# JOHN MACKWOOD SOME REFLECTIONS ON 'OBSCENITY'

WHAT is 'obscenity'? In common parlance it is generally held to imply something which arouses sexual desires together with a feeling of disgust. It would add to the usefulness of any definition to include the term sensual, since this would permit the inclusion of all prepubertal erotic phenomena together with the skin and internal organ-feeling tone that is essentially sensual as opposed to sensuous.

Naturally any mixed state of consciousness of attraction and repulsion involves conflict; and such a conflict may be present in the agent, the observer, or in both. But the account so far given is not an explanation and does not get us very far. Still less is it a definition; and it is noteworthy that there are no practical definitions of obscenity, so that English Statutory Law even fails to provide one, offenders being charged with 'indictable misdemeanour', without any clear explanation of what that implies. The generally accepted test in the Courts is based on that laid down by Chief Justice Cockburn in 1868, who defined it as a tendency 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences'. Imagine the Gilbertian confusion that could arise in skilful argument between Counsel as to which individuals had this depraved tendency!

Havelock Ellis in an Essay on 'Obscenity' recalls how Sir Archibald Bodkin, for many years Director of Public Prosecutions and a zealous prosecutor of 'obscenity', appeared as the Representative of Great Britain at an International Conference, which met at Geneva to discuss 'The Suppression of the Circulation and Traffic in Obscene Publications'. A Greek delegate suggested the desirability of first defining the meaning of the word 'obscene'. Sir Archibald objected, on the score that there was no such definition in English Law, and it was unanimously resolved, before proceeding further, that 'no definition was possible' of the matter which the Conference was called together to discuss.

The fact is that obscenity evades strictly legal definitions. It could certainly be said to lie within the province of Religious jurisdiction, but religious definition of the term would prove to be even more confusing for practical and scientific purposes because 'obscenity' is clearly a psychological concept. So far the word 'tendency' provides the most fruitful of possibilities in the matter under discussion, for tendencies are biological phenomena. Henri Bergson has pointed out in Creative Evolution that the deployment of evolutionary changes of Nature are sheaflike and open out into more and more divergent patterns. He warns us how we tend to limit significance, if we form our categories too strictly by the mere collection into groups of individuals possessing similar characteristics, and how much more fruitful it is to observe and categorize those individuals who stress certain characteristics shared by a larger group. For Bergson the primary biological dualism is that of Instinct versus Intelligence; and this point of view provides us with a psychobiological conflict in the making—something biologically natural. This conflict is the basis and essence of human cultural development.

Human nature has changed and progressed so far from its origins in the animal kingdom that its genes transmit tendencies which can no longer be accurately described as Instincts. Today we speak of instinctual impulses. These, few in number as observable phenomena at birth, quickly and steadily liberate new attitudes and tendencies that interact with increasing complexity and deliver into consciousness human character-traits and dispositions which develop with body-growth, emotional responses, and mental perception. Any traumata, whether physical, mental or emotional, that cause blocking or slowing down of any component of development in general, will cause some degree of dissociation or dislocation in the ego-development and will necessitate defence mechanisms which will cause later distortions and complexes of motor expression and behaviour.

To return to the meaning of 'obscenity'. Usually we are fairly safe to turn to literature for generally accepted significance of words; but if we try to get at the derivation of the word 'obscene' it is clear that the word 'scene' refers to the external organs of the special senses and especially that of sight. The prefix 'ob' has various meanings, and we are justified and accurate in translating it as 'facing', 'over-against' or even 'reversely'; and this

serves to bring out the idea of conflict and dualism. It connotes a sense of antithesis, of antinomy or dualism in which there may be contraries, but never contradictions. Contradiction is, strictly speaking, a metaphysical term which has no place in mature reasoning from experience, though it is an invariable phase of mental activity in the development of the child's mind.

