

The Shock of Learning: Literary Pornography in the Classroom

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This article arises out of the experience of teaching Jane DeLynn's *Leash* (2002), a " pornosophical" novel about a sadomasochistic lesbian relationship. I have taught the text twice over the past few years in a third-year level English course on gender and sexuality in literature and film. I initially co-taught this course with a colleague, but the choice of this text was mine. DeLynn, an unprolific and little-studied author, is something of a favorite of mine, and I had previously published on her work (Davidson 89-116). My choice of the text, then, was premised on my familiarity with it, my investment in it, and, to be frank, a kind of path-of-least resistance reasoning, in which I—and I think I'm not wrong in suggesting, other teachers—sometimes indulge: to wit, if I've published on this author, it will be easy to write a lecture on her work and to teach it in seminars.

When I did sit down to write the lecture, however, thoughts about the path of least resistance and ease of teaching were quickly displaced by the mental refrain, "what was I thinking?" *Leash* is a shocking text, and although ruminating about and writing on the text for academic publication had dulled my sense of shock, the thought of presenting it to students renewed my sense of its disturbing impact. That impact was duly registered in the classroom experience, in ways that exceeded my expectations. Several students refused to read it after

learning about its content; other students stated that they stopped reading at certain points when the narrative events became intolerable to them; one student who had nominated to present on it refused to do so; and one student who went ahead with her presentation was obviously deeply upset, making for a very uncomfortable seminar. The course syllabus included a caveat advising that some of the texts studied contained graphic representations of sex and violence and that students likely to be offended by such representation should enroll in another course; yet this warning, it became rapidly clear, did not adequately prepare students for the intensity of the text's transgressions. (Since I first taught this text I have followed the example of my co-teacher in adopting the further precaution of giving students an amnesty in which they can, within a set time period, change the text they elect to present on at the first seminar if they discover it is not to their liking.)

In the lecture that preceded the seminars on *Leash* I began with the kind of justificatory preamble that many of us practice when we introduce texts that are in any way "difficult." I noted that I expected some students would be offended and upset by the book, but that the book is *meant* to be offensive and upsetting, and that we needed to try and think about the purpose of writing such a text. I proposed that we read the novel as a kind of thought experiment, whereby the generic capacities of pornography enabled DeLynn to explore ideas not possible in texts adhering to the dictates of realism. However, in the seminars, the students were, it seemed to me, fixated on the sexual content; and, despite my entreaties they tended to regard this content precisely through the lens of realism. In my view at that time, it was the students' reading of *Leash* in this way that disabled them from appreciating its ideational force. As one would expect

in a course of this type, the general attitude of the enrolled cohort was highly accepting of sexual diversity and of sexual representation. But teaching *Leash* brought home to me that some kinds of textual treatment of sex still have the power to shock. Of course, as I said in the lecture, *Leash* is *supposed* to shock; it was the inability or unwillingness of most of the students to get past their shock that, in turn, shocked me.

However, when I taught *Leash* for the second time, although students still registered shock, they seemed overall more receptive and less resistant to the text. Part of what I want to do in this article is to suggest that the varying student responses to DeLynn's novel indicate how we might rethink the investments and motivations at stake in teaching pornography. Teaching a text like *Leash* and other shocking works of pornography, I argue, unsettles comfortable understandings of sexuality for students, but may also unsettle comfortable assumptions that we, as teachers and critics of literature, and particularly of shocking or pornographic literature, might have about our own practice. Additionally, I aim to use my experience of teaching *Leash* to reflect on the teaching of pornography within the context of literary studies and on the place of written pornography in the thriving academic field of pornography studies. I want to think about the relations of mutual illumination and complication that might be generated by bringing studies of image-based pornography and literary study of pornography into dialogue. I refer specifically throughout to *Leash*, though the novel is offered as a case study rather than a special case. In order to approach these topics, I begin by providing detail on the content and thematic concerns of the novel.

