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FOR DAN,
WHO PUT UP WITH IT

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION



IN PART III OF *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver visits the kingdom of Balnibarbi, whose citizens have fallen under the spell of the ridiculous schemes cooked up in the Academy of Lagado, the capital city. The result is universal misery. As an unhappy local nobleman tells Gulliver,

The professors contrive new methods of agriculture and building, and new instruments and tools for all trades and manufactures, whereby, as they undertake, one man shall do the work of ten; a palace may be built in a week, of materials so durable as to last for ever without repairing. All the fruits of the earth shall come to maturity at whatever season we think fit to choose, and increase an hundredfold more than they do at present, with innumerable other happy proposals. The only inconvenience is, that none of these projects are yet brought to perfection, and in the meantime the whole country lies miserably waste, the houses in ruins, and the people without food or clothes.'

Eager to see the source of the blight, Gulliver is given a tour of the pernicious Academy, where, in the school of languages, he encounters the silliest scheme of all:

Since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. . . . [M]any of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by *things*, which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a greater bundle of *things* upon his back,

unless he can afford one or two strong servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like pedlars among us . . . ?

Swift's satire was aimed at the Royal Society, established in 1660, which had debated even farther-fetched plans than this one. Fortunately for the welfare of England, the dreams of its "sages" generally went unheeded; otherwise, the nation might soon have been plunged into the wretchedness of the imaginary Balnibarbi.

Some silly ideas, however, have long, stubborn lives; among the stubbornest (and silliest) is the notion that "words are only names for things." Swift mocked it two-and-a-half centuries ago, but it still survives—much to our detriment and confusion. If the proposition were literally true, we would of course be unable to talk about such abstractions as "freedom" and "justice"; the fact that we do go on talking about them, even laying down our lives in their service, suggests that we know how complex the relation between words and things can be. There are certain words, however, that habitually cause trouble because their unstable, shifting connection to things gets either ignored or denied. "Love" ranks at the top of this list, but "pornography" comes in a close second.

If a modern-day Balnibarbian sage wished to chat about "pornography," he would have to tote a formidable bundle of *things* on his back. First, he would need a few frescoes from Pompeii, along with a selection of statues, necklaces, amulets, and the like. Buried by Vesuvius in 79 A.D., exhumed by a project begun in the early eighteenth century and continuing today, these relics inspired curators and cataloguers to coin the term "pornography"—quarrying the word from Greek, though the ancient Greeks (who, it seems, painted explicit sex scenes at every opportunity) would have had no idea what "pornography" was supposed to mean. The works of Catullus, Juvenal, Martial, Suetonius, and several other Roman authors would also have to be loaded on, because though the Romans saw nothing objectionable in them, a later age called them "pornography."

The Middle Ages would contribute sparse pickings, but much of

Chaucer would join the pile, along with Boccaccio and Margaret of Navarre. Most of Renaissance literature deserves packing in, including (as the Bowdler clan discovered) great chunks of Shakespeare. As we move toward our own time, the sage's bundle comes to resemble a universal anthology. Just about every Jacobean and Restoration play would be found "pornographic," and though the Earl of Rochester knew nothing of the word, his name would become virtually synonymous with it. As for the ephemera of those days, Pepys acted presciently when he burned his copy of *L'Ecole des Filles*, "that it might not be among my books to my shame."

The eighteenth century provides, along with the first Pompeian relics, a book so quintessentially "pornographic" that it would not be legally sold in the United States until 1966, more than two hundred years after its initial publication—John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, better known as *Fanny Hill*. Not to be outdone, France furnishes the legendary Donatien-Alphonse-François, Marquis de Sade, whose voluminous complete works belong in the collection, if not also his very name. But in addition to these notorious cases, much of eighteenth-century fiction and a good deal of its pictorial art would get bundled up. Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, Rowlandson, and Hogarth in England; Prévost, Rousseau, Fragonard, and nearly everything French—all were described as "pornographic" at some later time. Swift, too, of course: it would surprise later generations to learn that Gulliver made three voyages, not one, and that he doused a Lilliputian conflagration by pissing on it.

When we reach the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, we can leave off enumerating the works our bent-backed sage will need by him. Everything written, drawn, or otherwise portrayed that was not of a strictly informative or instructional nature (and even a good deal of that) must come aboard. For we have entered the great age of "pornography," when the word was invented and the past was scoured to locate those books and pictures that had been "pornographic" all along without anyone knowing it. Now the burden gets multiplied by the parallel invention of new media, each of which contributes its "pornographic" share. Indeed, as time goes on, books—the definitive "pornographic" medium since the Renais-

sance—slip gradually into irrelevance, until by the late twentieth century, the bundle will be taking on practically nothing but photographs, films, videotapes, and even telephone messages. As far as bulk is concerned, however, the poor Balnibarbian will obtain small relief from the dropping of books. According to the 1986 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, the output of pornography had boomed fearfully in only the last sixteen years, reaching an annual volume of nine billion dollars in the United States alone. All this, too, must join the bundle if the sage wishes to express himself on "pornography"—and the discussion hasn't even begun yet.

In *The Secret Museum*, I might have taken on the silliest of Balnibarbian tasks—to trot out everything that has ever been called "pornography" and attempt to discuss the word by displaying those *things*. If I had done this, I'd still have been a step ahead of most commentators on the subject, who evidently believe that the *things* they see before them are "pornography" as it is now and must always be. But I've attempted yet another step—to recognize that "pornography" has named so many things during the century and a half of its existence that any statement of what it means now must degenerate into nonsense within a very short time. In the mid-nineteenth century, Pompeian frescoes were deemed "pornographic" and locked away in secret chambers safe from virginal minds; not long thereafter, *Madame Bovary* was put on trial for harboring the same danger. A century-long parade of court cases ensued, deliberating the perniciousness of *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and scores of other fictions, many of which now appear routinely on the syllabi of college literature courses. All these *things* were "pornographic" once and have ceased to be so; now the stigma goes to sexually explicit pictures, films, and videotapes. It would be laughably egotistical to suppose that our parents and grandparents called the wrong things "pornographic" out of blindness or stupidity. It would be equally stupid to think that we, at long last, have found in our X-rated images the *real* pornography. Given the history of the word, it seems likely that future generations, if they use the term at all, will mean by it something quite different—something as unimaginable today as *Debbie Does Dallas* was fifty years ago.

In the chapters that follow, "pornography" appears most often within quotation marks, as a sign that what is being talked about is not a thing but a concept, a thought structure that has changed remarkably little since the name was first applied to it a century and a half ago. "Pornography" names an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue, a perennial little melodrama in which, though new players have replaced old, the parts remain much as they were first written. By taking this approach, I have sought to escape the fate of the Balnibarbian sage, crushed under a monstrous bundle of things that have little in common except that they were once, or are now, called "pornographic." In *The Secret Museum*, I have talked a good deal about the paintings, books, and pictures that have instigated battles over "pornography," but I have devoted less attention to the things themselves than to what was thought and felt about them—the threat they posed, the victims they claimed, the usually self-appointed rescuers they galvanized. *The Secret Museum* is not a history of pornography; it is a history of "pornography." There is a considerable difference.

With surprising uniformity, arguments about "pornography" for the past hundred and fifty years have boiled down to a pair of assertions: "This is pornographic" and "No, it isn't." "This" may be a book, a photograph, a film, or virtually anything else, from *Ulysses* to a decorated deck of cards; it hardly matters. Both sides in such arguments have agreed that there is something in the world properly called "pornographic"; they differ only on the merits of whatever is up for debate at the moment. As a result, despite hundreds of books, pamphlets, picketing campaigns, and court trials, confusion is endemic. Legal history teaches that *Ulysses* is not pornographic, *The Well of Loneliness* is not, even *Fanny Hill* and *Secret Museum of Anthropology* are not, but it fails to provide any guidance as to what this elusive thing really is. Attempts at definition have not been wanting; they pile one on top of the other, each tinkering with the last and leaving flaws for the next to tinker with, but none has come closer to pinning down the thing than Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's unjudicial bleat: "I know it when I see it." If no one could define a skunk more closely than that, campers would be in trouble.

