

Forbidden Fictions



Pornography and Censorship in
Twentieth Century French Literature

John Phillips



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Note on Translations/Editions

All translations are mine, except where otherwise shown. In the case of the primary texts, English quotations are taken from published, English-language versions, currently available in the UK, except for *Récidive*, for which no English translation is in print. Page references following quotations are, therefore, to the French and English editions listed in the bibliography.

Chapter 6 analyses the unabridged version of *Emmanuelle*, which was not published in French until 1988. The extant English edition of the novel, first published by Grafton Books in 1975, is based on the earlier, abridged French version. Any page references following quotations in English are to this edition, whilst their absence indicates that the passage in question does not appear in the English edition and that the translation is, therefore, my own.

The analysis in Chapter 4 is of the first edition of *Histoire de l'œil*, upon which the Penguin translation is based.

1

The Erotic Novel and Censorship in Twentieth-Century France

French culture has long been perceived by the English-speaking reader as somehow more 'erotic' than Anglo-Saxon culture. This impression is partly due to the large numbers of pornographic publications which have been imported from Paris since the sixteenth century, first into England and later into the United States, but also to the peculiarly French association of pornography and subversion, hence the fascination that the genre has held for well-known and highly regarded writers from Rabelais to Robbe-Grillet. The choice of modern French (as opposed to any other nation's) pornography as object of study is, therefore, justified by the unique existence of this historical tradition of literary erotica, invigorated in the eighteenth century by the enormous popularity of libertine writing and in the modern period by the Surrealists, and later by Roland Barthes and the *Tel Quel* group, all of whom vigorously opposed censorship and were responsible for an intellectual fascination with the Marquis de Sade, which has had considerable influence on this century's artistic and cultural output.

In the context of such a plethora of erotic works produced by France over the last four hundred years,¹ this study, therefore, has two modest aims: to introduce a limited number of modern French erotic texts to the anglophone reader, and to help open up the long neglected field of erotic and pornographic fiction to serious and objective study.

If pornography has become one of the most hotly debated academic subjects of the 1990s, it is partly because it encompasses many different discourses – feminist discourses about the representation of women, Marxist discourses about cultural commodification, postmodern discourses about the identity of human culture and the human individual, and discourses about representation itself. And of course,

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pornography is provocative but sexy, controversial yet thrilling, even if for some, the thrill is less about sex than about power, the victory over the monster that others dare not even contemplate lest they recognise themselves in its image, or the satisfaction derived from defending the same monster against those who fear it because they don't understand it. As the nine works chosen for analysis will hopefully demonstrate, textual pornography is the most reader-centred of genres and it is this reader-orientation which makes the genre not only artistically innovative, but also socially subversive and, consequently, threatening to a political *status quo* founded on a conservative moral consensus.

This is a study of what we might agree to call 'literary' erotica, in order to distinguish it from the popular erotic novel as a separate genre, although the boundaries between the two are by no means clear, especially in the contemporary period. Pornography in general might be said to contain many elements characteristic of so-called popular fiction (for instance, erotic themes, violence, travel to exotic places, the extended use of colloquial, even vulgar language). Indeed, the tendency of the pornographic text to cross generic and cultural boundaries is part of its subversive character, unsettling the conventions and expectations associated with social and cultural stereotypes. However, if the novels discussed in this volume have a claim to be part of the literary canon, it is chiefly because they have a sophistication of form which makes them interesting on a textual as well as on a sexual level. On the other hand, the exclusion of pornography which lacks such formal properties can in no way be taken to imply that such writing is less socially or morally acceptable. As we shall see later, the notion of 'artistic value', so widely employed to defend erotic and obscene writing in the court cases of the 1950s and 1960s, is no longer relevant in a debate about freedom and responsibility.

