

Nicole MOORE, *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary. A Global View*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, ISBN 978-1-6289-2009-3, 260 p.

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Censorship is commonly viewed as being exclusively characteristic to totalitarian regimes, in which the State’s hegemony has a direct influence on cultural, therefore artistic and literary, production. These are portrayed as geopolitical enclaves, separated from the liberal, global macrosystem, for which the principles of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (especially its 19th Article, stating that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression”) is crucial, although utopian. Censorship seems to be one of the major differences between a democratic state and an illiberal society, representing a criterion by which the freedom (and civility) of the citizens is measured. Nicole Moore’s collection of essays, *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary. A Global View*, begins with this statement: “Censorship embodies the tension between the historical legal limits of the nation state and the new planetary reach of the communicative sphere” (1).

However complex this global-local conflict may seem, there is another factor that is nuancing the traditional perspective on the relationship between censorship and culture. This factor is most visible when it refers to the specific connection between literature and state-implemented control. The latter is perceived as having a negative and coercive effect on the first, while literature’s only standing chance to evolve is by revolting against censorship or, at the very least, finding different strategies to avoid it. This is not far from the truth: literature has been a destabilizing cultural and political act even from its very beginnings. What is perceived as literary value is often associated with this anti-establishment attitude toward any repressive measures that would limit its ideological, imaginary, and formal possibilities. What the studies in this volume aim to portray is the way in which the strategies to escape from these exclusionary structures of repression have been (and still are) determined and internally modelled by censorship, for it not only limits, but also *defines* the literary: “literature and censorship have been dialectical forms of culture, each

defining the other in ongoing, agonistic engagement” (2). This fact implies that censorship is not confined only to the extreme cases of totalitarian regimes; it is also to be found in each national and international system, to different degrees of influence and under numerous aspects. “Literature has not consistently stood as censorship’s heroic adversary, nor has censorship always refused the prerogatives of the literary” (2), but they are constantly determining each other. This is far from referring to an ineffable, psychoanalytic definition of censoring, but to the strictly bureaucratic or material methods by which the socio-political context is pivotal to the realization (and circulation) of cultural products. Censorship, as presented throughout this volume, is one factor that regulates the literary polysystem (in Itamar Even-Zohar’s terms). The fact that these studies bring insight into the censorial regimes of “twelve different countries or nation states” (4), “including from some states and colonies that no longer exist” (5), considers a problem whose solution could also facilitate how *world literature* studies understand the ways in which censorship contributes to the global circulation and reception of literature, either from the centre to the periphery or vice versa.

This theoretical extension of the meaning of “censorship” can prove itself methodologically useful only if it is based on a coherent gradation of the censoring involved in each individual case. From this point of view, censorship is not inherently “wrong,” but has different “grades of intensity”. This way, studying each level’s internal structure can explain how certain aspects determine this controlling system’s effects on the literary. There are three *forms of censorship* brought into discussion in these essays. The first one is associated with premodern, totalitarian or colonial states, and it is defined by the authorities’ *direct* and *explicit* involvement in book production and circulation. The *ancien régime*, 20th century’s Australia, apartheid South Africa, Stalinist Russia, East Germany, contemporary Iran, and China are all examples of this. The main definitory characteristic of these cases is that censorship is implemented before publication, therefore not permeating any virtual circulation of controversial material into the public sphere. However, the transition from pre-publication to post-publication censorship is not necessarily a transition to the second category, *soft censorship*, which is “indirectly produced by the «chilling effect» of more direct forms” (3). Clara Tuite argues in an essay on William Hone’s case that post-publication control represented “a freedom on the part of the government to fit the deed to the crime” (35), which meant that it was not a

sign of modernisation *per se*, but a juridical instrument used by the authorities. Also, the case of the Dutch East Indies described by Paul Tickell shows how punishment was used for reasons other than strictly “civil” or “moral,” since it was determined by the race of the authors (82). A case of proper “soft” censorship is the one presented by Loren Glass in his essay on Henry Miller publishing in the United States and the mutation from the concept of the author’s “freedom of expression” to that of the public’s “freedom to read,” an argument that brought with it a new understanding of the object of the literary. Another one is that of the American confessional poets from the 1940s and 1950s. Tyne Daile Sumner explains the connection between these poets’ sardonic attitude toward the American myth of domestic privacy and the geopolitical context during the Cold War, of which they were not allowed to speak critically. The political aspect of American confessional poetry can also be included in the third category of censorship. “*Self-censorship*” (3) is a particularly interesting subject, because it represents an internalized coercive, culturally achieved attitude, which defines both the cultural system and the individual psychology of its members. Sanaz Fotouhi’s chapter on diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs is explicit about this phenomenon: what the Iranian Revolution in 1979 did was to legitimate the repression of women only from a legal point of view, given the fact that this attitude had already been perpetuated by a profoundly segregated society.