This idea of conflict implies two different realities. The psychological reality is always one based on emotional feeling and is a consciousness of 'as if', so strong in all of us at some phase of life that its force is as compelling as that of the adult acceptance of the reality of 'as such'. Adult reality is the perceptual mental judgement arrived at through experience by a synthesized agreement between our emotions, our external world perceptions, and our intelligence which is active in relating the parts to each other and the whole. When there is a conflict between the inner unique, subjective world of individual feeling and the outer world that is shared by all, the results are divergent and complicated and fall mainly into two groups according to which reality is stressed; and in the absence of mental defect the intelligence is over-active in defence through noting similarities for the purpose of displacing the tension from a higher to a lower potential. For the purpose for which it is defensively employed the intelligence is perfectly effective and, consequently, contradiction is actively resented. Pascal brought out this conflict when he said that 'the heart has its reasons that the head recks nothing of', and he is clearly stressing the emotional content. Dostoyevsky brought the idea of conflict much nearer to what we are discussing in the words of one of The Brothers Karamazov: 'What is beauty to the heart is obscenity to the mind; did you know that?' Here one senses that 'beauty' refers to a pleasurable conscious experience belonging to a time when it was legitimate and antecedent to the mental stricture which afterwards makes a critical judgement on that experience. And one is reminded of St. Paul's saying that 'to the pure all things are pure'—a thing he would hardly have been likely to have said before his 'revelation'.

What is the main tendency behind 'obscenity'? Every individual has the natural urge of curiosity. It is perhaps the chief factor responsible for learning and scientific exploration, as Aristotle recognized when he said: 'Therefore all men desire to know'. The world is and always has been attractive to certain

tendencies in our 'libido'. But if we agree that we are all curious we shall equally agree that curiosity is preceded by ignorance, and that true ignorance is synonymous with innocence. It has been stated that no properly educated girl of eighteen years could be innocent; but she may be virtuous. For both of these states of non-consciousness—ignorance and innocence—the teaching or enforced infliction of new 'knowledge' at the wrong time, or in an unacceptable manner, will cause what is presented to appear as contradiction. Further, owing to the necessity for the child to depend in an emotionally secure manner upon its upbringers this contradiction cannot be rejected. The result, in many cases, is that the child's innocence may be taken away; and, because it has no understanding of its internal tensions, these are experienced as feelings of guilt and disapproval when referred to persons and objects in the outer world.

When something naturally interesting, e.g. curiosity, is forcibly taken away or inhibited without the child's appreciating the reason, it may quell any overt manifestation of the interest but it does not stop the dynamic activity of the natural tendency below the level of ordinary consciousness. Whenever this dynamic tendency erupts into consciousness it is accompanied with anxiety which is immediately referred and felt in relation to the community and experienced as a sense of guilt. But worst of all, it checks the onward development of the natural interest or tendency and condemns it to immaturity, whilst the rest of the personality development continues as chronological age advances. Is such an adult one who has a tendency 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences', or is he one whose mind is open to be corrupted?

Everyone understands the implications of the 'smutty' story; the 'dirty' story, i.e. the sexual innuendo. If we include the sensual factor we can also understand the significance of the 'foul' or 'filthy' story, for we shall have included bodily organs with their functions—all of which sooner or later must to some extent come under the ban of cultural taboos. From the filthy story to the 'Ca-Ca' stage in the infant is not a far cry in memory, and Freud has traced back the meaning of 'filthy lucre' to obsessional interest in the bowel-functions. Most of us enjoy a 'really good story' because it has the saving grace of also being funny, and it (erotically) 'tickles' our fancy. Further, when such a story

evokes roars of laughter the teller feels almost a public benefactor, so little sense of individual responsibility do we feel in a group where all are identified by agreement with us. It would appear that spontaneous laughter, a sense of humour, was part of a natural compromise-mode of coming to terms with the taboos evolved in the course of cultural development. If the taboo forces us to give up most of the interest in some previously enjoyed innocent experiences it permits the gain of laughter to redress the balance, and something new has taken over from the past rather than anything been taken away; and whereas we had the earlier enjoyment all to ourselves, we get something we can share with others.

Laughter is surely something important in any comprehensive understanding of what is meant by 'obscenity'. What makes one 'heave' with disgust cannot make one want to laugh: and vice versa. If we get caught between two perceptual foci and ambivalently 'jam', there is tension with blushing—a tacit emotional admission and denial at one and the same time; but if none of these reactions occurs and there is true ignorance or innocence, the individual is merely curious to have the matter explained to him.

