

Hung Like an Obelisk, Hard as an Olympian

*An alphabet of English-
language literature in Paris*

Joshua Cohen

A is for Avant-Garde

Before the French *avant-garde* came to mean a movement in the arts, it was a military metaphor: It referred to the front flank, or vanguard, of an advancing army, the soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the progress of the rest. It was in this way that the Napoleons understood the term.

Over one thousand enemy cannon were captured in the Battle of Austerlitz, in which Napoleon I defeated the Russians and Austrians in the winter of 1805. The bronze from this artillery was melted down for an obelisk, erected in the Place Vendôme in Paris. Because of its proximity to the publisher's offices, this phallus of French glory became the imprimatur and namesake of the Obelisk Press, an English-language avant-garde (and pornographic) publisher, active throughout the 1930s and responsible for issuing first editions of works by James Joyce and Henry Miller.* Obelisk's Napoleon was a Manchester Jew named Jack Kahane.

Following World War II, Kahane's eldest son, Maurice Girodias, founded the Olympia Press, redoubling Obelisk's crusade against Anglo-American censorship by publishing Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Jean Genet (in translation), Vladimir Nabokov, and others. Olympia financed these works by publishing explicit erotic literature—referred to in-house as d.b.s, dirty books—that, like the

* Alternatively and perhaps more convincingly, Obelisk's emblem is said to have been inspired by another monumental column, the ancient Egyptian Obelisk of Luxor. Dating from the reign of Ramses II, hieroglyphed from bottom to top, that immense obelisk had guarded the entrance to the Luxor Temple and was a gift of goodwill from Egypt to France. It was erected, in 1836, by King Louis-Philippe I, the last King of France, in Paris's Place de la Concorde, just a handful of blocks from the Vendôme column and the press's future offices (16 Place Vendôme).

artistic work of the house's marquee authors, challenged the obscenity laws of the countries of their linguistic audience: Britain and America. Olympia's porn also proved extraordinarily popular among American GIs stationed in Paris toward the end of the war—men lonely for sex and the language of home.

B is for Bataille, Georges

Georges Bataille (1897–1962) was a French writer of surrealist and erotic fiction, poetry, and mystic philosophy. Though Bataille had studied for the priesthood, he abandoned religion upon introduction to the brothels of Paris; his life would have descended into total depravity if not for his pretensions to art.

Ignored in his own lifetime but posthumously lauded by Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Baudrillard, the author's involvement with Olympia began with his literary review, *Critique* (founded 1946), the first twelve issues of which were published by Éditions du Chêne, Maurice Girodias's first and failed publishing venture. Bataille's best novel, *Histoire de l'œil* (*Story of the Eye*), today a classic of obscure symbolism and underage sex, was published in French in 1928 and peremptorily banned. American Austryn Wainhouse's 1953 translation was called *A Tale of Satisfied Desire*, a title received from Girodias himself, who hoped to prevent the authorities from noticing any connection between the French and English editions. Its author went under the pseudonym Pierre Angélique. Bataille's French pseudonym for the book had been Lord Auch, literally Lord To the Shittery, *auch* being a condensation of *aux chiottes*, slang used to reprove a person by telling them off "to the toilets."

C is for Chester, Alfred

Alfred Chester, born in 1927 in Jewish Brooklyn to Russian immigrant parents, can be regarded as a typical Olympia author: a *littérateur* who took himself seriously, supporting his own fiction with

the hack writing of a pornographic novel. Chester was a brilliant, bitchy stylist when he wanted to be and, by age forty, a madman who claimed to be receiving telepathic messages from the British Crown. Due to a rare childhood disease, the pasty, pudgy Chester went bald at a young age and took to wearing outlandish, ratty wigs.

Chester decamped New York for Paris in the 1950s, in 1955 publishing his sole Olympia d.b., entitled *The Chariot of Flesh* (the *the* was dropped in future editions) under the name Malcolm Nesbit. In 1959, with money from the sale of a story to *The New Yorker*, Chester returned to New York, where he became one of the foremost critics of the 1960s, writing witty, scabrous reviews for *The New York Review of Books*, *Partisan Review*, and *Commentary*. But sensing his true calling in fiction—his novels are *Jamie Is My Heart's Desire* and *Exquisite Corpse*—Chester abandoned journalism and moved to Tangiers, where, with the help of pills and alcohol, he began losing his mind and his friends. He was deported from Morocco (which, in those tolerant days, was quite the achievement) and found his way to Israel, where he died a probable suicide in 1971.

Chester self-defined as homosexual, though he gave Cynthia Ozick her first kiss, once offered to marry Susan Sontag, and seemed not to have difficulty producing heterosexual porn (Olympia's misogynistic sex world was almost exclusively hetero, plus lesbian). *Chariot of Flesh* is an excellent example of a rush-job d.b., though it is also notable for scenarios that speak to the author's personal proclivities:

It was difficult to believe that this tearful boy sucking my penis was the same as the one who had raped Carla. In any case, I flung him away. He returned, and I pushed him again, harder than I intended. Coming back, he deliberately provoked me into hitting him, and he continued to do so. We both became a little wild, and I pounded him with all my strength. It was a while before I realized how much he was enjoying it. He moaned and sighed; his penis was in an enormous state of erection. I'd gone so far, I couldn't stop, and I continued beating him, pinching

him, tearing at him until he was bloody. With each wound I inflicted, his passion rose, and he rubbed against my body giving it small wet kisses. He dropped into a heap at my feet, begging me to kick him, and I did, again and again, and each time he came back to stroke, lick, kiss my ankles, knees or thighs. Half-crazy I threw myself on him; his buttocks rose under me, and suddenly we were locked together. And while we rolled and swayed, I continued pounding him and pinching him as if this last horrible act must purge me of all the terrible degeneracy of the past two weeks. My member throbbed in and out of him, tearing at him, and finally I came.