The real existence of any *thing* ought to be thrown in doubt by the failure of several generations' efforts to define it. That this has not

happened with “pornography,” that indeed the struggle gets fiercer as reality resists, indicates clearly enough that desire, not logic, is at work—a desire so imperious that no default of logic can slow it down. This desire is also called “pornography,” and *The Secret Museum* tells its story.

CHAPTER ONE



ORIGINS

WHAT DOES “pornography” mean? The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1975) gives a single, apparently decisive definition: “Written, graphic, or other forms of communication intended to excite lascivious feelings.” Etymology suggests that the word is as old as Western culture: “From Greek *pornographos*, writing about prostitutes.” There is something strange about this, though it need not be troublesome. Most modern writing about prostitutes seems intended to excite feelings of indignation or compassion, not lasciviousness. Prostitutes still endeavor to excite their clients’ lust, but—nowadays, at least—writing about prostitutes seldom tries for that effect. Yet it is not hard to imagine a past time, a more primitive one, when whore writing sought to do exactly what whores did. As an ancient word, “pornography” would naturally show traces of its oldest meaning, an identity that time has split apart.

If we go back a few decades, however, we find that the opposite is true. The fifty-year project of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reached “P” in 1909; its definition of “pornography” is, oddly, more complex than any later one. The first meaning, surprising to a modern reader, comes from an 1857 medical dictionary: “a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene.” Modern readers are familiar with this kind of whore-writing, but the last thing we would call it today is “pornography.” The OED’s second definition is somewhat more up to date: “Description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons: hence, the

expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art." It seems strange that this, a close approximation of what we now mean by "pornography," ranked second in 1909 behind a definition that now is completely outmoded. The vocabulary is outmoded, too: we seldom use the word "obscene" nowadays, and "unchaste" never. And though we may still have some recollection of a time when literature and art were called "pornographic," that time is far behind us. Instead of starting out simple and turning complex with the passage of time, "pornography" seems to have moved in reverse, growing perversely from multiplicity to oneness.

If we go back further, an even stranger thing happens: "pornography" disappears. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 jumps from "porkling" to "porosity" with nothing in between, an unaccountable leap if the Greeks already had a word for it: *pornographos*. In 1857, "pornography" meant something very different from what it now means; in 1755, "pornography" meant nothing at all. The inescapable conclusion is that, sometime in the century between 1755 and 1857, "pornography" was born. But it must have been already ancient at birth, rising from the grave instead of coming new into the world. Vampires are said to do this; so did "pornography."

Around 1710 an Italian peasant was digging a well in Resina, a small town south of Naples. He unearthed a mass of marble and alabaster, including fragments of *gallo antico*, the yellow marble prized by ancient Roman architects. Antiquarianism was not yet the rage it would later become, but Giovanni Battista Nocerino was well aware that this was no ordinary mud. Rich foreigners often paid high prices for *gallo antico* and alabaster; Nocerino sold his fragments to a local dealer who specialized in this taste. It was an especially profitable line around 1710, because southern Italy was at that time in the hands of the Austrians, represented by figures like Supreme Officer of the Guard Maurice de Lorraine, Prince d'Elboeuf. D'Elboeuf was building a villa at nearby Portici and was on the lookout for relics from the history of the country he had appropriated. Happening to visit the same dealer to whom Nocerino had sold his discoveries, the prince bought them. His

first purpose was to decorate his newly built walls, but soon he became interested in the archaeological value of Nocerino's find. He pensioned the peasant and bought his land, ordering the well dug down to a depth of sixty feet, where horizontal shafts were sent out in random directions. A few Roman artifacts were discovered, including a marble Hercules; they were restored in Rome and shipped back to Vienna, for the delectation of Prince Eugene of Savoy. But the depth of the excavation, and the solid rock that had to be cut through, made progress laboriously slow. When, after a couple of years, the trove seemed to peter out, d'Elboeuf's project was abandoned.

Not until 1738, when the Spanish had retaken Naples, was work resumed, at the direction of King Charles of the Two Sicilies. Other impressive objects were unearthed, and it was determined that Nocerino's well had plunged directly into the amphitheatre of Herculaneum, one of the three ancient cities buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. For a while, discoveries came so thick and fast that a museum was set up to house them—the Museo Borbonico ("Bourbon Museum"), named for the current ruling family of that unstable area. Again, however, the well ran dry. By 1745, Herculaneum having apparently failed, the excavators turned their attention a few miles to the southeast, where under a hill provocatively named *Cività* ("City"), Pompeii had to lie waiting. Digging at the new site proved much easier, since Pompeii had been engulfed in ashes and small stones—not, like Herculaneum, in a sea of mud that later petrified. Pompeii soon eclipsed Herculaneum as a source of excitement and treasure. In April 1748, the first intact fresco was discovered, in what proved to be an ancient dining room; later the same month a skeleton emerged, still clutching coins stamped with images of Nero and Vespasian.

For its first century and more, the excavation of Pompeii more nearly resembled a circus than a modern archaeological dig. On many occasions, when a notable find was made, it was buried again in order to be refound before the eyes of some visiting noble personage. In the earliest days, thievery was common; even when objects were carefully transported to the Museum, so little was

known about how to preserve them—delicate frescoes in particular—that very often they were damaged beyond repair. Systematic excavation did not begin until the appointment of Giuseppe Fiorelli as head of the project in 1860. It was Fiorelli who first rationally mapped the city—so that the original location of an artifact would not be forgotten as soon as it had been removed—and who established the practice, still in use today, of preserving most finds in place, “instead of ripping out the more spectacular and leaving the rest to disintegrate.”¹ Despite haphazardness and rapacity, however, the gradual unveiling of the Vesuvian cities made a profound impression on the imagination of Western culture. It was de rigueur, of course, for tourists to visit the Museum and take a day trip to the excavations. Meanwhile, those unfortunates who had to stay at home could find in a thickening swarm of guidebooks and catalogues, often with lavish illustrations, a convenient substitute for firsthand experience.

Among the stay-at-homes was eighteen-year-old Thomas Babington Macaulay, who nevertheless, in 1819, won the chancellor’s gold medal at Trinity College, Cambridge, with his poem “Pompeii.” After a strained description of the ancient catastrophe, Macaulay exhorted a modern visitor:

Advance, and wander on through crumbling halls,
Through prostrate gates and ivied pedestals,
Arches, whose echoes now no chariots rouse,
Tombs, on whose summits goats undaunted browse,
See where yon ruined wall on earth reclines,
Through weeds and moss the half-seen painting shines,
Still vivid midst the dewy cowslip grows,
Or blends its colours with the blushing rose.²

This prizewinner offers no glimpse of the future historian’s genius (the goats are especially embarrassing), but it does sum up current clichés about Pompeii, jumbling together observable facts and fanciful Gothic views of Roman ruins. Most typical is the young Macaulay’s labored juxtaposition of the ancient and the new, the

dilapidated and the fresh: amid scenes of neglect, the “half-seen painting,” eighteen centuries old, is as vivid as this season’s rose. For Pompeii’s early enthusiasts, the fascination of the place came from its eerie immediacy, the sense that ancient and modern worlds had met face to face.

An 1830 guidebook put it this way:

But the most astonishing thing is that this city, which was surprised by an unprecedented eruption and disappeared from the face of the Campania, as if by magic, in a few hours, still preserves all the identifying marks of recent human activity and existence. Palmyra, Babylon, Rome, Athens, Canopus—all have nothing to show us but ruins that bear witness to the slow progress of years and the traces of pillage by barbarians who, like violent storms, have left on them the signs of their passage. Pompeii, on the other hand, looks like a city deserted a few moments ago. It is as if the citizens had all flocked to one of those religious festivals that used to draw whole nations, and that were so characteristic of paganism.³

To an age deeply versed in classical literature, Pompeii offered the compelling spectacle of an unmediated vision. Here was no cold collection of white marble, no venerable hoard of texts encrusted with centuries of commentary. At Pompeii, tradition had been short-circuited; the actual color and texture of ancient life were on display, complete with all the trivial accoutrements that literature disdained to mention.

