issue.

The birth of Death from Sin is far more horrifying than that of Sin from Satan and offers a more explicit picture of a body, albeit a monstrous one, turned inside out. The larger meaning of the birth of Death and whether such an act is creative or destructive, also contributes a novel and complex perspective on the nature of opening bodies. The violent birth of Death is both horrific and transformative, “At last this odious offspring whom thou seest/ Thine own begotten, breaking violent way/ Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain/ Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew/ Transformed.” Death thus breaks into the realms of Hell leaving the body of Sin forever changed and exposed as he introduces mortality to the world. The “life” that Sin gives birth to is actually destruction, Death. On one hand, that Death results from the tearing of Sin’s stomach challenges the idea that life, or knowledge of life, comes from opening the body. On the other hand, in a binary mode, Death is necessary to life, and thus the exploration of life, so the opening of the body of Sin does promote the life-knowledge that dissection should produce.

In an eighteenth century speech, G. Arnaud explicitly exploits the idea that the opening of the body is a key to obtaining knowledge as a way of justifying the practice of dissection. Arnaud, visiting surgeon at the Amphitheatre of Surgeons in London in 1767, seeks in his speech to tie anatomy to nobility, in the social and abstract sense, and the pursuit of

---

64 Here, I define dissection as opening a body to reveal information or knowledge.
65 Milton, II.781-85.
higher truth. He initially mentions only the study of anatomy, never the act of dissection. He attempts later in his speech though to show dissection to be necessary in the service of the pursuit of anatomical knowledge. One of Arnaud’s central arguments is that dissection creates the knowledge necessary for medical endeavors to repair the live body. Through studying the dead, the life of man may be prolonged:

By this series of knowledge [of anatomy], it is therefore that the Surgeon lays just claim to superiority. Nay, dare to say, what Artist will contend in useful knowledge with the surgeon. I mean a Surgeon worthy of the title, whose skill can repair the disasters which befall the fabric that boasts an Almighty architect.

Arnaud clearly addresses the utility of anatomy in this passage. Because of the “useful knowledge he possesses, the surgeon can claim superiority over others who seek to understand the human body, such as artists. A scientific understanding of the body, which comes from a knowledge of the interior of the body arrived at through dissection, surpasses the qualitative and imaginative understanding of the body contained in the work of an artist. The knowledge of the body as something that may be repaired, something mechanistic, becomes superior to a more subjective knowledge of the body as a whole entity, at least in the sense of utility. What Arnaud does not address is the other kinds of “useful” knowledge, unrelated to a materialist understanding of the body. Along with all non-materialist discourses, Arnaud closes off ethical considerations of the body.

66 G. Arnaud was a visiting surgeon from the Royal Academy of Surgery in Paris. Although he is French, his speech was given to an English audience, in an English context in English. It is important to note that the French and English situations differed with regard to public perception of anatomists and dissection. Because of the overall context of the speech, and subsequent release by a London publisher as a bilingual pamphlet, I am assuming that he is speaking primarily with regard to an English, not French, situation.

67 Arnaud, 11.

68 Arnaud seems to suggest Surgeons are the repairmen of God’s creation. They do not alter the human frame, merely fix “the disasters which befall the fabric” of man. While they do not meddle with creation, Arnaud raises them to a God-like status by claiming that they can fix his creation, which must be a form of recreation even if it follows the original form. In using this rhetoric, Arnaud indirectly addresses the perception that surgeons butcher the body and in doing so destroy God’s creation.
To assert the primacy of anatomy, Arnaud relies on allusion to the sublime. The foundation of Arnaud’s argument lies in the essential nobility of anatomical practice, and by extension in the colloquial definition of the sublime. He refers to the highest social form of nobility, royalty, to promote anatomical study. He says, “Some Princes and even Princesses of Royal Blood were sensible that the knowing of our own frame, is preferable to many other kinds of learning, perhaps more sublime, but certainly not so necessary.” His references to both the titles of the nobility involved in anatomical studies, “Princes and Princesses,” and their royalty, “Royal Blood,” seems redundant. It serves, however, to emphasize the inherent attraction of anatomy for the ultimate gentlemen and gentlewomen – royalty. Arnaud uses this to justify the latter part of the sentence indicating that anatomy is “preferable to many other kinds of learning.” If it were not preferable, the argument goes, why would the most noble, and hence most elevated minds, choose to pursue it? In addition to claiming that anatomy is a superior kind of study in a general sense, Arnaud makes the specific claim that it is “perhaps more sublime.” He modifies this claim with “but not necessarily so,” but even this does not serve as a negation of his initial claim about the aesthetic and elevated nature of the anatomy. He is making a rhetorical negotiation; Arnaud makes a strong claim, anatomy is “preferable” and “more sublime” but then anticipates objections and moves away from his privileging of anatomy by admitting it is not a core area of study. The presence of these rhetorical strategies in the text connects it to Longinus’ definition of the sublime. He is using reference to abstract qualities of nobility and elevation to escape a discourse of the ethics of anatomical practice. Arnaud provides a logical grounding for these claims, references to Royal practitioners, but the claims themselves appeal to feelings about anatomy and present a poetical picture; he only

