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Raymond Birn, *La Censure royale des livres dans la France des Lumières.* Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007. 179 pp. Notes. 26 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-7381-1851-6.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Turnovsky, University of Washington

In July 1756, a Royal censor named Millet wrote a glowing review of a manuscript that he had been assigned to review, entitled *Réflexions littéraires et philosophiques sur le poëme "De la Religion naturelle."* Offering, according to Millet's report, a measured critique of the aesthetic shortcomings of Voltaire's poem while defending "du même temps la religion rélévée des coups que l'auteur lui porte," the text sounds like the type of work that would be ripe for approval. Such support would, in turn, open the door to a *privilège*, giving its holder—whether the author himself or a bookseller with whom he might have contracted an agreement—the excusive rights to publish the work. Curiously, though, Millet held back from outright endorsement: "Avec un privilège," he explains, "il faut, Monsieur, que mon approbation apparaisse. Camarade de l'École de M. de Voltaire si souvent nommé et critiqué dans ce petit ouvrage, je n'y mettrai mon nom qu'avec toute la répugnance possible, je ne manquerais pas d'être en butte à tous ces partisans et à lui-même si mon approbation paraît" (p. 110).

Millet's hesitation captures the reality that Raymond Birn reconstructs in four lectures delivered at the Collège de France, based on impressive archival research and collected in his absorbing new book on *La Censure Royale des livres dans la France des Lumières.* Of course, we have long known that censorship was at the core of intellectual life during the Enlightenment in France: "le censure est au coeur du travail des lumières," writes Daniel Roche in his preface to Birn's study (p. 15). Generally, this is taken to mean that censorship shaped the eighteenth-century literary world as a repressive force, with the Enlightenment taking form in its opposition to official efforts to silence its progressive, critical voice. But Millet did not demur out of deference to authority and tradition. His vacillation was a function of his anxiety about promoting a too-orthodox text in the face of the inevitable ridicule that Voltaire and his partisans in the camp of *philosophes* would heap on him, suggesting that censorship in the Enlightenment was a more ambiguous, complicated practice that we might think.

Birn's study demonstrates that complexity was a defining characteristic of eighteenth-century censorship, a fact obscured by the tendency in scholarly accounts to overemphasize "censures à grand spectacle," which is to say, stark, visible acts of state oppression involving arrests, book-burnings, and imprisonments. Birn instead highlights a more banal exercise of control over print in the mode of an administrative mechanism run by bureaucrats who, by and large, were more invested in their careers as officials and their status as *gens de lettres* than in the ideological defense of religious and political orthodoxy. Such a vision of censorship, along with the more fluid, collusive relationship that it posits between writers and authorities, no doubt corresponded more closely to the everyday reality lived by those subjected to its scrutiny.

In line with fruitful recent studies by Ann Goldgar and Véronique Sarrazin, Birn advocates approaching Enlightenment-era censorship as a type of negotiation between writer, state, and a reading public, in which it played a mediating rather than a purely prohibitory role, aiming both to protect readers from dangerous as well as bad writing, and to ensure that writers, within the reasonable limits set by prevailing moral, stylistic and epistemological norms, were able to express themselves with some measure of freedom and dignity.[1] *La Censure* for Birn thus represents as much a positive condition of

possibility for publication as a constraint on it. Not simply "agents de la répression au service d'un Etat autoritaire," censors learned to "examiner les textes en critique" (p. 40) advising *gens de lettres* as allies to adhere to "certaines règles du jeu" (p. 23) in order to be more effective, better writers.

The basic opposition on which Birn's study pivots is that between pre- and post-publication censorship. It was the latter which tended to produce the garish spectacles, while the former existed as a regulatory process under the supervision of the Direction de la Librairie in conjunction with the printers' and booksellers' guilds. This opposition is a source of some degree of confusion. For one thing, eighteenth-century writers would themselves have understood "Censure" to mean the pre-publication mechanism. Yet "censorship" assumes a broader meaning nowadays, referring to all acts of official control over print, with its purely negative function in suppressing *a posteriori* rather than managing *a priori* surely more salient. The risk is to emphasize as "censure" what may not have been so categorized at the time. In fact, Birn shows that the very meaning of censorship is in play.

