

L.W. Conolly

PORNOGRAPHY

“. . . the project group believes that, where adults are concerned, the possession, sale and distribution of 'sexually explicit material' should no longer be penalized. . . . The Project invites individuals, associations and groups to make their views known.”¹

I have, I suppose, been reading pornography (on and off) for a number of years, although a decade ago as a student in a smallish town in South Wales (where even the pubs couldn't open on Sundays) it was difficult enough to get hold of *Playboy*, let alone raunchy paperbacks with titillating covers. Nowadays it is rather easier to acquire pornography, but in most Canadian cities the combined forces of police and customs officials do their best to keep pornography out of the bookstores and even private collections. Nonetheless, despite these handicaps, the range of my reading of pornography is modestly broad and in addition to the pornographic classics (*Fanny Hill*, *My Secret Life*, de Sade, and so on) I can boast of some close acquaintance with such delightfully named novels as *John Krugge: the Autobiography of an Old Man in Search of an Orgasm*; *Venus School-Mistress*; *A Handbook of Good Manners for Little Girls*; *Without a Stitch*; *The Beautiful Flagellants of New York*; *The Horn Book, or Modern Studies in the Science of Stroking*; and *The Altar of Venus, Wherein a Late Member of the House of Lords Has Given the True History of His Erotic Life* (all published by Grove Press).

Over the years I have also read a number of books *about* pornography, and one reason for my writing this paper is that I have found the arguments about pornography to be bewilderingly contradictory. In a debate in which passion seems so often to dominate reason, and speculation to take the place of evidence, it has become a

challenge to establish and maintain an intelligent attitude towards pornography.

Not that all books or all arguments about pornography need be taken seriously. A recent work on the subject is a fascinating volume called *The Obscenity Report: Pornography and Obscenity in America* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1970). This is alleged to be an official report to President Nixon from an anonymous body which appears to have some connection with the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography appointed by President Johnson early in 1968, the Commission which finally reported to President Nixon in September 1970, the full Report being published by Bantam Books shortly thereafter.² But despite its impressive array of references, tables and statistics *The Obscenity Report* is, without much doubt, a hoax, a skilful parody of the language and style of the real Commission's report. As such it is more entertaining than most of the pornography I have read; if it is *not* a parody then it was compiled by some very odd people. Without the trace of a smile they pronounce shattering truths of this kind: 'The Task Force confidently reports that with no exceptions whatsoever, greater frequency of sexual intercourse produces greater possibility of conception' (p. 47); or, 'The lust motive seems to appear more frequently among the young than among the old' (p.54). And then, speaking of the effects of obscenity, they report that

Even more persuasive of the dangers of obscenity than broad truths carried by sociological statistics are case histories of individuals. The seventy-year-old matron who, after retiring to Arizona for reasons of health, received by mail an unsolicited advertisement so describing the joys of a new battery-run kit of prosthetic male genitalia that she raped a teen-age mailman; the federal funds so desperately needed to protect our wholesome overseas youths, diverted instead to help equip a little-known medical facility in the Black Hills of South Dakota named the Hospital for Excessive Onanism and Respiratory Ailments: these stories, and thousands like them all suggest forcefully the need to curb obscenity. (p. 49)

Reporting on 'obscenity consumption', that is, the time of the day when most obscenity in America is read or viewed, the Task Force concludes that the 'dirtiest hour in the nation' is between ten and eleven p.m. 'Indeed,' they say (and the imagery here is interesting), 'obscenity consumption builds from an extremely low early-morning level, swells slowly through the afternoon, and climaxes suddenly during the ten p.m. hour, subsiding peacefully afterwards . . . ' (p. 69).

At the end of its Report the Task Force recommends, among other things, 'the establishment of a national scholarship program to encourage bright young men and women to pursue study and training in the area of obscenity corrections' (p. 106) and advocates 'compulsory federal registration of pornography readers' (p. 114). The frightening thing is that like students who fail to see the irony in Swift's *Modest Proposal*, public officials may read *The Obscenity Report* only on its literal level.

The Obscenity Report makes fools of zealous opponents of pornography; yet the zealots are not to be laughed at for taking pornography seriously. There are at least three good reasons why it should be taken seriously. First, statistics produced by the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, as well as one's own personal observations, show that pornography in many forms is now widely available and has become a marked feature of popular literature, and as such deserves and demands study. Secondly, the relationship between pornography and its readers—particularly the *effect* that pornography has on individual readers and society as a whole—raises interesting and important questions regarding the influence of literature in general and how we assess such influence. And thirdly, since governments have always, and still do, concern themselves with the control of pornography, we should carefully examine their reasons for doing so, since obviously no government should be permitted to deprive people of the right to read what they choose to read unless on very substantial grounds.