It was interesting—was it merely a coincidence?—that it was the Greek delegate who wished to have the term 'obscenity' defined. Greek civilization and culture are still strongly represented in our cultural patterns. Part of the fascination of Ancient Greek History is that it flowered so quickly and evenly, and exhibited such remarkable continuity. The basis of religious guilt upon which this culture rested is nowhere better portrayed than in the presentations of human conflicts and sufferings in the Tragedies of Æschylus and Sophocles. Euripides changed Tragedy to Drama, since consciousness was expanding fast with increasing knowledge, and man began to be aware that he could do something toward his own deliverance, and that he was not absolutely forced to suffer under a malign fate. In his Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche complains bitterly that Euripides 'introduced the spectator onto the stage', where, before, there was no real audience but only a chorus-group waiting expectantly for the arrival of the god with whom it immediately identified itself. In Euripidean Drama, the spectator could to some extent critically observe the action and enjoy the spectacle, unless his complexes caused him to react too severely; especially so as he was made

aware by an oracular proem of what had happened and what was about to happen. It was left to Aristophanes to introduce bizarre incongruities into the same field of perception, and poke fun at Euripides in his New Attic Comedy in a manner that gave rise to laughter.

The Ancient Greeks were so biologically fused with Nature that their bodily shapes and functions were never a source of guilt to their minds; there was never anything shocking in anything that pertained to Nature, she was merely dangerous and they felt subservient to her until they won freedom through increased knowledge. It was precisely this fact of seeking only a bodily deliverance that led to their downfall; for when it was attained, they had no conscious future aim but to love their corporeal selves. When St. Paul preached in Athens, his criticism was that everywhere people flocked together 'only to hear and see some new thing', and when they did not understand and were not interested in what he said, they called him a babbler; the word they used was 'spermologos'. In crude slang today, the term would be 'verbal diarrhoa'—inferior all round to the Greek word. It is unlikely that the Ancient Greeks suffered from anxiety-states with psychosomatic symptoms, as we do today, for they had no guilt-sense about these symptoms and accepted them as a natural body-speech. Only 150 years divided the birth of Æschylus from the death of Aristophanes.

It seems as if we needed this priceless gift of laughter—the recognition of something funny in the incongruity of any situation—as a defensive displacement of conscious tensions from a higher to a lower potential to help us accept what is otherwise too great a strain. Humour develops toward a higher level and more toward a mental plane as the personality develops; but in every civilized community there must always be taboos, the breaking of which may constitute 'obscenity'. Even if it is wellnigh impossible to define this term accurately, we can say that it arises out of cultural progress and change. And if the exclusion of the 'obscene' is desirable from every point of view, it is important that it should be a natural and gradual process of development for, in the long run, the prude is a far greater offence than the lewd person. We might go so far as to define 'obscenity' as a perversion, though the converse is not necessarily true. The foundations of perversions, in otherwise normal people

without constitutional and temperamental defect, is nearly always the persistence of certain sensual or sexual tendencies, normal at some phase of life, after they have ceased to be socially acceptable. When these perversions are overtly manifested, or include other objects and persons, they become an offence to the rest of the community which has outgrown them, and which has successfully forgotten its own (literally) abandoned interests. Finally, when such perversions have no saving grace, especially that of laughter and humour, or some other cultural value, they may be 'obscene'.

In conclusion the following extract from a clinical case epitomizes most of the points that have been touched on:

Mrs. A- B- Married, aged 35. A case of Anxiety-Hysteria with an intense phobia of 'lice'. These insects represented in their finally condensed form all the fears she had ever suffered from, and which could be included under the heading of 'dirt'. Clinically, she was never at ease and feverishly searched for furniture mites—which she said she always found—whenever there was an access of anxiety or tension. She was intensely curious, but could never ask questions (during therapeutic sessions, she was always wanting to look round, but dared not); she seemed too often to come across salacious references in what she saw, read and heard; and she felt herself the victim of all the things she most disliked and dreaded. There were many traumata in her early life, but the most important was an incident that occurred between the ages of four and five, when her mother was in hospital and her spinster sister came to look after the household. One day the patient was coming up her area-steps, and as her head reached the level of the pavement she saw through the railings two dogs mounting each other a few feet away. She gazed at them with round-eyed wonder and absorption. Her prudish aunt caught sight of the scene from the window and rushed out shouting: 'You dirty little bitch!', grabbed her and hauled her down the steps into the cellar. The small child fought with the frenzy of fear and despair, and fainted in the cellar. As she came to, she screamed: 'I'll tell my Daddy when he comes home', whereupon her aunt seized the wood-chopper and, raising it above her head, threatened to 'cut off her head' if she did. The threat was efficacious, and the child locked up this experience within herself so that it became repressed.

