



*(Following materials taken from issue #16 of THE NEW YORK QUARTERLY, editorial on PORNOGRAPHY, EROTICISM AND CENSORSHIP)*

THE SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY defines obscenity as "inauspicious, filthy, indecent". As such, obscenity (from the Latin: "out of the scene") includes two other separate elements it is important to distinguish between -- pornography and eroticism.

Pornography comes from two roots: PORNE which means a prostitute and that which pertains to fornication; and GRAPHE which means a picture, painting, or writing. It is significant that commerce seems to be inextricable part of this definition inasmuch as "prostitute" implies love object for hire, for money. Eroticism, on the other hand, has more interesting history: mischievous imp child god Eros who was winged youth born of Chaos, or son of Aphrodite. While eroticism is seen as mischievous and childlike, it is also curiously mercurial and is integral part of the regeneration mysteries, cycle of fertility and harvests and seasons. Eros is thus incidentally essential aspect of very highest poetry, Dionysian tragic view of life.

One test of the intention of any work is to ask: how much is at stake? In pornography, all that is at stake really is the price of admission and/or fee paid to actors or models or authors who turn out the stuff. The sexuality is held at arm's length so we can leer at it and be sated. With eroticism, a great deal is always at stake: author or actor or artist has allowed us to enter into an experience of his or her own sexuality, to share in crucial risk of sexuality.

---

Early court rulings have always been aware of crucial distinction between pornography and eroticism in art. Probably most famous case involved importation of ULYSSES by James Joyce into United States. December 1933, same week as repeal of Prohibition, Honorable John M. Woolsey, U. S. District Judge, rendered historic decision lifting the ban on ULYSSES:

... in ULYSSES, in spite of its unusual frankness, I do not detect anywhere the leer of the sensualist. I hold, therefore, that it is not pornographic. For his attempt sincerely and honestly to realize his objective has requisited him incidentally to use certain words which are generally considered dirty words and has led at times to what many think is a too poignant preoccupation with sex in the thoughts of his characters. The words which are criticised as dirty are old Saxon words known to almost all men and, I venture, to many women, and are such words as would be naturally and habitually used, I believe, by the types of folk whose life, physical and mental, Joyce is seeking to describe.

Counsel for claimant in this case, RANDOM HOUSE, was Morris L. Ernst, who commented:

The ULYSSES case marks a turning point. It is a body-blow for the censors. The necessity and circumlocution in literature has been eliminated. Writers need no longer seek refuge in euphemisms. They may now describe basic human functions without fear of the law.