Of course there were lessons to be drawn. In his immensely popular novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Edward Bulwer-Lytton made an obvious point:

Pompeii was the miniature of the civilisation of that age. Within the narrow compass of its walls was contained, as it were, a specimen of every gift which luxury offered to power. In its minute but glittering shops, its tiny palaces, its baths, its forum, its theatre, its circus,—in the energy yet corruption, in the re-

finement yet the vice, of its people, you beheld a model of the whole empire. It was a toy, a plaything, a showbox, in which the gods seemed pleased to keep the representation of the great monarchy of earth, and which they afterwards hid from time to time the wonder of posterity,—the moral of the maxim, that under the sun there is nothing new.⁴

Despite its frivolous tone, Bulwer's conclusion had ominous implications. It was widely believed (the belief is with us still) that the Roman Empire had fallen on account of internal depravity; monitory analogies with modern corruption had been commonplace since Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88). Pompeii was buried three centuries before Rome “fell,” at a time when the Empire had in fact been at the peak of its vigor; but among its relics was an embarrassingly large number that seemed to document a moral laxity far more extreme than even the bitterest satires of Juvenal had suggested. If modern civilization resembled its Pompeiian predecessor in any way, it was in a perilous state indeed.

From very early in the excavations, objects were being unearthed that presented a special problem to the authorities. Already in 1758, for example, rumors circulated that “lascivious” frescoes had been found; not long thereafter, a particularly outrageous artifact turned up—a small marble statue, highly naturalistic in style, representing a satyr in sexual congress with an apparently undaunted goat. This distressing artwork, under special orders from King Charles, was entrusted to the royal sculptor, Joseph Canart, with the “strict injunction that no one should be allowed access to it.”⁵ Evidently, the order was not strictly obeyed, because in 1786, in his *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, Richard Payne Knight referred to the statue, “kept concealed in the Royal Museum of Portici,” as “well known.”⁶ No doubt the procedure was already in operation, as it remained two centuries later, that a gentleman with appropriate demeanor (and ready cash for the custodian) would be admitted to the locked chamber where controversial items lurked; women, children, and the poor of both sexes and all ages were excluded. Make-

shift in origin, this method of segregation worked well enough to be extended to the *lupanaria* (brothels) that were uncovered from time to time as the digging went on.

The plan was less practicable, however, for the authors of guidebooks and catalogues. They were faced with the awkward choice of omitting such objects and places from their accounts—thereby rendering them incomplete—or of somehow mentioning the unmentionable. The former course was taken by Sir William Gell, whose *Pompeiana* (1824), a supposedly comprehensive guide to the city, claimed to be the first work of its kind in English.⁷ Gell managed to get through two thick, heavily illustrated volumes without once letting on that anything untoward was to be found either among the excavations or in the Museo Borbonico. His foremost English successor, Thomas H. Dyer, performed the same feat in his anonymous contribution to the *Library of Entertaining Knowledge* in 1836.⁸ Forty years later, however, perhaps because *lupanaria* had gone on being discovered with some regularity, Dyer felt obliged to cast a brief glance at one of them. “We cannot venture,” he snippily remarked, “upon a description of this resort of Pagan immorality. It is kept locked up, but the guide will procure the key for those who may wish to see it.”⁹ As one might expect, Continental guides were less reticent, though only slightly so. Writing in 1830, three years after the first Pompeiian *lupanar* had been unearthed, Charles Bonucci laconically summed up its aura: “The neighboring chamber was devoted to licentious scenes; its paintings indicate this only too clearly.”¹⁰ In 1870, commenting on the same unwholesome room, Ernest Breton made a similar observation: “The coarse paintings which decorate this place evidently indicate that it was intended for the most shameful debaucheries.”¹¹

Popular guidebooks could afford their reticence; suitable tourists (gentlemen) would be able to fill in the gaps without much trouble. This was less true, however, for catalogues of Pompeiian artifacts, since comprehensiveness is among the main reasons for issuing a catalogue in the first place. Following the lead of the Museo Borbonico, which began publishing official catalogues in 1755, a number of similar compilations appeared, in all European languages,

during the subsequent century. These ranged from grandiose picture books in elephant folio, full of color plates and short on text, to multivolumed works packed with allusions to the classics.¹² The official catalogues came out in limited editions intended for an erudite, specialized readership. All other versions were based on them and often merely translated their commentaries. Unofficial catalogues, however, were intended for an audience which, though far from general by twentieth-century standards, nevertheless comprised readers who were able neither to visit Naples nor to read Italian. Such books therefore encountered a problem that could not be solved by the easy expedient of locking a gate.

Pierre Sylvain Maréchal's nine-volume catalogue of 1780, though it is not absolutely complete (the well-known satyr and goat are missing), contains enough eyebrow-raising plates to call for special comment by the author. The questionable objects were mostly representations of Priapus, god of generation and protector of gardens, whose worship was widespread in the ancient world and continued, under a thin Christian veneer, well into the eighteenth century in regions of Sicily and the Campania. Priapus can be identified by his gigantic erect phallus, often out of all human scale, which he brandishes because it is his essence. Maréchal did not segregate his Priapean engravings; he scattered them here and there throughout the work. But each time he came to one, he apologized for it: "Antiquated religious notions, just as much as libertinism, multiplied these images, symbols of generation and also of the universal cause of life. So extremes meet—or rather, in their customs, men change and differ! The simplicity and innocence of our ancestors found nothing indecent in objects which today make modest blush."¹³

Most of the time, like a faithful disciple of Rousseau, Maréchal was inclined to criticize his own age for having fallen away from an imaginary state of primal innocence to which the Romans were much closer:

Ancient relics . . . are full of objects so indecent, if we compare them to modern compositions, that the brush or needle of our

Artists hardly dares to reproduce them for us. Nevertheless, we should not take this as an opportunity to slander the customs of the people who left us such relics. One blushes, perhaps, only to the degree that one has strayed from nature; and a virgin's eye can linger with impunity on objects which arouse vicious ideas in a woman who has lost her innocence.¹⁴

Now and then, however, this rose-tinted view of the ancient past failed to account for the evidence. So Maréchal shifted his stance:

I know of no way to justify the Ancients in this cynical habit. Their imagination, inflamed by the lure of pleasure, desired that all objects, even the most indifferent and alien to this purpose, should remind them of what seems to have been the sole focus of their existence. Vases, lamps, everyday utensils, and the most necessary articles of furniture became, as it were, accomplices of their libertinism, by showing them its crude simulacrum. We must believe that articles shaped like this were intended only for bawdyhouses.¹⁵

Despite all appearances to the contrary, and despite his own predilection for the more "natural" ancient world, Maréchal could not bring himself to believe that the Romans spent their days amid a forest of phalluses. Such things were too highly charged to be dispersed throughout the environment. They had to be set apart, and the best place for them was a brothel.

This was the largest problem for early cataloguers of Pompeii. As the city gradually came into the light, it grew more and more obvious that images which a modern sensibility would secure behind locked doors had been indiscriminately on display there. Paintings of nude bodies, even in the act of sex, had been placed side by side with landscapes and still lifes, forming a jumble that mystified modern observers. Maréchal's first way out—that the Romans were childlike enough to gaze upon anything safely—hardly sufficed; it also failed to tally with the scarifying accounts of Roman debauchery supplied by Juvenal, Petronius, Suetonius, and others.

