
*The Garden of Eros* is what it claims to be; namely, the story of the Paris expatriate, post-war literary scene and those bookish acolytes who arrived in the fifties to emulate Joyce, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Miller. But it is also much more. Calder’s engaging, intimate style and personal recollections of the characters, the place and the period is part memoir, part anti-censorship polemic, as well as a cultural and social history. With his reputation as a long-term and passionate promoter of modernist/beat/post modernist writers, John Calder is an icon of British publishing. He established Calder Publications in 1949 and ran the company until 2007 when he sold out to Oneworld Classics. During his extended and often times controversial career, Calder’s publishing list included nearly twenty Nobel literature laureates. Now 87 years old, he is one of a triumvirate of publishers who post-war, created a trans-Atlantic network to publish the modernist and transgressive avant-garde. Calder is the only one of the three who is still alive today.

In its publishing heyday, the triumvirate embraced John Calder in London, Maurice Girodias (Olympia Press) in Paris and Barney Rosset (Grove Press) in New York. Although this chronicle invests hugely in the avant-garde writers of this post-war period, it also skew the crucial focus away from them and onto their publishers. Many of the celebrated texts by the authors profiled in *The Garden of Eros* had to withstand censorship battles both prior and post publication. These combats demanded unwavering conviction, moral courage, as well as money. Barney Rosset in New York, John Calder in London and Maurice Girodias formed the unlikely partnership which was prepared to print and damn the consequences. Collectively they promoted ‘literary lists that were iconoclastic, bucking current literary trends fostered by the establishment that did most of the reviewing, and politically anti-authoritarian and libertarian’ (154). Accordingly, these three ‘derring-do’ publishers are the real luminaries of the *The Garden of Eros* and especially so in the case of Maurice Girodias for whom this book is somewhat of an homage. Rabelaisian, gargantuan in his appetite for life, pyrrhic, manic and an inexhaustible lover of women and literature, Girodias subsidised the publication of his literary list with his proceeds from his db’s (dirty books) – the soft pornography that he also printed. Rosset and Calder, to divergent degrees followed suit in the United States and Britain. Calder sums up the transatlantic alliance:

A bond was formed that in spite of later quarrels, recriminations and even lawsuits, was never broken. It is also fair to say that all three of us were, in different ways, eccentric, stubborn and motivated by our own literary convictions, which were far from identical, but most of the time coincided near enough. (154)

Predictably, given the subject at hand, Calder’s account is littered with legendary literary names of the twentieth century: Henry Miller, Samuel Beckett, Jean
Genet, William Burroughs, Eugène Ionesco, Allen Ginsberg, Vladimir Nabokov, Alain Robbe-Grillet and ‘his colleagues in the nouveau roman’ – the list goes on (116). Not all the authors shine in this retelling of the trials and tribulations of publishing their work. The anecdotes run the gamut from scandalous, salacious, squalid and sobering. Moral edification is not the specialty of choice for iconoclastic libertarians and bohemians. During the prosecution to ban his books in post-war Paris, Miller is defended as a ‘naive American, a noble savage’ (27). However, Henry Miller ceaselessly susceptible to feminine charms, is politically disengaged and to some extent a moral coward: ‘he had always run from trouble, from wars and violence and unpleasantness’ (27). Allen Ginsberg and his lover Peter Orlovsky turn up paranoid and ‘doped to the hilt’ at the Olympia Press office, demanding to see the publisher’s correspondence with Ezra Pound (102). Unable to overcome the resistance of the office manager they devise a devious ploy to make her leave: ‘they undressed and began to make love on the floor’ (102). On the other hand, there is Vladimir Nabokov, neither libertarian nor bohemian but a white Russian in exile who subsists as an ‘old style aristocrat unhappily teaching American students’ (140). Right through the preparations to publish Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov, is ‘icily polite’ and contemptuous of his ‘unsavoury publishers’ (140). His wife Vera edits his letters as Nabokov is in a ‘constant state of inner rage’ at the necessity of accepting his publisher’s ‘unclean money’ (140). Vera is described as Nabokov’s ‘anti-nymphette, the opposite of a Lolita and his terrible dragon’ (140). There are also other writers such as J P Donleavy and Marguerite Duras, who once their literary reputations are established, are equally contemptuous and disloyal towards the publishers who first dared to print their ‘obscene’ work.

Moreover there are tales of those whose fame is intertwined with infamy, writers who became standard bearers for the counter culture such as William Burroughs and the lesser known and less prolific Alexander Trocchi (Young Adam, Cain’s Book). A long-standing smack addict, Trocchi proselytises heroin. He prostitutes his wife, Lyn, to support their habit. Lyn is dead at 35. Their eldest son, addicted in the womb, dies of cancer and the younger son commits suicide – both boys die in their teens. William Burroughs notoriously kills his second wife, Joan, with a revolver. Although he is given a suspended sentence, he leaves their son Billy in the care of his long suffering parents. At sixteen, when Billy decides he wants to get to know his father, he arrives in Tangiers where Burroughs lives in a ‘highly unconventional household’ (239). Two of Burroughs homosexual lovers lose no time in ‘trying to seduce the boy’ (239). Billy is also subjected ‘to the advances of many queens in the area and introduced to kif-smoking on arrival…’ (239). And the moral of this story is that counter culture writers and heroes make very bad parents and husbands. But Calder is not in the business of moral judgments and it is to his credit that amidst the drug-addled mayhem he is able to evoke sympathy and understanding for both Trocchi and Burroughs. Nonetheless, Calder is unstinting in his praise, for the worth of one writer, Samuel Beckett – both as a human being and an artist. His assessment of Beckett in both respects is worth reading. As well, The Garden of Eros gives an excellent overview of the literary magazines of the period, their considerable

influence and the people who devoted themselves to them: magazines such as The Paris Review, Merlin and Evergreen Review.

Beneath the bohemian cavalcade, The Garden of Eros provides a dark and often times menacing motif for the metaphor of creation. Always in attendance is the tense polarity of opposites: eros and thanatos, creation and destruction, order and mayhem, violence and tenderness, loyalty and desertion, honour and disgrace, repression and abandoned utterance. Given the catastrophe of two European world wars within fifty years, perhaps such a feverish post-war environment was foreseeable. Undeniably, we are still indebted to the passionate publishers of the vehement, writerly cacophony that this period produced. Girodias and Rosset, alongside with Calder were prepared to risk both jail and bankruptcy to publish a legacy of extraordinary writing. Their moral courage needs to celebrated and emulated in the lack lustre, ‘brave, new world’ of global publishing.

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