There were innumerable reactions subsequent to this trauma, leading up finally to the phobia. She required more than two years' treatment to become really free. We need not go into details; but there was one curious repetitive habit she had of giving a little short laugh during the analytical sessions, and saying: 'Do you know what I am laughing at?' Naturally the psychotherapist had to confess ignorance and put the question back to her—but always with the same reply: 'No, I don't'. After nearly two years of treatment, the same question came up yet again, with the same response from the psychotherapist. On this occasion she said: 'Yes; I do know now'. On being asked if she felt inclined to give him the solution, she replied as follows: 'You remember those two dogs? Now I know what I was laughing at. The one that was on top was very worried, but he looked so silly, as though he were laughing with his tongue out.'

This should serve as a warning never to offer interpretations until the patient has further material on which to base a judgement. There is always the risk that our own minds may be more 'obscene' than those of the patients, and most psychotherapists will agree that they have been caught in this way before they have acquired experience.

Reflections of this nature go on to ideas about dealing with the problem, and with the other side of the problem—that of the deprivation suffered by the more mature members of the community when a too prudish censorship denies them easy access to works of culture that have a real value. And the question arises, How can psychology be expected to change the Legal attitude?

As a fact, psychology has already effected a good deal in influencing the legal attitude to those who commit acts involving punishment under existing Statute Law. The Home Office is definitely concerned with the mind of the convicted offender, and with means for understanding more about the contributing factors of crime in general and treatment directed toward preventive recurrence of the offences. This side of the problem is not static and offenders (though it is by no means certain that the author or artist whose work has been banned, with or without additional punishment, stands equally to gain) may look forward to gradual change from the hard and fast attitude of the past. And there are increasing instances of Judges who express the hope and opinion that convicted prisoners should

receive treatment for offences that clearly involve psychogenically-motivated impulses. One big difficulty is that our laws are the outcome of the cultural demands of the common people, and we are a nation slow to alter our opinions; another difficulty is that Judges are appointed and paid (i.e. forced) to administer these laws or resign. And psychiatry is not yet in a position to be able to assess the individual before treatment with such a degree of accuracy that it can be tolerably certain of the total personality, or of cure, in any particular case; and the Judge naturally requires some evidence approximating to 'fact' to weigh against the fact of the offence. There will always be 'Bodkins' on the Bench, and prosecuting in the Courts, so long as the culture of the community continues to throw them up in considerable numbers; that is, until knowledge, as significance and understanding, is enlarged by suitable upbringing.

In regard to the members of the community who are deprived of legitimate enjoyment of cultural works, such as books, paintings, and sculpture, on the score of their being indecent, the underlying problem is the same. The thought occurs, Why has there never been a prosecution of indecent or obscene musical composition? Why are the waves of some spoken sounds held to be obscene whilst those of otherwise produced sounds are not considered to be so? Clearly, the only answer can be that it is due to the esoteric meanings in language and the written word. Pictorial calligraphy escapes the charge and approximates to the status of the Greek word 'Logos' when this held the same significance for 'language' and 'meaning'. It is obvious that the effect of cultural taboos has been at work to produce the present situation.

It should be a cause for curiosity why, in the creative arts, it is so widely felt that 'Holy water' should be contained in Holy bottles, or at any rate in 'pretty' bottles that long custom and convention has sanctified. Anything new, startling or 'uncouth' rouses all the innate hostility to the stranger which is termed Xenophobia, and which is so classically represented by our insular attitude that still tends to label all non-Nordic races as 'dagoes'; but quite forgets that the idea of the 'white' man is a Myth and that the Albino is a recessive freak, common to all species of animal and plant life. These end-results of rigid attitudes and character-traits have early and small beginnings, and it is there

that they must be tracked down, detected, and taken in hand. Cultural taboos are necessary for all civilized communities and are, in this sense, a 'good' thing; but one can have too much of anything, and the too persistent emphasis of any rigidity tends towards the fixed type. The limpet, indolent fellow, has remained true to type for over a hundred million years!