The Text

Leash narrates a sadomasochistic relationship between a jaded Manhattanite, Chris, the narrator-protagonist, and a woman whom she meets through a personals ad, and who is only ever referred to as her “master.” The relationship progresses through scenes of spanking, bondage, verbal humiliation, the ministrations of a dildo, and a pepper enema. Chris is also convinced to have sex with the master’s dog. Later she becomes the centerpiece of a perverted dinner party: she is encased in plaster of Paris and used as a table on which her master and others dine.

After some weeks, Chris agrees to a shift in the relationship, in which, when she meets with her master, she is dressed in a dog suit, and generally treated like a dog: forced to walk on all fours, taught to fetch, sit, and heel, and fed dog food. Eventually it is revealed that Chris’s master is a member of an all-female secret organization, the Society of the Leash, who own and trade human-dogs. At a meeting of the Society, Chris is offered what’s called “the Magnificent Choice.” Under the Magnificent Choice, she is told, her tongue and vocal cords will be partially severed so that she loses the capability of coherent speech, and her thumbs sewn to her fingers so that her hands become like paws; her former life as a human will be erased by the Society, which has the power to terminate bank accounts and to empty apartments. If she chooses not to take up the Magnificent Choice, she is told, she may return to her old life, though under the threat that “things will not go well with you if you attempt to betray whatever of our secrets you think you possess. . . . You may be sure we are not without connections” (235).

The offer is a moment of high narrative tension. Chris ponders her answer for over a page, thinking back on her romantic life and the tendency for “love” always to devolve into

“pain,” “because . . . it is the nature of desire to go forever unfulfilled” (246). Finally, Chris howls, “*No!* . . . then ‘*yes, yes, yes.*’” We learn that the narrative we have been reading is a record that she was allowed to write before her fingers were turned into paws “to alert those like us who are unaware of our existence about a world in which, if they are lucky, they may someday find themselves at home” (247).

In *Leash* the jadedness of the narrator arises not only from her disenchantment with love and desire, but also from her disaffection with twenty-first-century consumer culture. This is evidenced, for instance, in a passage in which the narrator lists for over a page, in brand-name-festooned detail, the contents of her lavishly outfitted apartment. At the end of this list, Chris states: “Did these things bring me happiness? Not at all. Yet I was sure I could not survive without them” (23). Chris is fully aware of the ways that “capitalism enslaves us in its chains” (25). “But,” she ponders, “if I were not enslaved, could I want anything?” (26). In exchanging her enslavement by capitalism for enslavement by her master, and in ultimately taking up the Magnificent Choice, Chris absolves herself of what the novel calls “the tedious curse of humanhood” (233). Under the Magnificent Choice, the wearing complexity of life under late capitalism is replaced by a life without language and without volition, but also, tantalizingly and temptingly, without responsibility.

Pornography/Pornosophy

There is now available an extensive archive of scholarly work on the teaching of pornography but it focuses exclusively (as far as I have yet been able to find) on visual or

moving image pornography (e.g., Attwood and Hunter, Curry, Kirkham and Skeggs, Kleinhans, McNair, Miller-Young, Noble, Penley, Smith).¹ This focus is of a piece with the orientation of “porn studies.” In the introduction to the 2014 inaugural issue of the journal of that name—the first scholarly journal on the topic—the editors assume that pornography is wholly constituted by still and moving images, and this assumption is repeated in most work in the field (Attwood and Smith). When scholars from film studies and media studies backgrounds recount the history of the field of pornography studies, they tend to present it as more or less originating with the cinema scholar Linda Williams’ pioneering 1989 study *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*,² and as gaining momentum in the past twenty years with the publication of a rash of monographs and edited collections. But there is also a significant body of work by literary scholars on printed pornography and erotic literature, mostly from the pre-twentieth century period, that is usually ignored by film and media studies work on porn (e.g., Ferguson, Hunt, Kendrick, Marcus). This is probably explained not only by the disciplinary orientations of the scholars concerned but also by the orientation toward the contemporary that characterizes cultural studies, of which pornography studies might be regarded as an offshoot.² Image-based pornography is very frequently characterized by scholars as a variety of popular culture; as with the study of other popular genres, it is its very popularity that is offered as the prime justification for its academic scrutiny (Penley; Williams, “Porn Studies”).

