
Those who Love Art the Most also Censor it the Most

‘More than half of modern culture’, remarks Algernon in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ‘depends on what one shouldn’t read’ (I.131). And the other half, he might have added, on benign interpretations of what one should read. Which is the more effective in keeping the peace: blunt state censorship of ‘dangerous’ texts, or safe interpretations of supposedly ‘respectable’ ones?

One wants to say the former, and with good reasons, not the least of which is that overt censorship of art tends to be the symptom or forerunner of more insidious and brutal censorship. At the same time, in a ‘democracy’ nothing more effectively gives a platform to the voices of the enlightened like state censorship; to ban a book is to guarantee its place in cultural history. In certain democratic contexts censorship is a gift on a plate limpingly delivered by someone who’s just shot themselves in the foot. Even establishment critics are likely to cautiously dissent from censorship, even though privately they avow that the work in question is of little or no literary merit (this being the case with Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, as we’ll see shortly).

I sense then that more effective censorship arises with the benign interpretations. Consider how often we find such criticism from the past striking us now as myopic; either missing the truly significant, or just looking the other way, full of censorship by omission. And yet in its time it seemed otherwise, the height of good judgement delivered from the seat of wisdom, the Oxbridge chair. It’s customary in literary criticism to disregard such voices from the past, or cite them in passing as instances of individual stupidity, preliminary instances of how not to read. Yet this might be to remain complicit

with the same institution of criticism, since such voices must remain significant precisely because they once seemed obviously right and sensible.

Behind the problem of censorship is the scandal of influence; quite simply, it cannot be predicted or controlled. With reason Yeats asked:

Did that play of mine send out
 Certain men the English shot?
 Did words of mine put too great strain
 On that woman's reeling brain?
 Could my spoken words have checked
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?
 ('The Man and the Echo')

That powerful influences can be effected by the most fleeting of contacts, the most blatant of misreadings, the most partial and incomplete of interpretations,¹ is one reason why art has the power to challenge both conservative and progressive social agendas. Establishment critics respond by legislating for responsible ways in which art should be approached. If this is the basis of their kind of censorship, it also produces an irony they can never acknowledge: the most influential interpretations have usually violated whatever 'responsible' criteria of viewing or reading currently obtained.

More interesting than the establishment critics of the past were the voices of those off-centre: those who were unconventional enough not to get the establishment jobs – the Oxbridge chairs, grammar school headships, editorial positions in the broadsheets, and more – but who were sufficiently of the same cultural formation to be heard, and who might still have been educated at Oxbridge, still be avid readers of the arts pages of some broadsheet, and still be keen to send their children to the local grammar school and hopefully Oxbridge thereafter. These are the enlightened voices, quick to contrast themselves with establishment complacency. It used to be the case that such voices were of a liberal or left persuasion. Not much perhaps, but somewhat so. Which is one reason why it was they who would want to rescue books like *The Well of Loneliness*, or D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from the censor, and help confer eventual respectability upon them. It's they who made the 'dangerous' book safe, if not for the whole culture, then for its liberal constituency. The establishment and the enlightened critics perform complementary tasks in the medium run. Establishment critics are, in retrospect, easy targets – though, as I just remarked,

not insignificant ones. My argument is with the enlightened, for whom I also have more respect.

It's customary for these enlightened voices to ridicule state laws against obscenity, and to regard others who support such laws as not merely authoritarian, but stupid as well. But these opponents of obscenity know, albeit perhaps in a stupidly authoritarian way, something about the power of art which the enlightened often do not. To take art seriously – to recognize its potential – must be to recognize that there might be reasonable grounds for wanting to control it. Some artists, like certain intellectuals, seek out and embrace the dangerous knowledge which potentially conflicts not just with reactionary social agendas, but progressive, humane and responsible agendas as well. An inability to acknowledge this leaves art lovers in an impasse resonating with ironies: their belief that true art is intrinsically incapable of damaging or 'corrupting' us is one which does not take art seriously enough, and its corollary, their conviction that true art should not of its very nature be subject to censorship, actually produces a censorship of its own. In fact, as we will see, in the celebrated censorship trials of *The Well of Loneliness*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the subtler censorship emanates from the defence rather than the prosecution. In short, both in and out of courts, some of the most effective censors of art have been its most earnest defenders. As a result we find ourselves in a position today where significant dimensions of literature are avoided or persistently misrecognized by those who claim literary critical expertise. I believe that a refusal of the naive faith in art's cultural efficacy is now a precondition for being fully receptive to the significance of art. We accord it the seriousness it deserves by trusting it less.

