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Modernism and the Obscene

Introduction

Philippe Birgy and Aurélie Guillaïn

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Introduction

Philippe Birgy and Aurélie Guillain

- 1 Arguably, modernism is indebted to romantic aesthetics, notably to the postulate that all areas of reality, be they noble or ignoble, can be represented and given shape through an original gesture of artistic creation.¹ Indeed, in many modernist works, new zones of experience, new aspects of corporeality and sexuality, have gained both visibility and aesthetic dignity through the invention of experimental forms, as excretory body functions famously did in Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the process, modernist artists may have continued one important aspect of the romantic tradition, but they were also increasingly going against a vision of art in which the artist's freedom of expression is a strict correlative of art's civilizing function. An illustration of this vision is Matthew Arnold's 1869 statement that literature and the arts are dedicated to the advancement of civilization: "culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically" (Arnold vii). In this statement, the matter is settled: the function of the artist is to watch over the development of modernity, to exalt its motives or denounce its vagaries, expunge its passions and correct its improprieties; in such a view, a claim to freedom of expression can only be justified because this expression is crucial to society as a whole.
- 2 Yet at the turn of the century, some modernist artists seemed willing to interrupt this fruitful agreement as they seemed to become increasingly absorbed in explorations of a disturbing interiority: Beckett, Cunard, Eliot, Joyce, H.D, Woolf, Lawrence, Pound, Yeats and before them, Beardsley and Wilde, were cases in point. H.G. Wells deplored Joyce's "cloacal obsession"² and E.M. Forster regretted his friend Virginia Woolf's attraction towards the "dreadful hole of aestheticism" which caused her writing to drift rudderless, untied as it was to any moral cause (Forster 240). Even when representatives of the various modernisms and avant-gardes viewed themselves as the heralds and enunciators of modernity, as artists who were determined to accompany the movement of the modern age, to point out its ins and outs, illuminate its nooks and crannies, their critics could be prompt to reject that claim; their censors would argue

that these modernist explorations did not concern the average sensual man and that these artists spoke only about themselves, in their names only, with a strange pretension that placed them on the side of the vulgar and unworthy. To contemporary critics and censors, when modernist authors engaged in the indecent exposure of corporeal matters, these authors were being idiosyncratic, thus betraying the mission of the artist to enlighten the public about the contemporary state of society. If on the contrary, they were acknowledged as artists who indeed brought into light some aspects of the modern condition, then those aspects of the modern age were deemed inherently intolerable, unthinkable, better left entirely alone and preferably in a state of invisibility. In trials such as the 1921 obscenity trial incriminating the serialized publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*, it seemed that the only way of making visible the revolting and embarrassing pictures of contemporary life was through the process of their purgative expulsion, through their delegation to a perverse author who had to bear full responsibility for it. This was quite an unsettling consideration at a time when the figure of the author was already so controversial.

- 3 Obscenity trials are, of course, highly revealing of the evolution of free speech in the United Kingdom or the United States from a legal point of view: through the study of these trials, one can establish what, according to custom and the moral precepts of the time, must be banned from the public sphere and even held as illegal, i.e. as condemned to remaining secret, for even if they were merely exposed in private circumstances, such contents might still corrupt the mind. Of course, the definition of what counts as obscene is bound to fluctuate at the same time as standards of morals and customs. The question needs to be further problematized by considering that the criteria determining what was offensive (and what was not) were disputed ones and could hardly be considered as being standardized in the UK or the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century. In obscenity trials, the morality leagues often appropriated the prerogative to speak out on behalf of putative victims, stating the seriousness of the potential offence to which they could be exposed, thus creating the legal fictions of the impressionable young girl, or that of the man in the street. Such fictions merely betray the fantasy of a homogenized, universal response to universally offensive contents, rather than actually reflecting a standardized set of moral and affective responses to the "obscene" in the public.³
- 4 Now, to reflect upon the nature of the sensitive reader's revulsion at certain "obscene" contents, modernist literature itself can be of invaluable help: indeed modernist texts rarely fail to contain a self-reflexive approach to their own handling of obscene material which is often intertwined with an experimental approach to both narrative technique and to questions of subjective identity. Consequently, this collection of essays will not be not an exploration of legal issues related to free speech in the arts and letters during the modernist period; the essays that are gathered in this special issue will rather concentrate on how modernist literature problematizes its own relation with its shocking contents and its impressionable reader. Indeed, one major question raised in the discussion of "literary obscenities" is the question of how literature redefines itself as it tackles material that is designed, or expected, to shock its audience.
- 5 The question is thus - at least in part - the nature and role of literature, which itself is bound to a reflection on aesthetics. Now aesthetics, in its elaboration, is partly linked to obscenity, as it defends itself from the latter by distinguishing a form of detached