Maréchal's second escape route was taken fifty years after him by Bonucci, and by Breton forty years later still: any room where obscene paintings were displayed must have been devoted to obscene activities. This explanation worked well in some cases—*lupanaria*, for example, and nuptial chambers—but it would have become rather frightening if it had been extended to account for the erect phalluses found at many Pompeiian streetcorners, or the statues and paintings of Priapus that adorned the foyers of private homes. Confronting these unappealing alternatives, some commentators threw up their hands: "the inhabitants of Pompeii," sighed a cataloguer of 1842, "placed these subjects, repulsed by modesty, in the most conspicuous places, so widely did their ideas of morals differ from ours."¹⁶ In the twentieth century, it has been generally accepted that, for the most part, such images had a mystical function, free from incitement to lust. At the entrance to a home, for instance, Priapus served "to bring good luck and to ward off evil spirits."¹⁷ This solution was available to early cataloguers and sometimes invoked by them. Yet it, too, was inadequate to the real problem that underlay these confused haggles about Roman morality. The problem was purely modern: however the Romans might have responded to such representations, what was one to do with them *now*?

Of course, they could not be destroyed. Had they been of recent manufacture, this would have been the obvious expedient; but any relic of the ancient world possessed, merely thanks to its survival, a value that overrode the nature of the relic itself. Besides, it was essential to the charm of Pompeii that many of the objects found there had equivalents nowhere else. Perversely, this added value accrued principally to two classes of relics, the trivial and the obscene. Though both kinds had presumably been distributed throughout the Roman Empire, trivial things had mostly vanished in centuries of neglect, while obscene ones had succumbed to the zealous progress of Christianity. When it came to obscene objects, an unsettling inverse ratio applied: the more obscene an object was, the more liable it had been to destruction anywhere but at Pompeii, and the more necessary its Pompeiian preservation therefore became.

The matter was further complicated by the fact that mere preservation was not enough. Pompeiian artifacts were valuable because they formed a source of knowledge, and knowledge requires dissemination; somebody besides diggers and custodians had to view these things if their value was to be realized. While Pompeii was alive, anyone and everyone had had access to them, but from the moment the first obscene artifact was unearthed, it was apparent that the ancient and modern worlds differed drastically in this regard. Depending on their inclinations, early commentators condemned the one as debauched or the other as prudish, sometimes both by turns; but all agreed that the ancient system of organizing images—which amounted, it seemed, to no system at all—would never do in a later age. What was required was a new taxonomy: if Pompeii's priceless obscenities were to be properly managed, they would have to be systematically named and placed. The name chosen for them was "pornography," and they were housed in the Secret Museum.

It was in this context that a form of the word "pornography" first appeared in English print, in a translation of German art historian C. O. Müller's *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst* (1850). Late in the volume, Müller briefly alluded to "the great number of obscene representations . . . to which also mythology gave frequent occasion"; he dubbed the producers of such representations "pornographers" (*Pornographen*).¹⁸ The source of Müller's coinage was a unique instance in classical Greek of the word *pornographoi* ("whore-painters"), tucked away deep in the *Deipnosophistai* ("Learned Banquet") by the second-century compiler Athenaeus. Like the Pompeiian artifacts themselves, Athenaeus' influence had had to wait a millennium and a half to exert its full effect, though in a very different way from any he could have intended or foreseen. At about the same time Müller was digging him up to name a new category of art, others were drawing on him for an apparently remote purpose—the history of prostitution.

Among the many, mostly dry topics covered in the *Deipnosophistai* were the prostitutes of Athenaeus' day, on many of whom he is the unique surviving authority. He therefore earned special gratitude from the new scholars of prostitution, like the bibliophile Paul

Lacroix (1806–84), whose six-volume *History of Prostitution among All the Peoples of the World from the Remotest Antiquity to Our Own Time* (1851–53), published under the pen name “Pierre Dufour,” is certainly the longest, if not the most reliable, early work of its kind. For his discussion of Greek prostitution, Lacroix relied heavily on Athenaeus:

Athenaeus, who draws by handfuls from a heap of books we no longer possess, identifies by their surnames a great number of courtesans whose entire history is confined to these sometimes amphibolous sobriquets. He enumerates, with all the stolidity of a scholar unafraid to squeeze his subject dry, the names provided by his authorities Timocles, Menander, Polemon, and all the other Greek pornographers. . . .¹⁹

In this context, Lacroix employed “pornographers” (*pornographes*) in a more or less neutral sense: they were writers who had described prostitutes. A few pages later, however, freely paraphrasing his source, he explained the word’s ancient meaning:

We therefore believe that the artists who were called painters of courtesans (*πορνογράφου*), like the Pausanias Aristides and Niophanes mentioned by Athenaeus, did not restrict themselves to making portraits of *hetairai* and to representing their erotic academies. When the occasion arose, they did not disdain to paint a courtesan’s face, just as they painted the statues of gods and goddesses in the temples.²⁰

By retaining Athenaeus’ Greek, Lacroix sought to obscure any link between his own *History of Prostitution* and that other, disreputable form of “pornography.” His book was intended to join the *Deipnosophistai* among the “pornographic compilations,”²¹ but it did not at all resemble, said Lacroix, the works of those obliging artists who painted the whore herself as willingly as her portrait.

Instead of merely representing prostitutes, ancient pornographers had decorated them, thereby abetting the trade and allying them-

selves with it. The term “pornography”—“whore-painter” or “whore-writer”—is an ambiguous one, since it fails to specify on which end of the brush or pen the whore is to be found. Modern pornographers in the fields of artistic and social history struggled to tame a wanton word by insisting with wearisome frequency that they had remained untainted, and that readers who imitated them could do the same. In the long run, as we know, they failed: the whore in twentieth-century pornography is the maker or witness of the representation, not the person or scene represented. Perhaps there is something whorish about the very act of representing, since its product—a book or picture—is promiscuously available to all eyes, unless some outside authority restricts access to it. Any book or picture will give itself equally to all comers, and the author or painter, no matter how loudly he protests his good intentions, has no control over his work once he has made it public.

The 1864 edition of Webster’s Dictionary defined pornography as “licentious painting employed to decorate the walls of rooms sacred to bacchanalian orgies, examples of which exist in Pompeii.” Here, as is often the case with attempts to pin down this unruly word, Webster’s made its definition both too precise and too general. By no means all of the “pornographic” representations unearthed at Pompeii were intended to spur imitation in the flesh; not every ancient “pornographer” moved with the ease of Niophanes from painting images of licentious scenes to daubing the actors in them. Early commentators expended a great deal of effort—without much success—distinguishing what we may call “innocent” pornography, with its primarily religious or mystical import, from a less common, “guilty” variety, which may indeed have had the aim of inciting lewd behavior by representing it.

This rather profound difference, however, did not prevent the two kinds from being lumped together as “pornographic.” The old locked room at the Museo Borbonico (by then transformed into the National Museum of Naples) obtained its first systematic catalogue in 1866, under the title “Pornographic Collection,”²² but this gross designation, which sufficed for the museum’s custodians, only aggravated the difficulties of other commentators. M. L. Barré’s French

compilation of 1875–77, for example, reserved the “pornographic collection” for the eighth and last volume as the *Musée Secret*;²³ his introduction cited so many sources of value for these prohibited objects that an uninformed reader might have wondered why they were not the showpieces of the whole establishment. First of all, according to Barré, they gave unique evidence of the “regular or irregular, legitimate or illegitimate relations between the sexes.” Interesting in themselves, these relations held “the meaning and as it were the key of the most important and poorly understood events; they are, so to speak, the secret articles of a treaty, in which alone we often find its whole spirit.”²⁴

In addition, relics of this kind—“which one might call ‘pornographic Relics’”—helped to validate the claims made by ancient satirists. They established the impartiality of historians like Tacitus, whose accounts of imperial debauchery had often seemed purely malicious; they provided priceless information on “licentious poems or treatises” which had been handed down only in fragments or in secondhand summaries by the likes of Athenaeus. Even those relics for which no such excuse could be made would be rendered innocent if everyone involved, writer and readers alike, underwent a bizarre transformation:

Besides, the majority of the relics we are concerned with are truly chaste even in their obscenity, thanks to the artist’s strict intention and style, along with the sanctity of the ideas they are supposed to arouse. . . . Let us see these coarse representations through the eyes of those who dwelt upon the plains of Latium—ignorant and rustic people who consequently remained pure and virtuous even during the most elegant and depraved days of the Empire. . . .²⁵

Barré’s romanticized vision of ancient history was identical to Maréchal’s a century before him, but he pushed the myth to the breaking point. It is inconceivable that sophisticated French readers of 1877 could make themselves over into illiterate Roman peasants; it is equally inconceivable that Barré seriously expected them to do

so. Yet the fiction of such a conjuring trick was necessary, if these precious, poisonous objects were to be rendered safe.

