

Groping the Mormon Eros

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WHEN LEVI AND I PRESENTED EARLIER VERSIONS of these papers at the 1986 Sunstone Symposium, the moment had already acquired an appropriately symptomatic quality by being given two titles: Levi's too-brave or even brazen "In Defense of a Mormon Pornography" (which he didn't entirely intend and which the present title does not improve much) and the organizers' coy or downright misleading "In Defense of Mormon Profanity." Maybe that was not an intentional emendation but, as one couldn't help suggesting, a Freudian slip — just a little gremlin of the superego editing the program and not the mind of Sunstone Symposium Correlation averting the mere mention of the unmentionable.

Either way, it might have prompted a D. H. Lawrence to suppose that the Mormon culture, too, was and is very much a part of the "diseased . . . body politic" (1936, 177) he castigated so shrilly in his famous essay on "Pornography and Obscenity": we too, it might appear, perhaps as a rightful if lamentable heritage from American Puritanism and Victorian gentility, "tickl[e] the dirty little secret" while "rolling the eyes to heaven" (1936, 181). Whatever my misgivings about Lawrence as novelistic "apostle of the erotic," I cannot help but be struck with the supposition that we Mormons, as a culture and as separate persons, might be thickly involved with "the sentimental lie of purity and the dirty little secret" (1936, 185). Not a nice thing to suppose. But that, after all, was the point.

It was a mild disappointment that Levi did not "intend to defend real pornography"; we might have found less agreement and more argument. The most threatening defense I know is Susan Sontag's "The Pornographic Imagination" in her *Styles of Radical Will* (1970). That essay in part responds to two earlier attacks: George Steiner's "Night Words" in his *Language and Silence* (1970), and George P. Elliott's "Against Pornography" in his *Conversions* (1971). Any thoughtful Mormon *literary* discussion of the topic

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would, I think, have to confront these as well as Lawrence (whose definition none of these three totally accepts). It would especially have to meet Sontag's position, which she argues from premises that some of us may find persuasive because of our training in literature or humanities: that, like other forms of art, literature is "a form of consciousness" (1970, 44) and that it offers us the chance of "a wider scale of experience" (1970, 72). I don't attempt that confrontation here, though all of these essays lie behind much of what I can say. Informed discussion ought also to take into account a broad spectrum of feminist writing on the issue; my acquaintance with it is still peripheral. What I can do is respond in passing to Levi's paper as I make my own general and particular observations on Mormons and the erotic.

Levi's references to "Mormon attitudes" and the "dearth of sexuality in Mormon literature" do deserve more discussion. The "dearth" or "conspiracy of silence" does suggest that, as Lawrence would put it, we have "driven sex to the underworld, and nudity to the w.c." (1970, 175). I want first to examine two unhelpful kinds of Mormon talk about pornography; then, by way of some scriptural texts, to rethink such habits of talk; and last, to look at two Mormon literary instances that seem to display a prevalent attitude.

We are frequently, duly, and properly warned, over the pulpit in general conference, against the evil of pornography — an attitude Levi and I share, though we both also value and wish to allow a place for the erotic. But all too often, that evil is referred to in terms of poison, disease, or wounds. I will call this the fallacy of overextended or overcredited metaphor. Yes, pornography is dangerous, as are poison, disease, and wounds. But right where we most need clarity for any genuinely moral discussion of the problem, the metaphors cloud the issue. Yes, reading a *Silhouette Special Edition* romance or watching bare bodies simulate copulation on a screen is a kind of taking-in, but it is not the same thing as ingesting botulism toxin from a can of vegetables or catching a cold by a kiss or breaking skin on sharp glass. Each of these events begins a biochemical or physiological process that, unless decisively interfered with by other such processes, will proceed inexorably to its end: illness, bodily damage, death. But reading is an act of consciousness, a work of the spirit, a free act of a free agent; its consequences are not deterministically predictable, as far as my experience has shown. I may "ingest," by reading, a false analogy like the ones I am talking about; I may "eat" error. Yet I do not necessarily become erroneous; I can analyze and judge and even use the error to get nearer to the truth.