D is for Donleavy, J.P.

James Patrick Donleavy was born in 1926 to Irish immigrants in New York. Joining the navy brought him to Europe. Following World War II, Donleavy settled in Ireland and wrote. His first and best book, *The Ginger Man*, about the sexual exploits of Sebastian Dangerfield, was published by Olympia in 1955 but proved the press's downfall a decade later.

Naïve Donleavy had expected his book to be published in the manner of Samuel Beckett's, Henry Miller's, or Vladimir Nabokov's, which is to say respectfully, as literature. However, Girodias decided to publish it as volume seven in the Traveller's Companion imprint of raunchy sex books (the excerpt above, of Chester's, is from number twelve of the same series).

Donleavy's novel was advertised alongside Traveller titles such as *Rape*, *The Loins of Amon*, *The Libertine*, and *Tender Was My Flesh*. Piqued, Donleavy made the cuts necessary to avoid prosecution under Britain's obscenity laws and resold his book to a UK publisher in 1956, depriving Olympia of an audience for its edition. Adding to the lawsuits already proliferating, the expurgated version of *The Ginger Man* appeared in America in 1958. As the novel

went on to sell tens of thousands of copies, Girodias felt that his press was due a portion of Donleavy's royalties. Unfortunately, there were problems with Olympia's filing of copyright and with Girodias' always late reports of sales to the author, causing courts to rule in Donleavy's favor. Girodias and Donleavy litigated against each other on two continents and in three countries throughout the 1960s.

In 1968, Olympia went bankrupt and was put on the block. Despite Girodias's attempts to keep the auction secret, Donleavy sent his then-wife, actress Mary Wilson Price (once remarried, Mary Guinness), to Paris, where she engaged in a bidding war with Girodias for ownership of his press. Price's deeper pockets won out and Olympia remained her property until her death. With the press that had sued him for rights to the royalties of his book now part of his own portfolio, Donleavy was essentially suing himself, and *The Ginger Man* killed the press that, a decade earlier, had given it life.

E is for Erotica

Olympia was named after *Olympia*, a painting by Édouard Manet (1832–83). Manet's entry into the 1863 Salon had been the infamously rejected *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which, in its subsequent exhibition in the Salon des Refusés, scandalized with its depiction of a nude woman displaying herself in modern picnic surroundings. In 1865, Manet offered the Salon his roughshod, frankly erotic portrait of a lounging odalisque, or prostitute—a naked cocotte of the *demi-mondaine*—being attended to by her African servant. Upon its inexplicable acceptance, *Olympia* (the model for which, Victorine Meurent, became a painter herself) caused a furor that Manet had to have expected. Still, he complained to Baudelaire, “abuses rain upon me like hail. I have never before been in such a fix.... I should have wished to have your sound opinion of my work for all this outcry is disturbing and clearly somebody is wrong.”

F is for France

France is a French-speaking country located just across the English Channel from the most formidable English-language literary market outside of the United States. Lost Generation conspirators as disparate as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein found the cheap, libertine Paris of the 1920s conducive to reflection on American home. But their freewheeling, free-spending spirit was crushed from abroad in 1929 with the onset of Depression. Capital Letters Ran Amok; Headlines Cried Sorrow. As American novelists, painters, and composers evacuated the Left Bank in droves, Kahane's Obelisk opened shop. The spirit of France's third and fourth republics, from the fall of Napoleon III, the last French emperor, to postwar reconstruction in the wake of Nazi devastation, is best embodied by Obelisk's and Olympia's smutty paperback books, which had to be smuggled out through border crossings, liberating the world once clearing customs between Calais and prudish Dover.

G is for Girodias, Maurice

Olympia's founder, "a second-generation Anglo-French pornographer," as he often described himself, was born in Paris in 1919 as Maurice Kahane. The Nazi occupation of Paris compelled him to exchange his Jewish surname for his mother's Spanish sobriquet. As Girodias, he survived the war by publishing a useful weekly film guide, *Paris-Programme*, and supplying paper to the Reich.

Following the war, Girodias published some of the greatest literature of the twentieth century, in the process committing every possible offense under the guise of free speech, including obscenity, indecency, defamation, hate speech, and what would later come to be called child pornography. With Anglo-American censorship disappearing by the late 1960s, Gallic glamour fading under de Gaulle, and Olympia collapsing around him, the occasionally dishonest, always disorganized Girodias relocated to the United States, where

his attempts to establish various American Olympia imprints were perennially frustrated. Girodias was forced to return to France, living off the proceeds of his memoirs, and died in Paris in 1990 following a radio interview.

Though chiefly known for publishing prose, Girodias was also talented at writing it, as evinced by this excerpt from *The Frog Prince*, the first of his three autobiographies. Here the author loses his virginity to Didi, a Provençal waitress:

For my part, I am so carried away in delight that I've completely forgotten my own desires. A need more subtle than mine has me captivated. I ask nothing more than to serve my beautiful Didi, for she and I are now bound by a common passion, which is for her body. The desire in my hands penetrates her flesh deeply. She loves that beautiful skin of hers as it glows with the pleasure of my caresses. My clumsy admiration arouses in her a narcissistic voluptuousness, for she takes my beginner's errors for subtle refinements; and she no longer knows what is happening, she's deliciously disoriented. I thank my stars, I treasure my luck, I even congratulate myself on my ignorance.

