

CENSORSHIP AND THE LIMITS OF THE LITERARY: A GLOBAL VIEW
EDITED BY NICOLE MOORE

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From the Churches of revolutionary Europe to the librarians of Quebec, Moore's ambitious project travels the globe in its attempt to provide a sprawling overview of censorship and its productive (dis)engagements with the literary work over time. Whether all the contributions can articulate her ambitions or match her ability, is debatable; however, all of them provide a unique and carefully-orchestrated insight into the critical directions they emulate and the historical periods they discuss, from the 18th century Royal intrigues to the 2011 Arab Spring.

Nicole Moore reads censorship as the key obstacle to any 'unitary culture' in a globalised world; yet confusingly, censorship also manages to act as 'an instrument against differentiated dissent,' whether it be national, political or otherwise: for our own time, as before, the availability of literature in the hands of the public reflects 'the tension between the historical legal limits of the nation and the new planetary reach of the communicative sphere.' (1) Whether it can contribute to global discourses, but also to the very *production* of literature itself, is another assumption she intends to re-evaluate here:

Censorship defines the literary only in the negative, as necessarily that which is not its primary object, but it is worth questioning whether such a definition of literature is inevitably a 'failed' definition. Censorship's legal proscriptions actively produce [literature] ... and cannot in that sense always be set aside as historically 'wrong'. (107)

Acknowledging the five directions of censorship scholarship (and using them to divide the sections of this volume), Moore views the first as 'the new censorship,' which rose in Foucault's shadow, using his hypothesis of power and resistance; the second direction came from Beate Müller's search through the tragedies and banalities of the Soviet archives, and her systematic modelling therein; the third, the genetic criticism of publication histories; the fourth led back to Foucault, this time with more emphasis on the sexual politics of his later writings; the fifth is the transnational comparatist scholarship of today, in which the circle of cultures has been widened to include the peripheries (or 'para-peripheries,' as Moore refers to them) beyond the Western world.

Sadly, the early chapters seem more preoccupied with legal historicism than literary criticism, an approach that does disservice to the periods in question and the pace of the collection as a whole. Finally, Karen Crawley trades historicism for a more nuanced analysis of censorship, tracing the genealogy of 'obscenity,' and artfully linking such regulation with the demographic surges of 19th century Europe: 'obscenity thus turned on questions of access,' she explains; a literary work was only deemed 'corrupt' insofar as it was 'available to a large number' of 'corruptible people.' (66)

Moore's article, juggling the French Modernists with Rita Felski's notions of 'shock' as a harbinger of social development, is by far the best of the collection, and goes the furthest in convincing the reader that censorship can be a positive and productive force for the literary. Her management of Maurice Blanchot's difficult, cryptic texts is smoothly handled, and the way in which she traces Lautréamont's writings through Australian customs offers a cross-national perspective that allows her a persuasive flexibility. As the critical directions continue to approach our global contemporaneity, the volume improves astonishingly.

Ilona Urquhart's study of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is impressive in its application of Levi-Strauss, and his belief that the persecuted are privileged in their ability to 'write between the lines.' Moreover, it breaks with the criticisms above, managing a narrative of authorship and creativity as vivid as it is informative.

Similarly, Christina Spittel's chapter chimes with Moore's quote above, destabilising any easy binary between the written word and the censorship that forbids it: as the newly-reunited Germany piled, burned and pulped the novels of the GDR, German actor Peter Sodann told a journalist, 'Nobody wanted them anymore. But I won't let people take my past away from me!' The moral ambiguities here are what Spittel leaves in suspense, describing East Germany 'as mutually constitutive as well as repressive.' In a sober and balanced conclusion, she reminds us that, for all its faults, its industries were not driven by 'bestseller hysteria'; or 'the manipulation of taste' for 'the striving for profit.' (158)

In Loren Glass's lucid piece, we follow Barney Rosset, a 'bereft' and lovesick student at Swarthmore College, who found 'solace' in the pirated copies of Henry Miller's explicit novels, and went on to fight for decades to have them printed. (177) Here, publication is presented more as a dogged, personal battle than as a broad process of social liberalism and historical progress - and reads all the better for it. Heading South East, Jeremy Fisher charts the acceptance of gay literature in Australian publication houses, before ending hopefully that such tales 'could never have been told without the perseverance and tenacity of those who fought for such freedoms.' (203)

Sanaz Fotouhi, in a melancholy, personal account, reminds us that while she is 'erased from the public scene and privatised, the Iranian woman has for long been without autobiographical possibilities.' (207) For such instants, she says, literature is a source of vitality and expression, not just aesthetic pleasure. Meanwhile, Jumana Bayeh argues that 'the role of digital media' in the Arab Spring (Egypt in particular) has led many to overlook the role of literature in this uprising, despite the fact that - from President Nasser in the 1950s to President Mubarak's overthrow in 2011 - 'literature was the space where resistance to the regime could be maintained'; and, perhaps rather uniquely, 'the work of writers and artists remained largely free of state censorship, interference and monitoring.' (219)

Lynda Ng ends the collection at the gates of the Hermit Kingdom, arguing that 'strict and overt censorship laws in a country such as China implicitly attest to literature's capacity to challenge and destabilise.' (233) Paradoxically, she states, every successive move by the Chinese Communist Party to clamp down on articulations of anger, dissatisfaction and dissent, can only persuade us that we still live 'in a world where the power of literature to shock, threaten and provoke is alive and well.' (233) Ending the chapter with a haunting quote from Gloria Davies, the stakes of Chinese censorship are laid bare: 'it is self-censorship

that the government seeks to encourage' – which is, in many ways, far worse than those already covered in this volume - 'as it fosters deceptive ways of speaking and writing' that aim to, and are capable of corrupting 'the art of human expression itself.' (235)

Moore's decision to structure the volume according to the previous scholarly directions seems at first a smart one; but overall, this design only confirms why the 'new censorship' that formed its first direction was so wilfully abandoned, as the criticism seems to fly far above (or rather around) discussing literature altogether. Incidentally, Mary Spongberg characterises this predicament in her chapter on 19th century English royalty, as she admits that 'while it is impossible to write a history of censorship around what has not been written,' such a process 'can provide an important counter-narrative in this period.' (51) While scholars preoccupied with the socio-historical intersections of law and literature will find the early chapters invaluable, for many, I sense, the 'counter-narratives' employed (speculative, biographical, sometimes vague) offer little satisfaction to the critic who rather seeks to understand the texts themselves, their global import, their aesthetic immediacy and the very representation of their content.

However, the Foucauldian frameworks give way to more energetic readings, and the volume improves greatly as we come closer to contemporary and transnational perspectives, where the topic regains a sense of urgency, as well as insight. It is a thesis rearticulated carefully by each contribution, and in its very range engages with (and retaliates against) the 'planetary reach' that Moore began by inquiring. The traditional dialectic of literature and censorship is unearthed as a rich and varied critical terrain, and assumption in need of reformulating, and one that – in the sweep of its national contexts – refuses any easy answers.