This line of thinking might help explain Jesus' startling declaration that "there is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him" (Mark 7:15). The occasion was a Pharisaic criticism of the disciples for eating without washing their hands; but this statement to "all the people" (v. 14) is categorical, a universal negative — "there is nothing." And for the puzzled disciples, Jesus' explanation does not stay in the ritual or physiological domain but shifts emphatically into the moral (vv. 17–23). His point seems to be that because we are free agents, nothing can defile us but what comes "from within, out of the heart" (v. 21).

Mormon talk on this topic (and I don't pretend to an exhaustive survey) seems to me to have reached a high point of moral clarity and wisdom with Elder Marvin J. Ashton's October 1977 conference talk, "Rated A." Elder Ashton seems to me to keep agency in mind and at least some of his language moral by talking about "choosing . . . habits" (p. 71) and by recommending knowledge of the good, of "things that are lovely, wholesome, and praiseworthy" (p. 73), as the best defense against evil. I sometimes amplify this idea for my students in this way: If we are free, and if, because of that, what comes out of us defiles us, then we must watch what we choose, and watch the rewards our choices bring us. If I choose to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* for sexual titillation, my choice corrupts me, and my reading will reward that choice in a way that will begin to confirm a habit of such choices. I am obliged to try to know my motives and to choose my actions carefully. I cannot blame a book for what happens to me if I choose to read it for prurient reasons. What corrupts me comes out of my heart.

Not moral talk but metaphorical, porn-as-poison talk may lie behind the attitudes of those students Levi describes whose "cloistered virtue" will not allow them to "test their character in the vicarious arena of literature" and who he fears "will go on assuming that vice is unconquerable, that flight is the only weapon the righteous have against evil." Certainly, if they believe words about the erotic are poison, they must believe avoidance is their only chance: they cannot tell the moral difference between Joseph in Potiphar's house and themselves in a literature class. But having said that, I will say, too, that I think young Mormon students should exercise their right not to read, on the good and fairly clear moral ground that they may not be prepared to make the judgments that will help them avoid porn-reading habits. What looks to Levi or to me (or even to Milton) like "fugitive and cloistered virtue" may well represent quite valid self-knowledge.

Besides unhelpfully metaphorical talk about porn, our culture sometimes employs inadequate, inaccurate, or incomplete definitions. Both Levi and I risk this. But consider a definition proposed some years ago by a colleague of mine: that pornographic writing is any verbal representation of sexual parts or intercourse. What do we mean by "representation," and in what context, with what intent, what tone, what degree of "explicitness"? Nothing tests a definition like examples; so consider a series from the Bible. I know: the oldest "liberal" ploy in the book. But I mean to do it a bit more seriously than I've ever seen it done.

1. Genesis 4:1: "And Adam knew Eve his wife . . ." Does this "represent" sexual activity? Surely, for us who know how to read, it does denote it. And if, as I believe and would even insist, this does invite us to imagine an act of sexual intercourse, must we call it pornography? By the proposed definition, "any verbal representation," yes. But I will say no and will explain why later.

2. Genesis 19:30-36: Lot's daughters conspire to "lie with" Lot. This does look more "explicit" in its denotation of sexual acts, or at least intentions. What is more, those acts are illicit, even forbidden because incestuous. Does that make this episode pornographic? Again, no.

3. Genesis 29:23: Jacob “went in unto” Leah. Depending on how we read the phrase — and how we read, as you see, is all-important — this may seem either less or more “explicit” than the previous instance. It also surely “represents,” or invites us to imagine, a sexual act; yet again I will not call it pornographic.

4. I could go on with Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, David and Bathsheba, and others, but I skip to the text my children in seminary have been advised not to read: *The Song of Songs* which is Solomon’s (esp. 1:13; 2:16–17; 4:1–7). Without needing to quote, since the pages are familiar to most of us from our teens, I must say that here, though it is often veiled in metaphor or obscured in translation, we have so much more “explicitness” that for centuries Christians have piously taken this as “allegorical,” a representation of the relationship between Christ and the Church rather than a celebration of human sexual love. It may well be both. Again, I’m reluctant to call it pornographic, though it is keenly erotic and often does seem intended to arouse positive feelings about sex. (Not always; compare 3:1–5 with 5:2–7.)

