Censorship and the limits of the literary: a global view, edited by Nicole Moore (Bloomsbury, 2015)

This volume of essays, edited by literary historian Nicole Moore, explores the dynamic between literature and censorship. Moore describes her collaborative scholarly project in these terms: ‘The essays … engage with more than twelve countries or nation states, placing into revealing contiguity a set of case studies examining national regimes, publishing industries, book trades, reading contexts or authorial circumstances’ (5).

Her introduction proposes two possible approaches to reading Censorship and the limits of the literary. First, through the four-part ‘chronologically-ordered’ structure, beginning in the Enlightenment with Simon Burrows’s essay on ‘French Censorship on the Eve of the Revolution’, through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the Cold War (Part III) and then ‘the final, contemporary section [which] has much to say about our world right now’ (7). Within this structure, the reader can also move easily across the book’s global perspective, selecting chapters on a range of countries, including South Africa, Quebec, East Germany, Australia, China and Iran.

The second approach recommended by Moore turns on ‘the volume’s reflect[ing] a moment of congruence, when new directions in a number of scholarly fields are converging’ (2). This approach would work well for the specialist reader, one who is willing to engage with Foucault’s theories relating to contemporary censorship scholarship and ‘the degree to which, rather than removed and antithetical opposites, literature and censorship have been dialectical forms of culture, each actively defining the other in ongoing, agonistic engagement’ (2). The ‘scholarly fields’ mentioned include various forms of literary studies, history, theatre, film, books and printing.

The contributors’ areas of expertise, and the accompanying case studies, focus on historical period and on place. For example, Peter McDonald’s excellent essay on ‘the Critic as Censor’ deals with Apartheid South Africa, where censorship was ‘always officially euphemized as “publications control”’. McDonald is also the author of The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences (2009); in his essay in Moore’s collection, he covers the white, university-educated, predominantly male censors who acted as ‘guardians of the literary’. These were men who allowed J.M. Coetzee into their ‘Republic of Letters … despite [his] obvious offensiveness towards the government’ while excluding Wilbur Smith, writer of ‘morally corrupting pulp fiction for the masses’ (124).

Christine Spittel’s rewarding essay, ‘Reading the Enemy’, deals with East German censorship during the 1990s. Here the state suppressed titles in the ‘national interest [and] sought to define moral reading’ (149); the censors’ intrusive enquiries extended to determining whether their writers were ‘good citizens’, requiring ‘bio-bibliographical details and an Afterword that identified each author’s political and aesthetic standpoint’ (155). This is unsurprising in a regime that routinely inserted listening devices in people’s homes and obsessively collected personal clothing to test and record body odours. Spittel’s essay is a fine example of Moore’s second ‘new direction’ in the field of contemporary censorship scholarship, made possible by ‘the opening up of the voluminous archives of censorship records from the former communist bloc’ (3). Spittel was able to examine the newly released files and manuscripts down to the ‘ ticks, crosses and question marks’ of the censor’s pen.

The more distant historical periods covered in the essays include France’s ancien régime and Regency Britain. One of the unintended consequences of censorship is, ironically, its tendency to draw attention to the very texts that are being suppressed. Clara Tuite’s analysis of the trials of
early nineteenth-century radical writer, William Hone, demonstrates this: charged with blasphemy and sedition, Hone ‘the political showman’ succeeded in publicly mocking the government and making a name for himself as a London celebrity. In ‘The Gender of Censorship’, Mary Spongborg details the circumstances of the Queen Caroline affair, when George IV’s efforts to suppress the work of caricaturists only had the effect of further damaging his ‘already tawdry reputation’.

I have singled out a few of the sixteen essays in *Censorship and the limits of the literary* in order to show the range of its scholarship and interests. Some of the chapters were developed from conference papers given at a themed conference of the Australasian Association of Literature; this explains the preponderance of eastern-state Australian university contributors (thirteen of the sixteen), mostly from the field of literary studies. Diversity comes from the different stages of the writers’ careers, from recently awarded PhD students to early career academics to established scholarly writers. There is also diversity in writing styles; many of the authors provide clear, lucid prose that is a pleasure to read, while a minority seem to have mistaken obfuscation and pretentiousness for scholarly rigour. Nonetheless, I would recommend Moore’s edited volume as a whole – interesting for the general, educated reader as well as the specialist, and valuable as a collection of contemporary literary censorship scholarship informed by the ‘global view’.

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