Even within the category of so-called 'literary' pornography, a severely limited choice had to be made, dictated mainly by the need to introduce English-speaking readers to some of the acknowledged landmarks of modern French eroticism as well as to some exciting examples of 'transgressive' writing. The nine novels discussed in this volume are representative of the

highly transgressive character of twentieth-century French pornography, dealing as they do with masturbation, voyeurism, fellatio, cunnilingus, masochism, paedophilia, buggery, coprophilia, lesbianism (from a male point of view), troilism, multiple rape, bestiality, sadistic violence and murder. Regrettably, many pornographic works that others might consider masterpieces of literature, such as Louis Aragon's *Le Con d'Irène*, Jean de Berg's *L'Image*, Pierre Guyotat's *Éden*, *Éden*, *Éden*, Pierre Klossowski's *Les Lois de l'hospitalité* or Bernard Noël's *Le Château de Cène*, do not have a place here; this is because, with the exception of Guyotat's apocalyptic novel, which is largely unreadable for all but the most conscientious of readers, they do not, in my view, represent a turning point in the evolution of modern French erotic literature.²

Individual works apart, I have also excluded discussion of a whole category of erotic fiction, lesbian erotica. This is an important sub-genre of the erotic, including the work of many well-known and highly regarded authors – Colette, Violette Leduc, Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous, for instance, have made significant contributions to erotic writing by and for lesbians in France. It is, in my view, however, a form of eroticism best commented on by female critics.³

The novels which have been selected for discussion are, in almost equal number, by male and female writers (five by men, four by women, the additional male-authored work being by the gay activist, Tony Duvert). Four of these texts (*Les Onze Mille Verges*, *Trois Filles de leur mère*, *Histoire de l'œil*, and *Histoire d'O*) figure in the list of the twelve most pornographic French works of the century, drawn up by the writer and critic, André Pieyre de Mandiargues.⁴

In this introductory chapter, I shall first attempt to define the terms 'erotic', 'pornographic' and 'obscene' in the French context in particular, but also in relation to the wider debate on sexual representation and censorship presently going on in the English-speaking world. I shall then briefly summarise the evolution of French erotic writing in this century and the censoring forces which have attempted to suppress it before examining the main arguments currently advanced for and against censorship. The chapter will end with a brief résumé of subsequent chapters and some concluding observations.

Definitions

'Pornography,' Alain Robbe-Grillet once remarked, 'is what other people find erotic.'⁵ Robbe-Grillet's remark captures perfectly the subjectivity of any distinction between erotica and pornography and suggests the difficulty of precise definition. Others make a virtue out of this difficulty, preferring to abandon the attempt to define altogether. This seems to be Catherine Itzin's position, when she approvingly cites Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's infamous remark, 'I can't define pornography, but I know what it is when I see it.'⁶ Such disregard for scientific objectivity, surprising in a serious academic like Itzin, is hardly desirable in a debate generating so much emotion that clear thinking and the proper definition of terms is especially important, whatever the difficulties involved. Let me, therefore, at least attempt my own definition of 'pornography' and 'erotica', but first it is necessary to consider the etymological and cultural history of these terms and of the associated notion of obscenity.

In antiquity, the word 'pornographos' bore little relation to our contemporary notion of pornography as writing or images aiming to arouse sexually, since it merely denoted a type of biography, 'the lives of the courtesans', which was not necessarily obscene in content.⁷ In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that the dictionary definition of the word was widened to include 'the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art'⁸ and began, therefore, to assume a pejorative meaning.

The etymology of the word 'obscenity', by contrast, is dubious. Its modern definition of 'indecent' or 'lewd' is preceded by the archaic meaning of 'repulsive' or 'filthy' (*OED*). Some recent commentators have suggested that the word originally meant 'off the scene', in other words, referring to actions in the classical theatre which were too shocking to take place 'on stage' in full view of the audience.⁹ What all of these definitions have in common is their subjective basis, for what is 'repulsive' or 'shocking' to some will not be so to others. Moreover, when used in a sexual context, the word reveals a profoundly negative attitude to the sexual functions and to sexual pleasure. For Susan Sontag,