Literature and obscenity

In 1933 Judge John M. Woolsey ruled that James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was not legally obscene, thereby ending a thirteen-year ban on the novel in the USA. As Paul Vanderham shows in his recent study of the history of the censorship of *Ulysses*, Woolsey based his judgement on a range of significant criteria since characterized as 'well-intentioned lies'. They drew on the aesthetic defence of art, which can be summarized in two claims: first, that the truly literary work cannot, by its very nature, be obscene or pornographic; second, that its effect – at least upon those who have read it properly – is always and only aesthetic; in other words, the true work of art does

not influence its readers politically, morally or whatever. This second idea had been put by others before, including Oscar Wilde and Joyce himself. This is Wilde in 1890: 'No artist has ethical sympathies. . . . There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.' (Preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 5). Joyce's version also comes from a work of literary fiction, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (first published in 1916):

The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. The arts which excite them, pornographic or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing. (pp. 204–5)

Wilde's disreputable or 'decadent' version was not thought to help the cause, whereas Joyce's austere philosophical one was. There is indeed a significant underlying difference between the two views. Joyce is voicing the aesthetic defence of art as it will be enshrined in law; Wilde is voicing the decadent crede of art for art's sake which was always cunningly tendentious: by liberating art from morality it was also liberating illicit experiences and desires; to licence, in other words, a view of art the opposite to that expressed in the Joyce passage. In that the Wildean aesthetic made art a place to explore the illicit, 'art for art's sake' is a misdescription of it, and one which has subsequently helped to evade its implications, as the aesthetic defence of art does more generally.²

Joyce's *Ulysses* could not have been elevated to its status as one of the greatest modernist masterpieces without the aesthetic defence of art.³ With variation and greatly differing degrees of sophistication, it has been, and remains, an influential defence against censorship. When in 1992 Iranian intellectuals in exile publicly defended Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* against the censorship of it by the government of Iran (which included a notorious death sentence upon its author), their statement proposed that 'in judging a creative work of art no considerations are valid other than aesthetic ones.'⁴

Vanderham is surely right in thinking that the logic of this defence is not only counter-intuitive and implausible, but also tends to rob art of its power, suggesting as it does that essentially art affects nothing, least of all its readers, who, in Joyce's terms, find themselves in an arrested, static and transcendent mode of apprehension. Neither the true work of art, nor its correct aesthetic reception, will endorse

or challenge anything. And yet we know that literature does have the capacity to influence readers for better or worse, and a theory of art must account for this fact, not eliminate it by definition from consideration. In practice of course the aesthetic defence is always invoked selectively: we often allow art to challenge the things we think need challenging, rarely those we don't. Dissident art is rather like the dissident sexuality discussed earlier (chapters 1 and 2): it always challenges someone else. If a work of literature does seem to challenge our own cherished beliefs there are two main ways of dealing with it: we may invoke the aesthetic defence to neutralize the challenge (considered as art, the book isn't really about that) or, if that seems impossible, we disqualify it as not 'true' or great art. Most recently the aesthetic defence has also been invoked to combat political criticism of literature; arguably, in the culture wars of recent decades, that defence becomes as active in relation to criticism of art as of art itself (see Part III).