Evidently mistrustful of his readers’ mental agility, and perhaps uncertain of his own, Barré concluded his introduction to the Secret Museum with the assurance that a battery of safeguards had been installed:

Even so, we have taken all the prudential measures applicable to such a collection of engravings and text. We have endeavored to make its reading inaccessible, so to speak, to poorly educated persons, as well as to those whose sex and age forbid any exception to the laws of decency and modesty. With this end in mind, we have done our best to regard each of the objects we have had to describe from an exclusively archaeological and scientific point of view. It has been our intention to remain calm and serious throughout. In the exercise of his holy office, the man of science must neither blush nor smile. We have looked upon our statues as an anatomist contemplates his cadavers.

Just as at the real Secret Museum, Barré’s printed version excluded women, children, and men lacking the price of admission. Without further aid, the high-priced sumptuousness of his eight volumes would have discouraged the last of these classes; but, books being sluttish as they are, Barré could not duplicate the case-by-case surveillance exercised by Neapolitan gatekeepers. Instead of money, therefore, he stretched out his palm for erudition—a less tangible currency, but one that had the virtue of scarcity among all three of the groups who ought not to see what the Secret Museum put on display.

Barré never let his own text stand alone; the pornographic cadavers were always “surrounded by a venerable retinue of ancient authors who explicate for us the profane debris of antiquity.” Their words had not been translated, for an obvious reason:

If we were treating another subject, we might be criticized for this extravagance of erudition; here, however, we will no doubt

be commended, just as sculptors are forgiven the overgrowth of foliage that sometimes screens the nudity of their human figures.²⁶

Of course the poor would be ignorant of Latin and Greek, as would all but the most exceptional women and children. Barré's volume, however, also contained engravings plain to even the least lettered mind. Disdaining fig leaves—which earlier illustrators had applied²⁷—his engravers had chosen a much stranger device:

Our draftsmen have obeyed an analogous rule; but instead of tacking on draperies or other accessories to their designs—which might have spoiled the spirit of the composition or distorted the thought of the ancient artist—they have restricted themselves to miniaturizing a few things. The truly erotic nudity of these rare subjects has thereby been stripped of the excessively crude and impertinent features that marked the originals. They have lost their importance; sometimes, without detriment, they have utterly vanished.²⁸

The result of this odd policy is that phalluses, naturalistic in the originals, taper off like uptilted icicles in Barré's engravings; while the actors in sex scenes have a plaintive look, since instead of genitals they are endowed only with patches of fog.

Barré's rather comical anxiety arose from a pair of dilemmas that haunted all those who wished to set up secret museums, especially in print. It is impossible to display things—as museums do—and keep them hidden at the same time; internal safeguards, no matter how ingenious, can hardly take the place of living gatekeepers. A second problem was even more troublesome. Any museum (or catalogue) gives publicity to its exhibits; if those exhibits promote lewdness, no amount of self-justification by the curator can dispel the impression that he is playing the role of pander. This is what Athenaeus' *pornographoi* did, earning centuries of scorn; later, scholarly pornographers could not rid themselves of the fear that to display pictures of whores was to encourage whorish behavior. The

word "pornography" contains this slippery ambivalence, and even the most restrained cataloguer of ancient obscenity was made anxious by it.

That whoredom, however, was metaphoric. During the same period when museum cataloguers were struggling in vain with these problems, another group of scholars was encountering them in literal form. In its characteristically fractious way, "pornography" was not content with a single origin; it insisted upon having two, which only gradually combined to produce our modern definition. The OED's first meaning is medical: "a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene." In this, the OED agrees with Littré's French dictionary of 1866, which defines *pornographe* ("pornographer") as "one who writes on prostitution" and *pornographie* as "(1) a treatise on prostitution, (2) a description of prostitutes in connection with public hygiene." Already in 1842, however, the Académie Française had certified *pornographe* in only a single sense: "one who treats of obscene subjects"; *pornographie* followed as "the production of obscene things." These rival definitions, which have become the basis of our modern ones, place second and third in Littré: a *pornographe* is also "a painter who treats of obscene subjects," and the last definition of *pornographie* is "obscene painting." In its second definition of "pornography" the OED attempts to make a connection between these two divergent lines: "Description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons; hence, the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art."

A large step is taken in that "hence"—exactly the step the cataloguers of the Secret Museum tried their best to forestall. The connection would have been even more dismaying to the earnest researchers who gave both Littré and the OED their first definitions of "pornography." These pornographers were mostly doctors and public-health officials, who saw prostitution as not only a historical phenomenon but also a present menace. They wrote books on the unsavory subject with the aim of stimulating public awareness; they hoped to alleviate an evil that, if it continued to be ignored, might turn lethal. They fell, of course, into the same quandary that en-

snared Pompeian curators: to shine light on dark corners makes those corners known and possibly seductive. If that were not enough, they also faced the disturbing fact that their own brand of "pornography" had a dubious founder, one who might deserve the label "pornographer" in the pernicious as well as the hygienic sense.

The meaning of "pornography" traveled a surprising distance during the nineteenth century, largely on account of historical amnesia on the part of those who used the word. Forgetfulness of the past is the most deplorable feature of twentieth-century arguments about the subject, but the trait was already visible in 1896, when Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote to his close friend Théodore Watts-Dunton, announcing a literary rediscovery. An omnivorous reader with a taste for obscurities, Swinburne was always burrowing through the neglected shelves of libraries. This time, he had dusted off a copy of *Le Paysan perversi* ("The Depraved Peasant") by the forgotten French novelist and pundit Nicholas Edme Restif de la Bretonne (1734–1806); some comments on Shakespeare had so forcibly struck Swinburne that he transcribed them for Watts-Dunton's benefit. "Is not the appreciation of Shakespeare simply marvellous in a contemporary countryman of Voltaire's?" The novel as a whole, however, was a different matter:

Yet I do not say I should recommend this his most famous work (as I believe it is) as a prize for proficiency in French to be competed for by English schoolboys. I cannot count the rapes, and nobody but the gifted author could possibly remember how to unravel the complicated webs of reduplicated and intertangled incest. And the moralist who treats the most atrocious and unnatural crimes and outrages of this kind (or rather of these two kinds, now combined and now distinct) as pardonable if regrettable lapses or momentary aberrations from the narrow way, which need not trouble the most sensitive conscience for more than a moment of atoning penance, winds up, apparently in conscientious earnestness, with the elaborate model of a communal association founded on principles and regulated by statutes which would have been rather too rigid for a colony of Spartans disgusted

with the licentious luxury of their native Lacedaemon. What a wonderful time—and country—it was!