Pornography today remains pretty much what it was when it first began to attract government attention in England in the seventeenth century. Strictly speaking pornography is the description of the life of prostitutes and their patrons. D.H. Lawrence's well-known and more useful definition, to which I will return, is that pornography "is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it", which he took to be an "unpardonable" offence deserving of rigorous censorship.³ A fair account of the novels I listed earlier would be that they present an interminable and ultimately boring repetition of variations of the sexual act, "the copulation of clichés" as Nabokov has described pornography. The pornographer's sole intention is to arouse sexual excitement in his reader—usually, I might add, a male reader. This is not, I think, necessarily an undesirable or reprehensible objective; but like melo-

drama and sentimentality pornography arouses our emotions quickly and superficially. This is one objection to pornography (which I will develop later): it is shallow and cheap literature. But governments have never to my knowledge suppressed pornography solely on literary grounds. Their arguments and assumptions have always been that the reading of pornography has harmful effects on individuals and societies.

Historically, the reasons for government suppression of pornography have varied. David Foxon, in his study of early English pronography, *Libertine Literature in England 1660-1745* (University Books, 1965), links the suppression of pornography in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the suppression of religiously heretical or politically revolutionary literature. 'It seems', he writes, 'that the revolt against authority first took the form of heresy, then politics, and finally sexual licence; clearly pornography is closely related to this revolt' (p. 50). The suppression of pornography in the nineteenth century was at least partly related to the threat it posed, or appeared to pose, to a social structure based on rigid sexual morality, but in recent years the emphasis has shifted to the relationship between pornography and criminal behaviour.

The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography reports that 'The belief that reading or viewing explicit sexual materials causes sex crimes is widespread among the American public' (p. 269). It seems that 47% of American men and 51% of American women believe that 'sexual materials lead people to commit rape'—as we have seen, even retired matrons in Arizona are not immune from such stimulating influences. David Holbrook, a vigorous campaigner against pornography, has linked performances of *Oh! Calcutta!* (a dreary sex show devised by Kenneth Tynan and others) with increases in crimes of violence;⁴ and Pamela Hansford Johnson (C.P. Snow's wife) in her analysis of the brutally sadistic murders of some children in Yorkshire ten years ago suggested the likelihood of a connection between the sado-masochistic reading matter of the murderers and their crimes.⁵ But this kind of causal relationship between pornography and behaviour has long been questioned. Those indefatigable sexual researchers, Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, recognized some years before the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography began its work the widely accepted notion that the reading of pornography "leads to delinquency and criminal acts, especially those involving violence, for instance, rape, sexual

assault, the molestation and abuse of children by adult sex deviates, and a variety of similar offenses" (*Pornography and the Law*, revised ed., Ballantine Books, 1964, p. 330). The Kronhausens, while admitting the absence of conclusive evidence one way or the other, doubted the validity of the cause and effect argument; the majority opinion of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, albeit expressed in clumsy committee prose, was firmer: 'Research to date . . . provides no substantial basis for the belief that erotic materials . . . operate as a significant determinative factor in causing crime and delinquency' (pp.286-87).

So if there is no firm evidence that pornography harms anyone, do governments have any case for suppressing it? I think not. A British Arts Council committee succinctly summed up the case against government censorship of pornographic or any other kind of imaginative literature in a report published in 1969:

It is not for the State to prohibit private citizens from choosing what they may or may not enjoy in literature or art unless there were incontrovertible evidence that the result would be injurious to society. There is no such evidence.⁶

Apart from the principle involved here—the principle, that is, of the individual's right to be free from government control of what he chooses to read—there is the important consideration of the consequences of government censorship so far as serious creative literature is concerned. That any kind of literature is banned or burned or bashed into pulp by government edict is bad enough; but the history of literary censorship (I recommend Donald Thomas's *A Long Time Burning*, Routledge, 1969) shows that many major authors have at one time or another been on a censor's blacklist—the Roman Catholic Church has always had a long one, of course. Courts and customs officials, especially customs officials, have never been very adept at separating literary wheat from the chaff, and important works of literature together with the rubbishy ones have been suppressed or impounded under the very same laws—*Ulysses* and *The Rainbow* are two obvious examples from the present century.

