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THE BADNESS OF BAD WORDS

Louis Foley

Everybody knows—and feels as if he had always known—all the common “bad” words. We all know them because they have been very effectively *taught*. The things that we remember from our earliest years are the things connected with emotional experiences. The bad words make unforgettable first impressions, not only because typically they are uttered very distinctly and emphatically but because they are outbursts of strong feeling. Also from the beginning they are likely to be associated with startling incidents or confrontation with unpleasant people that would shock us anyhow. So they stick firmly in our memory, whether or not we ever come to use them ourselves. They will not come readily to the tongue of a person not habitually given to *thinking* in such terms. They will just not be part of the dialect he naturally speaks.

The so-called “four-letter words” do not, of course, form a class on the basis of mere spelling. Taken together they amount only to the slightest fraction of all the words written with four letters, including some of the finest that we have. What really sets them off is the fact that they are ugly-sounding. They seem to be intrinsically so, though the tone with which they are generally uttered no doubt enters into the effect. The point is that they are *meant* to be ugly. No one could pretend that they are simply “frank” or “realistic.” The thing about them is that they are customarily used to express hatred or contempt as an arbitrary attitude. The person who is really addicted to their use employs them continually without necessarily any clear reference to their literal meaning, but just as a crude and easy way of disposing of somebody or something that he dislikes. It is a simple form of mindless argument by name-calling, akin to the practice of deflating a person’s dignity by giving him a ridiculous nickname.

There has been a good deal of confusion in both popular and legal thinking about this matter. This confusion appears, for instance, in the handling of a recent court case in Boston. Two women and three men who peddled an underground newspaper had been convicted of selling obscene material to minors. Finally, however, in January, 1970, the Massachusetts Supreme Court reversed their conviction. In the view of the higher tribunal, under current legal standards the “rather sad publication” in question did not violate the existing statute against obscenity. The decision remarked in passing that the authors of this

underground newspaper “seem to take pride in the rediscovery of certain four-letter words . . .”¹

The idea of “rediscovery” is absurd; those words had never been lost or forgotten. The fact that for centuries they have been omitted from dictionaries *pudoris causa* has made no difference; who ever needed to look them up, from the time he was old enough to use a dictionary? They have been part of living language for nobody knows how long. Originally, they probably did not seem particularly vulgar in the primitive speech in which they belonged. They may well have been used at one time without especial emphasis, as common terms for what there was no other convenient way to say. With the passage of time they have become more and more definitely “dirty” words. This is true not only because of the refinement of taste which comes with the development of any civilization, but because the manner of using these words has long been purposefully vicious.

Pornography, literally “writing of harlots,” is the depiction of erotic behavior intended to cause sexual excitement. What makes such writing “pornographic” is the *intent*, which is not always easy to prove. Vivid description of intimate sexual relations, capable in some degree of arousing desire on the part of the reader, is nothing new in the world. Through the ages examples have appeared in some of the most famous and highly regarded of all literature. From the time of ancient mythology the thought of sexual contact, of physical desire and its fulfillment, has been connected with love in its complete expression. It has been glorified with poetic language. Even the most mundane pornographic writing, however, has no need or use for crude speech. On the contrary, since it seeks to make sexual fantasy attractive, pornography in order to succeed in its purpose needs to avoid the kind of coarse language which would make sensuality seem sordid or repulsive. Instead of making passion alluring, crude words can make it ugly and ridiculous.

Or consider the widespread telling of *risqué* jokes which has gone on time out of mind. Insofar as such stories are really clever and amusing (as many of them undeniably are), they are by no means pornographic. Far from tending to excite any feeling of erotic desire, they view sexual matters with cool objectivity, as one must see anything to be able to laugh at it. The humor in such anecdotes—when they are good—is created by wit and surprising innuendo.

¹ *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 20, 1970.

Coarse words can only spoil the effect. Really "dirty" stories are boresomely unfunny; they make no appeal to a genuine sense of humor.

Obscene basically means "offensive to *decency*"; it connotes a shock of offense to good taste. When we speak of "obscenities," we have in mind indecent remarks or expressions, a matter of repulsive *language*. So long as such language remains merely oral, relatively personal and private, especially between persons who have no higher standards of taste, it can be largely ignored by the majority of civilized people, who live in a healthier mental climate. They do not feel a need to give vent continually to frustrations by degrading persons or things with mindless ugly expletives. But when these unnecessarily crude expressions appear in cold print, they flaunt an assumed importance that is less easy to overlook. As the old Latin proverb says, spoken words float away in the air, but written letters endure.