He sets out to clear up the confusion with a systematic survey of La Censure royale as what Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes, the famous head of the Direction de la Librairie from 1750-1763, forcefully argued it must be in his *Mémoires sur la libriarie*, written as the Direction faced a deep crisis in the late 1750s: "un objet d'administration."[2] In his first lecture, Birn describes the "révolution bureaucratique de Pontchartrain." As Chancellor of France from 1699 to 1714, Pontchartrain wrested control over "censure préalable" from those institutions-- the university and parlements--which had traditionally held it, bringing the book trade under the direct supervision of a corps of specialists working for the centralized state.

Jumping ahead to the time of Malesherbes, lectures three and four shed fascinating light onto this new class of professionals "à l'oeuvre," drawing on archival reports to highlight the resolutely moderate considerations that informed their judgments. Birn underscores their "tolérance académique," shaped by a strong sense of the integrity of the particular fields of knowledge that they were called upon to patrol: "Vers 1760," he writes, "chaque champ de savoir produisait son propre type de discours légitime ainsi que ses propres contraintes structurelles. En conséquence, ceux qui voulaient contester ces contraintes pratiquaient la 'mauvaise science' et devaient être réduits au silence. Telles étaient les limites de la tolérance censoriale pendant l'époque des lumnières" (pp. 130-1). This was, Birn argues, consistent with a sensibly progressive orientation towards the values of Enlightenment as expressed in the 1777 report by a censor named Jean-Baptiste-Colbert Cadet de Saineville, whose area of responsibility was economic writings: "Le vérité me paraît toujours prétieuse, indépendamment de tout parti; et pourvu que les discussions soient sagement présentées, sans déclamation ny personnalités, je crois qu'on ne peut lui lasser un champ trop vaste" (p. 37).

But the narrative of growing tolerance through professionalization is undercut by another story, which casts the first one into a more uncertain light. Indeed, the irony on which Birn constructs his investigation lies in the fact that the bureaucratization of control over the book trade correlates with a rapid commercial expansion of the book trade and with the politicization of print as a medium for the expression of "public opinion." In this respect, Birn recounts the history of an institution that, faced with these changes in the intellectual sphere, was becoming less effective even as it became more systematic and rational.

The administrative revolution was concomitant with a growing tendency to let inappropriate material through the cracks, and consequently, with the State's growing need to defend its prerogative to regulate print publication against the incursion of other bodies eager to pounce on the weaknesses of La Censure in coping with the mounting pressures. Most prominent among these, as Birn shows in the second lecture on "La censure sous Louis XV," was a reinvigorated Paris Parlement, which produced one of the best-known of the eighteenth-century "censures à grand spectacle" when it mobilized against Helvétius' *De l'Esprit* in 1758, less for its sensationalist philosophy, than for the fact that such a

heterodox philosophical vision was published with a *privilège du roi* and a signed approbation.

The ambiguity that Birn emphasizes in his study pertains therefore not only at the level of the editorial back and forth between writer and censor. We also find it in the measures taken by the censors to cope both with the increasingly unmanageable commercial environment and with the efforts of the Parlement to challenge the Direction de la Librairie's wavering control over these circumstances. Famously, a system of "gradations" was implemented, which permitted censors to nuance their judgments, or more exactly, to hedge their bets and protect themselves from the accusation of being too lenient or too harsh. Simple permissions, with no prospect of a *privilège*, allowed them to remain anonymous, while tolerances offered informal verbal assurances that the authorities would simply look the other way.