H is for Harris, Frank

James Thomas (Frank) Harris was born in Ireland in 1856 and worked as a cowboy, lawyer, journalist, politician, playwright, and a builder of the Brooklyn Bridge. He was also a short, husky sex maniac who slept and talked his way around the world while producing his prolix memoirs, *My Life and Loves*, in four volumes, self-published in the 1920s and reprinted by Obelisk in 1934. Its most notable characters include whores, Ruskin, and Marx. The elder Kahane first met Harris in 1912 in Manchester, where Harris was lecturing at the Midland Hotel in support of his book *The Man Shakespeare*, which opined that the playwright had encoded his personality in the soliloquies of his leading men and argued that Mary Fitton, maid of honor to Elizabeth I, was in fact the elusive Dark Lady

of the sonnets. The book was unanimously derided, though it could not do as much damage as his memoirs: Their publication left Harris alienated, embittered, and financially destroyed.

However, *My Life and Loves*, rife with vain, preening sex, proved to be an exceptional seller for Olympia, which reprinted it for decades. Though Harris died in Nice in 1931, a fifth volume of lewd hagiography appeared in 1954, ghostwritten, in grand impersonation of Harris' style, by the indefatigable Alexander Trocchi. Volume five of *My Life and Loves* is commonly regarded as the best of the set.

I is for *Inside Scientology*

Inside Scientology: How I Joined Scientology and Became Super-human was written by former Scientologist Robert Kaufman and published by Olympia USA in 1972 (Olympia USA was one of the press's American incarnations, founded after Girodias lost Olympia Paris and became, like his father, an expatriate).

Kaufman's book was the first to publicly criticize the Church of Scientology and also to reveal its organizational secrets by reproducing founder L. Ron Hubbard's inside instructions and training techniques. The Church is said to have immediately responded: Allegedly, it mailed thousands of letters to Olympia's UK associates, informing them, on forged Olympia letterhead, that the press had gone out of business. One morning, a blonde woman appeared at Girodias' office, claiming an interest in his legal affairs. According to Girodias, she drove him to New Jersey and abandoned him, under false pretense, at the Port of Newark, having planted marijuana on his person. Girodias was charged with trespass on property without legitimate purpose and possession of a controlled dangerous substance, but this being his first offense, he was only given probation.

In 1974, a letter accusing Girodias of violating the terms of his U.S. visa was sent to Henry Kissinger at the State Department, on the occasion of Olympia USA's publication of the horny, dystopian novel, *President Kissinger*. Girodias would be forced to leave the

country unless he could find another way to maintain his status. The Church of Scientology, which Girodias suspected was behind the Kissinger letter, would then be responsible for Girodias' brief but happy marriage to medical student Lilla Cabot Lyon, a union that served to legalize his American residence.

J is for Joyce, James

Hoping for literary glory, Kahane wished to reproduce the success of Sylvia Beach's publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* through her bookstore, Shakespeare & Company, in 1922. By 1929 all the great avant-garde English-language publishing houses of Paris had died—Shakespeare, Three Mountains Press, Contact Editions—and so, in search of an unattached name with which to launch his venture (which he was calling the Fountain Press, operating in collaboration with printer Henry Babou), the dandyish Kahane pestered the spinsterly Beach into introducing him to that blind Irishman he called God. For fifty thousand francs, Kahane purchased the rights to publish five thousand words entitled *Haveth Childers Everywhere*, the first excerpt of Joyce's last novel, *Finnegans Wake*.

H.C.E. was published by Obelisk in 1930 in a deluxe edition of six hundred copies (one hundred of which were printed on "mother-of-pearl Japanese vellum paper"). Two years later, Obelisk published an edition of Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach*, with illustrations by Lucia Joyce, the author's daughter. Though he liked Lucia's art, Kahane was said to have found her father's texts unreadable.

K is for Kahane, Jack

Jack Kahane, son of Romanian Jews, born in Manchester in 1887, first made his name as a poet and dramatist, active in Mancunian artistic circles. He made early noise by accusing Hans Richter, famed German musician and principal conductor of Manchester's Hallé

Orchestra, of too infrequently programming French repertoire. Richter quit the orchestra in the wake of Kahane's press campaign while the young arch-Francophile, newly understanding the value of publicity, went on to found the Swan Club, Manchester's leading literary salon, the denizens of which included playwrights Harold Brighouse and Stanley Houghton.

Kahane served in World War I, was wounded, and convalesced in France, where he met his wife, Marcelle Girodias, a Spanish-born Catholic Frenchwoman, the daughter of a wealthy engineer who had built railroads across Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and South America. During his recovery, Kahane began writing light fiction. His most popular novel was his first, a bubbly but prim concoction called *Laugh and Grow Rich*. Others of Kahane's books include six erotic novels written under the name Cecil Barr, after a favorite pub, the Cecil Bar, and his 1939 *Memoirs of a Booklegger*.

Natalie Barney held Friday soirées; Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas had their klatsch on Saturdays; while Sylvia Beach's bookstore was open for business daily; but by 1929, as those great salons disappeared, and Americans left for home, Kahane began to envision two possibilities for his literary future. First, he could step in to publish the work of eminences like Joyce; second, he could support such idealism by making money off British tourists interested in buying English-language books, of all kinds, that were banned in their own country. Kahane was the only expatriate publisher in interwar Paris who wasn't independently wealthy and found it necessary to profit from anything he chose to put between covers. Kahane's Obelisk published work by Joyce, Miller, D.H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, and Cyril Connolly, alongside mild smut such as *To Beg I Am Ashamed* ("the autobiography of a London prostitute") and *Mad About Women*, by "the Marco Polo of sex," N. Reynolds Packard, Rome correspondent for the New York *Daily News*. Obelisk died when Kahane died, in September 1939, with the Nazis invading Poland, the Vichy regime only a winter away.

