

In Defense of a Mormon Erotica

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DESPITE MY TITLE, I do not intend to defend pornography, Mormon or otherwise. But I do intend to discuss Mormon attitudes toward erotica and suggest that a dearth of sexuality in Mormon literature may be a kind of obverse pornography — and also to suggest that expressions of sexuality and other human functions are not intrinsically offensive to God.

In defining pornography I would like to cite that apostle of the erotic, D. H. Lawrence, an English writer much respected for his realistic study of the Oedipus complex in one novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913), and much deprecated for his graphic treatment of adultery in another, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). Although by today's standards it is not a sensational book, Lawrence was forced to publish *Lady Chatterley's Lover* privately in Florence. In 1932, two years after his death, his publisher put forth an expurgated version. As late as 1957, when Grove Press published the unexpurgated version in the United States, the Post Office banned the work from the mails. Following a successful suit by the publisher, the work has circulated without hindrance. Utterly sincere as a prophet of the liberated sexual instinct, Lawrence responded to critics who called *Lady Chatterley's Lover* pornographic by writing a pugnacious essay entitled "Pornography and Obscenity." I personally find his definition of pornography persuasive:

It isn't sex appeal or sex stimulus in art. It isn't even a deliberate intention on the part of the artist to arouse or excite sexual feelings. There's nothing wrong with sexual feelings in themselves, so long as they are straightforward and not sneaking or sly. . . . Pornography is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it (1956, 37).

I will apply Lawrence's definition to a hypothetical magazine which I will have to buy at a truck stop on the Interstate outside of Utah — say, in Idaho or Wyoming. The magazine has little text. It consists rather of numerous

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color photographs of human genitalia and of nude adults engaged in many sorts of benign sexual intercourse. *Benign* means that these participants appear to be mutually consenting — not necessarily in love with one another but at least not distressed by their activity. In my opinion, these photographs “do dirt” on sex, to repeat Lawrence’s term. The unrelieved accumulation of genitalia, the incessant scenes of intercourse are distressing, inordinate, unseemly. But surely they constitute a mild rather than an egregious pornography. There is no reason to ban the magazine utterly from the universe. If travelers on the Interstate want to buy it, let them.

What is egregious pornography? I find, in another hypothetical magazine which I buy in an adult bookstore in Las Vegas, photographs of a terrified nude woman chained to a stake, of a man inflicting sodomy upon an anguished girl, of a female torso with bloody, half-severed breasts — there are worse, but I’ll not describe them. Sexual depictions associated with violence, brutality, and humiliation unquestionably do dirt on sex and worse. In fact, I consider the depiction of violence unrelated to sex far more pornographic than the non-violent depiction of sexual parts and acts. Ironically, millions of readers and TV watchers who pride themselves upon their militancy against sexual display calmly ingest graphic shootings, stabbings, decapitations, and disembowelments. A movie replete with violence can easily be rated PG; a single scene of nudity makes it an R.

The Committee on Pornography established by the Attorney General of the United States recently issued a two-volume report showing a link between pornography and crimes of violence. I find myself strongly agreeing with a witness before the committee who testified, as reported in *Time*, that the link is the violent content of pornography rather than the sexual:

Edward Donnerstein, a University of Wisconsin psychologist who has studied the effects of sexually violent material, was billed as one of the committee’s star witnesses. But in his testimony he refused to make a direct causal link between pornography and violence. Although he does not repudiate the report, he suggests that the crucial variable is not explicit sex but graphic violence. Violent films without sex, like *Rambo*, he suggests, cause the same changes in attitude as sexually violent ones. “If you take out the sex and leave the violence, you get the increased violent behavior. . . . If you take out the violence and leave the sex, nothing happens” (“Sex Busters,” 1986, 15).

I contemplate the morally self-satisfied ingesters of violence with alarm and irritation, finding their inconsistent behavior unworthy of the reasoning species to which they belong. I also respond irascibly to those fervent, punctilious Mormons who flee all mention of sex. Several years ago in my American novel class at Weber State College, I included John Updike’s *Couples* among the assigned works. When it came time to read that novel, three Latter-day Saint students, a young man and two young women, demurred. Though I exhorted and cajoled and though they were apologetic and distressed, they maintained their position: they preferred not to read a book about spouse swapping. I therefore negotiated a substitute novel for the three, and my class went forward in a dichotomous fashion. A year later, when I had replaced *Couples* with

Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, four students demurred, all young Mormon women. Already defeated, I allowed them to make an exchange with scarcely a breath of expostulation.

I accepted their scruples, but I didn't admire them. I was ashamed of these young adults for their illiberal understanding of human nature and their cloistered virtue. In particular, I regretted their inability to test their character in the vicarious arena of literature. They will go on assuming that vice is unconquerable, that flight is the only weapon the righteous have against evil. Though they do not commit a sin of lust, they commit an obverse sin of prudery. Prudery forces the sexual impulse underground, banishes it to the territory of the abnormal and forbidden. Ironically, prudery reinforces pornography.

