



Rachel Potter. *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment 1900-1940*

Rachel Potter. *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment 1900-1940*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 231p. ISBN 9780199680986. £55.00 (hardback).

Why was *Ulysses* deemed obscene? Why was *The Rainbow* banned? What was offensive about *Boy* or *The Well of Loneliness*? Why did so many modernist writers get into trouble with the law, in Britain and in the USA? Why, in 1923, in an orgy of righteousness, was the entire cast of a Broadway play arrested and prosecuted for obscenity? What was it about Anglo-American society that reacted so viscerally and vehemently to mention of sex or shit?

Rachel Potter's consistently interesting and illuminating book sets out to show why and how this could happen. She traces the history of "obscenity" through law and social policy, and, focussing on the period between 1900 and 1940, shows how an increasingly vociferous puritanism led to a more exigent policing of literature. Taking the books that met with censorship or suppression — works by D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Radclyffe Hall, Wyndham Lewis and Djuna Barnes — she anatomises the reasons for their prosecution, and unearths a wide variety of sources to map the complex web of censorship networks, including "customs officials, printers, library administrators, editors, publishers, journalists, and sometimes other writers" (33), as well as the grounds of self-censorship. A brief postscript on *Lolita* and the Chatterley trial sketches in the start of a new, less censorious regime. Potter argues that the obscenities in those once-excoriated books continue to be artistically significant, and that "prohibition produced ideas of literature as liberation and resistance that have been important for subsequent understandings of novels" (201).

Defining obscenity proves as difficult for the modern critic as it sometimes was for the lawyers. A moral fastidiousness about waste and excrement, bodily functions, sexuality and sexual behaviour seems to have been particularly sensitive to their representations, however allusive. Thinking about it involves thinking about the significance of smell, about distinctions between public and private, and about the possibilities of language. And what, above all, can be said or hinted at in print. Gender lies at the very heart of it, and a large part of the pattern Potter traces is the course of a struggle for the freedom to express and implement modern ideas: feminism, birth control, psychoanalysis, sexual health, all (then as now) provoked strong reactions, and attracted accusations of obscenity. "The close proximity of obscenity



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and healthy-mindedness is a common feature of modernist meditations on the obscene” (102), as she shows nicely in her analysis of Joyce. The book is, as she says at the outset, designed to provide a deep background to the question of obscenity, with the concomitant questions about whether there should be any limits on what may be written and printed, and if so, who should set them and police them. Sexual repression, hypocrisy, and censorship turn out to be crucial to an understanding of the work of modernist writers.

But the book is let down by its publisher: Oxford University Press should be thoroughly ashamed of the copy-editing and proof-reading. The book is riddled with errors of spelling, proper names and places are misspelled, accents are misplaced, and — unforgiveably — *Finnegans Wake* is given an apostrophe throughout the text, and in the bibliography. (And the footnote on page 142 that gives Oxford University Press as the publisher of *Harlequin Prince Cherrytop and the Good Fairy Fairfuck* should really have pointed out that this is a false imprint, part of the mischievous stock-in-trade of Victorian pornography.)

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