It is a historical fact that what has been generally agreed to be art, just like almost any kind of representation, has the potential for kinetic effect, and literary theory since Longinus has recognized as much. Both history and theory would justify a use of 'kinetic' which included more than Joyce's 'pornographic or didactic' arts; here I mean it to include responses to art which are political, moral, religious and philosophical, as well as explicitly erotic and phantasmatic. Whether we invoke theoretically sophisticated notions like 'aberrant decoding', or just the common sense one of reading against the grain, we know it has always happened. And, ironically, the very sophistication of high cultural artefacts far from pre-empting the 'incorrect' readings, facilitates them.

'The more dangerous because of its literary character'

In 1928, the British Government wanted to ban Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Despite 'enlightened' testimony to the contrary, those against the novel feared it would encourage or legitimate lesbianism. In the long term, and probably the medium if not also the short term, their fears proved to be justified. To avoid misunderstanding, let me say at the outset that the trial and subsequent suppression of this book was engineered through a contemptible establishment conspiracy fully prepared to 'pervert' the course of justice to achieve its end.⁵ The eminent men involved in this conspiracy, initiated by the then Home Secretary Sir William Joynson-Hicks, loathed and feared the very idea of sex between women.⁶

That notwithstanding, the Chief Magistrate, Sir Chartes Biron, said something during the trial that is true, but which the aesthetic defence of art would subsequently deny:

The book may be a very fine piece of literature and yet be obscene. Art and obscenity are not disassociated. This may be a work of art. I agree it has considerable merits, but that does not prevent it from being obscene. (Souhami, p. 205)⁷

Biron used this as a conclusive reason to prevent an array of literary experts giving evidence at all: if a book could be great literature *and* obscene, then evidence as to its literary merit was irrelevant to the question of its obscenity. One can see then how urgently were the well-intentioned lies needed as a defence in censorship trials.

A similar opinion to Biron's had already been put by James Douglas, editor of the *Sunday Express*, in an editorial which precipitated the trial. For Douglas sexual perversion was a 'pestilence . . . devastating the younger generation'. He would rather give 'a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body, but moral poison kills the soul.' This editorial displays the extreme contradiction in the anti-homosexual position remarked earlier, one evident in the Wilde trials, and which reappears throughout the twentieth century: on the one hand homosexuality is so self-evidently 'hideous', 'loathsome', a 'degeneracy', a 'degradation', a 'debasement' (all terms which Douglas uses) that any right-thinking and healthy person would avoid it like the plague. On the other hand it has this extraordinary capacity to seduce precisely the 'healthy', right-minded boy or girl; to devastate the entire younger generation, in fact. More than that: for Douglas it has the capacity to destroy Christianity and 'the civilization it has built on the ruins of paganism'. That last remark inadvertently suggests the reason for the panic in those like Douglas: 'paganism' is still underneath or latent within Christianity, and capable of being reactivated. Worse still, Radclyffe Hall brilliantly appropriates Christianity to validate lesbian love – Stephen, the hero/ine of the book is a Christ-like figure, full of suffering integrity and martyrdom. Douglas half realizes what Radclyffe Hall has done – that's why he, like Biron in court, also finds that the book's aesthetic virtues make it more dangerous, not less:

It is no use to say that the novel possesses 'fine qualities' or that its author is an 'accomplished' artist. It is no defence to say that the author is sincere or that she is frank, or that there is delicacy in her art.

The answer is that the adroitness and cleverness of the book intensifies its moral danger. It is a seductive and insidious piece of special

pleading designed to display perverted decadence as a martyrdom inflicted upon these outcasts by a cruel society. It flings a veil of sentiment over their depravity. (Souhami, p. 177)