Perhaps I am attempting to corrupt model young Latter-day Saints. Perhaps I should admit that I am perverse, that I am one of those unvaliant spirits who do not fare well in the probation of mortality and are fated to spend eternity on the lower rungs of glory. I remember a winter night when, five or six years old, I knelt behind the glowing wood stove in obedience to my mother's orders to say my evening prayer. I was angry about something, perhaps simply about having to go to bed. Instead of whispering my usual prayer, I muttered a four-letter word over and over. Was that a sign of my innate depravity? Perhaps Joseph Smith should not have revised the venerable Puritan doctrine of infant damnation.

Truly, what might God think of my obscene prayer? Does he despise me for defecating and urinating? Has he a lesser tolerance for these vital body functions than my gastroenterologist? Is he indignant over the angry, scornful four-letter words by which I sometimes name these functions and their products? I for one think obscenity is a human, not a divine, issue. I can't conceive of Almighty God, creator and sustainer of galaxies, occupying himself with my four-letter words. Obscenity is a matter of taste and discretion, not of morality and sin. Had she heard me, my mother would have thought the less of me for muttering obscenities instead of pieties behind the stove on that winter night, but I believe God only laughed. Surely he was not so petty as to be angry over my pettiness.

Although I am overawed in argument by those who have the Holy Ghost as their immediate second, I have some faith in my intuitions about God's attitude toward human sexuality. On the basis of those intuitions I accept that fidelity is better than infidelity, that committed sex is better than promiscuity, that marital sex is better than extramarital sex. I believe the Church properly assumes the role of inculcating sexual mores and standards and of defining sexual sin. However, I believe that on the whole Mormons overreact to sexual sin, that they make far too much of it. I do not believe the Church should excommunicate or even disfellowship for sexual sin. I believe it can achieve its purposes of teaching propriety and order without such punitive measures, which indeed seem startlingly contrary to the Church's mission of saving rather than damning sinners.

I have difficulty believing that God has infused the human psyche with the powerful sexual impulse merely to sift the obedient from the disobedient, the self-controlled from the self-indulgent, the ascetic from the sensuous. I do

not believe that God admires chastity for its own sake nor that he ordains celibacy and a denial of appetite. I do not believe that God frets over the lush practices and heights of passion between me and my wife, so long as they please both of us. Our manner of making love is our affair, not his. Nor will he be astonished if I sin. I do not blame God for my contrary personality, but neither do I believe that he blames me. It is our mutual problem. I will trust in his tolerance for my errant experimentations with life. He gave me a Savior because he knew I would need one.

I can hear the rustling of pages in the Bible and the Book of Mormon as knowing persons search for scriptural passages proving me wrong. Isn't it true that all the holy prophets have been sexually reticent and clean of speech and that they have declared God's pleasure with such qualities among his children? I remember that David and Solomon had concubines; that by God's command Hosea married a whore; that Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and my grandfather took plural wives; that even Jesus himself when he denounced the scribes and Pharisees with angry, insulting names, calling them hypocrites, fools, and vipers, came close to obscenity. I think it would not be at all impossible to develop a Mormon theology more tolerant of sexuality and bold speech. I hope some gifted scholar of the scriptures will step forward to do it.

If God's people are sexual creatures and if they are sometimes angry and scornful, and if their anger and scorn sometimes well up into obscenities, the literature which expresses God's people should reflect those facts. Literature should reflect life. Ultimately it should reflect all of life. Nothing that people feel, nothing that they do, should be denied a place in literature.

Then how shall I distinguish between an acceptable expression of sexuality and pornography? It is a matter of proportion. Proportion is fundamental in any theory of art. It suggests a variety of elements standing in harmonious relationship with one another, none without due representation, each fitted to each, each shaped by the shape of the whole.

Proportion applies to morality as well as to art. The Golden Mean, the point of balance between opposite excesses, is a matter of proportion. Body and spirit, obedience and initiative, action and contemplation, altruism and self-centeredness, appetite and conscience are to be reconciled and harmonized, to be made proportionate to one another. If we respect proportion, we can dispense with foolish discussions in our Priesthood and Relief Society lessons about whether we would jump off a cliff if the prophet ordered us to. Obedience carried to an excess is a sin.

It is gross disproportion that creates pornography. Neither sexual images nor obscene words nor even depictions of violence in themselves make literature pornographic. If they are amassed, concentrated, enormously emphasized — if they become the single end and purpose of the writing — they are pornographic. But if they are intermittent in an action, if they mingle with other images and deeds, balancing proportionately, appearing as a part rather than the whole of life, then they are not pornographic.

Writers are not obliged to create sexual images or attribute obscenities to their characters if they have no instinct for that kind of writing. It is easy to

name numerous great works of literature devoid of such qualities. Yet I for one find it sad and, yes, even eerie to contemplate the acres of shelf space occupied in local libraries by Mormon novels and to realize that there may not be a half dozen satisfying obscenities nor a single good orgasm among the lot. Writers who eschew entirely the sexual and the obscene fail to exploit an immense reservoir of energy, vigor, and sensory experience. It is as if they are piloting a twin-engined airplane but insist by reason of their scruples to operate only one engine. Timid authors fall into the error of incompleteness. Sexuality is a part of living. There is health in treating the broad range of experience in literature, in viewing clearly the full spectrum of human act and emotion, thereby helping to domesticate disorderly impulses and to disarm an unfounded fear of those that only seem disorderly.