contemplation and appreciation from the consumption of representations of the body that engage and arouse the senses—an erotic stimulant that feeds fantasy and encourages concupiscent or lascivious states. In *Obscene Modernism*, Allison Pease regards the aesthetics of the late 19th century as the foundation stone of the attitude that consists in defending literature against any moralist attack. Aestheticism is analysed by Pease as a defence system, a rampart against the attacks of the leagues of virtue and good sense: the aesthete claims that he is creating an exclusive domain where nothing can be inappropriate and where freedom of expression is protected in an absolute, unconditional manner. All objects, including those confined to the dustbin by civil society, can be taken up as material by the artist since it is the artist's formal research that matters and prevails. In this way, as Pease puts it, obscenity is made "safe for literature". Thus the self-contained, autonomous quality of formal experiments in the aesthetic movement and later, in modernist texts, is precisely what makes them the privileged textual site where obscenity can energize the aesthetic gesture, endowing it with an increased power to affect the reader.

- 6 Many important studies of the links between modernity, modernism and the obscene have analysed this shifting, complex articulation between the literary sphere, the defence of free speech within and without it, and the relation between the text and the "sensitive reader" who is going to be affected by the shocking text, which is always at the heart of the public debate on the function of art (Bradshaw; Cotter; Pease; Potter; Parkes). In this collection of essays, we propose to examine how individual texts deal with the question of obscene exposure in a self-reflexive manner, often questioning the role of the sensitive reader, always a potential voyeur, a witness corrupted by the very act of seeing. Indeed, obscene modernism is endlessly pondering the nature of what is most likely to shock and provoke revulsion. Is revulsion the result of some acquired reflex or is it visceral disgust? Is there any physiological cause to this aversion? Which are the specific visions causing it and why? Is it the evocation of mud and formlessness, waste, flux, decay and if so, why is that and above all, how is the subject related to it—for inevitably, whatever gives us cause for concern cannot be entirely foreign to us. In this instance Kristeva's definition of the abject has remarkable explanatory force and what is called "obscene" might very well derive its horrifying power from the process of abjection. In Kristeva's scheme, the term designates a state of indistinction between self and non-self that plays a role in our constitution as subjects, which we must reject once we have achieved self-control and autonomy. Yet for all that, what has been abject-ed does not cease to come back to us in our thoughts, precisely because the process of abject-ing the Other has gone into the making of the self and is never wholly overcome: Freud's dynamic model of the unconscious is the mainstay of Kristeva's own scheme and for this reason, it does not consider the possibility of abjection ever being overcome in a dialectical process. If the obscene is to be interpreted as deriving its power from "abjection," then obscenity will give endless cause for offence. Obscenity will be associated with some external corrupting agent, some guilty party, always other, sometimes a whole class of suspects, but it will derive its power to offend from the dynamic, conflict-ridden constitution of the subject itself. Why a sensitive reader feels revulsion at "obscene" material has to do with the (shifting) foundations of subjectivity and is therefore a question that philosophers and philosophically-minded critics have already explored at some length (Nietzsche; Bataille; Lacan; Kristeva; Bersani; Žižek; Rabaté). The essays in this collection will carry on this exploration, but through the close examination of particular texts.