A very different time and country, at least, from late Victorian England. Restif's blithe alternation between licentiousness and stern moralism, in which he seemed to sense nothing odd, mystified Swinburne, for whom the two attitudes were utterly irreconcilable. "Rape, incest, and the pox," he marveled, formed the basis of *Le Paysan perversi*, yet the book also contained chapters full of "good sense, just reasoning, right feeling, and . . . true prophetic insight." The conundrum was impossible: "And this critic, to whom we can find and cite no parallel before the coming of Coleridge and Lamb, was the writer who assumed, with modest dignity and manly confidence, the honourable title of 'The Pornographer.'" ²⁹

Restif was a puzzle to his contemporaries as well as to posterity. Meanly born, largely self-educated, he rose to prominence in the France of Louis XVI, weathered the Revolution, and survived to greet the dawn of the nineteenth century, meanwhile pouring out a seemingly inexhaustible flood of tracts, novels, and memoirs. His fiction, as Swinburne's response to his best-known work suggests, is licentious in the manner of Tobias Smollett or Restif's countryman Choderlos de Laclos. His name is often linked with that of the Marquis de Sade, though not so much on moral grounds (nothing in Restif comes close to Sade's excesses) as because they were bitter enemies, each accusing the other of corruption; both also imagined themselves to be social reformers. Indeed, when Restif called himself "The Pornographer," he was invoking his reforming side, not his literary one. And from his own point of view, he had no reason to apologize. "The Pornographer" was Restif's favorite title, and he took it to be strictly honorable; he had, in fact, invented it—at least he thought he had.

In 1769, Restif published a little book entitled *Le Pornographe* ("The Pornographer") which, in good eighteenth-century style, bore an exhaustive subtitle: *A Gentleman's Ideas on a Project for the Regulation of Prostitutes, Suited to the Prevention of the Misfortunes Caused by the Public Circulation of Women*. Near the end of his life, still in

apparent ignorance of Athenaeus, he explained the neologism: "*Pornographer*," he wrote, "is made up of two Greek words: *porne*, prostitute, and *graphos*, writer; it means *a writer on prostitution*."³⁰ Swinburne's astonishment that a man could call himself "The Pornographer" with dignity and confidence reflects neither Restif's perversity nor Swinburne's misunderstanding; it is the byproduct of the tangled history of a word.

Restif's pride in *The Pornographer* was somewhat justified; though there is no evidence that any government ever saw fit to implement its program, it was the first published proposal for the management of an age-old institution. In forty-five "articles," Restif outlined the operation of state-run brothels called *Parthenia*, where every aspect of the trade (except the sexual act) would be strictly supervised. He allowed broad liberty to the residents in the *Parthenia*—such as the right to refuse patrons who displeased them—but in the end it was male desire that ruled, even if its means sometimes became ludicrous. Restif viewed the regulation of prostitution as only a part—and a rather trivial one—of a general program for cleaning up urban life. In the conclusion to *The Thesmographer* (1789), he put prostitution in its place:

O public administrators! Forbid carriages in cities; allow horses to go only at walking pace; prohibit dogs and birds; admit only those dogs which are absolutely necessary; punish with disgrace and a fine all men and women who make idols of their cats; establish the *Parthenia* from *The Pornographer*, so that no *fille publique* appears in the streets or at the window; make their base condition useful after its fashion. . . .³¹

Window-dressing was Restif's chief aim; for him, prostitution was no more serious a problem than crowded streets, and "public girls" were hardly distinguishable from house pets. From the perspective of later works on *The Pornographer's* subject, his recommendations were both impracticable in substance and offensively flippant in tone.

Slight though it was, however, *The Pornographer* remained for

sixty years the only significant work of its kind. As late as 1836, Restif's first important successor, the irreproachable Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet (1790–1836), reluctantly placed it "at the head" of all discussions of prostitution, though he had to lament its reflection of his precursor's inveterate "levity, which characterizes his numerous publications."³² No one could accuse Parent of that failing; his two hefty volumes *On Prostitution in the City of Paris, Considered with Regard to Public Hygiene, Morals and Administration*, the fruit of eight years' research, were so fiercely serious that, in effect, they invented their subject all over again. Parent's credentials, like his style, were impeccably dreary: a doctor and a member of the Paris Municipal Sanitation Department, he had made his reputation with several monographs on sewers and drains. The very look of *On Prostitution*, with its aggressively scientific organization and plethora of charts and tables, would have stifled any doubts as to its author's intentions. Yet in introducing his subject, Parent felt obliged to confront those priggish souls who might find it (and him) scandalous. In a rare burst of eloquence, he made a provocative analogy:

If I have been able, without scandalizing anybody, to enter cesspools, to handle putrid substances, to spend part of my time in refuse dumps, and to live, as it were, in places that the majority of men would close off as degraded and disgusting, why should I blush to open up a cesspool of another kind (a cesspool filthier, I assure you, than all the rest), in the reasonable hope of doing some good by examining it in all its aspects?³³

Parent's death at forty-six, in the year *On Prostitution* was published, invites some doubts about the physical side-effects of his probing. But he remained, as he insisted, morally unstained.

Indeed, the underground quality of both his lines of work inspired in Parent an intensity of self-righteousness that the most straitlaced of his readers could hardly have rivaled. Touching pitch had not defiled him: "Because I devote myself to research on prostitutes, must I necessarily be stained by contact with these unfor-

tunate women?"³⁴ And should anyone accuse him of licentiousness, Parent had a crescendo ready: "The usefulness, I would almost say the necessity, of undertaking this labor has shown me that I must speak frankly; I have done so. I am treating a serious subject and addressing sober people; it has been my duty to call things by their names and to march straight toward my goal."³⁵ The leering smirk of his foremost predecessor must have haunted Parent as he wrote these repetitive self-defenses; if, two generations after *The Pornographer*, an air of lewd frivolity still clung to writing about prostitution, Parent was determined to dispel it.

Usefulness, necessity, frankness, sobriety—the assertion of these staid attributes calls up, like ghosts at noon, their opposites: frivolity, luxury, innuendo, drunkenness. Parent's tactics had the lamentable potential of reminding his readers—who might not have thought of it on their own—that there were other stances he could have taken, other ways his book could be read. Parent had many reasons for laying such heavy emphasis on his detached attitude and hygienic intentions, but one of them surely was that these were the only things that distinguished him from Restif or any other old-time roué. He had visited brothels at least as often as they and knew much more than they could have known about the private habits of prostitutes among themselves. Point of view was everything: prostitution itself had not changed much since Restif's day, but this modern aficionado, with notepad in hand and constable by his side, carried in his head a different desire. Perhaps it was the invisibility of this difference—invisible, that is, unless he declared it—that led Parent to wax so eloquent on the subject of his mental cleanliness. Perhaps it was this reason, too, that caused him to return obsessively to his pet analogy between sewers and prostitution.

Parent's reinvention of pornography quickly came to seem like invention; Restif's *Pornographer* was forgotten, and a new field of study was founded, with Parent as its leader. In England, traditionally the belated imitator of French innovations, Parent's volumes spurred what one recent commentator has called "a flurry of local surveys," including Michael Ryan's *Prostitution in London, with a Comparative View of That of Paris, and New York* (1839) and J. D.

Talbot's *The Miseries of Prostitution* (1844).³⁶ For the most part, these early works were hasty, ill-informed, derivative of Parent and of each other. They were superseded for once and all, in 1857, by William Acton's *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities: with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils*, the first thoroughly researched pornographic study in English. Acton's facts and figures, along with his recommendations, were original; but his title and methods harked back to Parent, as did his rhetoric.