5. Ezekiel 23:1–49: a chapter of evidence that at least one of the holy prophets, as Levi surely knows, was not at all “sexually reticent.” In this chapter we must find “the word of the Lord” (v. 1) itself obscene, indeed, almost literally “pornographic” in the root sense, since it describes in gross bodily detail the whoredoms of the sisters Aholah and Aholibah, which represent the spiritual whoredoms of Samaria and Jerusalem. Must we at last accuse God himself of inspiring pornography? On the definition proposed, yes. But not quite, I would say, because of the tone and intent. Here, one of the most explicit biblical references to sex seems clearly intended to arouse not lust, nor any positive feeling toward sex, but disgust, utter and enraged revulsion against the spiritual promiscuity of those wayward sisters. The chapter divinely “does dirt on” faithlessness by using lewdness as its metaphor.

It should be clear by now that as a definition of “pornography,” a phrase like “any verbal representation of sexual parts or intercourse” won’t do. I suggest that any “pornographic event” may involve three elements: a porn author, a porn text, and a porn reader. In fact, it seems to me that the porn event seldom requires all three, though it always requires one: just a porn reader. Porn author and porn text make the event more likely but do not inevitably guarantee it.

Now some definitions, keeping in mind the root sense of “pornography”: writing about whores; descriptions of their parts or activities, usually intended to attract customers.

A porn author is one who verbally represents sexual activity intending sexual arousal in readers, usually as an inducement to buy something (a whore’s services, more porn, a deodorant).

A porn reader is one who reads for sexual arousal or titillation. Some read the Bible this way — a home teaching companion told me he had seen a missionary’s Bible with red underlining every passage that could possibly be construed with sexual meaning, though it’s possible this represented a research interest. But perverse reading is not an argument for banning or burning that or any other book. What comes out of the heart defiles us.

A porn text is any text which represents people engaged in sexual activity in such a way that they become mere outlines, collections of the names of body parts and secretions and functions, become nothing more than words about sex, totally or largely abstracted from the full dimensions and mystery of human personality and connection. All literary characters, of course, are collections of words and sentences; but the people that porn “characters” invite us to imagine “have sex” rather than “make love.” They do things *to* one another’s parts, take pleasure *from* one another, but do not make anything *with* or *for* one another except nervous excitement, vasocongestion, tumescence and detumescence endlessly.

As far as I can tell, this definition accords with Sontag’s views that porn “is mainly populated by creatures . . . endowed with neither will nor intelligence nor even, apparently, memory” (1970, 53); “What pornographic literature does is precisely to drive a wedge between one’s existence as a full human being and one’s existence as a sexual being” (1970, 58); and that “the universe proposed by the pornographic imagination” reduces “everything into the one negotiable currency of the erotic imperative” (1970, 66; cf. 39–40). Like Elliott and Steiner, I cannot take Sontag’s attitude toward this terribly reductive universe.

This definition will also explain why I cannot find Levi’s story of Pickett and Pansy pornographic: Their creator does not compel me to watch in detail the privacies of their lovemaking; and even as rather comic caricatures — “grotesque” as Levi admits — they’re too human for porn, so I’m glad for them and guilty with them, amused and delighted by their affection and their quirky delicacy about bathing and about Pickett’s “dainties.”

Now to tease out some implications.

A porn text necessarily implies an antecedent porn author. (Innocent accidents do happen in words or sentences, as every freshman English teacher knows; but the result is usually laughter, not arousal.) And a porn text will tend to create a porn reader. When I read such a text (with any other than an unimaginably pure, disinterested, analytic or documentary eye), I risk becoming, while I am reading, at least in part the only kind of reader pornography normally defines for itself.