So the case against government censorship of pornography is a convincing one: such censorship abrogates a central principle of democratic society; it does so for no demonstrably sound reason; and it

hinders and sometimes prevents the free circulation of the works of serious creative writers. The case, I would have thought, is a strong enough one to dismay the exponents of censorship. Yet they still speak, albeit with little authority. Here is a Professor of Urban Values at New York University: 'If you think pornography and/or obscenity is a serious problem, you have to be for censorship. I'll go even further and say that if you want to prevent pornography and/or obscenity from becoming a problem, you have to be for censorship. And lest there be any misunderstanding as to what I am saying, I'll put it as bluntly as possible: if you care for the quality of life in our American democracy, then you have to be for censorship' (Holbrook, p. 193). As pretty a series of non-sequiturs as you will find anywhere. All cats must die. Socrates is dead. Therefore Socrates was a cat.

I do not see how one can argue against the unimpeded circulation of pornography among adult readers. And there was a time when I was also convinced that not only should the free circulation of pornography be defended, but that widespread circulation of pornography should positively be welcomed and even encouraged. Many still hold this view—wrongly, I am now inclined to think. Storm Jameson, the novelist, puts it this way: pornography's "wholehearted admirers see it as a great gesture of moral and intellectual liberation: the mind has been set free to explore unhindered an area of sensual experience, vitally, overwhelmingly important, hitherto repressed and degraded by taboos and hypocrisies" (Holbrook, p. 215). A dozen years ago when, in Britain at least, the freedom of writers to describe sexual behaviour as a normal part of the human condition was only just being established (in 1960 a jury found *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to be not obscene), the argument outlined by Jameson was a persuasive one. The end of Victorian prudery and hypocrisy was finally at hand. I could sit on Thomas Bowdler's tombstone in the Swansea churchyard near where I lived and read of the sexual antics of Mellors and Lady Chatterley with the smug satisfaction that the influence exercised even from the grave below me by the reverend Mr. Bowdler was coming to an end. The age of sexual enlightenment was nigh.

But after several years' experience of reading accounts of sexual gymnastics and minutely detailed descriptions of organs and orgasms I doubt that my understanding of human sexuality has increased one iota. We have witnessed (if I may put it this way) a severe anti-climax.

To be sure, the publishers of Joyce and Lawrence and other serious writers are no longer threatened with prosecution, and those non-creative writers who want to disseminate knowledge about sexual behaviour are free to do so, as Havelock Ellis once was not. That these are immensely important benefits cannot be denied—although David Holbrook (with some justification) sees Kinsey and other ‘scientific sexologists’ as dangerous pornographers (Holbrook, p. 11). But the most obvious and perhaps the most influential product of the new freedom in sexual writings has been pornography, and in so far as pornography has falsified and will continue to falsify human sexual behaviour it has been a positive obstacle in our attempts to understand it.

But there is another argument in favour of the widespread circulation of pornography. Just as pornography’s opponents turn to statistics for their evidence (the increase in sexual assaults and so on) so do its supporters. They go to Denmark to get them. Since the abolition of legal restraints on pornography in that country (1967 on written, 1969 on pictorial pornography) crimes of a sexual nature have apparently diminished. The argument which links the easy availability of pornography with a reduction in sexual offences runs something like this: the reading of pornography by would-be sexual offenders has a therapeutic effect in that their aggressive sexual urges are satisfied by the pornography, so obviating the need for direct action, as it were. An American psychotherapist puts it this way: “Contrary to popular misconception, people who read salacious literature are less likely to become sexual offenders than those who do not, for the reason that such reading often neutralizes what aberrant sexual interests they may have” (*Pornography and the Law*, p. 338). If we accept this argument then we must conclude that the writers and distributors of pornography are providing a valuable social service, perhaps even deserving of a special category of government awards to encourage them: more porn less rape might be their motto.

I am no more convinced that pornography will rid the world of sexual offenders than I am that it will populate the world with sexual offenders. The evidence, such as it is, is conflicting. Then perhaps the only attitude we can reasonably adopt is that pornography has established itself as part of the popular culture of western civilization and, like other features of popular culture—television, for example—we

really cannot be certain about what it is doing or is likely to do to that culture. We are in no position to damn it or to praise it. An editorial article in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 25 February 1972 outlined what it took to be a sensible attitude towards pornography: 'But it is surely reasonable to stop short of the missionary belief that pornography is an instrument of social welfare, and to stick instead with the view that it does neither harm nor good.' But it is not reasonable to conclude that pornography 'does neither harm nor good' simply because we cannot resolve conflicting evidence about its influence. Nor do I accept that imaginative literature of any kind is entirely neutral in effect. The *TLS* writer recognized that his attitude towards pornography was a pessimistic one, for 'it implies the impotence of literature in general to influence the way we live.'