---

69 Arnaud 1.
discusses the utility of anatomy in the second half of the speech, once he has laid a foundation of emotional response.

Before Arnaud turns to anatomy's concrete benefits, he moves from a discussion of anatomy's noble status based on the social elevation of its practitioners, to an even more abstract argument about anatomy as the pure pursuit of truth. Arnaud argues that the knife of the anatomist is the weapon of truth; in doing so he transforms his argument for anatomy wholly into an argument for dissection. He says, “It by the power of ANATOMY, that the Surgeon surpasses many philosophers, whilst armed with his dissecting knife, truth’s best discoverer, he can with ease over turn [sic] their hypotheses, and confound their sophisms.”

This sentence links the act of discovering inextricably with the “dissecting knife.” Without dissection to support it, anatomy cannot fully engage in the pursuit of truth because it lacks “truth’s best discoverer.” This is the first time in the speech Arnaud uses the word “dissection” in any of its forms. He cannot speak of the production of truth within the field of anatomy without using it though, because dissection is the means by which anatomists explore the frontier of the human body. To value dissection is to value an experimental approach that will “over turn” the claims of sophist natural philosophers. Arnaud now argues both within the Liberal Arts discourse, where the investigation of truth is the highest objective of study, and within an experimentalist discourse, where the observation and testing of natural phenomena, particularly in unknown spaces, to acquire truth is the highest ideal. In claiming dissection as a means to truths about the obscure internal worlds of the body, Arnaud connects it with one of the components of the sublime.

---

70 Arnaud 7.
71 Unknown spaces include the heavens, the “world” of microbes and anything else not normally visible to the naked eye.
Finally, Arnaud examines the practical benefits of anatomical studies and concludes that anatomy has wide-ranging consequences beyond medicine. The physical sciences, according to Arnaud, would have progressed faster had only their practitioners studied anatomy. All “truly ingenious [mechanical] contrivances” can be found within the body. The body constitutes the ideal experiment, the place where important principles of physics and mechanics can be reserved. In making this practical argument, Arnaud equates the body to a machine. At the same time, he suggests that the body is a microcosm of all nature, a map of all life. There is tension between Arnaud's materialist view of the body and his presentation of the body as an almost holy representation of all creation as he claims that the intricacies of the body prove the power of God as a creator.

The very complexity of the body and its status as a microcosm of nature places anatomy at the center of many academic disciplines. According to Arnaud, among other disciplines, art owes a great debt to anatomy because artists may use anatomical knowledge to create more realistic works. The artist without anatomical knowledge, according to Arnaud, is a failure. He says, “It is by ANATOMY, that the surgeon challenges the first rank among artists. It is to him that the Painter and Sculptor have recourse to learn the situations, actions and proportions of the muscles, varying with the different postures and different movements of the Body.” Arnaud portrays a relationship of dependency, in which artists must rely on surgeons for the information to practice their craft. As he does earlier in the text, he also privileges anatomy above other disciplines. The text emphasizes this as “ANATOMY” screams in all capitals from the page and “Painter and Sculptor” pass quietly with a single capital letter. In this passage, Arnaud makes the supremacy of anatomy relative to art explicit,

72 Arnaud 9.
73 Ibid.
saying that one who studies anatomy, “the surgeon,” is an even greater artist, a greater observer of life, than painters or sculptors. What Arnaud fails to recognize though, is that anatomists need artists to record their studies, their experiments and turn them into sublime objects of art.