Another aim of this collection of studies is to rethink the actual *effects of censorship*. In his essay, Nicole Moore argues that the literary factor is determined by the context of its reception, implying that a study of “institutional, even legal production of literature as a concept” (106) is necessary. Censorship has had an important role in defining what literature *meant*, since it was the institutional organ which permitted or rejected access to cultural products in the public sphere, directly influencing the collective perception on art and literature. There are several ways in which this “mutually-defining relationship” (106) is portrayed.

Firstly, there is the unidirectional influence of censorship upon literature by setting its limits, value, and function. In order to do this, censors use multiple strategies. Moore’s essay describes the ways in which the Australian Customs determined which books could be imported, based on the critical verdicts of the censors. More than insisting upon the shock-value of the two controversial books Moore refers to (Lautréamont’s *The Lay of Maldoror* and James Noble Gifford’s *Furnished Room*), the censors brought up the aesthetic factor: while the latter is

banned because of its lack of artistic merit, the first is accepted because of its rather exotic aspects, while its obscenity is considered to be “poorly rendered,” even “unsatisfactory” (111). This proves that “the literary is made, denied or defined in the *action* or event of banning” (115). Similarly, Peter D. McDonald’s essay on criticism in apartheid South Africa shows how “nineteenth-century aestheticism fused with New Critical formalism” (124) can be used to discriminate against certain writers based on elitist criteria. Secondly, the act of censoring determines the existence of intrinsic “breaches” that permit the concretization of subversive literary phenomena. This originates from the fact that censorship can either exclusively focus on literature’s ideological surface aspects, allowing some ambiguous or codified works to be published, or its laws can be very ambiguous themselves. Simon Burrows’ study on “French Censorship on the Eve of Revolution” proves that, while French censorship at the end of 18th century is successful in stopping the publication and importation of controversial material (dismantling the myth of the French Revolution as being a “printing press revolution”), the real subversive movement occurred within the elite, by means of political satires written by the aristocracy itself. Karen Crawley shows how law’s self-contradiction exposed “the epistemic violence that grounds law” (74) in Regency England, due to its problematic rhetoric. A more illustrative case is that of William Hone, which demonstrates how the rhetoric of the aesthetic principle was used in court against accusations of seditious and blasphemous libel, strengthening literature’s autonomization as a means to make political statements.

These examples exhibit only the institutional blind spots of censorship. A more interesting fact is how censorship can influence the internal structure of literary works. As Ilona Urquhart proves, Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* uses modernist techniques and discursive ambiguity in order to avoid being censored and banned in Soviet Russia. However, this is a method that characterizes most totalitarian regimes and it is not necessarily subversive: in the East Dutch Indies, the colonial government’s subtle control resulted in “the creation of a tame, largely apolitical fictional literature as the new norm in modern Indonesian literature” (85).

However, censorship’s blind spots determine a continuous, dynamic relationship between the formulations of the law and the tactics of literature. This is the third effect of censorship and has been manifest ever since the trials of Flaubert

and Baudelaire in the 19th century. The shock value of certain literary forms results in a recontextualization of the boundaries of offence, permitting authors such as Henry Miller or minorities' narratives (an example given in this volume is the emergence of gay literature in Australia) to break into the mainstream.

Another aspect discussed in this book is how the *localization* and *transplant* of a literary phenomenon can alter its initial meanings, given the change of the censoring system. This is especially relevant in the case of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs. For these authors, the mutation from state-implemented control upon the written word to the more liberal context of the Western world represented a break not only from a tradition that does not enable their presence in the cultural life, but also their very self-censorship. This resulted in a preference for autobiographical strategies to the detriment of other forms of fiction. However, "it seems that they cannot escape the socio-political predicaments of the diasporic society in which they are received" (214). These particular narratives mirror the very stereotypical Western view on Iranian phenomena, meaning that a new censorship apparatus directly models this type of exoticized literature. Another example is that of the importation of West German literature in the German Democratic Republic. What is particularly interesting is how this kind of potentially controversial literature (Christina Spittel's example is Werner Liersch's compilation of short stories written by 19 different West German authors) comes with a critical appendix (an *Afterword*) explaining *how* it should be read: contextually, as particular portrayals of a different regime. This "safety measure" implies an institutional recontextualization of controversial literature, which is rhetorically stripped of its problematic ideological premises.

Nicole Moore's volume reshapes the implications and objectives of studies regarding the effects of censorship on the literary by focusing on its inherent productive nature in a seemingly Foucauldian manner. The different levels of censorship, its particular and surprising outcomes and the transnational relationship between distinct systems of controlling the literary production create a nuanced image of the ways in which literature was not antagonistic to any systemic implementation of control over cultural production, but it was moulded by it. Even more, this moulding is mutual, resulting in a continuous adapting to each other's expansion or withdrawal. The main aim of the sixteen essays in this volume is to analyse different accounts of this phenomenon, which seems to be even more relevant nowadays, in a cosmopolitan, globalized, and digitalized world.

Consequently, *Censorship and the Limits of the Literary* opens a new area of studies by proposing a dialectical perspective on censorship and the literary.