L is for *Lunch, Naked*

Olympia originally rejected William S. Burroughs' seminal novel because, literally, its manuscript was seminally soaked, steeped in alcohol, cigarette-burnt, and nibbled by rats. Always a footloose collation of pages, *Naked Lunch* would be resubmitted in a fresh copy, with organizational help from Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso and typing assistance from Jack Kerouac, who also suggested its title. Girodias accepted and published the manuscript in 1959. Purportedly, Girodias was convinced to acquire Burroughs's book not by any intrinsic quality of the writing, but thanks to the scandalous publication of excerpts in a magazine called *Big Table*, a name Kerouac had suggested as well.

Barney Rosset at Grove Press purchased the American rights, but proceeded to warehouse ten thousand copies of the book, awaiting the resolution of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* obscenity trial to know whether works like Miller's and Burroughs's would be allowed American distribution (Obelisk had published Miller's book in Paris nearly three decades earlier).

However, following Burroughs's triumphant appearance at the 1962 Edinburgh Festival, a landmark literary gathering featuring Miller, Norman Mailer, and others, Grove decided to release the novel, damn the censors. If not for this Scottish *succès d'estime*, *Naked Lunch* would have hungered much longer, as Miller's case was resolved only in 1964 and censorship in America was not itself censured until 1966 with the Supreme Court decision in the matter of *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*. Mary McCarthy lent her crucial support only three months after publication. A 1963 newspaper strike provided the perfect opportunity for the launch of *The New York Review of Books*, the inaugural issue of which featured McCarthy's *Naked Lunch* assessment, which remains among the best: "The literalness of Burroughs is the opposite of 'literature,'" she wrote. "Unsentimental and factual, he writes as though his thoughts had the quality of self-evidence."

M is for Miller, Henry

Henry Miller dealt with both Obelisk and Olympia and so had working relationships, however strained, with Kahane *père* and Girodias *fiis*. The relationships were consummated simultaneously when Obelisk first published Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934, two years after it had been submitted to the press. It took that long for Kahane to come to terms with its subject matter and to feel comfortable printing it after the relatively tame titles of *Sleeveless Errand* and *The Well of Loneliness*; Joyceiana aside, Miller's was Obelisk's first important literary work. The cover image of a woman being abducted by a gigantic crab—incongruously, *Cancer*—was the work of Maurice Girodias, then still Maurice Kahane, fifteen years old and not even allowed to read the work himself. After such a delay, Kahane had no more excuses for not publishing when money for the printers was loaned him by Miller's lover and fellow Obelisk erographer, Anaïs Nin, who borrowed the money herself from her mentor and occasional tryst, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank. Nin's own Obelisk book, *The Winter of Artifice*, was the last title published in Kahane's lifetime, released a week before the beginning of World War II, nine days before the publisher's death. That book was financed by another Obelisk author, Lawrence Durrell—Miller's friend and, again, a lover of Nin's. Henry Miller lived a long and productive life (1891–1980) in two cultures (Parisian, Californian), so it is unsurprising that his books, lovers, and friends gave rise to so many connections. Frank Harris's tailor in New York was none other than Heinrich Miller, a German immigrant to Yorkville, Manhattan, and the writer's father.

N is for Nabokov, Vladimir

In 1955, Denise Clarouin, a past friend of Kahane's and Parisian literary agent, introduced Girodias to her colleague Doussia Ergaz, a

muse to Russian émigré writers and, occasionally, their representation. At the drunken business lunch that followed, Ergaz sold Girodias a manuscript previously rejected by four American publishers: a licentious, cerebral book about a European scholar's love for a little suburban girl, *Lolita*, which Olympia published in the same year. Its author, the Russian exile, lepidopterist, and chess master Vladimir Nabokov, was then teaching English at Cornell University and, with an immigrant's fear of losing his livelihood, initially wanted his novel to appear under the *nom de plume* V. Sirin, which he had used to publish in Germany amid the revolutionary heyday of Russian Berlin. Eric Kahane, Girodias' younger brother, translated *Lolita*—Nabokov's third novel written in English—into French, though the novel would be banned in France until 1958. In an odd reversal, *Lolita* was always legal in America and Britain.

By 1958, American presses, continuing their practice of profiting from the republication of Girodias's list, were prepared to defend any challenge to the book in court, ready for what Nabokov would refer to in correspondence as "lolitigation." But the glory of state-side prosecution was never to be. Instead, the deal Nabokov signed between Olympia and Putnam, the American publisher, enriched all involved. The novel sold more than 100,000 copies within three weeks of publication, thanks to masterful publicity and hints of illicitness with no real illegality. Putnam editor Walter Minton, who first read the Olympia edition of the novel thanks to the influence of his showgirl girlfriend, Rosemary Ridgewell, became one of the most influential and rich editors of the decade. Nabokov quit academia to live the rest of his life in Swiss hotels. Girodias, however, squandered his fortune—which would have run his press for years—in the construction and operation of a two-floor, seven-room nightclub. Initially wanting to call this establishment *Chez Lolita*, Girodias reconsidered after he was threatened with legal action; he named the place *La Grande Séverine*, after its address, 7 rue Saint-Séverine, where Olympia also maintained offices.

This pleasure house, built on a nymphet's fortune, boasted an Oriental red room; a blue room called Le Salon Cagliostro, after its tarot-card theme; a Winter Garden replete with rococo birdcages; La Salle du Grand Siècle, a candlelit formal restaurant; La Batucada, a Brazilian-themed club for Latin American dancing; Club de Jazz (also known as Le Blues-Bar), which hosted such notables as Chet Baker, Memphis Slim, and Marpessa Dawn; La Salle Suèdoise, a late-night restaurant specializing in light Scandinavian fare; and Chez Vodka, a Russian cabaret featuring a balalaika orchestra. There was also a theater in the building's ancient cellar where plays and readings were staged. By the 1960s, La Grande Séverine would help to bury Olympia.

