

## Robert Darnton. *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*

Robert Darnton. *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*. London: The British Library, 2014. *The Panizzi Lectures* 2013. 316 p., ill. ISBN 9780712357616. £25.00 (hardcover).

This excellent book represents a peak in Robert Darnton's long-term research and should indeed become compulsory reading for all those interested in censorship and, more generally, mechanisms of control in the age of print. Darnton takes the reader on an exciting voyage through censorship as exerted by three authoritarian systems in three different centuries: eighteenth-century France, the British Raj, and Communist East Germany. Instead of starting from definitions, he provides subtle "ethnographic" insights into day-to-day censorial practices. By offering a "thick description" of how censorship actually operated (19), he argues that the understanding of this phenomenon has to overcome not only the Manichean view of a writer struggling against a wicked censor but also the idea that anything that hinders communication can be labeled censorship.

First of all, censors cannot simply be discarded as "watchdogs." Underpaid or not paid at all, the censors in Bourbon France were mostly prominent intellectuals—sometimes working hard to improve the texts submitted and to defend the "honor of French literature," as one of Malesherbes's men once put it. Even though they did defend the rulers and the clergy, "censorship was not simply a matter of purging heresies" (29). Notably, it was not so much the ideas that censors deemed dangerous, but the risk of offending the potentates of the Ancien Régime. However, the censors granting royal privileges (or tacit permissions) only represent one half of the story; the other half—narrated in this case with a masterful literary touch—is about the harsh police repression of the extensive corpus of illegal, "clandestine" books that were circulating under the cloak.

British rulers in India resorted to violence as well. In theory, they were granting the subjects of the Raj freedom of expression. In practice, however, "the disparity between preaching liberalism and practicing imperialism" (124) became overtly manifest when the colonial rulers felt increasingly threatened after 1900. British surveillance of the vernacular book production, initiated in the mid-century, was replaced by punishment. Courtrooms became hermeneutic battlefields and jails were filled with arrested writers, tried for sedition—a legal notion vaguely defined as exciting feelings of "disaffection" to the authorities. The rulers simply "could not allow the Indians to use words as freely as Englishmen did at home" (142).

Using brutal force was seldom necessary in totalitarian regimes. In East Germany, the Party control was so omnipresent that the major work—the thorough self-censoring—was already done by the authors. The rest was achieved by central "planning" of the annual book production, a process that involved negotiations among authors, editors, officially non-existent censors (part of the governmental structure) and high officials of the Communist Party. But even in such cases, warns Darnton, "it would be misleading to characterize censorship simply as a contest between creation and oppression" (234).

Although censorship in the three analyzed systems took quite diverse shapes and nuances, a common feature was its profound connection to the power structures. For Darnton, censorship is essentially bound to the state, to its monopoly of power and its ability to sanction. Moreover, it is precisely such a political understanding of censorship that prevents the object of research from dissolving as merely

one of the many possible constraints in communication. Although Darnton refrains from conjecturing on more recent manifestations of censorship, his thorough insights into the ways in which policy makers have thought about it in the past might prove inspiring for a reflection on its manifestation in the present times. All the more so since today the stateâ€”and this is how the author closes this seminal bookâ€”may be watching every move we makeâ€” (243).

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