Douglas's position becomes even clearer from another of his reviews, written thirteen years earlier. This one, which appeared in October 1915, was also influential in the legal suppression of the book it was castigating, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. And here too lesbian love was singled out, in court, as an especially disgusting and subversive aspect of the novel. Douglas in his review insists that it's the job of the artist not to tell the truth but to uphold civilized values – even more so at that time, in the midst of the First World War. The danger of 'decadent' art like Lawrence's is that it leads us in the direction of forbidden knowledge, it 'open[s] all the doors that the wisdom of man has shut and bolted and double-locked'. Whereas the power of art should be on the side of beauty, wholesomeness and health, Lawrence uses it to 'express the unspeakable and to hint at the unutterable. The morbidly perverted ingenuity of style is made the vehicle for saying things that ought to be left unthought, let alone unsaid.' In this review, read out in court, Douglas finds *The Rainbow* pernicious not because it tells lies, but because it tells the truth about a reality which civilization necessarily and rightly represses. There are echoes here of degenerationist philosophy (which I shall examine in chapter 8), as when Douglas insists that life must 'go on climbing up and up' to put as much distance between its evolved forms and the 'nethermost deeps', and when he acknowledges the inherent instability of those evolved forms.⁸ But Douglas is drawing on a very old belief, affirmed with new vigour in the late nineteenth century in relation to novelistic realism, that the artist is potentially dangerous because of seeing, saying and knowing too much. This was Walter Bagehot's view of Thackeray. Comparing him unfavourably with Dickens in this respect, Bagehot describes Thackeray as a writer who frequented 'the borderline that separates the world that may be described in books from the world which it is prohibited so to describe'. What made Thackeray particularly worrying was his power of suggestion, his 'hinting with subtle art how thoroughly he is familiar with . . . the interdicted region on the other side'; and although he never explicitly violated conventional rules, 'the shadow of the immorality that is not seen, is scarcely ever wanting in his delineation of the society which is seen' (*Collected Works*, vol. 2, p. 98). The question being: whose shadow is it? That of course is one question asked implicitly by the artist who knows too much and goes where she shouldn't.

Returning to the censorship of *The Well of Loneliness*, those who were to speak in defence of the novel, had they been allowed to, argued that it would not encourage perversity. A. P. Herbert was representative when he said that if he'd found a healthy girl of twenty with the book he'd tell her to read on because she'd be bored. And if he found an 'unhealthy' one reading it he'd still say read on, because it would be a warning to her. This claim about the effects of the novel was another well-intentioned lie, as subsequent history has shown. Long after this trial gay liberation fostered, perhaps necessarily, the belief that homosexuality cannot be nurtured (another well-intentioned lie): one simply is or isn't gay. But the increase in gay and bisexual people in more liberal climates isn't just a consequence of those who are 'already gay' and bisexual coming out; it's also because many people are exploring homosexuality who otherwise wouldn't have. Without in any way underestimating the extent of the virulent homophobia around these trials, we can allow that there is more than 'phobia' involved: those like Douglas, Biron and the Home Secretary believed literature could contribute to homosexuality becoming more widespread, along with many other things which they believe equally deplorable. And they were right. Just before the unsuccessful appeal against the banning of *The Well*, the Home Secretary triumphantly addressed the Authors' Club in London; the degenerationist rhetoric is clear:

The tone of the Empire comes from you the authors of our land. If the tone is pure, the blood will go on pulsating through the whole world carrying with it purity and safety. If the stream of the blood is impure, nobody can tell the effect it will have right through our Empire.⁹

Not even this Home Secretary could believe that lesbian literature could destroy the Empire, but he made it a focus of, a surrogate for many of the things that could and would, and about which people like him could do little. And Joynson-Hicks' worst fears were, after all, realized: the Empire would go, lesbianism would become acceptable, and the censorship of literature would be relaxed, to then unthinkable degrees. Maybe there were connections after all?

Radclyffe Hall's defence as author was a dangerous mixture of outright defiance and high moral purpose. Yes, she wanted to plead sympathy for those who were condemned to be inverts. But this was a problem of abnormality, not evil. Inverts were no better or worse than normal people, but 'when they are good they deserve more praise because from their birth nearly every man's hand is against them. Hopeless outcasts are a social danger, and persecution is as

harmful to the persecutors as to the persecuted' (Souhami, p. 199). It was evident she was not ashamed of, or apologizing for, her own sexuality, and reading between the lines of her defence as well as the novel it was evident too that she thought some inverts *were* morally superior to some normal people. And nothing more enraged the normal than that.