Today, Acton (1814–75) is chiefly famous, or infamous, for his remark, in a book published the same year as *Prostitution*, that the "majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind."³⁷ However typically Victorian this statement may be, or revealing of Acton's personal illusions, the attitude it implies is not that of *Prostitution*. There, Acton adopts Parent's stance of reasoned, scientific detachment, dispensing with his predecessor's nervous assurances that unsavory research need not taint the researcher. Twenty years after Parent, the burden of reproach had fallen upon the hypocritical public:

It is high time for us to get the better of "a fear that starts at shadows." The word RECOGNITION may sound very dreadful, and be regarded by many as the precursor of a coming deluge of continental immorality. But what is the real fact? Is not recognition already accorded by society? Who are those fair creatures, neither chaperons nor chaperoned, "those somebodies whom nobody knows," who elbow our wives and daughters in the parks and promenades and rendezvous of fashion? Who are those painted, dressy women, flaunting along the streets and boldly accosting the passers-by? Who those miserable creatures, ill-fed, ill-clothed, uncared for, from whose misery the eye recoils, cowering under dark arches and among bye-lanes? The picture has many sides; with all of them society is more or less acquainted.³⁸

Acton showed none of Parent's skittishness about his own reputation. He opposed the French system of licensing prostitutes but strongly advocated the Contagious Diseases Act (1864), which au-

thorized justices of the peace to order the medical examination of women suspected of prostitution. The jurisdiction of the first Act was confined to eleven garrison towns; the second (1866) strengthened the first, and the third (1869) extended it to cover six additional municipalities. In the 1870 edition of *Prostitution* and till the end of his life, five years later, Acton propagandized vigorously for the extension of the Act to cover the whole population, in civilian as well as military areas. But popular resistance (and apparent ineffectiveness) won out; the Acts were repealed in 1886.³⁹

By Acton's time, Restif's levity had become inconceivable, and even Parent's self-defensiveness was passé. Occasionally, however, as if his subject demanded it, Acton turned distinctly Parentesque:

What we have to do is to close the approaches to this deadly swamp—to drain it, and to fill it up, and at the same time to disinfect its foul malaria streams, and prevent them from overflowing into purer soil—to diminish its power for mischief—to stop aggregations to it—to withstand its extension. To do all this, we must take its measure, probe its depths, and accurately experience and understand its nature. We must look at it ourselves, and call the attention of others to it; we must discard euphemisms, and call it by its true name; we must prescribe the method of treatment, appoint its limits, and subject it to rule. What is this but recognition?⁴⁰

Though in Acton's version the scene had turned somewhat tropical, Parent's unruly metaphors were still in operation: vile, insidious fluidity that clear eyes and straight talk would render harmless. Indeed, perhaps impelled by his metaphors, three years after the publication of *Prostitution*, Acton triggered a lively public debate by writing a letter to the *Lancet*, later reprinted in *The Times*, complaining about the "wretchedly imperfect" drainage of a house he had rented at Brighton.⁴¹

When hygienic pornography reached the United States, it brought its metaphors along. In his *History of Prostitution* (1858), Dr. William W. Sanger, resident physician of Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Is-

land, introduced his subject with a declaration which, to a specialist, must have sounded hackneyed: "Though benevolence may at times lead its devotees through scenes where moral purity is shocked, and to neighborhoods where filth and obscenity violate the very air they breathe, there is no contamination to those whose motives are good."⁴² "Has not the hour arrived when truth will speak trumpeted, and when her voice must be heard?" Dr. Sanger went on,⁴³ ignoring the fact that, across the Atlantic, truth had been trumpeting for more than twenty years. However, despite his threadbare rhetoric, Sanger's methods—much like Parent's and Acton's—were sound, and his research was thorough. He went somewhat further than his precursors in directing attention to the causes of prostitution as well as its effects, and he introduced a new dimension into pornographic literature—history.

Actually, the title of Sanger's book is misleading, since a third of it is a statistical study of prostitution in contemporary New York City. But the first chapters intend to give a full survey of the oldest profession from the earliest times until the present moment. In this, Sanger departed from Restif, Parent, and Acton, for all of whom prostitution was eternally rooted in human nature; for them prostitution had no history, since though its trappings might have changed with time, its essence was always the same. Like a good American, Sanger imagined that this social evil could be not only controlled but eradicated. He was therefore able to conceive of prostitution as a truly historical phenomenon—one that had passed through various phases of development and would reach an end. No doubt unwittingly, however, Sanger's optimism had the peculiar effect of compromising his patently sincere moral probity. It brought him up against a much older form of pornography than the hygienic kind.

When he came to the Roman part of his *History of Prostitution*, Sanger first threw up his hands in horror. "The walls of respectable houses," he wrote, mindful of the Pompeian excavations, "were covered with paintings, of which one hardly dares in our times to mention the subjects. Lascivious frescoes and lewd sculptures, such as would be seized in any modern country by the police, filled the

halls of the most virtuous Roman citizens and nobles." This indignation was commonplace but irreproachable; shortly thereafter, however, Sanger's imagination ran away with him:

A young Roman girl, with warm southern blood in her veins, who could gaze on the universal pictures of the loves of Venus, read the shameful epigrams of Martial, or the burning love-songs of Catullus, go to the baths and see the nudity of scores of men and women, be touched herself by hundreds of lewd hands, as well as those of the bathers who rubbed her dry and kneaded her limbs—a young girl who could withstand such experiences and remain virtuous would need, indeed, to be a miracle of principle and strength of mind.⁴⁴

Nothing more deplorable could have been dreaded by the cataloguers of the Museo Borbonico than that they might inspire in their readers overheated fantasies like this. Yet this dream came not to a woman or a child or a poor man but to a medical doctor, who retailed it under the same injunctions to purity the cataloguers themselves had employed. Dr. Sanger was not personally to blame; he did his best under impossible conditions. Already by the time he wrote, the pornographic field had been staked out, and he merely tumbled into one of its many boobytraps.

Though the metaphors were different, in its fundamental structure the dilemma that faced Dr. Sanger was the same as that which plagued the first cataloguers of obscene antiquities. In both cases, a subject of study was dangerous and valuable at once: attention had to be paid to matters which, if they had lacked hygienic or historical worth, would properly have been kept out of sight. Both kinds of early pornographers felt compelled to dig up things that had lain buried for centuries—not only exposing them, but also making them public to an extent never possible before. At the door of a brothel, or of the Naples Museum, guards could inspect visitors; in the middle of the eighteenth century, when Restif's *Pornographer* and the first Pompeiian catalogues were published, limited literacy combined with the high price of books to guarantee that the po-

tential danger of certain subjects would never turn actual, because only proper eyes would see them. A century later, theoretically at least, anyone had access to such books. Writers no longer enjoyed the luxury of external restraints on their audience; now, if risky things were to be talked about, and if the old hegemony of mature, affluent men was to be maintained, the restraints had to be internal—that is, somehow set up within the books themselves.

To some extent, the nineteenth-century development of professional specialization served as a replacement for crumbling barriers of sex and class. So long as surveys of prostitution appeared only in medical journals, and so long as Roman depravity was exposed only in tomes that no one but well-to-do antiquarians would buy, the gentlemanly enclosure remained unbreached. But it was characteristic of early pornographers that, though they shielded themselves behind these walls, they strove at the same time to break through them. Acton's plea for "RECOGNITION," in shrill capitals, is a case in point: he wrote as a doctor, but his campaign could not succeed unless it was joined by a larger audience than the medical one. He therefore ran the risk of promoting the evil he sought to cure, as a reviewer of *Prostitution* saw:

Although a scientific investigator may be called upon to detail the results of his experience, and although the *littérateur* may find his end in giving photographic representations of filth and low debauchery, and although this may stimulate the really good to exert themselves for the amelioration of vice, yet, to the sensual, the vicious, the young and inexperienced, these scientific books thus popularized are too liable to be converted into mere guide-books to vice, or to afford amusement to the prurient fancy of the depraved; and thus, as it were, they hold a candle to the devil, by suggesting means and appliances for vicious indulgences which otherwise might never have been thought of. . . .⁴⁵

The same specter haunted the authors of Pompeiian guides and catalogues: the best way of insuring that these books would do no harm would have been to leave them unwritten—an alternative

never mentioned by writers on most subjects, but invoked by early pornographers with an earnest persistence that made it impossible not to ask the question "Why did you write this?"