- 7 In “Disinterest and Disruption: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the Modernist Aesthetics of the Obscene,” Kevin Kennedy examines Wilde’s text in the light of Pease’s arguments in *Obscene Modernism*. The close study of Wilde’s example is, among other things, an opportunity to reconsider these arguments. As Pease recalls, Kant establishes a distinction between the pleasant and the beautiful: the first category (the pleasant) relates to individual pleasures and includes pornography, while the second (the beautiful) is a fundamentally disinterested emotion. The quest for the pleasant is associated with the undisciplined bodies of the lower classes, whose interests must be policed and disciplined by the ruling class of educated gentlemen, who are capable of freeing themselves from material concerns and the demands of the body for the good of all. Kennedy remarks that making Lord Henry a spokesman for sensual and amoral aesthetics is to forget that Lord Henry never puts into practice the principles that he is professing, and that in the absence of action, spirit and ideas continue to prevail in him. Depersonalization and an inclination towards the immaterial tend to repress the corporeal in him. Lord Henry appropriates the excesses of his friends’ passions and he thus de-substantializes them, converting the expression of these passions into some sort of aristocratic Kantism. Kennedy’s analysis echoes with Potter’s statement that the very term of “obscene” or “obscenity” is, in itself, an attempt at domesticating, controlling, fixing the meaning of what defies reason and threatens a collective order based on the control of disruptive elements of society—the uneducated masses.
- 8 The following essays, by Margaret Gillespie and Olivier Hercend respectively, focus on the theme of the “dirty little secret” that is placed at the invisible core of textual dynamics in works by Djuna Barnes, Joyce, Woolf or T.S. Eliot. The very notion of “dirty secret” has been envisaged variously in literary modernism. A case in point was D.H. Lawrence, who felt, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “that psychoanalysis was shutting up sexuality in a bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs, fitting it into an artificial triangle of desire, thereby recasting the whole of sexuality along entirely different lines, making it a ‘dirty little secret,’ a family secret, a private theater, rather than regarding sexuality as the fantastic factory of nature and production” (Deleuze & Guattari 49). In the process, sexuality is covered in a guilty veil and objects of desire are thus concealed from view. For Lawrence, it is the upper body, the head and the hands that *want* to intellectualize the lower body in order to understand it. According to him, this is how a substitute for sexuality is born: pornographic literature and its intellectualized obsession with sex are really the product and offspring of contemporary morals:

And so you get first and foremost, self-consciousness, an intense consciousness in the upper self of the lower self. This is the first disaster. Then you get the upper body exploiting the lower body. You get the hands exploiting the sensual body, in feeling, fingering, and in masturbation. You get a longing to see the lower self, the pornographic desire to see the lower reactions: like the little chamber-pots with an eye painted on the bottom, and “je te vois, petite sâle,” which were sold in Paris as little chimney-piece ornaments. You get the obscene post cards which most youths possess. You get the absolute lust for dirty stories, which so many men have. And you get various mild sex perversions, such as masturbation, and licking, and so on. What does all this mean? It means that the activity of the lower psyche and lower body is polarised by the upper body. Hands and mouth want to become the sexual agents. Eyes and ears want to gather the sexual activity into knowledge. The mind becomes full of sex: and always, in an introvert, of his own sex. If we examine the apparent extroverts, like the flaunting Italian, we shall see the same thing. It is his

own sex which obsesses him.” For Lawrence, brute unthinking sexuality is perceived as what has been, and is still being, wrongfully repressed. (Lawrence 146)

- 9 For Barnes, it is the opposite, as Margaret Gillespie demonstrates “‘Obscene and touching’– the tainted aesthetic of Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*”. To her, it is the incestuous perversion and its destructive effects on the subject that must be exposed. In her study of Barnes’ *Nightwood*, Gillespie emphasizes the relationship between the empirical reality of incest on the one hand and the writing to which it may give rise on the other, the writing having incorporated the imposed necessity of silence and displacement. The article situates the question of what can be said in a work of literature in the context of the obscenity trials of the interwar period. For Gillespie, obscenity in Djuna Barnes’s text appears as the obfuscated content of a trauma. Literature, as she conceives it, harbors the upset expression of an inexpressible secret. In this perspective, obscenity appears to be constitutive of modernism. The traumatic experience is what gives form to the writing which holds the obscenity of trauma without the author or the reader ever being directly exposed to it. In the case of Djuna Barnes, the ambivalent attempt at simultaneously representing and obfuscating the obscene trauma is the very source of literary sophistication and formal inventiveness—notably because literary sophistication has a screen-like, cosmetic and legitimizing function. Simultaneously, a metaphorical style of writing appears to be the only way of reconstructing this experience of incestuous pedophilia: the character of Robin, the protagonist’s lover, who concentrates in herself, in a displaced form, the contradictory qualities of the incestuous person who misled the child. Barnes deploys, according to Gillespie, a modernist narrative and stylistic program dictated by the re-evaluation of ethics and aesthetics, which cannot be satisfied with a linear narrative exposition, when it comes to representing the un-representable trauma.
- 10 As for Olivier Hercend’s article, “Show! Hide! Show! : High Modernism and the Lure of the Obscene” it analyses how the devious strategies of modernist authors such as Woolf, Joyce and Eliot serve the evocation of unspeakable structures of domination. Those who have an interest in hiding their “dirty little secret” adhere to the status quo, throwing a modest veil over what underlies their prosperity: male domination (the repression of sexual fluidity in *Orlando*) and the exploitation of the most deprived. Conversely, the modernist texts studied by Hercend place these unspeakable structures of domination at the heart of the text. They remain in its margins, unutterable but persistently suggested. Indeed all their technical and stylistic resources are propped against the unsaid. Hercend shows how in each case, the work’s facture seems determined to incorporate and contain everything that has been repressed, instead of comfortably leaving out the factors that secretly weigh on the work from the outside. The article thus suggests that modernism forces an ethical position on the reader, who must make the choice either to see or not to see. Thus, if Joyce’s readers stick to the narrative of “Two gallants,” they inevitably become the accomplices of the protagonists. Likewise, Eliot’s fixation on the sordid is redoubled in the minds of both the narrative *persona* and the reader who become attached to it. Hercend’s analysis of how modernist texts represent the un-representable strongly resonates with Rancière’s reflections on how ignoble matters and little people gained visibility in modern literature through what he calls the “aesthetic regime of art”. Rancière argues that literature, in this sense of “the best that has been thought,” was merely a way of keeping the vast bulk of mankind out of the picture, to consolidate the hierarchy where the dominant set the rule and the dominated remained invisible since they did not