Paul Valéry, in his Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci, writes of the majority of people: 'They see through a dictionary rather than through the retinæ, they come so ill to an object, so vaguely to knowledge and the pleasures and pains of sight that they have to invent beautiful views'. It may not be easy for us to follow Leonardo and make ourselves universal facil cosa e farsi universale—but it should not be beyond the development of an average personality to ask that, in any field of perception, he does not enlarge some detail, make it stand out and, in total ignorance of the fact that he can do this only through the faculty of identification with the stressed particular, proceed to throw a brick at this unwelcome stranger and call him obscene. Such people need to realize that they are seeing themselves in a mirror. Then, like St. Paul, they may cease persecuting others for faults in themselves which they have projected onto their fellows.

Can psychology do anything to help alter this state of affairs and, if so, how? I think it can and in a manner that would, in time, act both in the interest of those punishable by law for psychologically determined offences and also in the interest of those who are denied free access to cultural works in any realm of the Arts. But, first, let us take a very brief historical glance of the psychological field. The credit for first seeing the obverse side of the medal in the motivations of human behaviour belongs almost entirely to Freud, who painstakingly evolved a highly polished and scientific instrument for curing psychogenically determined abnormal behaviour-patterns. Freud was able to prove his thesis by clinical results, and, by undoing and reversing all kinds of neurotic behaviour, he enabled the individual to emerge really free, and with a true alternative, to repeat his old pattern or to forget it and develop on to maturity. He incurred great hostility from the medical world and the laity, and was more or less a pariah during this phase of his life. His results have been repeated by a host of followers in many thousands

of cases. But one of the great arguments against psychoanalysis, and other forms of psychotherapy based upon Freud's original technique, is the time required for even the average case; and the attempt thus to deal with the problem and to cure the vast numbers needing such treatment has been likened to chasing an express train with an ox-wagon. Of course, psychological medicine could never rest content merely to deal with the emotionally distorted and neurotically dispositioned adults and leave the underlying productive conditions and causes to pile up a waiting-list at a rate higher than could be dealt with, short of training an impossible number of therapists. The knowledge gained from treating the individual was sorted and worked on and it was found that all the most important determining factors began to operate in the early developmental years. And if the adult could be cured, it should surely be possible to prevent the child from becoming handicapped in like manner? This has been found to be so, and to be practicable; and the numbers of children who have been rescued from some form of neurotic disposition already run into very large figures. The tragedy is that there are all too few suitable Clinics for this purpose.

The child's mind has a logic all of its own, and it is literal and concrete. J. Vendryes, in his book Language, brings out well the difference between the small child's language and that of the adult world around him. He writes: 'We have no right to consider a rational and abstract language, because it happens to be our own, as in any way superior to a mystical and concrete one. It is entirely a question of two different types of mentality, each of which may have its own merits. There is nothing to prove that, in the eyes of an inhabitant of Sirius, the civilized person's mentality does not represent degeneration.' This concrete mind of the child needs concrete and three-dimensional material with which to express its thoughts and feelings, and to make contact with the strange world outside itself in order to establish suitable object-relationships. Hence, play and toys are an all-important and serious business of early childhood, as any interested observer can see for himself. If this externalizing of the child's inner world proceeds satisfactorily, it does not matter that its verbal vocabulary lags behind, for this is entirely normal. One is on safe lines if, to use Jeremy Taylor's phrase, one 'is sure of the thing though not so sure of the argument'. The suitable words will come later

to fit the significance. The early childhood vocabulary of the body, its functions, and the fantasy-life become gradually transferred to, the concrete things it uses in its play, which is highly symbolical and magical; and as knowledge out of experience and words come in, some of the symbolism is lost into the 'unconscious'—and a process of mature growing-up is satisfactorily started.