Certain dangers follow from this: (1) I may form a habit, get hooked on the stuff, find that I want more and more of it; (2) worse, I may begin to believe that my own body and others’ bodies, to say nothing of our several complicated strange selves, are little more than excitable parts watched over by detached, spectatorial minds; (3) worse still, I may seek, act in, and experience sexual relations as if these things were true, which is to make them true for me, and thus to substitute tumescence/detumescence for the problematic joy of knowing another, by reducing myself and someone else, in my mind, to nonpersons all too like the noncharacters in porn texts.

These three consequences are simply my elaboration of Elder Ashton’s remarks about the “habit” of porn. They are also, again, fairly consistent with Sontag’s analysis of serious porn, though for her “the transcendence of personality” (1970, 55; cf. 42, 44, 70) is not reduction but the expansion of

consciousness that porn offers which makes it a valid literary experience. One response to this argument is Elliott's: "In respect of pornography and nihilism, my consciousness has expanded enough. There are things I want not to know" (1971, 171).

Because we are free agents, none of these things is a *necessary* consequence of porn reading or of porn texts, but it would be hard to deny that such things can and do happen. Further, to recur again to Mark 7, it should be clear that intending to porn-read is itself something "from within, out of the heart," that defiles us. Prior encounters with porn texts may have established an appetite and formed a habit, but the intent is a matter of our choice, and the intent needs no more than curiosity to fuel it. The intent itself corrupts; the act rewards the intent and thus works to confirm it as a habit, breakable but dangerous.

From all of this it may begin to be clearer, too, why I find the poison or disease or scarring metaphors not only misleading but dangerous themselves: they all reduce us, in a way disturbingly like the way porn reduces us, to less than the fully personal, free, and moral agents that we are. Porn is a moral problem, and only moral language can begin to deal with it.

It should also be clearer now why I am unwilling to call any but perhaps the last of my biblical examples pornographic: none of them, not even the "explicit" Song of Songs, reduces its characters to body parts and functions, though the Lord in Ezekiel portrays Samaria and Jerusalem as sisters whose whoredoms tend that way. For us as readers, to know their erotic actions is to know these characters, these verbal representations of moral agents or persons in relation, more fully, not less.

Perhaps the richest example is the first: "Adam knew Eve his wife" (Gen. 4:1). We seriously distort this if we take *knew* as a translation of some sort of Hebraic euphemism. Further, if we try to make it more explicit, we reduce or vaporize its meaning. Adam "lay with" Eve? Adam "had intercourse with" Eve? Yes, but more than that. Adam "made love with" Eve? Yes, better, if we take that phrase seriously and not as just an English euphemism; but still more than that. Adam "had carnal knowledge of" Eve? Hopeless: the legalese derived from biblical usage hits even wider of the mark than four-letter words would. "Adam knew Eve": each knew the other as that single self God had blessed with body and breath; perhaps knew in a holy and holistic way quite beyond any additive account of physical attributes, character traits, thoughts, feelings, whatever; knew reciprocally and unboundedly in ways possible only to whole persons intimately joined.

It is a stunning paradox to find a word that seems *not* to say so much, actually *saying more* than could any word that seems to say what this word does not. There may be instruction here for writers: too much erotic naming, too much enumeration of parts and motions and functions will say too little; for me, Levi's moral-theological fabliau about Pickett is a positive demonstration of this principle. Maybe in writing of the erotic the minimalist slogan applies: less is more.

Because porn-texts and porn-reading may tend to preclude our having the experience suggested in "Adam knew Eve," porn is, as George Steiner says for

a somewhat different reason, “a massive onslaught . . . on the delicate processes by which we seek to become our own singular selves, to hear the echo of our specific being” (1970, 76). It is a severe threat to our deepest humanity and selfhood, which literature normally seeks to nourish and enrich, and to that godlikeness that scripture and modern revelation call us to.

