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► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Hercend. “Show! Hide! Show!”: High Modernism and the Lure of the Obscene. *Miranda : Revue pluridisciplinaire sur le monde anglophone. Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world*, 2020, 21, 10.4000/miranda.27796 . hal-03950818

HAL Id: hal-03950818

<https://hal.science/hal-03950818>

Submitted on 22 Jan 2023

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Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

21 | 2020
Modernism and the Obscene

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/27796>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.27796

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Olivier Hercend, “Show! Hide! Show!”: High Modernism and the Lure of the Obscene”, *Miranda* [Online], 21 | 2020, Online since 09 October 2020, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/27796> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.27796>

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Olivier Hercend

Introduction

- The accusations of obscenity which were famously leveled at major modernist works like *Ulysses* and *The Well of Loneliness*, and the long and complex history of trials, censorship and resistance that followed, have long framed the debate on modernism and the obscene around artistic freedom and the merits of representing sexuality and the body in literature. Between the description of real life—as in the passage in the “Calypso” episode of *Ulysses* where Bloom’s stay in the outhouse is described—and the desire to play on provocation, bawdiness or bad taste—for instance in Eliot’s youthful “Bolo” poetry—, arguments centered around the question of what constituted art, and what remained in the realm of pornography. This was compounded by political and social struggles, which in Britain centered around the “Obscene Publications Act” of 1857, as well as the practices of distributors, such as the decision by circulating libraries to self-censor at the start of the twentieth century.¹ However, these oppositions tended to rest on a narrow definition of obscenity as pure vulgarity, and as such obscured a shift in the meaning of the word, which came to also encompass “the uncomfortable or unconscious dimensions of the psyche”, to quote the words of Rachel Potter (Potter 10). As Potter observes, obscenity is a complex word. Coming from the Latin “obscēnus”, with the dual meaning of “inauspicious” and “disgusting” or “indecent”, the obscene as a concept not only describes more or less thinly veiled references to sexuality, scatology, perversity and violence, but also refers back to the “scene” or stage, and to the “limits of representation; to those aspects of humanity or language which ought to remain off-stage”, out of the frame, for fear of shocking or outraging the public (Potter 3). This plurality of meanings is particularly important when dealing with modernism, as the tension between what can be seen, what is

hidden and what is hinted at, is central in the modernist aesthetics, especially in relation with sexuality, violence and scandal.

- 2 Indeed, as Christopher Butler argues, modernism is part of a larger cultural movement, questioning "the boundary between an idealized waking fantasy suitable for literature, and the primitive, liberating regression of dreams" (98), the interaction between the drives of the human mind and the censorship of accepted discourse. Quoting the epigraph to Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, "Flectere si nequeo superos, acheronta movebo" ("If I cannot direct the forces above, I will then put the lower spheres in motion"), Butler integrates this dichotomy within a broader reflection on the interactions between surface and depths, the visible and the invisible, as well as the spoken and the unspoken, which directs the early development of psychoanalysis (Butler 4). In this context, the ambiguity of the obscene appears: it is both a form of protection, keeping out what should not be shown, and a way to highlight the limits of the framing, a way to admit that something has been left out. Not showing, leaving a blank or covering up a scene also reveals its existence, creating a form of mystery.
- 3 As a matter of fact, a recurrent feature of modernist texts is the perceivable covering up of violent, erotic or disturbing scenes. This will be my starting point in order to define the modernist notion of the obscene. Far from being a form of accident, the side effect of a new form of realism or literary experimentation, I believe it to be a form of artistic trope, and part of a set of parallel rhetorical strategies. Whether it be for artistic or political purposes, hinting at blind spots, luring the reader towards the seams of the textual fabric, is central to modernist aesthetics, and a recurrent pattern in otherwise very distinct texts. Authors as different as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf all tend to outline scenes which they partially or totally cover, leaving them beyond the limits of what is explicitly stated in the text. In doing so, they highlight the literary conventions of framing, as well as the cultural and political forces that influence the choices determining what to show and what to leave out. Finally, by creating this form of indeterminacy, opening up the possibility of another event behind those which the text presents, they call to us as readers. Obscenity places us in front of a dilemma which invokes the notion of ethics, of what we are allowed to infer or imagine, how far away from the written word it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to go, in order to forge our own understanding of the work and of the world that it depicts.
- 4 Hence, analyzing a number of defining works from these three authors as examples, I will show that the obscene, as the margin between what can be written and what cannot, is a fundamental feature of modernist texts, which are very often haunted by a form of "tantalizing" absence, to quote the words of Makiko Minow-Pinkney (Minow-Pinkney 59). This tension is both artistically fruitful and politically charged, as it opens up the frame of expression, using the lure of the scandalous to highlight the arbitrariness of taboos and socially accepted forms of framing. Finally, by tying interpretive decisions to ethical dilemmas, it reshapes the interaction between writer and reader. Asking us whether to look or not to look further, to imagine what is implicit or to choose between competing visions of the same scene, it focuses our attention on the limits of literature, and beckons us to question our role within the work; our capacity, and perhaps our duty, to participate in the construction of meaning.