O is for *Histoire d'O*

Histoire d'O, or *Story of O*, is the story of a woman named after the most open, accessible vowel in the alphabet. O, a fashion photographer, is taken to a château in Roissy, a Paris suburb, by her lover, René. There, she is sexually—and, shockingly to feminism, willingly—enslaved: She is whipped, multiply raped, and kept manacled in dungeons while being repeatedly sodomized by a succession of ebonite dildos. She is branded on her buttocks; her labia are pierced with a ring connected to chains by which she is led around, crawling. *Story of O* was published simultaneously in French and English in 1954, under the pornonym Pauline Réage, with a preface signed by Jean Paulhan, a respected critic for the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, editor at the Gallimard publishing house, and member of the Académie française. Thanks to Paulhan's imprimatur, the book became an instant *succès de scandale* and bestseller, the author's identity an avidly sought secret.

The French press doubted that Réage was a woman and proposed as author André Malraux, Raymond Queneau, Jean Paulhan

himself, or even the American writer George Plimpton. Forty years after publication, though, Réage was publicly outed by Olympia scholar John de St. Jorre (writing in *The New Yorker*) as Dominique Aury, a prominent translator of English-language books into French and a Gallimard employee. Aury, who was privately suspected for decades of being *O's* author, maintained that her novel had been a love letter to Paulhan, who had guarded her identity after he captured her heart. As Paulhan was years older than Aury and already married to an invalid who would outlive him (Paulhan died in 1968), Aury's *O* had been intended as a complete gift of herself to the man she could not possess.

However, Dominique Aury was also a pseudonym, used for the author's translation work, and ultimately de St. Jorre chose to protect the true identity of the novel's creatrix. The real writer of *O* is named only in the definitive bibliography of the Olympia Press, written by book smuggler and erotician Patrick Kearney and edited by Angus Carroll. There we are told that Réage-Aury is, or was, Anne Cécile Desclos (1907–98). But Desclos's is not the only pseudonymous conundrum involved with *O's* publication: The translator of the book's 1965 American edition was Sabine d'Estrée, believed to be Richard Seaver, translator of Samuel Beckett's French work and husband to a woman whose middle name was Sabine. The first English version of *O* was said to be execrable, with Olympia's translator translating the name *Madeleine* as *cake*. Because brother Eric was busy, Girodias had entrusted the work to Baird Bryant, dilettante novelist. Bryant would abandon literature for cinematography; he was one of the cameramen who, at the 1969 Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, California, caught on tape the murder of gunman Meredith Hunter by Hell's Angel Alan Passaro, which can be seen in the documentary film *Gimme Shelter*.

P is for Pornography

My breasts, if it is not too bold a figure to call so two hard, firm, rising hillocks, that just began to shew themselves, or signify anything to the touch, employ'd and amus'd her hands a-while, till, slipping down lower, over a smooth track, she could just feel the soft silky down that had but a few months before put forth and garnish'd the mount-pleasant of those parts, and promised to spread a grateful shelter over the seat of the most exquisite sensation, and which had been, till that instant, the seat of the most insensible innocence. Her fingers play'd and strove to twine in the young tendrils of that moss, which nature has contrived at once for use and ornament.

But, not contented with these outer posts, she now attempts the main spot, and began to twitch, to insinuate, and at length to force an introduction of a finger into the quick itself, in such a manner, that had she not proceeded by insensible gradations that inflamed me beyond the power of modesty to oppose its resistance to their progress, I should have jump'd out of bed and cried for help against such strange assaults.

Instead of which, her lascivious touches had lighted up a new fire that wanton'd through all my veins, but fix'd with violence in that center appointed them by nature, where the first strange hands were now busied in feeling, squeezing, compressing the lips, then opening them again, with a finger between, till an "Oh!" express'd her hurting me, where the narrowness of the unbroken passage refused it entrance to any depth.

(From *Fanny Hill, or: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, first pornographic novel in English, by John Cleland, published in installments beginning in 1748, republished by Olympia in 1954, defined as protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution by the United States Supreme Court in the matter of *Memoirs v. Massachusetts*, 1966, which effectively ended censorship in America.)

Q is for Queneau, Raymond

Raymond Queneau (1903–76) was a French poet, novelist, literary theorist, and Gallimard executive. His apprentice interests were with surrealism and the way in which the use of language manipulates thought, which makes his work difficult to translate. Later, Queneau cofounded the Oulipo movement (an acronym for *ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or workshop for potential literature), dedicated to experimenting with writing under formal and stylistic restrictions. Queneau's most successful book in any language is 1947's *Exercices de style*, in which the same story is told multiple times and in multiple ways, such as in retrograde and in rhyming slang. Queneau's most commercially popular book, however, was 1959's *Zazie dans le métro*, published simultaneously with its English edition by Olympia under the same French title but translated by Eric Kahane and Akbar del Piobo, a pseudonym for American artist Norman Rubington. A film version by Louis Malle was made in 1960.

The book, which concerns the adventures of a young girl placed in the care of a transvestite uncle to allow her mother time alone with a lover, explores the possibilities of a nonacademic, colloquial French. Its opening word is "Doukipudonktan," a neologism and phoneticization of the correct *D'où qu'il pue donc tant?* ("How come he stinks so bad?") The now-standard English translation, by Barbara Wright, reads "Howcanaystinksosho," while "Holifart, watastink" was Olympia's original.