Few other books present themselves so emphatically as acts of will; in few other books is the author's motive of such central importance. All such works were the products of what Michel Foucault calls "an institutional incitement" to speak about sex, "and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail."⁴⁶ The ultimate aim of this incitement, according to Foucault, was neither a censorship nor a taboo but a "policing" of sex, its regulation through "useful and public discourses."⁴⁷ To make the discourse of sex public was to make it susceptible of control; to risk danger was to define danger and render it beneficial by gauging and channeling its energies. The two forms of pornography we have been looking at in this chapter played important roles in staking out a "specific field of truth" about sex;⁴⁸ by choosing not to keep silent, their authors took unwitting part in "the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself"⁴⁹—a multiplication that has continued at a dizzying rate to the present day.

In this case, however, the impersonal, infallible movements of Foucaultian "power" are less pertinent than the confusions and contradictions that beset the early speakers of pornography and that still bog down anyone who ventures upon that miry field. Foremost among these is the bewildering interplay of speech and silence: from the point of view of the early pornographers, it was a good thing that centuries of silence had been broken, yet by speaking out they burdened themselves with the impossible task of regulating both what they said and who heard them. Certain things never talked about before had to be mentioned now, but only in certain ways and to certain people; if this discourse became general, the consequences would be far worse than those of silence. Professional jargon and lumps of Greek and Latin were of some help; most pornographers, however, put their trust in something less palpable—the intention of the writer and the attitude of the reader.

They make a dreary chorus, these tirelessly repeated exhortations to sobriety and detachment. Like any protesting too much, they have the effect of holding their opposites always in view, refusing to let writer or reader forget that intoxication and arousal are equally possible—indeed, easier and more amusing—states of mind. Such reiterated declarations also shift the site of value and danger away from the representation itself and onto the ineffable subjectivities of the representer and his audience. The effect was the same in both genres of original pornography: prostitutes and Pompeiian relics became, in themselves, morally neutral, impotent to do good or ill. All depended instead on how they were portrayed and on how the portrayal was received. The same statue might be a cadaver for one observer, lewd flesh for another; if any control was to be imposed, or any evaluation made, the intangible realm of the author's and reader's intentions had to be entered, since the object before one's eyes gave no clue as to its impact.

In the mid-nineteenth century, writers on prostitution or ancient art could be relatively sure that their books would not fall into improper hands. Even so, as the reviewer of Acton's *Prostitution* said, a well-to-do, well-educated man might also be prurient and depraved. The best hope an author had of enforcing an attitude in his readers—a faint hope, but the best one—was to demand it of them explicitly. The demand was treacherous, however, and not merely because the author could not hover at the reader's elbow to make sure it was fulfilled. It flew like a boomerang; the reader had to imitate the author, whose calm and serious frame of mind also had to be asserted. Yet, as Acton's perceptive reviewer went on to ask, who would ride herd on the author?

The extent of prostitution is very imperfectly known, and Mr Acton has rendered a service by discussing the subject, and furnishing us with an account of the evil. It is, nevertheless, to be regretted that the author should have allowed himself to introduce sensational matter into his history of a most repulsive subject; letters from Belgravian mothers and their respondents, culled from the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, were quite unnecessary.

Still more objectionable are highly coloured autobiographies of women of loose character, or picturesque descriptions of evenings spent at Cremorne and elsewhere.⁵⁰

The evening at Cremorne had been Acton's own. He visited the notorious Chelsea gardens, "on a pleasant July evening," with the stern intention of taking notes on "the demeanour of London prostitution," and nothing in his rather disgruntled account would suggest any lapse from sobriety on his part. Nevertheless, in contrast with the rest of *Prostitution*, Acton's style in this passage tends toward lushness, as if he found it a relief to turn from gray statistics to the evocation of actual sights and sounds:

As calico and merry respectability tailed off eastward by penny steamers, the setting sun brought westward hansoms freighted with demure immorality in silk and fine linen. By about ten o'clock, age and innocence, of whom there had been much in the place that day, had seemingly all retired, weary with a long and paid bill of amusements, leaving the massive elms, the grass-plots, and the geranium-beds, the kiosks, temples, 'monster platforms,' and 'crystal circle' of Cremorne to flicker in the thousand gas-lights there for the gratification of the dancing public only. On and around that platform waltzed, strolled, and fed some thousand souls—perhaps seven hundred of them men of the upper and middle class, the remainder prostitutes more or less *prononcées*.⁵¹

A writer's pleasure animates this scene, which goes on for three more pages in a modern edition—pleasure taken and pleasure offered. Aside from the slight chance that an unimaginably ignorant reader, somehow encountering *Prostitution*, might have learned from it that Cremorne existed and immediately hailed a hansom, Acton could hardly be accused of providing occasion for vice. Yet his claim to absolute sangfroid put him in a vulnerable position. Like his fellow pornographers—and, like them, probably unaware—he invited an inspection of his motives and feelings at every moment. He had required detachment from his reader and used himself as

the model to follow; if he slipped even once, he was compromised.

The stance was impossible to sustain. The very fact that a writer had chosen obscenity as a subject, instead of something innocuous, would impugn him. But "pornography" as a field of discourse was mined from the start with impossibilities, not the least of which was that it turned writers and readers alike into amateur psychologists, who never asked what an object was, only what was meant by it. From the start, "pornography" named a battlefield, a place where no assertion could be made without at once summoning up its denial, where no one could distinguish value from danger because they were the same. The reason we now use a relative neologism—and a learned one at that—to designate a class of objects most commentators take for eternal is that "pornography" names an argument, not a thing. We have always had obscenity, at least as long as we have had a scene of public, reportable life that requires a zone of darkness to lend sense to it by contrast. But the zones got jumbled about a century ago, as one dark area after another was reclaimed from forgottenness, mapped, and thrust into the light. "Pornography" had its origins, around the middle of the nineteenth century, in the two specialized fields we have considered in this chapter. They were the first to dig up the obscure old word and to begin the exploration of its manifold, maddening ambivalences. Even among specialists, however, the word "pornography" was never common, and if it had remained their property, the world at large would not have learned it. But those specialists were part and parcel of their culture; the tensions they responded to reached outward into the world around them—tensions that found their proper forum when "pornography" ceased to be a technical term and went fully public.

It was when contemporary art joined in the pornographic battle that the modern concept of "pornography" had its origin. From Chapter 3 until the end of this book, that will be our subject. Now, however, we need to investigate the various ways "pornography" was dealt with in the pre-pornographic era—those centuries before the nineteenth, when obscenity existed in plenty but did not yet go by its modern name. The development of the modern concept

entailed the wholesale reorganization of the past to make room for a category the past had not recognized. The project was begun at the Secret Museum and in its catalogues: the Romans had displayed their "pornographic" objects in what seemed the most unlikely places; modern classifiers had to rip them from their Roman street corners and entrance halls and group them under a single heading. Gradually, the project of regrouping was undertaken with the relics of all ages, giving rise eventually to the twentieth-century fantasy that pornography has always been a fact of life, and that the past always dealt with it as we do.

CHAPTER TWO



THE PRE-PORNOGRAPHIC ERA

THOUGH THE NINETEENTH CENTURY invented "pornography," it did not invent the obscene. All cultures known to us, even the most ancient, distinguish classes of acts and objects according to some opposition of public against private, proper against improper, or clean against dirty. There has never been a society—until our own—in which all representations were available equally to any observer at any time. That we are rapidly approaching such a condition (or have reached it) is the result of complex social transformations: rising literacy, increasing urbanization, and the accelerating incitement to control all things, especially the forbidden, by making them subjects of discourse. Ironically, in the movement toward promiscuous representation, "pornography" stands not as a roadblock but as an important stage of progress—a sort of shadow zone between highly selective darkness and indiscriminate light. It is by no means an unequivocal gain that all things should be displayed to everybody; nevertheless, it seems undeniable that this is the direction in which Western culture has been heading for the last two centuries at least. If we wish to understand the post-pornographic age we live in, we should first encounter the pre-pornographic age, the time (most of human history) when the standards of who should see what were very different from those our great-grandparents have bequeathed us.