The symbiotic relationship that existed between the artist and anatomist goes some way towards explaining the aestheticization of anatomy and its introduction into the discourse of the sublime. While anatomists lectured at the Royal Academy, giving lessons in anatomy to aid the students in figure drawing, the artists aestheticized the surgeons’ discoveries, using aesthetic principles and popular techniques of the day. Artists who worked to document and aestheticize the knowledge collected by the anatomists used effects evocative of the sublime in their work, further associating the Sublime with anatomy. A work by Petrus Camper, a Dutchman, *On the Connexion Between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing Painting and Statuary*, was translated into English in the late eighteenth century. The work elucidates the importance of learning anatomical structure to producing great art. Camper writes in his preface, “As the Painter or Statuary, who has made the human figure the most peculiar object of his study, has doubtless given the preference to the most sublime department; so it must be confessed, that he has chosen the most difficult and comprehensive.”74,75 Whether Camper uses a word comparable to “sublime” in the original Dutch is of less interest than the English translator’s choice of the word. Given that the context is art, and the translation was published after the works of Burke and Addison on the Sublime appeared, it may be fair to read “sublime” in the aesthetic context. The text suggests that like


75 The language used here in the Camper translation is echoes the earlier speech of G. Arnaud, as we will see in the discussion of various texts and paintings, which follows.
an anatomist, the artist “studies” the human figure. His responsibility is not simply to represent a figure but to delve into how the muscles work, how to depict a realistic skeletal structure. The knowledge of the figure that only the anatomist can provide is essential to the artist.

A book that attempts to explain anatomy without illustrations would be incoherent; anatomy is a topic focused on the structures of the body, and the intensely physical nature of the topic demands a literal representation of these structures. Any practice of anatomy or dissection both requires and produces representations of the body. The presence of illustrations presents a dilemma though, for though the imagination may produce a vision of the dissected body in its live state and create a picture of the living function of the organs and muscles, illustrations may either show the body alive, show the body dead, or risk appearing both contradictory and confusing. The vitality of illustration to text was such that anatomists became artists to properly convey their findings. John Bell and Charles Bell, Scottish surgeons, their own works. John Bell took the view that a deep knowledge of art and anatomy was necessary to render anatomical illustrations that were both realistic and portrayed the body in a scientific way that guided the reader to a deeper understanding of the subject. Together, John and Charles Bell published *The Principles of Surgery*. As sole author, Charles Bell produced *A System of Dissections, Explaining the Anatomy of the Human Body, The Manner of Displaying the Parts, and their Varieties in Disease*, with some plates by John Bell. This volume was a practical guide to anatomy, intended for the students of surgery beginning their educational program, which included dissection. When looking at the prints in this text, it is important to remember that the intended audience would have engaged with the illustrations

---

76 John and Charles Bell were both the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, the same academy whose members were notorious for their no-holds-barred approach to acquiring subjects.

not as representations of a rare or rarely experienced practice, but as part of the daily reality of their training. The book would have been both an invaluable "how-to" guide for students of surgery and anatomy.

The contradictory nature of a guide to a scientific research process such as dissection lies in the tension between the unknown and the known, the mundane and the sublime. Experimental science must follow a procedure yielding reproducible, meticulously recorded results. The form of the research constitutes a known and is general. To be useful, a guide such as Charles Bell’s must deal with the known and general. But as Charles’s own brother, John, wrote of the old illustrations of Albinus, “each drawing of his is but a mere plan, resembling no individual body...; it is such a view as never is to be seen in a dissection;”\textsuperscript{78} the general case can never fully illustrate reality. There is a divergence between actual and idealized procedures and results; it is in this divergence that discovery exists. Without the deviations from the “normal” results of dissection, without results that arise from irregular, irreproducible events, dissection is compulsive exercise lacking in novelty and providing no insight into the peculiarity of life as a variable event. Such a situation causes anatomy to become mundane and lose its sublime character. The text that instructs a student in the general procedure must embody generalization and systemization to enable discovery. In its very form, the anatomy text attempts to act as a rational, systematic means to the wondrous.