R is for Rijeka

Kahane was shelled and gassed at Ypres, Belgium, in 1916, his health forever ruined. After his hospital discharge, marriage, and honeymoon recuperation, Kahane resumed his duties, serving as a transport officer with the Fourth Army in Dunkirk, France, and Italy. Stationed in the port of Fiume, Italy—today known as Rijeka,

Croatia—Kahane's job following the armistice was to ensure that the Italian railways ran on time to facilitate the return of Allied troops to Britain.

Austro-Hungarian Rijeka's population had been majority Croat, or Slav, until the *fin de siècle*, when the Hapsburgs began encouraging Italian emigration. The town had been administered by the Hungarian half of the empire from Budapest, but by the time Kahane arrived, the city was under British control, and Italy—especially the Italian Right—had begun claiming Fiume as its own, if only unofficially. Meanwhile, Rijeka's port moored ships from the fleets of Britain, France, Italy, and Austria. With his decent French and inadequate Italian, Kahane became chief negotiator of Rijeka's future.

When the Treaty of Versailles failed to award the Dalmatian territories to Italy, Italian nationalists felt insulted and sought to restore their dignity through the figure of Gabriele d'Annunzio, warrior-poet. A crazy, black-shirted fascist—he popularized both the politics and the fashion—d'Annunzio had emerged from the war a hero, not only as an artist but also as a cavalry officer and fighter pilot. When it emerged that Fiume itself would not be returned to Italy, d'Annunzio, with the support of Mussolini, who had just founded the Fascist Party in Rome, marched on the city in September 1919. There, he claimed Fiume for Italy against the will of the Italian government. The government condemned d'Annunzio; Mussolini's Fascists denounced the government; and d'Annunzio, calling himself Il Duce before Mussolini, ensconced himself in Rijeka, where he remade the city in a Romantic, bloody image. Calling his state the Regency of Carnaro, d'Annunzio instituted the laws of ancient Rome, including capital punishment. When the Treaty of Rapallo between Italy and Yugoslavia in 1920 declared Rijeka an independent state to be incorporated into Croatia, d'Annunzio responded by declaring war on the country of his birth. But with the Italian fleet blockading the harbor and shelling d'Annunzio's villa, the poet-provocateur retreated.

Kahane himself had already left, in 1919, for France, where he was asked to approach the Yugoslav delegation at the Paris Conference on behalf of Italy, covertly offering to purchase Rijeka from Yugoslavia; in return, the Italians were willing to surrender Spalato, also offering to build a new port for that city. Kahane's remuneration would have been the concession for the port's construction, but this exaggerated scheme came to nothing. Rijeka was Kahane's first encounter with the fascism that his sons would experience more directly.

S is for Sade, Marquis de

La Grande Séverine, Girodias's nightspot and office, was located down the street from the fifteenth-century Saint-Séverin church. While excavating the building's cellars for an expansion, workers unearthed skeletons from the church's medieval burial grounds. Converting this (rumored to be cursed) basement into a vast underground theater, Girodias turned impresario, staging theatrical works for the public and friends. These included a revue entitled *Les Playgirls* as well as a stage adaptation of Norman Rubington's *Fuzz Against Junk* in a French translation by Eric Kahane. Girodias's brother was also responsible for a 1959 adaptation of Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (*The Bedroom Philosophers*), the dialogical original of which Olympia had published in 1953. Olympia also released editions of the ithyphallic Marquis's *Justine* (first published under the Obelisk imprint), *Juliette*, and *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

While *La Philosophie dans le boudoir's* opening night proved a success, the Paris vice squad—increasingly repressive in de Gaulle's France—arrived two nights later and closed the play down. Girodias, who unlike other porn publishers never much kept a low profile, defied the ban, mounting the stage the next night to read, as an opening act, the text of the decree that shuttered his show. The police did

nothing, however, perhaps because that night the audience included de Gaulle's former minister of education; the writer Romain Gary and his wife, actress Jean Seberg; the filmmaker Roger Vadim; and actress Catherine Deneuve. The following night, though, the vice squad returned and the theater never reopened. La Grande Séverine soon exhausted its resources and credit, closing doors forever. Olympia Paris would not survive the club by much, and by 1965 Girodias had moved his operations to America.

T is for Trilogy

Alexander Trocchi, Scottish writer and pornographer, cofounded *Merlin* with his American wife, Jane Lougee, in 1952 as a magazine for "innovation in creative writing." Their partners included Austryn Wainhouse, Richard Seaver, and British poet Christopher Logue. It was Seaver who discovered Samuel Beckett in French, helped translate him into English, and brought the Irish writer to the attention of *Merlin*, which published an excerpt from *Molloy*.

Girodias, who had befriended the impressionable *Merlinois*, as he called them, and who supported *Merlin* by employing its editors in the writing of d.b.s, was introduced to Beckett (1906–89), and published *Watt*, the Nobel laureate's first book in English, as part of a series called Collection Merlin in 1953. Another of the *Merlinois*, South African Patrick Bowles, translated *Molloy* into English in collaboration with the author, while Beckett translated *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* on his own. Olympia published them as a trilogy in 1959.

In 1938, Kahane had asked Beckett to translate the Marquis de Sade for Obelisk, but Beckett refused, not wanting his name associated with a press that dabbled in erotics. Beckett considered *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* as individual entities and submitted them separately to many publishing houses that had rejected them because of their difficulty and perceived obscenity. Kahane's

son grouped Beckett's three novels into the famous dispensation in which we read them today.

U is for Unexpurgated

Sleeveless errand is superannuated slang for a fool's errand, or fruitless endeavor. *Sleeveless* derives from *sleave*, or *sleive*, meaning raveled thread or the raw edge of silk, implying uselessness. An Old English verb, to *sleeve* meant to divide or separate. To sleeve silk meant to prepare it for weaving by passing it through the *slay* of a loom, sometimes called a *sled*. The sleeve itself was the tangled, coarse end left over from the process.