I have said this in a different way in my short story, "Night Soil," published in *Utah Holiday*, December 1985. "Night Soil" is about an aging man in a Utah village who yearns for redemption but compulsively resists righteousness. Named Pickett, he is, I suppose, a kind of grotesque. He has only one leg, the other having been amputated and, by his insistence, given a formal burial. As the story opens on a Sunday morning, he is lurching along with the assistance of an artificial leg to pay a visit to the grave of the amputated leg. Despite his vow to respect the Sabbath by staying out of the poolhall, he quickly finds himself there, where in the course of events he maligns the local bishop by telling his cronies the following tale:

"I had me a dream about Delbert," Pickett said. "One night in vision I saw me and him in the Celestial Kingdom."

"I imagine you did, all right," Jorley said.

"No fooling. There I was in the Celestial Kingdom and it was time to go to the bathroom and all they had was an old-fashioned privy. I went in and peered down the hole and who did I see bogged down in that privy pit but Delbert himself? I backed out and looked up the Angel Moroni, and I says, Brother Moroni, I can't go to the bathroom in that privy because a feller I knew in mortality, Delbert Wheatley, is in there mired up to his neck; did you know that? Sure, I knew he was in there, Moroni says; now you just go ahead and relieve yourself according to custom. Oh, no, I couldn't do that, I says. You bet you could, Moroni says; all your life he done it on you and now it's your turn to give a little back" (p. 79).

It is an obscenity on Pickett's part to tell this story. But I testify that I came by the story, with different locale and characters and more forceful diction, directly from the mouth of a real Mormon villager. It would have been a crime of high order if, in the name of a timid morality, I had let this energetic tale, this Chaucerian fabliau from northern Arizona, sink into oblivion.

Pickett hobbles on toward the cemetery, carrying a burlap bag filled with bottles of beer he has won playing pool. He hopes to proceed safely past the house of a temptress named Pansy. Pansy, however, engages his sense of duty by telling him that her outdoor toilet has been demolished during a quarrel with her half-witted brother Wendell. After Pickett has helped reassemble the shattered privy, Pansy invites him into the house to eat a meal. Shortly she entices him to make love:

"You ain't had a bath in a while," Pansy said, wrinkling her nose.

"No'm, I ain't, that's true."

She put a washpan of water on a burner. "Strip off and I'll wash you."

She brought him a pillowcase to cradle his crotch like a diaper because he was too modest to have her see his privates. He dropped his coveralls, unstrapped his leg, and stood clutching the pillowcase with one hand and gripping a chairback with the other, his gullied face morose, his scarlet stump pulsing. She soaped his back and belly and armpits and wiped off the lather with a washcloth. "Time for your dainties," she said, laying the soap and cloth on the table within his reach. "My back is turned. I won't peek, I promise."

When he was through she said, "Look at me, Pickett!" She had pudgy knees, dimpled thighs, billowing buttocks, narrow shoulders, bulbous breasts. "Am I pretty?"

"Oh, lord, just like a sunrise," he said.

After they had made love they lounged against the headboard of the bed, each with an arm around the other, drinking beer slowly, coughing and belching and gazing at the motes adrift in the afternoon sunlight. Pickett peered into his empty bottle. He saw foamy bubbles stretching like cobwebs between slick glass walls, he saw an amber glow like a moon about to rise over the horizon. "Don't begrudge the back side of things," he said.

"Oh, I never do," she said hastily.

"For example, take your privy pit, which is foul with stink. I'm lying here thinking, Ain't Pansy and Wendell ate many a fine meal; ain't they been hungry to eat and they ate? You laughed many a time, had many a fine thing happen. And you left a bit of all that pleasure in that privy, didn't you? It ain't a pit full of mire and mess. It's a picture album, it's a museum, it's your grandmother's trunk full of wonderful old things out of the past."

"Gosh, Pickett, are you crazy?"

"No," he said, "don't begrudge poor things" (p. 81-82).

That isn't the end of the story, for Pickett lurches on toward the cemetery; but he has expressed, perhaps with a clumsy directness, a minor theme. I tried to suggest that human taboos are not necessarily God's taboos, that the human repugnance for defecation and urination and scandalous words is not shared by God. Compared to God's perfection, perhaps every living ounce of the human body, the heart and brain as well as the emunctories, is no better than night soil. Yet in the light of his redemption, can any particle or shred of the human creature be less than eternal gold?

So I will close with a summary exhortation to Mormon writers — and to those Mormon readers who finally dictate the tone and tenor of what those authors write. Don't be paralyzed by prudery. Don't fall into the opposite excess of pornography. If you are bold enough to write and read about characters eating a meal, be bold enough to write and read about characters making love or going to the bathroom or uttering angry, scatological expressions. There is a vitality in sexual imagery and obscenities. Shaped proportionately, they do not corrupt and vitiate a work of literature. Like a tributary river, they add to the swelling current of ideas, images, and emotions that makes the reading of a good book a consummate experience.

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