The absence as lure

- 5 In analyzing modernist texts that deal with sexually explicit, violent or disturbing scenes, I would argue that a certain cluster of stylistic and narrative patterns emerges. The event in question is very often only hinted at or hidden, but paradoxically influences the rest of the description and takes on a larger symbolic meaning. Instead of being circumscribed by the silence, it tends to evoke other things left unsaid, and reveals a form of hidden discourse. A very telling example of this is the interaction between Gerty and Bloom in the "Nausicaa" episode of *Ulysses*. On the beach at sundown, Bloom leers at Gerty. She accepts his voyeurism and leans back to watch fireworks, letting him see her legs and masturbate to her "half-offered" body (477). However, neither her actions nor his are explicitly described. Her exhibitionism is partially covered up by her own thoughts: she shows her "knee," then "legs," her "garters," "nainsook knickers" and finally "above her knee where no-one ever not even on the swing or wading" (476-478). The enumeration starts with body parts, but then metonymically shifts to her articles of clothing, and finally to a half-finished sentence, which only hints at what she shows—what Bloom would be the first to see—through the triple negative construction "no-one ever not even". The closer the text comes to the obscene part of her display, the more contorted the style becomes in order not to state what is being shown, to the point that the grammar of the sentence breaks down. Meanwhile, other parallel scenes are evoked, such as the activities of "skirt dancers and high kickers" (477). Likewise, though it is clear that Gerty understands Bloom's actions, she does not put them into words. She sees that "His hands and face were working" (476) and remembers a friend telling her about a lodger doing "something not very nice" over some pictures. And after the event, she hints at the vulgarity of his behavior: "An utter cad he had been!" (478).
- 6 However, this way of meandering around the unspoken event actually conjures up a number of tropes and signs, which enhance the erotic intensity of the scene.² There is more to hiding than to showing in this passage. Firstly, the mediations themselves are sexually charged. As Benoît Tadié remarks, the "Nainsook" brand adds a tactile dimension to an interaction which would otherwise be only visual, through the integration of the publicity slogan "the fabric that caresses the skin" (211-212). Furthermore, the shared secret itself becomes a form of sensually charged silence: "Should a girl tell? No, a thousand times no. That was their secret" (478). And most of all, as previously mentioned, other scenes of unspoken desire and obscene lust echo the one at hand. Uncouth desire breeds desire, as this moment on the beach reminds Gerty of the "something not very nice" that lodgers do, which "you could imagine sometimes in the bed" (476). This form of ripple-like effect, this wave of desire rushing from being to being behind the fixed barriers of the text, reaches its peak when the firework goes off—a very straightforward metaphor for climax—"then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream" (478). The "sigh of O!" is reified: it reaches beyond individuals, linking them in a "gushing" "stream" of inarticulate emotion. Far from keeping the sexual tension out of the passage, its obscenity seems to liberate it from any form of fixation, letting it course through individuals, and symbols, influencing the entire passage until even the sky bursts in climax. The fact of keeping the concrete event at the margin of the text,

creates a point of indeterminacy, which ends up saying a lot more about the ubiquity of sexuality than any realistic description could purport to express.