Sleeveless Errand is a novel by Norah C. James, written in 1928 and scheduled for publication by the British Scholartis Press in 1929. But in February of that year, on the eve of publication, London police raided every bookstore that had ordered copies and confiscated their stock. What followed was a sleeveless prosecution. The Crown found the book lascivious, while supporters praised its (illusory) literary merit. Offending passages included such verbiage as *bloody hell, balls, homos, whores, for Christ's sake, like hell, and bitch*.

Kahane read about the fracas in a newspaper across the Channel and managed to obtain a confiscated copy (most of the print run had been pulped). He didn't enjoy it as literature as much as entertain it as a business opportunity. Believing that the book was attacked because a prominent politician had been maligned in its pages—though neither he nor James ever mentioned any names—Kahane conceived the idea for a prurient but entirely legal Parisian press, which profited from exploiting the definitional differences between British and French pruderies and libels. In March 1929, Kahane purchased English-language, French-publication rights to *Sleeveless Errand*, taking out advertisements in the London press announcing that "in the event of other books of literary merit being banned in England," he was "prepared to publish them in Paris

within a month.” *Sleeveless Errand* was Obelisk’s first title. James, the author, said that had she known that portions of her book would have offended, she would have removed them. Kahane, contrarily, relished the economics of transgression and emblazoned on a blue-green wrapper across his edition’s cover the catchphrase:

THE COMPLETE
AND UNEXPURGATED TEXT

which would be the promise made to Obelisk and Olympia readers for decades to come.

V is for Valerie Solanas

In 1967, while establishing Olympia USA, Girodias lived in New York at the Chelsea Hotel. His neighbor was a disturbed novice writer named Valerie Solanas. A friendship began, and Girodias came to appreciate Solanas’s anti-male play *Up Your Ass*, as well as a manifesto entitled, and for, *S.C.U.M.*, the Society for Cutting Up Men. Girodias commissioned Solanas to write a novel, offering her an advance of \$2,000, and Solanas—a friend and collaborator of Andy Warhol’s—introduced Girodias to the pop artist at a screening of the rough cut of his film *I, a Man*. Solanas could not finish her novel, however, and offered Girodias her manifesto instead. In June 1968, Girodias abruptly evacuated New York for Montréal. The day after he left, Solanas entered Warhol’s studio and shot Andy three times, damaging organs. That evening, with Warhol undergoing surgery, Solanas surrendered to police in Times Square. Warhol’s shooting was front-page news until Sirhan Sirhan shot Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles two days later.

Capitalizing on the Warhol shooting as best he could, Girodias immediately published Solanas’s manifesto, treating it as an exhibit in her public trial by quoting in a press release Solanas’s statement to the police that her motives for shooting Warhol were “very

involved but best understood if you read my manifesto.” There was a rumor, possibly spread by Girodias himself, that the deranged Solanas had actually been after him; that she had stopped by Olympia USA’s Gramercy Park office first, but, finding Girodias gone, instead walked, gun in hand, to Warhol’s Factory at Union Square. Gossip says that Girodias, with whom Solanas was dissatisfied as publisher and friend, knew this in advance, which explains his abrupt departure for Canada.

W is for Wyndham Lewis

Marjorie Firminger was a mediocre novelist who, in 1929, fell in love with Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957). Firminger, born in London in 1899, began her artistic career as an actress, playing gadfly girl Penelope Foxglove in Kenneth Barnes’s play *The Letter of the Law*. Despite good notices, this was Firminger’s last stage success. When she met the author, painter, and raconteur Lewis, Firminger was eking out a living writing about fashion for women’s magazines. Lewis occasionally stopped by Firminger’s Chelsea apartment and encouraged her to gossip, relying on the younger writer for her insight into Lewis’s circle of friends, who had become Firminger’s, too: Sidney Schiff, novelist, and Richard Wyndham, painter, among others. At this time, Firminger was writing a novel herself, a fact she kept from the intimidating, domineering Lewis. That novel, *Jam To-day*, was a messy satire, a masochistic act of social suicide, especially for someone with as little fame as Firminger. The title is borrowed from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the Queen tells Alice: “The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday—but never jam to-day.” Though the Queen’s line might derive from a Latin pun (*iam* in Latin means soon, or presently), Carroll’s phrase has come to signify unfulfilled promise or delayed gratification.

Firminger herself greedily gobbles her preserves from the very first page: Friend Sir Michael Bruce, author, is lampooned as Lord Jerry Poon; the book’s lesbian heroine, Bracken Dilitor, was based

on friend Heather Pilkington (whom Firminger had introduced to Lewis upon Lewis's request to meet a lesbian); and Pilkington's real-life lover, Wyn Henderson, friend to shipping heiress Nancy Cunard and collaborator with Cunard on the Hours Press in Paris, appears as Mrs. Wikk, "over six feet and colossally fat." Word about the book traveled, and even before publication Firminger's friends began to desert her. Firminger, though, remained convinced of her right to transmute life into art—a conviction influenced by Lewis's practice. Lewis, after all, had told her that "friends are there to be used." He soon proved this with pitiless force.

Jam To-day was accepted for publication by Herbert Clarke, of the Paris-based Vendôme Press. With Heather Pilkington threatening suit if the book were to be published in England, Firminger's first novel appeared in 1931, only to be promptly seized by British customs as obscene. Then suddenly, with the book selling well, Herbert Clarke died and Vendôme's list was bought by Kahane, whom Firminger had coincidentally met on her trip to Paris to negotiate terms with her previous, deceased publisher. Rebranding her novel with the Obelisk phallus, Kahane offered to publish Firminger's future books, but none was forthcoming. *After Thirty*, *That Cad Jane*, and *Love at Last* were left unfinished. A married Lewis, returned from an extended trip to Berlin, where he would fall under Nazi influence, distanced himself even further from Firminger, who remained obsessed with him, refusing to abandon her pretense toward their relationship.