Like most of the porn studied by film and media scholars, *Leash* is also a contemporary text; but it cannot be classified as “popular,” or even as a straightforward example of “literary fiction” (it was published by the self-consciously “cutting-edge” small press Semiotext(e) and

not much reviewed.) Part of what marks *Leash* as un-popular, as culturally marginal, is the transgressive sexual content through which it both exemplifies and self-consciously engages with the pornosophical literary tradition. A portmanteau term combining pornography and wisdom (*sophia*), “ pornosophy ” was apparently coined by James Joyce in *Ulysses* (“ Pornosophy ”). Lacking a dictionary entry in the *OED* or *Webster’s*, the term has been used sporadically by literary critics to refer to writing that combines erotic preoccupation with theoretical enquiry—for instance in Alice Jardine’s 1985 discussion of Jacques Derrida (Jardine 180). By the pornosophical literary tradition, I refer to a line of (indicatively French) novels that begins with the Marquis de Sade in the eighteenth century and that picks up again in the twentieth, for instance in George Bataille’s *The Story of the Eye* (1928), Pauline Réage’s *The Story of O* (1954) and Pierre Guyotat’s *Eden Eden Eden* (1970). It was this tradition that Susan Sontag delineated for English-language readers in her landmark essay “The Pornographic Imagination” (1967), distinguishing it from “the avalanche of pornographic potboilers” (36) of the previous two hundred years on the basis of its serious artistic and intellectual ambitions (a sample of that “avalanche” had received its own scholarly treatment three years earlier in Steven Marcus’s *The Other Victorians* [1964]).

The intellectual seriousness of this tradition might for some put its very status as pornography under question, given that pornography is stereotypically assumed to be uninterested in ideas—to aim to arouse the body rather than provoke the mind. And *Leash*, as well as its twentieth-century predecessor novels, are certainly assimilable to the more academically respectable category of “transgressive literature.” But I follow Sontag in retaining

the term *pornography* for these kinds of texts, not so much because their descriptions might sexually arouse some readers (though they might), as because the term pointedly indicates their obscene and potentially shocking content—a feature they share with the more popular, potboiling example of the pornographic genre. Insofar as I am interested in the response of shock, my approach here also aligns with that of Rita Felski in her discussion of the usefulness of the term for literary studies. Felski notes that “Critics tiptoe around the subject of shock, preferring to approach it in oblique or circumspect fashion,” drawing on “a more specialized language of transgression, trauma, defamiliarization, dislocation, self-shattering, the sublime.” Like Felski, I maintain that *shock*, “a word drawn from everyday usage,” can “clear away some of our calcified and often under-justified convictions about the import and impact of literary works” (105).

For those familiar with the pornosophical tradition, *Leash* is quite obviously a rewriting of Pauline Réage’s *Story of O* (1954) (Réage is a pseudonym of the French writer Anne Desclos). In that novel, in steadily intensifying scenes of sexual humiliation carried out (as in the latter part of *Leash*) by a secret society, the title character O willingly submits to a process of self-emptying, culminating (again as in *Leash*) in her transformation into a quasi-animalistic state: O is dressed in an elaborate owl costume and brought on a leash to a party where strangers sexually touch but do not speak to her. In “The Pornographic Imagination,” Sontag reads Réage’s novel, along with other works of literary pornography by Georges Bataille, Sade, and Dominique Aury, as elaborating an understanding of sexuality as “one of the demonic forces in human consciousness—pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range

from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one's consciousness, for death itself" (57). O's story, like the obsessive and extreme narratives of Bataille and others, reveals that "it's toward the gratifications of death, succeeding and surpassing those of eros, that every truly obscene quest tends" (60). Neither O nor Chris in *Leash* literally die; but for both their quest ends in the obliteration of human consciousness.