Although anatomy seemingly occupies a space between life and death, a space where knowledge about life is derived from the bodies of the dead, the practice of dissection is primarily involved with death. In \textit{A System of Dissections}, Charles Bell focuses entirely on the body in death, making no mention of the purposes of the physical systems in life. This may be

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
due in part to the stated focus of the text, providing a practical guide to dissection. The absence of any substantive information about the purpose of the systems under examinations seems to root the work entirely in the work of dissection and separate it from the resulting pay-off of anatomical study for those alive. His section on muscles uses illustrations representing muscles devoid of movement, and the text never refers to the function of these muscles. Instead of noting the life of the muscles as something wonderful or fascinating though, he finds beauty in the very process of dissection, of uncovering the muscles of the dead. To begin his chapter about “The Dissection of the Abdominal Muscles,” Bell writes,

The dissection of the abdominal muscles is often the first that a student sees; and if it be carefully done, he is astonished to find the fleshy mass of the body separated into so many distinct parts, and is pleased with the appearance of the muscles exposed in all their beautiful variety of shapes and colours, the smoothness of their surface and their silvery expanded tendons.

In this passage, the text suggests that dissection itself can provoke an experience of the sublime. The student, experiencing an unfamiliar situation, is provoked to astonishment by the revelation of the muscles. What once appeared to be a single “fleshy mass” is now a series of interlocking parts. That which the student thought he knew, his own body, is not what he previously thought; his body is not a single undivided system. When revealed by dissection, the body is a variety of parts, each, presumably, with some mechanical function.

According to A System of Dissections, the sublime moment at the viewing of the opened abdomen comes not only from surprise at the differentiation of the muscles but at their beauty. The sublime comes from the abstraction of the muscles, that is to say their removal from praxis and placement in a disturbing context, the dead, dismembered body. The

79 This is in contrast to the speech by Arnaud, where anatomy is first represented as a vital field and then dissection is mentioned as being the means to knowledge in the field. Bell seems to have no such compulsion to first state the results and then delve into the somewhat gory means.

experience of beauty that Bell cites does not come from knowledge of the functioning of the muscles, their role in life. The viewer experiences the sublime the muscles, although devoid of life, possess aesthetically exciting or pleasing qualities. The description of the beauties of the exposed abdomen refers to "shapes and colours" as well as "smoothness," a texture; these are three key principles of aesthetics and design. Within the text, there develops a tendency toward the artistic, a union of the systematized revelation of the body and an aesthetic creation. The beauty that the text explains is not uncomplicated though. The anatomist does not create the beauty; he merely reveals it. Any beauty revealed in the abdominal muscles is the beauty of the body in death. The revelation of such beauty demands something that under normal circumstances is unnatural, the opening of the body so that the concealed becomes known. It is this touch of the unnatural or unexpected that moves the way in which the text represents the interior of the body from simply beautiful (aesthetically pleasurable) to sublime. This experience of the sublime is only possible by removing the body from a quotidian social sphere and placing it on the dissecting table, in the social sphere of the academy.

According to *The Reward of Cruelty*, a print by William Hogarth, rather than a space for the experience of the sublime, the anatomical theater was a space of social corruption. Eighteenth-century depictions of dissection were by no means uniform in finding the practice as a method of understanding life or revelatory of the wonders of the interior of the body, and Hogarth’s print is an excellent example of such dissent. *The Reward of Cruelty* is the culmination of a series called *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, depicting the horrendous acts of cruelty committed by Tom Nero. The series includes two vivid scenes in which Tom tortures animals and one in which he kills his mistress, essentially decapitating her. In the final print,

---

81 Ibid.
he is on the dissecting table after having been hung at Tyburn, and the surgeons rip away his flesh in the same way that he has destroyed the flesh of his victims; the difference is that while Tom has victimized the living, the surgeons only damage the dead. The setting is certainly more decorous and orderly than any other in the series, but the essential theme of torture is still present. Hogarth exposes the violence enacted in the name of science as part of a larger social tendency towards cruelty.

Hogarth emphasizes the corruption of the academic setting by connecting it with a legal sphere, a community whose members he has already portrayed as having little regard for life earlier in the series. The semiotics of “The Reward of Cruelty” are far removed from those of academic study or scientific enquiry; they are those of the judicial system. The head surgeon sits over the body as a presiding judge, apparently disinterested in the scene in front of him. The reference reinforces the point that Tom is there to be punished; the surgeons enact the sentence that the law has prescribed. The hangman’s noose remains around Tom’s neck, emphasizing his status as a criminal. The entire proceeding is a consequence of his criminality. The surgeons may only dissect him because he is a criminal, and thus in a sense benefit from his criminal acts. The surgeons are at best merely extensions of the judicial system, and at worst co-conspirators of Tom himself.

