

## Le Hir on Olmsted (2016)

Olmsted, William. *The Censorship Effect: Baudelaire, Flaubert, and the Formation of French Modernism*. Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 240, 5 illustrations, ISBN 978-0-19-023863-6

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William Olmsted's new book offers an original, provocative interpretation of the 1857 trials of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. In moves meant to preempt or adjust to censorship, he argues, Flaubert and Baudelaire relied on a kind of "immoral moralism"—defined as "the handling of an immoral subject in an implicitly moralistic fashion" (69)—and developed the distancing textual strategies (free indirect discourse, multiple poetic personae) associated with modernism today. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, strategies such as the suppression of "many dangerously suggestive terms and themes" (49) and the depiction of "adultery in language neither too raw nor too indistinct and euphemistic" (51) allowed Flaubert to challenge "the limits of literary decorum while claiming to have observed the very proprieties the censors [...] felt he had violated" (11). Baudelaire used similar self-censoring strategies for the same purpose in *Les Fleurs du mal*—the creation of multiple poetic personae; the denial, in a prefatory note to the *Révolte* section, that these personae's words reflected his own views; and a rejection of "Realism" grounded in his awareness that the term had been used by the prosecution to try to establish *Madame Bovary*'s alleged immoral character at trial. We learn that *Les Fleurs du mal* faced the additional charge of containing "obscene and immoral passages and expressions" leading to "the excitation of the senses" (102). Here Olmsted takes the fact that Baudelaire revised the "pornograms" in his lesbian poems as evidence of a "fundamental agreement with the censors concerning the nature of literary obscenity" (12). In the last chapter, he similarly casts Baudelaire's post-trial reorganization of his poems as an effect of censorship, an ethical accommodation evidenced by the de-emphasis of women's sexual agency, the reactionary handling of social issues in the poems added to the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, and the separate publication of the condemned pieces.

As well-written and entertaining as *The Censorship Effect* is, Olmsted's charge against the founders of French modernism has, in my view, two flaws. The first is to present the censorship effect as the only determining factor in the genesis of modernist writing throughout the book, while at the same time acknowledging that it may well be just one among many other factors ("What has come to be understood as literary doctrine or technique... also needs to be assessed in terms of the pressure exerted by censorship" [73].) The second problem has to do with the strong claim that the notion that censorship affected "the very formation of the texts in question" (15), which, to be truly convincing, would need to be better qualified (through writings documenting a preoccupation with censorship prior to trial for instance). As it is, the accusation of "collaboration with a regime of ethical and political censorship" (2) seems particularly overstated in Baudelaire's case as most poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, Olmsted tells us, were already written in the 1840s (123). Flaubert, it is true, was able to mobilize "a powerful network of relations uniting writers, journalists, senior civil servants, major bourgeois who support[ed] the Empire (his brother Achille especially) and members of the court [...]" and to avoid condemnation, as Pierre Bourdieu notes in *Rules of Art* (52). Bourdieu, in fact, takes Flaubert's willingness and ability to put his social capital to work on his behalf at the time of his trial as evidence of "the profound imbrication of the literary and the political field" (52). Which brings me to one last point: *The Censorship Effect* claims, but fails to invalidate Bourdieu's analysis of the conquest of autonomy. As the preceding quotes illustrate, the understanding of "autonomy" as "independence from institutional and commercial constraint" (13) Olmsted attributes to Bourdieu is based on a misreading. What Bourdieu (*Rules* 48–54) writes is the exact opposite, namely that the very "structural subordination" Flaubert and Baudelaire experienced during the Second Empire, their art's subjection to external principles of appreciation and evaluation, was the starting point of the "symbolic revolution through which artists free themselves from bourgeois demand by refusing to recognize any master except their art" (*Rules* 81). In sum, while there is no question that the February 1852 decrees put the French world of publishing in a quandary, as writers, publishers, and printers suddenly had to conform to unstated moral and religious standards, the fact that these standards only came to light at trials should caution us against too readily turning Flaubert and Baudelaire into willing collaborators of the Third Empire's repressive policies.

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