Overlaying the narrative template of the obscene quest with a critique of consumer capitalism, *Leash* provides an impossible and outrageous answer to its own galvanizing question—"If I were not enslaved, could I want anything?"—by turning woman into dog. In accordance with Sontag's argument, the endpoint of this obscene quest leads beyond sex. Chris's transformation into a dog is the ultimate, logical conclusion of a transgressive desire that is explicitly presented as an alternative to the numbing comfort of affluence. Like the works Sontag describes, indeed even more overtly, *Leash* is of an avowedly philosophical or intellectual bent. Yet its philosophical and intellectual dimensions are inextricable from its shocking sexual scenes, as was brought soundly home to me in teaching it.

Teaching the Text

When I set *Leash* again for the second time, it was not without misgivings. But I was by now interested in theorizing the pedagogical implications for teaching such a text and connecting it to existing scholarship on teaching visual porn, with which I already had some familiarity; to this end, I successfully applied to my university's Ethics Committee to research student

response. Scholarly discussions of pornography frequently begin by noting the difficulty of working on such a disreputable topic (e.g., Attwood and Hunter, Miller-Young). Yet although some accounts of the teaching of visual porn note occasional reactions of dismay and discomfort on the part of students (for instance, Linda Williams' story of straight male students' reactions to the screening of gay porn), the tenor of these accounts is positive, even feelgood (Williams, "Porn Studies"). At the time that I began my research of the teaching of *Leash*, I had not found in any of the accounts of visual porn pedagogy anything that resembled the generalized distress with which my first cohort of students greeted *Leash* (and I still haven't). I was intrigued, then, by the difference that thinking about shocked reception might make to the existing corpus of work on teaching porn.

To optimize my assessment of student response, I arranged to sit in on the seminar on *Leash* conducted by my co-teacher. I also issued a brief survey to the students in my co-teacher's seminar and to the students in the two seminars that I taught. Students were asked:

1. whether they had read the text—all, none, or some;
2. whether they would say they were offended, upset, or disturbed by *Leash*;
3. if so, what was it about the book that offended, upset, or disturbed them;
4. did their thinking about the book change as a result of the class discussion, and, if so, how?

The seminars had, as usual, been preceded by a lecture, which was pretty much unchanged from that of the previous year, though I had played up the "thought experiment" angle, emphasizing that, although the book contains a lot of realistic detail (in its descriptions of its Manhattan

setting and so on), and also a lot of psychological verisimilitude, we would not get very far with what the book is trying to do if we treated it as realism rather than pornographic fantasy.

As already mentioned, the second cohort of students unexpectedly did not seem nearly as offended by the text as the students of the previous year, indicating, I suppose, the significant variability of cohorts from year to year with which we are all familiar. This is not to say that they were not shocked. But my impression was that there was this year, as there was not in the previous year, a general willingness on the part of students to move beyond their shock and consider the aesthetic and ideational dimensions of the text.

Or perhaps a better way of describing this response is not as a movement beyond shock but a thinking *with* shock, if that does not sound contradictory. I realize now that my strategy in teaching the book the first time had largely been to try to displace the affective response of shock by urging students to consider the book's intellectual concerns. In this, my strategy resembled that of contemporary criticism of *Story of O*, as deftly analysed by Anne Young. Young writes that

current attention to *O* tends to take a cool, detached stance, typically avoiding the sexual content and arguing that it is “really” about a philosophical concept hidden amongst a pornographic landscape. . . . It is no longer a sexy book, but an ironic, philosophic, erudite manuscript unreadable by those philistines who cannot see beyond the whipping, branding, torture, orgasms, terror, horror and desire—these are mere pedestrian pleasures and problems to be observed at a safe distance. (332)

Referring specifically to the teaching of “transgressive” literature such as Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, Layne Neeper makes a similar point, observing that when such texts are brought into the classroom, teachers emphasize conventional “critical preoccupations,” such as point of view, irony, and satire “at the expense of the book’s aberrance.” Likewise, in teaching *Leash* for the first time, I moved swiftly past the shock of the novel to its incisive critique of consumer capitalism. But, as a consequence of teaching the text the second time, it now seems to me that the text raises deeply provocative questions about consent, control, agency, and about the human/animal interface that are in fact more intriguing than that critique of consumerism, which is very explicit and which provides comparatively little “to think with.” If I seem to be retreating once more to the safe territory of the cerebral with this list of alternative concerns, then I need to stress that these are concerns suggested by the students’ affect-laden responses, both in class and in the surveys.