The difficulty of reaching a satisfactory conclusion arises, I think, out of the terms in which the discussion of pornography has customarily been conducted. We have been engaged in a ping-pong game of statistics, the players puffing and blowing facts and figures, the spectators getting dizzy all the time waiting anxiously for a winner so that they can hiss or cheer according to their inclinations. But the game will never end. The attempt to answer questions about the influence or effect of literature in statistical terms is a futile one. I strongly believe that literature influences human behaviour; but such influence is not measurable, nor ever can be measurable. We may be able to establish that a performance of a play caused an audience to riot; we may link a Dickens novel, say, with some area of nineteenth-century social reform; we may claim that the Bible has played an important role in the shaping of western civilization. But the precise cause-and-effect relationship between literature and life will always be unknown to us. And if we insist on trying to determine how many rapes or child molestations have been caused (or prevented) by the writings of the Marquis de Sade then we are simply wasting our time. (The absurdity to which this kind of statistical game can lead is well illustrated by a table reproduced in *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* [p. 204]. Some enterprising researchers showed two pornographic films to 194 male and 183 female undergraduates. Data was then gathered on "physiological responses in the genital region". The results reveal, for example, that 152 of the men managed to achieve only a 'partial erection' while watching the films; 37 managed a full erection for over

three minutes, while a heroic 8 men had a full erection for over six minutes. Of the women, one achieved an orgasm, 174 didn't, and six poor souls were uncertain whether they had or not.)

An article published in *The Human World* in May 1971 and a shorter piece in *TLS* on 4 February 1972 shifted the pornography debate onto new and more fertile ground.⁷ The authors of these articles, Ian Robinson and Masud Khan, remind us of what we should have been doing all along: look at pornography not from the point of view of what it *does*, but from the point of view of what it *is*. Look at it not in sociological terms, but in literary terms. Khan puts it this way: "The whole issue has been side-tracked. The real issue is not that pornography is immoral but that it is pathetically bad literature. An ironic and absurd situation has arisen vis-a-vis pornography in contemporary European cultures. While pornographic writers will engage in endless debate with the cultural moralists . . . they are dogmatically intolerant of any suggestion that pornography retails poor literature and sick psychology . . ." (Holbrook, p. 131).

I am not competent to talk about psychology, but that pornography is poor literature is not difficult to demonstrate. Here is a typical passage from *The Beautiful Flagellants of New York* (vol. 2, p. 76). The scene is set in a brothel specializing in flagellation. A young man, having been tied to a couch, is being whipped by two sisters. One sister has just 'exchanged her miniature rod for one that was long and supple, evidently a terrible stinger':

The boy, starting violently at this fresh attack, let incoherent words escape his lips; and he moaned while beaten firmly with the new, stiff birch. The ladies in the audience rose to their feet, to get a better view of the young fellow's bottom as it became covered with large red weals. He bounded and wriggled in contortions of despair, and then, as a conclusion, a few blows dealt on his mangled bum with frenzied violence made him lift the trembling tender cheeks as high as the ropes would let him. His red stern fell down again, and a long, low groan of voluptuous enjoyment burst from the entranced boy.

The kind of slipshod writing that tells us something is "supple" in one sentence and "stiff" in the very next sentence is not uncommon in pornographic writing. The inappropriate language and imagery used by the writer when referring to the young man's bottom is typical too: "bum" is a word that belongs in the nursery, not the brothel, and "stern", red or otherwise, is what we see when the *Queen Elizabeth*

sails. And anyone familiar with pornographic writing will recognize the usual moans and groans, the frenzy, the "voluptuous enjoyment", and the "incoherent words" that we find on virtually every cliché-ridden page of novels of this kind. The language of pornography is marked by its inability to explore and explain the meaning of the subject on which it dwells perpetually.

Of course, another feature of this passage common to all pornography is the equating of sexual fulfillment with violence. Flagellation is in itself necessarily violent, but in all pornography we find imagery of violence— "assault", "ram", "explode", "battle", "lunge", "bore", "empty the barrel of his gun", "weapon", and so on. Pornography is the literature of aggressive sexual success, of unfailing sexual achievement, of uncomplicated sexual relationships; pornography therefore lies about sex; it cheapens sex; it reduces human sexual relationships to the level of animal sexual relationships, perhaps lower. (*Le Monde* has reported that a young woman has made a fortune out of performing sexually with stallions and dogs; and it appears that the Danish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has felt obliged to ask the courts to outlaw the use of animals in sexual exhibitions [Holbrook, p. 8]).

