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This problem of immoral art is one that is ever cropping up, centering for the moment round one work or another which puts the vague principles involved in that problem into public focus. There are two aspects to the problem. The first is the abstract philosophical one which consists in the discussion of the relations between art and morals, the aesthetic problem of ethics, if we may so call it, or, putting it the other way, the ethical problem in aesthetics. I am not now concerned with this problem. My object is to discuss the practical problem based upon these two elements — the problem of pornography, we may say.

Should government or any authorities control or supervise the exercise of literary or artistic faculties, having regard to their possibly evil influence on the reading, seeing or hearing public? If so, on what bases will that supervision work?

We will take the problem as concerned with literature. The only classification admissible in literature, which concerns this problem is into literature proper and mere obscene writing. That obscene writing which is the script

equivalent of, say, obscene photographs, in which the only possible justification is obscenity, belongs palpably to a different species than the writing which is literary and in which either obscene elements are superimposed on the literary substructure, or inextricably interwoven with the artistic substance thereof. So that, if authorities are to interfere in this problem, they have to proceed, first, on a palpably aesthetic basis.

The question, as all questions, is of degrees. There are works which are palpably only obscene and not literary at all, such as those pamphlets, we have just named, which correspond in written manner to the obscene photographs which we also cited in parallel. And there are, at the other end, products like “Venus and Adonis”, like so many classical poems and prose-works; the difficulty is greatest when we meet with high works of art which are, not only immoral, but frankly apologetic for some species of immorality.

It cannot be claimed that the artistic elements involved absolve and extirpate the immorality of the work. Of the two kinds of public that read, one, the lower, does not see the artistic elements and enters into the significance of only the

immoral elements contained in the work of art. The other portion of the reading public, that portion which is sensitive to artistic influences, and able therefore to effect a separation between the two kinds of elements which are, by hypothesis, involved in the kind of artistic work we are discussing, is not very far from the other public in reference to effects, for, if the work be really a high work of art, and the immoral elements therefore not foreign to the substance of it, but inextricably wound up with it, these immoral elements are brought all the more into prominence, inasmuch as they gain intensity, beauty and fervour through the artistic way they are put.

“Venus and Adonis” is very likely to excite sexual feelings in a feebly educated person; but it is, if anything, still more likely to excite them in a highly educated or highly-sensitive one. The very artistic superiority of the work ensures that effect. The principle that “to the pure all things are pure” is pure fireworks; there are no “pure”.

If we wish to prohibit the sale of immoral art, we cannot do so without prohibiting art at the same time. The problem is especially difficult when we have to consider non-extreme works, that is works which are not palpably superior from the artistic standpoint, but which also are not pure obscenity, mere obscenity and no more. When we are at the Shakespeare level, we all more or less agree that it would be tantamount to violence to prohibit the circulation of immoral literature. When we are at the literary level correspondent to the obscene photograph, only the traders in it will not agree to its suppression. But when we are round the popular novelist level, the problem becomes very difficult. To a certain extent works on a literary par with Mr. Hall Caine’s or Miss Marie Corelli’s are literature; though they are unremaining literature — though several people, indeed, might claim for them a superior level. If such works convey obscenity or immorality, what is to be done to them?

The central fact is that the problem is elsewhere and its solution rendered impossible until we decide to see that some classification of publics must be entered into, before any light at all breaks into the discussion.

For the essential difference between the uneducated and the educated reading of, say, “Venus and Adonis” is that, though both educated and uneducated are very possibly sensually excited to the same degree while reading the work, the after-influence differs, special cases and morbid ones being, of course, not considered. A little after finishing “Venus and Adonis”, the uneducated reader who has not been bored but kept interested by the sexual part of it, remains under the influence of that part of it which interested him, and that is the sexual

one. Whereas the educated reader, once past the momentary excitement of the work, remains rather under the influence of the artistic elements.

The second distinction to be effected is between adult and non-adult public. An adult is held to be one who is able to shift for himself, which a child is not. So that, in this field, the problem becomes simple: the reading of immoral works, of whatever kind they be, should be forbidden to children, but permitted to adults.

Among adults, the distinction follows: there are the educated and the uneducated ones, and the latter are, to a certain extent, in the position of children. So that, if prohibition is to some extent to be decided on, it should be extensive only to the uneducated part of the public. The question of how that is to be effected is quite secondary and solvable, if only approximately, in several ways.

1914?

Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias. Fernando Pessoa. (Textos estabelecidos e prefaciados por Georg Rudolf Lind e Jacinto do Prado Coelho.) Lisboa: Ática, 1966: 57.