While _The Reward of Cruelty_ as an art object may not contain the sublime, the depiction of dissection reveals several ways in which, considerations of the knowledge acquired from the process aside, the process could theoretically inspire the sublime. Dissection may inspire sympathetic pain and certainly involves an exploration of the unknown. There is little emotion on the faces of the surgeons to indicate that the cutting of the flesh terrifies them.

---

83 Earlier in the print series, three men who appear to be lawyers climb out of an overturned carriage, paying no attention to the carriage-driver who is beating the dying carriage-horse.
or that this exploration of worlds under the skin has heightened their consciousness though. In the rear, the lone figure in the scene that appears distressed points to a skeleton; it is that of an infamous murderer, James Field.\(^{84}\) The unhappy, pointing spectator looks both disgusted and horrified as he looks on the body of Tom Nero. Seeing a body opened would seemingly inspire intense sympathetic pain even if the body opened were merely a corpse. The opening of the flesh serves as a reminder of the fragility and temporality of the body. The man who feels the fear inspired by such fragility is, significantly, probably not a surgeon. He does not wear a mortarboard and is slightly apart from the surgeons grouped in a semicircle around the body. Perhaps the surgeons are inured to the sight of an opened body and are no longer are sufficiently surprised by such sights to experience the sublime. Rather than making them aware of the intricacies and wonders of the body, viewing dissections has numbed them. The repetitive nature of the act of dissection has turned it from an exploration of the human body into a spectacle. That is to say, instead of remaining a search for the truth, it has become a social institution around which the collective life of the group is structured. Hogarth’s satire targets the ritual nature of the dissection and exposes it as something disgusting or horrifying. Without awe on the part of the viewers, the body opened is unnatural and the actors in the process appear cruel and inhuman.

The depiction of the opening of the body of Satan to produce Sin in *Paradise Lost*, like the dissection in *The Reward of Cruelty*, functions as an allegory about knowledge and morality. As Sin emerges from Satan’s head, free will and possibility of violating previously inviolable moral codes enter the world. The birth in *Paradise Lost* as a sort of pseudo-dissection offers a high literary resistance to the materialist practices of anatomists. From the

splitting of Satan’s body comes knowledge of the world, but it is horrible, corrupting knowledge. When birthed a second time, released from the gates of Hell that is, Sin and her monstrous son, death, wreak havoc on the world of man. As in Hogarth, the result of splitting bodies is not wonderful knowledge, but a loss of spiritual awareness. Hogarth’s anatomists are fallen victims of their own compulsive practice of dissection, no longer aware of the wonder in the body, just as mankind falls victim to Sin and Death. Unlike other texts related to anatomy, *The Reward of Cruelty* does not attempt to repair the corruption present in anatomical practice by alluding to the sublime. Instead, it leaves the viewer uncomfortable, sitting with the knowledge that a body has been destroyed, but unsure how to explain or justify this destruction.

The resistance expressed in Hogarth and Milton to a materialist understanding of science and the body was strong, but the tendency towards continuation of anatomical practice and scientific progress was stronger. The sublime came to serve the study of dissection by humanizing it. As Burke hoped, the graces of philosophy and aesthetics were transferred back to the physical sciences. The result was not always straightforward though. As often as anatomy and dissection appeared sublime in texts, they appeared cruel in practice. Rather than addressing the nature and status of the human body both before and after death, texts surrounding anatomy and dissection referred to the discourse of the sublime. This illustrated a gap in the medical sciences. Where philosophy was equipped to deal with ethical questions, questions about the nature of life, death and the body, medical science was not. Ethics became submerged in aesthetics and rhetoric, not by any intention, but because of the effects of a systematic gap.
The coincidence of aesthetics and the political is by no means uncommon and exists outside the field of science. Aesthetics is by no means apart from systems of power; it inevitably operates within an ideological structure. Furthermore, debates over ethics in medical science and the status of the body have persisted. As social and political power have become integrated with academic power, or social groups have consolidated knowledge, this debate has only become more intense as it persists not only wherever there is science, but wherever the politics exist. Rhetorical and aesthetic often lies at the center of these disputes as scientists and politicians scramble for language, for discourses capable of supporting discussion of the issues at stake. Debates over stem cell lines, animal experimentation and human drug trials have surged to the forefront of political, ethical and scientific disputation. Such debates are not the result of twenty first century political acrimony, but have their roots in an eighteenth century divergence of philosophy and science, when the gap became filled with aesthetics.