This was her compromise position, the one she would have put to the court had she been called. But as it became clear that the case was going against her, she became more defiant still. When her counsel, Norman Birkett, claimed in court that the relationships between women in the book were romantic and sentimental, and had nothing to do with sex, Hall was furious. She told him that unless he retracted this statement she would get up and tell the magistrate herself. So retract it he did, and the case was certainly lost then, if it wasn't before. In a way, and as I've argued elsewhere, her compromise position was as disturbing as her uncompromising defence of explicit sexuality (*Sexual Dissidence*, chapter 3). In respect of sexual inversion Radclyffe Hall was a radical; in most others she was deeply conservative. That combination constituted her challenge: with magnificent hubris she appropriates for lesbianism a religious ethic of the martyr and crosses it with a romantic ethic of the outsider. The lesbian is identified with Christ; the 'pagan' re-emerges in place of the Christian. Those like Douglas and Biron realized what was happening: if one reason for condemning the book as obscene was because it showed lesbian sex to be good – in Biron's revealingly perceptive words, 'giving these women extraordinary rest, contentment and pleasure; and not merely that, but it is actually put forward that it improves their mental balance and capacity' – another was that it used a religious and romantic ethic to make lesbians attractive and objects of admiration. The judgement that the book was obscene was upheld in an appeal. Summarizing the proceedings, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Archibald Bodkin, highlighted again the perceived threat: 'the book was regarded as a subtle and insinuating one and the more dangerous because of its literary character' (Souhami, p. 217).

Whether in relation to her compromise position, or her more radical one, the aesthetic defence of art, had it been available to her, was as irrelevant for Hall as it was for Magistrate Biron. From opposing positions, both realized the potentially radical kinetic influence of a work of literature, an influence which worked through a conversion which is, inseparably, a perversion of culture's most sanctified images.

And yet, the aesthetic defence would become victorious against

exactly the prejudice which led to the suppression of *The Well*. Much to the chagrin of those on the far right, the claim that art is essentially apolitical has won the day for broadly progressive political positions. In doing so, however, it instigates a subtler and arguably more effective kind of censorship of its own, one which was already apparent in the defence solicited for Radclyffe Hall's novel. Clearly their denial that the novel would encourage lesbianism was strategically necessary, but for the most part it was also what they wanted to believe; these testimonies for the defence – Birkett said 'a more distinguished body of witnesses have never been called' – wanted art to be safe.

Burning out the shames

In the trial of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960, the prosecution alleged that the book exalted adultery and promiscuity, bad enough in themselves but doubly so here because occurring between a woman and her husband's employee (his gamekeeper – property, power and class perfectly meshed).¹⁰ The growing influence of the aesthetic defence of art is reflected in the Obscene Publications Act of 1959,¹¹ under which Lawrence's book was prosecuted. But the actual defence was as ethical as it was aesthetic. In practice this is usually so: the aesthetic defence can't operate effectively without an implicit or explicit moral appeal. Distinguished witnesses queued up to defend Lawrence as a great literary moralist with a puritanical zeal to reform human sexual relations, and now they *were* allowed into the witness box. Some even argued that Lawrence was implicitly criticizing the anti-social and promiscuous practices he described. Again this was strategically necessary, but there was a large measure of agreement between those witnesses and many literary critics, most influentially F. R. Leavis, who, unhampered by the exigencies of the courtroom, helped make Lawrence one of the most respected writers of the post-war period.¹²