The case which brought up the question of both pornography and obscenity as never before was D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Published in Italy in 1928, for years it had to be smuggled in from Europe, until finally in 1959 publication of the unexpurgated version became legal in this country. All that can outlaw a book now, it appears, is conclusive demonstration that *as a whole* it is pornographic; it is not to be condemned for pornographic passages included in a work of supposed "literary" value. Of course the controversy over "*Lady Chatterley*" gave it enormous publicity and aroused irresistible curiosity; everybody had to read it to see for himself just how pornographic it really was. Surely no one could have been disappointed. It gives blow-by-blow accounts of a number of instances of the Lady's extra-marital sexual intercourse, besides marginal sex-play carried to extremes. Each lover tells her how her performance compares with that of other women he has had. The physical sensations are described from the woman's point of view, or at least as her feelings are imagined by a male writer.

What was really new about the narration, however, was its going beyond lasciviousness to unabashed use of obscene language. In their talk to each other the lovers use the four-letter words as often as possible. The defense of such language is its alleged "naturalness." Natural for *whom*, for what sort of people? D. H. Lawrence attempted a sophisticated justification of his use of obscene words. Objection to them he calls "mob-reaction," which he says "hardly one person in a million escapes." The "mob," then, includes just about everybody but a few "intellectuals" (like himself) who from their sublime elevation refuse to recognize the tone and implications which these words have

unmistakably acquired through the use long made of them and the company they have kept.

With legal acceptance of Lady Chatterley, the lid was really off. If *that* was not pornographic, then it was henceforth impossible to prove that anything was. "Since then," said a distinguished critic, "the secret language has been subjected to a long process of expropriation. Its territory has been invaded by a series of novelists, from Hemingway and Henry Miller to Norman Mailer . . . But I wonder whether the language itself has gained anything except a few exact but ugly synonyms . . . The bad words have lost their mystery and magic. They are like the venerated idols of a tribe, kept in a secret sanctuary but finally captured by invaders. When brought to light they are revealed to be nothing but coarse-grained and shapeless blocks of wood."²

The most brazen manifestation for dirty words of which we have any record was the Filthy Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1965. It was led by the notorious all-around trouble-maker, Art Goldberg, whose appearance has been described as "so extraordinarily unkempt that he seems to have stepped out of an old Hearst cartoon lampooning an anarchist bomb-thrower." Though the "Movement" as such was short-lived, it seems to have accomplished something toward achieving its aims. A recent observer of the California campus tells us that "today four-letter words appear in student publications and are blared over campus microphones with the same tiresome regularity that has made them a bore in plays and novels everywhere."³ We have even seen the sorry spectacle of a college professor using some of these vulgar terms in print in a publication of one of our most highly-rated universities. Is he accustomed to *thinking* in such words, or was this just a straining of effort to be "with it"?

That juvenile performance of pointlessly parading obscenities was supposed to be "evidence of emancipation from the constraints of bourgeois morality." What appears to be missed entirely is the distinction between "morality" and *decency*. It is possible to make out a case for the claim that *private* immorality which does no harm to anyone else is nobody else's business. This view may, of course, overlook various considerations, such as one's integrity or self-respect or any feeling for the honor of other generations past and future. And the question of whether or not harm *is* done to others is not always simple. But we know that within limits immoral behavior in private has gone

² Cowley, Malcolm. *The New York Times Book Review*, June 28, 1959.

³ Raskin, A. H. *The New York Times Magazine*, January 11, 1970, p. 65.

on since time immemorial without disrupting society. Often indeed, though generally known, it might be tolerated so long as it was not publicly flaunted. Shameless open indecency, however, is something else. It violates our right to be left at peace, not to be needlessly assaulted by what is naturally offensive. It goes beyond the lack of ordinary politeness, of consideration for the feelings of others, to deliberate affront. We have a right to be free from gratuitous insult.

It is of course perfectly clear that the people who crowd dirty words upon us choose them because they *are* dirty. They show the childish wilfulness of wanting to do everything a person is generally supposed *not* to do. This fits into the pattern of the various forms of violence wreaked upon us by parasitic elements of society. Along with physical violence against persons and property, we are subjected to violence in the form of words. It is intended to hurt. It is part of a negative, pointless rebellion against everything in a well-ordered, responsible way of life.

In a recent interview, the British actor Sir Laurence Olivier was asked what he thought about indecent language and nudity on the stage. In replying he lumped these things together as “unclothed language and unclothed people.” Witty as this expression may seem off-hand, it does not meet the point at issue. Completely unclothed human forms have been familiar in classic art since ancient times without indecent suggestiveness, and language can always be straightforward and unpretentious without being brutally offensive. Sir Laurence may be right, however, in disposing of these matters as “fashions” which he says “are bound to go.”⁴ Let us hope so. Eventually, we may expect, these crudities will become insufferably tiresome. The lessons about language which the race learned long ago will finally be learned over again by the lost generations. It will again be realized that reticence, respect, and delicacy are necessary to satisfactory human relations, and obscenity will again be relegated to its proper place, below the level of acceptable speech among supposedly civilized people.

⁴ *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 30, 1970.