In 1932, Lewis published *Snooty Baronet*, a novel that follows a writer-hero—a one-legged, Scottish minor noble, Sir Michael Kell-Imrie—as he makes his way through a world of mediocrities, unworthies, incompetent aspirants, and poseurs. One of them is his infrequent lover, hack writer Valerie Ritter, whose works were "quite unprintable, except in de luxe editions privately printed in Paris or Milan." A "giggling fantoche" with halitosis, Val's face "has a swarthy massaged flush. (If you look too close, it is full of pits; under the make-up is a field of gaping pores—her nose is worst in this

respect: some day it will disintegrate for all practical purposes)." Like Firminger, Val self-destructed, having alienated "all those bright nebulous monomaniacal patrons, of Gossip-column-class—on to the hem of whose garment she had clung like grim death—but who had shaken her off, of one accord, and by common consent, about a year since, when she had pooped in their faces."

The author of *Jam To-day* married, divorced, and worked in a department store, selling hats. Firminger's legacy was Lewis's immortal slight; Lewis would withhold their correspondence from his own collection of letters. She died in 1976, humiliated still.

X is for XXX

X's anonymity has stood in for the miscellaneously prurient, a shorthand for the scatological or otherwise forbidden. It stands for ten in Roman numerals and has also served as both a symbol of negation (*no*) and the traditional signature of illiterates. The origins of its myriad applications are obscure.

Two Olympians incorporated this anonymizing, lurid letter into their pseudonyms. XXX was the pseudonym of Diane, or alternately Diana, Bataille, wife of Georges, also known as Princess Diane Kotchoubey de Beauharnais, and the author of *The Whip Angels*. Greta X was John Millington-Ward, who wrote exclusively about *le vice anglais*—flagellation. As Greta, this dignified, older Englishman—Olympia's most commercially successful d.b. writer throughout the 1950s—wrote *There's a Whip in My Valise* and *Whipsdom*. He also wrote under the names Angela Pearson (*Scream, My Darling, Scream; The Whipping Club; The Whipping Post; Whips Incorporated*), and Ruth Less or Ruth Lesse (*Lash*). Under his own name, Millington-Ward was an English teacher, theorist of education, and author of such valuable textbooks as *New Intermediate English Grammar* and *Proficiency In The Use Of English: 10 Lessons of Guidance and Practice*.

Y is for *Young Adam*

Young Adam is a book by Francis Lengel, a.k.a. Alexander Trocchi, who wrote both d.b.s and more serious literature for Olympia under the gynonym Carmencita de las Lunas and aliases Oscar Mole and Frank Harris. He used the name Lengel for pornography; de las Lunas was used to write *Thongs*; and Oscar Mole was appended to Trocchi's translations, which included an Englishing of Apollinaire's *Les onze mille verges*. Trocchi was also Terry Southern's first collaborator on the latter's update of *Candide*, but Trocchi recused himself to meet d.b. deadlines, leaving Southern to work with Mason Hoffenberg on their subversive sex farce, *Candy*. Subsequently, Trocchi turned literary agent, introducing Southern and Hoffenberg to Girodias, who published their classic coauthored novel to enduring success. Trocchi was a one-man, rush-hour Grub Street and was even prodigious, or profligate, against his will: When his update of *Fanny Hill*, entitled *Helen and Desire* (1954), was banned in France, Olympia reprinted it under the title *Desire and Helen* (1956). *Helen and Desire* was the first Lengel book, but *Young Adam*—also from 1954, about a bargeworker plying Glasgow to Edinburgh who discovers the corpse of a woman he knew, and his sexual fantasies—was his most successful. In the late 1950s, Trocchi left Paris, moved to the United States, and, life imitating art, worked on a garbage barge on the Hudson River. He returned to England a decade later, continued writing, but summated his posterity by injecting heroin on live television. He died in 1984, having spent his last years operating a used books stall in London.

Trocchi wrote a single book of lasting literary merit, *Cain's Book* (1960), also concerning a bargeworker. A *Young Adam* film appeared in 2003 starring Ewan McGregor, Tilda Swinton, Peter Mullan, and Emily Mortimer. It was rated NC-17; Sony Pictures, the movie's American distributors, wanted to cut McGregor's full-frontal nudity scene for stateside release, but the actor protested and the scene was retained.

Z is for Zay, Theodore

Theodore Zay, ostensible Hungarian nobleman, wrote only one book for Obelisk, never reprinted. That novel, *Love Counts Ten*, subtitled

A SENSATIONAL STORY
OF THE NIGHT HAUNTS OF A GREAT CITY

concerns young gigolo Ernest von Sternheim, who services both sexes in Weimar Berlin. Sternheim falls in love and seeks retirement at the age of twenty-seven, but the stock market crashes and our tender whore loses his fortune. After his lover dies of consumption, Sternheim blinds himself in a suicide attempt as inept as his author's prose style (I am relying on summaries, however; *Love* is among the most difficult of Obelisk titles to obtain). At novel's end, our hero, broke and unable to satisfy his clientele, is left preternaturally old, selling matches on a Paris street corner.

Theodore Zay is certainly a pseudonym, especially given the location of Obelisk's offices just across the Seine from the Left Bank's Quai d'Orsay (and the Musée d'Orsay, where Manet's *Olympia* hangs). *Love* was published cheaply in Belgium in January 1939. The true identity of "Theo d'Orsay" remains unknown to this day.