Significantly, the novel's notorious episode of apparently ecstatic sodomy was overlooked by both prosecution and defence. Sodomy is one thing which makes Lawrence's work dangerous, not just because he was writing approvingly of a practice that would then have undoubtedly rendered the book obscene, but because anal intercourse is complicatedly central to Lawrence's own sexual ethic. It is, for instance, the focus for his ambivalent attitude to homosexuality. Sometimes for Lawrence an idealistic homoeroticism offers the possibility of redemptive escape from the degeneracy of western culture;

more often *actual* homosexuality is felt to manifest that very degeneracy. Likewise with anal sex: if, in the homosexual embrace, it is imagined as the sterile desire for dissolution and death, in the heterosexual embrace it seemingly becomes the transgressive search for life at its most searingly intense – a shattering of the self into a vulnerable, receptive authenticity:

Burning out the shames, the deepest oldest shames, in the most secret places. It cost her an effort to let him have his way and his will of her. She had to be a passive, consenting thing, like a slave, a physical slave. Yet the passion licked round her, consuming, and when the sensual flame of it pressed through her bowels and breast, she really thought she was dying: yet a poignant, marvellous death.

. . . And necessary, forever necessary, to burn out false shames and smelt out the heaviest ore of the body into purity. With the fire of sheer sensuality.

. . . She would have thought a woman would have died of shame. Instead of which, the shame died . . . routed by the phallic hunt of the man . . .

. . . the last and deepest recess of organic shame. The phallos alone could explore it. And how he had pressed in on her!¹³ (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, pp. 258–9)

But is it the case that this is exclusively 'heterosexual'? Might there not be displaced homoerotic and/or bisexual fantasies here also? Elsewhere in Lawrence the male yearning towards the male is occasionally expressed explicitly, as in the suppressed prologue to *Women in Love*, but more often it is expressed through the eyes and desires of women. He not only merges the male homoerotic gaze with the female heterosexual one, but he exemplifies the bisexual fantasy described earlier: he desires the male from the position of, and even as, a woman; a homoerotic fantasy is articulated in the form of the heterosexual one which it fuses with. This suggests something about human sexuality which might be even more disturbing than ecstatic sodomy, but which also suggests why the latter is excoriated. I've expressed elsewhere¹⁴ my belief that this makes Lawrence a writer of greater not lesser significance, someone who was exploring aspects of human sexuality which the trial prosecution apparently couldn't see, and which the humanist defence could not afford to acknowledge even if it suspected them. If, in Lawrence's most intense imaginings, the perversity of sexuality is found at the heart of the 'normal', this is something few of his admirers or detractors have been able to acknowledge. For some, like Leavis, he becomes the prophet of mental and social health: 'There is no

profound emotional disorder in Lawrence . . . intelligence in him . . . is not thwarted or disabled by inner contradictions' (*D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*, pp. 15, 28). In fact, the remorseless expression of 'inner contradictions', his own and others', is exactly what makes Lawrence such a courageous and significant writer. Even those more insightful than Leavis as to the sexual obsessiveness of the novels, like Norman Mailer in *The Prisoner of Sex*, would celebrate Lawrence's vital heterosexuality at the expense of a 'deathly' and 'sterile' homosexuality, thereby also suppressing Lawrence's own obsession with death. In the feminist criticism which so influenced the reading of Lawrence after the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1969, a gender politics gains plausibility only through a misrepresentation of Lawrence (and sex) as complete as anything that went before. As Rachel Bowlby has remarked, even Millett, this most unforgiving of Lawrence's critics, seems to share his conception of 'wholesome' sex (*Shopping With Freud*, pp. 42-3). Not despite, but because of her radical sexual politics, Millett shares something with the aesthetic/moralistic defence of art: a truly great novel cannot be pornographic, perverse or unhealthy. I am persuaded to the contrary. A not inconsiderable virtue of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* is the way it finds the western artistic canon to be pornographic and perverse at its heart. Time and again she finds a disturbing knowledge in the texts which have been tamed by those academics and critics who continue to censor literature even as they fight furiously to speak authoritatively on its behalf.