"La ligne de démarcation entre l'illicite et le permis fut brouillée," writes Birn (p. 74). This led to a more tolerant censorial regime, to be sure. But it also produced what was at least perceived to be a more arbitrary system characterized not simply by the earnest, genuinely supportive efforts of officials seeking a compromise between *licence* and despotism whereby writers might enjoy an honest, reasonable autonomy, but by the almost inevitable failure of these efforts, and by a certain embarrassment ensuing from awareness of this failure, which was manifest in the hesitation of a Millet or in the haplessness of the overworked censor named Jean-Paul Tercier whose ill-advised approval of *De l'Esprit* set off a firestorm. The moderation of censorship in the eighteenth century owes much to this discomfort, which traverses Malesherbes' *Mémoires*.

Accordingly, the key question to which Birn returns throughout his investigation—"peut-on conclure que la direction de la librairie a été davantage un arbitre culturel qu'un agent de répression?"—does not quite do justice to the complexity that his study uncovers. For this lies not only in the contradictory imperatives of positive versus negative censorship, but also in the inseparability of those two options, which emerge contemporaneously as two figurations of a regulatory practice whose evolution was, perhaps above all, characterized by its growing *visibility* and *autonomy* as a particular exercise of power, one that was distinct from the administration of a trade or an industry.

Previously, censorship had not been so easy to delineate from within a broader supervisory framework oriented, above all, by the need to protect the interests of a corporation of artisans. The *Code de la librairie* published by an officer of the Parisian community of booksellers and printers named Claude Saugrain in 1723 and 1744 did not systematically differentiate the ideological surveillance of content from an overarching guild organization of the production and commerce of books. [3] In fact, the agenda of the latter—typified by rules against working on Sunday or selling outside of designated areas in Paris—dominates the *Code*, and as such, probably better defines what it meant to monitor print publication in the Old Regime. However, by the time of Malesherbes' *Mémoires* and Diderot's 1763 *Lettre sur le commerce de la librairie*, written at the behest of the Parisian guild to advance their arguments for intellectual property rights, we encounter a far stronger articulation of censorship's specificity as an official act of control over individual self-expression. Correlatively, we find a more familiar, modern conceptualization of censorship as the negation of "freedom" in its various forms: freedom of the press, freedom of self-expression or freedom to speak out. Birn's account is especially illuminating in its exploration of how well meaning individuals, in their dedication to the broad ideals of Enlightenment, dealt with their fraught, ambivalent roles in this political, economic and symbolic transformation.

Roche's preface connects the four lectures to the broader trajectory of Raymond Birn's work from his groundbreaking early research in 1964 on Pierre Rousseau and the development of an extra-territorial French-language publishing industry during the eighteenth century to his investigation from 2001 into the complex commercial negotiations that underlay the publication of the *Oeuvres* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Birn's new study is an invaluable contribution to this impressive corpus. It offers richly documented insight into the complex mental world of Enlightenment-era censors, along with a compelling account of how the government managed their work, and in the effort, ended up

encapsulating so many of the key paradoxes of modernization in the eighteenth century.

NOTES

[1] See Ann Goldgar, "The Absolutism of Taste: Journalists as Censors in 18th-Century Paris," in Robin Myers and Michael Harris, eds., *Censorship and the Control of Print in England and France 1660-1910* (Winchester, UK: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1992), pp. 87-110; and Véronique Sarrazin, "Du bon usage de la Censure au XVIIIe siècle," *Lettre Clandestine* 5 (1996): 161-191.

[2] Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes, *Mémoires sur la librairie*, ed. Graham Rondell, *North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures*, 213 (1979): 83.

[3] Claude Marin Saugrain, *Code de la librairie et imprimerie de Paris* (Paris: Communauté des libraires, 1744). Birn discusses this publication and the circumstances in which it was produced, defined by nascent intellectual property debates, in his very fine article, "The Profits of Ideas: *Privilèges en librairie* in Eighteenth-Century France," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4:2 (Winter 1971): 131-68.

Geoffrey Turnovsky
University of Washington
gt2@u.washington.edu

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