In class, several students spoke of a sense of compulsion in reading the text, even as they struggled against it. One student said that she felt she couldn’t stop reading it, that she read it in two sittings; on the other hand, she said that when she read the scene where Chris has sex with her master’s dog, she could understand what was happening but that she resisted immersion in the scene, using the metaphor of pulling herself out of the text. Another student used the phrase “being imposed on” to describe her reading experience. And another used a term from the book, “acquiescence,” to define her relation to it. She said her experience of reading *Leash* was that she couldn’t stop, but that she wasn’t sure that she liked it, continuing, “you don’t want to go into that world, but you can’t help it.” The experience of many students, in other words, mirrored that

of Chris in the novel, for Chris is compelled by and acquiesces in a series of experiences suggested to her, or if you like, imposed upon her, by her master. This sense of readerly thrall to the text is anticipated by Chris—or DeLynn—in a reflexive moment in the text roughly halfway through the narrative: “Now we come to the heart of the story, where the titillations of delay and suspense give way to the pleasures of fulfilment. . . . What are you looking for, dear Reader, so supine and passive in my hands?” (135, 137). This model of text/reader relations inverts the position of mastery that is the aspiration of literary criticism. The literary-critical will to mastery was evident in my attempt to define the text as a narrative “about” consumer capitalism, rather than an affectively disturbing one. In turn, I attempted to persuade my students of this reading in the interests of their own mastery of the text—for mastery and detachment are, of course, the attitudes that we, as teachers of literature, attempt to found or foster in our students. However, the students’ own drive to mastery could produce frustrating results that worked against the reading that I wanted them to take up, or at least to seriously consider. In the first year of teaching the text, as I’ve intimated, I had been exasperated by the “realist” reading of the novel by many students, who had insisted that Chris is subjected to grooming and brainwashing. These students, it seemed to me, could not accept the notion of a complete surrender of agency even as a fantasy and stubbornly needed to read the novel within the framework of available cultural narratives of grooming and sexual predation, despite the fact that Chris insists on her own acquiescence and that the novel gives us no insight into the master’s motivations. I don’t wish to play the two cohorts off against one another, as my reflections are based on partial evidence from both years. But I was struck by the fact that while several students from the second cohort

pinpointed the giving up of agency as one of the most disturbing aspects of the book, unlike the students from the first cohort, they were willing to engage with, rather than simply dismiss, their disturbance. This engagement in turn prompted me to start to rethink what now seems to me to be the simplistic notion of consent with which I had been operating.

In her discussion of the criticism of *Story of O*, Young draws on the work of Bruno Latour to suggest the possibility of a relation to texts that rejects the illusion of self-mastery and mastery over texts in favour of one in which one “choos[es] to accept or remove attachments.” She also refers to the literary criticism of Dominique Aury (another pseudonym of Anne Desclos), which, as Young puts it, “describes the seduction of a reader who chooses their text and gives themselves over to its power—a power it cannot have without readers” (335). Young finds that this response informs the work of one critic of *Story of O*, Lisa Robertson, who writes that “the relation between passivity and will . . . is not oppositional . . . but a fully implicated, mutual relation” (Robertson 51; qtd. in Young 335). For Aury and Robertson, Young concludes, readerly submission “is not an unaware abdication of control, but a sense of engaging in a mutual relationship—one in which the reader is not ‘resistant’ but open to suggestion” (335). This model of reading reimagines submission or enthrallment as bound up with will, as it is inextricably in *Leash*—so inextricably, indeed, as to upset normative, and comforting, notions of consent. As was more noticeable in my second cohort, students accepted some of the attachments offered by the text and rejected others. In and of itself, this response is unremarkable enough; it might be understood to characterize the attitude of virtually any practiced reader to virtually any text. But given the students’ status as subjects of a culture in which sexuality is a particularly dense and