It seems to follow naturally, if this early play is the instinctual and safe way of learning about life and reason, that play material should be the means of expressing the child's conflicts too; and that, if we could by this means get into the mind of the childget behind the looking-glass—we should be able to see what the child sees and help him to see things directly, quite apart from the enormous advantage of also knowing what it is that is feared in its often apparently normal and secure environment. The problem of the 'p's' and the 'q's' should be in the course of comparatively simple solution for both child and upbringer. All this, too, has been done and proved to be practicable by Play-therapy. It is a delight to watch, for instance, young children of both sexes, suitably clad in macintoshes, squirting each other with hose-pipes, or 'making a world' in a tray of wet sand which they shape and people with all kinds of miniature everyday objects-intuitively, unerringly and symbolically stating their problems concretely for interpretation by the skilled therapist, if necessary and when the suitable time comes. But one wonders how many parents and grown-ups would be shocked or offended if they knew that the hose-pipes were symbolical streams of urine, and that the wet sand was their 'Ca-Ca'. Yet they give their children glitter-wax or plasticine to play with as being preferable to making mud-pies—so they fondly imagine.

It seems curious that, with all the contemplated outlay on the Health Services of the future, the development of the mind of the child—and all that this means for its capacity to function freely and to enjoy life—should not be taken more into account. The child seems to be the tail that, between the two stools of Health and Education, 'falls to ground'. The objection on the score of expense, or the problem of the training of enough skilled therapists, should hardly be seriously allowed to stand in the light of all our experience of war expansion in every conceivable branch of requirements. One would like to visualize—surely no

mere Utopian fantasy?—a school curriculum in which the normal play of the kindergarten stage was provided for and observed, and the earliest signs of something amiss detected. One would like to see an adequate number of Playtherapy Clinics to which these early cases went automatically, and any others that later on manifested signs of psychological and emotional problems. The time required for these early errors is very brief compared with what is needed for the endresults met with in adults. Mens sana in corpore sano; we are still too apt to think of health solely in terms of physical signs dependent on an organic pathology, regular work and hygienic surroundings. With the new slogan 'Rehabilitation' too many conjure up a picture of someone who is physically damaged. One very big advantage of a school psychiatric service, provided by the Education Authority free for all its pupils, would be the removal of parental Xenophobia, which so often prevents, even under existing conditions, a child from getting the treatment it needs; the parents would soon cease to feel affronted by the suggestion that their child needed treatment.

As true significance comes in, the early 'obscenity' tends to drop away into the realm of cultural prohibition. In the words

of Emerson:

'Heartily know, When half-gods go, The gods arrive.'

This will also apply to prudish censorship of cultural contributions. The solution for all these difficulties is educational, not in the sense of the stuffing in of facts as a kind of knowledge, but of drawing out what is there by the steady deliverance into consciousness of an increasing significance. We should accept the Platonic standpoint that man knows 'without knowing that he knows', and we have today the advantage over the Socratic method that concrete play-therapy provides as an adjunct to education.

# ENID STARKIE ECCENTRICS OF EIGHTEEN-THIRTY

## I. CARNIVAL

THE Revolution of 1830 left behind it a sensation of disappointment and disillusionment. The people had sacrificed so much and they were in no better position than they had been before. They had exchanged one king for another, but in doing so had

only exchanged the tyranny of birth for that of money.

During the last years of the reign of Charles X there had been two factions in opposition to the King and favouring a revolution. On the one hand were those who wanted a republic and on the other were those who wished to put the Duke of Orleans, the son of Philippe Egalité, on the throne. Most of the youth and intelligentzia were on the side of the Republicans, but the Orleanists had Thiers, Guizot, Lafayette, Talleyrand and all the financial interests. They had the solid bourgeoisie behind them, but they had no soldiers. They contented themselves with drawing up their plans and then waited for events. It was the Republicans who fought in the streets, who manned the barricades and who won the victory. Ten thousand of them under Cavaignac completely routed the royal armies. In those days Paris was a maze of narrow streets, and these were very helpful for guerrilla warfare. No artillery could be brought up against them, and the insurgents used paving-stones, poured boiling water and threw furniture out of the windows on the troops, who were helpless in face of such assault. Fighting began on 27 July and lasted three days, 'Les Trois Glorieuses' they were called. On the 28th, Charles X's soldiers were utterly defeated, and what was left of the armies went over to the revolutionaries. On the 29th, the Louvre was attacked. The Suisses, terrified of a repetition of the massacres of August 1792, fled in disorder. Some of the royal armies followed suit and others went over to the insurgents. At the end of the day the tricolour flag floated over every public building in Paris.