Pornographers—and here I return to Lawrence—make the human sexual act "ugly and degraded . . . trivial and cheap and nasty" (Lawrence, p. 67). The danger of pornography is that it not only fails to promote understanding of human behaviour, but also that it positively retards such understanding. It destroys, or attempts to destroy, whatever sense we have made of the complexities of sex. This is why we are justified in condemning it, as Khan does, as bad literature. "Pornography", Khan concludes, "negates imagination, style and the tradition of man's struggle to use language to know and enhance himself" (Holbrook, p. 132).

Ian Robinson is also interested in the language of pornography, and although he holds no brief for the sociological cause-and-effect arguments, he does recognize (as Khan does, implicitly at least) an important, although neither immediate nor measurable, relationship between pornography and human behaviour. The individual, Robinson says, 'recreates the value of sex from the language of sex of those around him. . . . the language of sex spoken and written in a society

expresses the commonly understood significance of sex there, and a change in the language of sex *is* a change in the experience and evaluation of sex in the lives of the speakers of the language' (Holbrook, pp. 174-75). That is, we can only understand sexual behaviour through the language we use to discuss it. If the language of sex becomes dominated by the language of pornography then we will understand sex only in pornographic terms. Pornography impoverishes the language of sex; it therefore impoverishes our understanding of sex. The language of pornography is crude, ugly, uncomplicated and often violent, (it is interesting that 'fuck', a popular term for sexual intercourse, is also a common expletive). Pornography restricts and simplifies the ways in which we may talk and ultimately think about sex.

Robinson's arguments are, of course, similar to those used by Orwell in his essay on "Politics and the English Language"—and no less convincing. The quality of our political thought, and ultimately our political behaviour, depends on the kind of political language we use. The quality and nature of human sexual relationships depend on the language we use to define those relationships.

Now if it is true that the widespread reading and influence of pornography will corrupt the language of sex and thereby corrupt sexual behaviour itself, there may well be unattractive social consequences. There are those who associate pornography with fascism, for example, and it is easy to understand why. The mechanical nature of human relationships depicted by the pornographer is perhaps one aspect of the dehumanizing process which can lead to the brutality practised by fascist regimes in this century. A social philosopher has argued that if pornography is allowed to flourish "our society at best will become ever more coarse, brutal, anxious, indifferent, de-individualized, hedonistic; at worst its ethos will disintegrate altogether" (Holbrook, p. 168). This leads us back to the unsatisfactory cause-and-effect hypothesis (although not on the simplistic statistical level), but if only a small part of the dire and exaggerated prediction is true it still makes the question of what to *do* about pornography an important one.

Well, don't encourage the pornographers for a start, as the Danes have; don't line the pockets of purveyors of rubbish. On the other hand, don't prosecute them either; don't censor what they write and

sell. Censorship is repugnant and unworkable, and governments have no business practising it. Ignore pornography and hope that it is only a passing fad which will soon fade away? Perhaps; but that which is cheap, ugly and second-rate has a habit of staying around: witness our television programmes or popular music, as corrupting in their own way as pornography. Ultimately, all we can do, I think, is take Ian Robinson's advice—although I am less optimistic than he appears to be:

If the question then arises: what to do about pornography and how to prevent the corruption of our language of sex, we would say that the main answer is: recognize pornography. The recognition is the best thing that could happen. Perhaps when recognized it will slink away—pornography ought to die of contempt—but that is not the reason for recognizing it. The recognition is itself the maintenance of language of sex, and that is what we ought to hope for. (Holbrook, p. 184)

NOTES

1. The Law Reform Commission, *Criminal Law: Obscenity. A Study Paper Published by the Prohibited and Regulated Conduct Project*, December, 1972, pp. 19-20.
2. *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*. Introduction by Clive Barnes (Bantam, 1970).
3. D. H. Lawrence, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover and Other Essays* (Penguin, 1961), p. 67.
4. David Holbrook, ed., *The Case Against Pornography* (Tom Stacey, (1972), p. 2.
5. Pamela Hanford Johnson, *On Iniquity* (MacMillan, 1967).
6. *The Obscenity Laws. A Report by the Working Party set up by a Conference Convened by the Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain*. Foreword by John Montgomerie (Andre Deutsch, 1969), p. 35.
7. Both articles are reprinted in Holbrook's book, from which I take my quotations.