fraught field of relations and meanings, I would argue that their double-edged response to the intense sexual content of the book rendered their experience more significant than standard readerly ambivalence. Students spoke in class and wrote in the surveys of their imagination being taken to places it never had been before; one student stated that it made her question a lot of things, but also that it was not a book she wanted to return to immediately. Though a few students from the second cohort adopted a position of outright rejection (usually those who had not read it but who attended the seminar), most students indicated the revelatory nature of the book's shock effect. Particularly interesting, in this respect, was the response of one student in my colleague's class who said he had not read the book when he learned about the ending, because he didn't want the psychic process whereby one would want to become a dog "in his head." He said that he wanted to see what everyone else thought before he read it. When my colleague asked the other students whether they thought he should read it, there was a general murmur of affirmation.

I have up to this point been attending mostly to the implications of teaching a shocking text like *Leash* within the context of literary studies. Treating *Leash* as a case study, I assume that the claims about teaching and reading I have made here have applicability to other shocking pornographic or quasi-pornographic texts—for instance, those of DeLynn's peers such as Kathy Acker and Dennis Cooper, as well as *Leash's* pornosophical predecessors from the French tradition. But what of the implications of this discussion for porn studies? I want to conclude by suggesting that serious consideration of the affect of shock might be salutary for a field that still tends somewhat defensively to stress the feelgood dimensions of porn, so that pornography

studies at times seems more like advocacy rather than a critical perspective—though there are signs this is starting to change, with some scholars actively resisting the celebratory impulse, as in Helen Hester’s excellent recent monograph *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex*. When it comes to pornographic texts, shock is not an affect that is associated exclusively with the high literary productions of Bataille, DeLynn, and the like, of course. Shock can be generated as easily by more popular versions of porn—in fact, it is something of a truism that contemporary pornography seeks to make itself ever more surprising or shocking in order to tempt the jaded palate of contemporary consumers. Linda Williams describes this dynamic of contemporary pornography with the neologism *on/scene*. By *on/scene*, Williams refers to the way in which contemporary pornographies, despite their proliferation and so-called mainstreaming, “still bear traces of their once-forbidden status—of their situation at some limit” (36). In a critical account of scholarly work on pornography in the inaugural issue of the journal *Porn Studies*, Williams defines the limit as “the place where pornographies seem to need to get distinguished from one another: it is the place where some pornographies such as those of [Sade], or by the fantasy and practice of barebacking, or the enactment of fantasies of rape, always seems to invite us to draw the line” (36). Referring to the writing of Bataille on taboo and transgression, Williams defines the limit as the place where “we come face to face with something that is beyond pleasure, dirty, perhaps even fatal” (36). The problem with a porn studies oriented towards the feelgood, Williams points out, is that “it implies everything is OK and misses the point that I might want to watch [or, we can interpolate, I might want to read] because it might not be” (36). Registering the potential shock of pornography, I suggest, can

educate us about the limit inherent in the genre and about our own limits—but also our capacities—as readers, teachers, students and researchers.

Notes

¹ Layne Neeper's essay "On Teaching Transgressive Literature," referred to later, discusses authors working in a similar vein to DeLynn, including Bret Easton Ellis, Dennis Cooper, and Kathy Acker. Our arguments are compatible, but I differ from Neeper in centralizing pornography rather than the broader category of transgression as a conceptual concern. In his magisterial study of French erotic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Peter Cryle notes that he made an informed decision to *not* teach Sade and his colleagues to undergraduates (vii).

² The orientation toward the contemporary in studies of moving-image porn has, however, been leavened by the recent publication of a number of works on the pornography of the 1970s and 1980s, and on cinematic porn's predecessor, the softcore "sexplitation" form. See Alilunas; Bronstein and Strub; Gorfinkel; Schaefer, ed., *Sex Scene*. See also Church for a very insightful discussion of the contemporary consumption of "vintage" moving image porn (from the silent film period to the 1980s).

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