appear in fiction. What happened with Flaubert and Balzac was that suddenly, a new literature appeared which narrated the lives of simple people, vulgar people, and made a style out of it, showing that it was possible to find a literary interest in incidents that concerned characters who had been deemed minor (and whose stories were often judged unpalatable if not downright disgusting by the defender of classical standards).

- 11 The obscene, then, takes the form of an appeal. Through clues and enigmas, the reader is challenged, led by his curiosity or his voyeuristic instincts to explore what is hidden behind the silences and ellipses of the text. The reader must confront the unsaid—what remains unsaid about mental suffering, alcoholism, rape and other sexual assault or the horrors of war—but the reader must also question his own blindness, in the face of these counter-stories of the world in which he lives.
- 12 In “Staging the Obscene in *A Glastonbury Romance*,” Florence Marie remarks that Cowper Powys, in his defense of *Ulysses* against the censors, talked about a text that would be “too obscure” to be obscene. The idea, she notes, displeased the judges who spontaneously associated obscenity and obscurity. The association implies that what lurks in the shadows must have been first relegated to oblivion, that it had to have been deliberately put out of the way. And repression certainly constitutes a deliberate (though unconscious) attempt at rejecting desires that do not agree with moral standards. In her study of two scenes from John Cowper Powys’ *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) that play on and with the abject and the repugnant, Marie concentrates on images of degradation, decay and formlessness. These are evocative of mortality, of the corporeal condition exposing us to such an infamous end. Marie suggests that the focus on such images indicates a shift in literary modernism from sexual material to visions of abjection and formless matter. But again the two remain linked by the role what has been repressed in the constitution of the subject. What has been repressed has a charm of its own, being mixed with disgust: the pleasure one takes in the obscene is unjustifiable and inexplicable and it cannot become fully conscious without causing remorse and anxiety.
- 13 In “Ezra Pound’s Representations of Sexual Intercourse and the Female Genitalia in The Cantos,” Emilie Georges’ observations on Pound’s poetic elaboration are particularly relevant in terms of symbolic constructions. As Georges reminds us, Pound’s texts forcibly assert the domination and superiority of a phallic principle that orders, classifies and distinguishes, over the primitive chaos embodied by women and the shapeless and soft character of their sexual organs. The phallic line gives form to the boundless and mysterious abundance of the feminine. In the *Cantos*, fecundity, when understood as the expression of natural sexuality (*luxuria*), is opposed to *usura*, a sexualization of economy engendering a misplaced taste for money. Decay and degradation result from reproductive functions being diverted from their natural purposes and being projected into economic thought—things that the hero must avoid in order for life to follow death, so that life may be renewed. And Pound duly emphasizes the sacredness and ritualistic dimension of sexuality, linked to ceremonies of fertility and regeneration. Georges’ article points to one possible key to understand the modernist use of obscenity. Indeed, the modernist use of ritual and profanity foregrounds the ambivalence of the sacred: pure and impure, the sacred is the means of renewal, but at the cost of a violent rejection, a visceral expulsion of mud, shapelessness, fetidity and everything that goes against nature, including vile, infamous, “unnatural” practices. In the sacrifice of a scapegoat, the contempt and

disgust of the community is focused on the appointed enemy who, besides corrupting everything it touches, is also infinitely beneficial, since it brings together the members of the community against him and allows a discharge of negative feelings and a symbolic eviction of evil. Thus, the judgment of obscenity points to a miracle whose secret cannot and must not be pierced, for it operates in darkness. It bears the seal of infamy but also represents the miracle of life. It is this double polarity that anthropologists emphasize and that René Girard takes up in his studies of sacrificial practices. It is, again, the same ambivalence that W.B. Yeats is exploiting in “Crazy Jane on God” and “Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop”: “All things remain in God,” Yeats writes, “foul and fair are near of kin,” and “love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement” (Yeats 263).