As a teacher of literature and of writing, sometimes a writer of poems and stories and chapters toward novels, I see porn-texts and porn-reading as enemies of literature. And I also see literature — including the erotic as Levi urges, from the lyric to the farcical — and literate reading as our best personal and cultural defense. My advice, if anyone is asking, is simple:

1. Don't bother to read, much less buy, what is clearly packaged and sold as porn.

2. When you encounter porn in a book not so packaged and sold, decide carefully whether or not the book merits your continued and sustained attention. If you find yourself skimming, looking for the next bit of porn, better stop — you're out of control and defiling yourself.

3. Above all, don't read pornographically. The best way to take this advice is to put it in positive form (again as Elder Ashton did): learn to read literately; learn by reading literary classics and the scriptures attentively, deeply, repeatedly.

To read literately is difficult in any time and place. It is especially difficult in a culture (American and Mormon) which pays lip service to literacy but does not take it all that seriously. And literately to read the erotic is even more difficult in a culture nervously clinging to “the sentimental lie of purity and the dirty little secret,” as ours (American and Mormon) seems to be.

But there is an unsentimental truth of purity, and there is in sex a holy “great mystery” (Eph. 5:32). As man is not without woman nor woman without man in the Lord (1 Cor. 11:11), nor spirit without element in the fullness of joy (D&C 93:33), we ought to take care what we put asunder. Two Mormon literary instances may suggest the struggle it is to hold things together.

Carol Hofeling Morris's novel *The Broken Covenant* (1985) looked as if it might be a landmark in the history of in-house fiction, as indeed it must have been. For one thing, it was easily twice as thick as the average cotton-candy LDS romance or “Mormon mushie.” For another, its subject had several times the usual specific gravity. It is a novel of Mormon adultery; or, now the genre has been surveyed by Judith Armstrong (1976) and brilliantly illuminated by Tony Tanner (1979), a Mormon “novel of adultery.” Imagine Deseret Book publishing a novel that admits Mormons do commit adultery, and for what seem at the moment good and sufficient reasons, however swift and murderous the reflex of guilt. The admission was softened somewhat by the offender being a woman rather than a priesthood holder, and her partner in sin a somewhat artsy gentile. Still, there was that husband, a single-minded authoritarian goal-setting executive, as deadly dull a male chauvinist as the most rabid anti-masculist might contrive. And there was, even during the nearly fatal attack of guilt, the woman's terrific anger against all patriarchs up to and including God the Father. I'm still not sure Deseret Book knows what it has let loose on

the Mormon world. Yes, Kathy repents, though in a way not quite credible, depending on a fairly rusty old *deus ex machina*. But I suspect what stays with most readers is her anger and the gray negation of life that urged her to desperate, self-deceiving passion and nearly consuming hatred and depression.

Maybe this is all rather beside the point of examining a case of the “dearth of sexuality” in Mormon literature; and admittedly I am looking too narrowly at a novel that, however flawed in conception and style, was seriously meant and merits more literate reading. I meant to say just this: Deseret Book kept it clean. In this book in which sexuality, marital and extramarital, is the central issue, no one ever makes love. Or ever made it. It is as if that textual fact drove Kathy to her panicked one-night stand, the central moral and physical fact of which her bishop must name for her: she “had sexual intercourse” (p. 85) with someone not her husband. This book, or its editors, can’t allow anybody to be sensual or sexual; can’t allow anybody to be *any body* — except poor Kathy in near-suicidal depression, dragging her load of guilty, self-loathed flesh. Kathy and her passionless husband have had, in about two decades of marriage, “intimacy” or some sort of “physical relationship” (p. 159); and finally, on the verge of reuniting, Kathy wonders if they will yet “enjoy a moment of physical intimacy” (p. 278). I watched this language carefully. In this text, for sex to be pure — for it to be at all — it must occur only in abstraction: in the bishop’s kindly supplied but dry and (yes, appropriately) searing objective legalism of “sexual intercourse,” and in that remote adjective and blurry noun which do attain a sublimated conjunction in “physical intimacy.”

It might be ludicrous except it looks mortal. God does appear to “admire chastity for its own sake” (or so Jacob 2:28 seems to say). But here there is something trying to look like purity, and there is sex as sin or sex as contraceptive abstraction. The great mystery that has been shriveled into a dirty little secret is that we are sexual bodies. Lawrence would say that this sundering, this dualism, this hypocrisy, is what generates pornography, which in turn “do[es] dirt on” sex and on life itself (1936, 175–78), on the “man alive and live woman” (1936, 538) which he held holy above all. We ought not to have needed him to apprise us of that. We ought not to need a voice like his to warn us of the sickness in our own body ecclesiastic, which is signalled by statistics or anecdotes we don’t talk much about in public and have a hard time confirming in private: child sexual abuse, incest, levels of marital distress leading to adultery and sometimes to homosexuality — all suggesting that to make something unmentionable is not to overcome it at all but to give it the eruptive force of a water polo ball held three feet under.

My second instance (maybe redundant but I know it more closely) rather strictly confirms the implications of *The Broken Covenant*. In October 1978 my story “Three In the Morning — A Song for One Still Voice” won the All-Church Fiction Contest and before being published in the *Ensign* was bowdlerized, prudishly stripped of direct references to the bodies and skin of the husband and wife who are its main characters. The textual evidence is there for anyone to read in the March 1979 *Ensign* and compare with the more

nearly original version in *Greening Wheat* (Jorgensen 1983). At the end of the first paragraph, the *Ensign* text says that the wife “needs this placidity that he senses in every part. She lies still as water without a breath of air moving on it” (p. 57).

In my original text, the last two lines of the paragraph read: “this placidity that he senses with his whole body. Touched, her skin would lie still as water without a breath of air moving on it” (1983, 1). I wonder if the editors realized how risky the slightly archaic compromise (one of three I offered) in the phrase “in every part” might be, even as it labors to diffuse the husband’s “whole body” awareness of his wife. The most damaging change, though, was the deletion of the husband’s thought of touching his wife, which dulled the small but sharp conflict I had meant to establish here between his desire and his solicitude. I had meant to put a finer edge on that conflict by beginning the second paragraph with “But” (1983, 1) rather than the not at all oppositional “So” (1979, 57).

A larger hole was torn in the fabric of the story’s imagery and plot in the penultimate paragraph of the *Ensign* version, where the husband’s self-renunciatory act is repeated as a kind of ante-climax to his awestruck moment of private grace. There at least he was allowed to “kiss [her] on her temple” (p. 58), though it could no longer be “warm, pulsing” (p. 5), as one spot where her bodily life is most tenderly evident. He was permitted to smell “the faint odor of the vinegar she rinsed her hair with last night” (p. 58), but not to have it remind him “how she came from the shower, blossoming from sharp spray” (p. 5), and thus connect her with all the drenched and blossoming world that graces him with joy. Nor was he allowed to think the apparently heretical (and grammatically reckless though logically impeccable) paradox, “There is no loneliness like the body, nor any delight” (p. 5).

Once again, something has been sundered: a married couple of course love one another. But purely. Which is to say that (at least in approved fiction) they do not think of or delight in one another’s bodies, or in the one body that in love they may graciously make. That secret must not be let out lest it corrupt the young, or those whose deficient reading skills might put their moral inclinations at the risk of erotic imagination. One accepts the editorial policies of an official church magazine as those of any magazine. So I compromised, partly because I knew the story was so permeated with bodily, sensory joy that little short of total erasure could make it invisible, impalpable.

Yet doing so taught me something about myself. Though I may compromise, I cannot consent to be less conscious than I now am: conscious of language, of how fiction may work, of how it is, sometimes, by the grace of God and nature both, to be live man with woman alive. Denial of that secret, refusal to speak or write or hear or read it, or to let it be spoken or written or heard or read, may “do dirt on” a mystery that our theology suggests lies near the core of our being. And suppression may let it rage in its dirtied and demonic versions.

All of which should serve to declare again my general, though sometimes qualified agreement with Levi’s position: Eros has a place, many places, in

Mormon writing. Which is not at all to say, or even to suppose, that erotic writing might cure our sickness. There seems to be as little evidence of that as of its opposite.

I don't know; I suppose and I fear. As is appropriate before the taboos that guard either the vile or the holy.

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