- 14 In “Against the Censor’s Scythe’: Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven,” Yasna Bozhkova remarks that the obscene is traditionally a mode of masculine expression in which it is the female body that embodies physical indignity, whether grotesque or frightening. One might think of Stephen’s mother appearing to Stephen in *Ulysses* as a “ghoul, corpse-chewer” who tries to bring him back to a universe of guilt and paralyzing conformism. Having sacrificed herself to her kin, she expects the same humility from her son. In Stephen’s delirious imagination, this undesirable place is equated with the realm of the dead. Opposing the flamboyant “non serviam” of the Promethean or Luciferian artist to the familial order, he strikes against the servility of this mother who reenacts the sacrifice. Conversely, as Bozhkova argues, female modernists such as Loy, Barnes or Freitag turned these expectations upside down. Their affirmation of the female body is not degrading, but stands in opposition to the prudery and modesty associated with the sublimation and idealization of women in Victorian culture and ideology.
- 15 Philippe Birgy’s article focuses on the chapter of *Ulysses* that was incriminated during the 1921 obscenity trials; above all, it centers on the many textual ambiguities making it impossible for critics to decide upon one vision of the female subject in this text: is she being empowered or victimized by the frame of female exhibitionism and male voyeurism? At a textual level, does the handling of free indirect speech grant the subject a voice of her own or is the female persona being ventriloquized by Bloom? The narrative apparatus of Joyce’s modernist text creates radical undecidability by instructing the reader to take one critical position and almost immediately dislodging that reader from that initial stance. Birgy moves on to interpret the image of Gerty’s indecent exposure as the product of an ambivalent vision of purity, one that uneasily “sits between an idealization of the female object of desire and the defacement of its purity”; the article points out the homology existing between the Catholic confession and pornography, in that both produce and rely on images of purity in order to exhibit images of defaced purity. Another layer of ambivalence, which accounts for the explosive, scandalous charge of the text, including in a contemporary context, concerns “the self-empowerment” of Gerty as she accesses “a position of visibility which actuates a situation of maximum exposure. It entails an extreme vulnerability and susceptibility, which invite degradation”. The text’s antithetical pairing of female purity and female defacement catches not only Gerty, but also the reader, in its net, and places the reader-turned-voyeur into an impossibly compromising position.
- 16 Birgy’s argument echoes some questions raised by Hercend about the position of the reader in modernist texts that invite readers to peep into the unspeakable secrets of

domination structures. The article also echoes Bozhkova's reflections on the feminist uses of obscene images of the female body: Bozhkova shows that Loyd's or Freitag's modernist use of shocking images of female corporeality aimed at debunking the distinction established between the obscene female figure and the idealized one, which are both objects of a male gaze, in order to link female sexuality to the assertion of a female subject. By contrast, Birgy's analysis of "Nausicaa" suggests that Joyce's text connects the obscene with the idealized, the impure with the pure, in a more fundamental way, making it impossible to entirely evade the terms of the ambivalence, short of a sacrificial purge.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière described this move in his own terms, calling it "the aesthetic regime of art" and distinguishing it from the representational ideal (and system) of the classical age (Rancière 2006).
2. "Mr. Joyce has a cloacal obsession. He would bring back into the general picture of life aspects which modern drainage and modern decorum have taken out of ordinary intercourse and conversation. Coarse, unfamiliar words are scattered about the book unpleasantly, and it may seem to many, needlessly. If the reader is squeamish upon these matters, then there is nothing for it but to shun this book." (H.G. Wells, "James Joyce," *The New Republic*, 10 March 1917)
3. On the complexity of legal and historical questions raised by obscenity trials, see Erik M. Bachman. *Literary Obscenities: U.S. Case Law and Naturalism after Modernism* Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018.

AUTHORS

PHILIPPE BIRGY

Professor
Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès
birgy@univ-tlse2.fr

AURÉLIE GUILLAIN

Professor
Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès
guillain@univ-tlse2.fr