- 7 Although certainly not a modernist invention, this paradox of a scene that is hidden, but in such a way as to enhance its evocative power, is a recurrent stylistic feature of high modernism. In "The Fire Sermon," the third part of *The Waste Land*, the encounter between the typist and the clerk is on the verge of turning into a squalid scene of barely consensual sex ("flushed and decided, he assaults at once [...] and makes a welcome of indifference," l.239-242), when a parenthesis opens, and Tiresias begins to speak, stopping only after the deed is done and the man "Bestows one final patronizing kiss" (l. 247) before leaving. On the one hand, this means that the intercourse is not described. It is visibly hidden, through the use of the parenthesis. However, what is described is Tiresias, looking at the scene being "enacted" (l. 244). As Maud Ellmann puts it, "The seer turns into a Peeping Tom, the most ambiguous of spectators" (97) while the reader witnesses this form of voyeurism. Furthermore, the figure of Tiresias is also very ambiguous in that context. One of the myths surrounding Tiresias is his having changed into a woman for seven years. Therefore, when he says "I Tiresias have foresuffered all" (l.243), the one hidden sex scene is made to evoke his entire sexual experience, including the violence that the term "foresuffered" implies, and links the modern setting with other scenes going as far back as Ancient Greece ("I who have sat by Thebes," l.245). While being absent from the explicit text, sexuality and violence insist at the margins, and seem to color the whole of human experience. In his *Five Lessons on Psychoanalysis*, Freud compares the neurotic effects of repressed emotions and experiences to a spectator at his conference being forced out of the room, and then hammering at the door, disturbing the class from the outside with much more forcefulness than he ever could within the room (Freud 26-28). This metaphor perfectly illustrates the effects of the obscene within the poetics of *The Waste Land*: it is visibly left out, and just as visibly disturbs and influences the meaning of the scenes in question.
- 8 In the context of modernist literature, this motif of absence and insistence, the duality that characterizes the obscene, is undeniably part of a broader aesthetics. This is why I include Virginia Woolf in the reflection, though she might be considered as warier of the obscene than many of her contemporaries, as attested by her comments on the "indecenty" of Joyce's *Ulysses*. First of all, her novels do contain numerous instances of partially covered violence or sexuality, although their inclusion is often more implicit than in the works of Joyce. But more importantly, she is concerned with the dialectics between showing and hiding. She knows both the importance of protecting the individual from the "shocks" of experience, and the violence of silence and social taboos imposed upon the individual who has experienced trauma or powerful emotions. In *Virginia Woolf and the Madness of Language*, Daniel Ferrer highlights her ambivalence towards language in that respect. Language is both a tool of control, and serves a "screening function" or, taking up the words of Bernard in *The Waves*, a tool of "attenuation of the original shock" of living (85-88). This duality particularly influences Woolf's attitude towards the obscene. In *Jacob's Room*, when Jacob is with his mistress Florinda, the narrative voice speaks of his mother's letters in his entrance hall while the two lovers are in the bedroom:
- if the pale blue envelope lying by the biscuit box had the feelings of a mother, the heart was torn by the little creak, the sudden stir. Behind the door was the obscene thing, the alarming presence... (124).

- 9 The sexual undertones of the “little creak” of the bed do hint at the unexpressed, “obscene thing,” while the position of the narrative voice, at the limit between the bedroom and the outside world, can be paralleled with the position of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*. But the entire scene also reinforces the motif of the novel: the room itself is “obscene,” always in the margins of the text, always seemingly unattainable, just as Jacob is. And the letters represent this inability to reach the protagonist and know him in other ways than *in absentia*. At the end of the novel, after his demise, when Betty Flanders and his friend Bonamy enter his room, one of the first things they see is “[a]ll his letters strewn about for anyone to read” (246). They are what is left after his disappearance, in the antechamber to his empty room. In Woolf’s writing, the obscene is a symbol among others of the impossibility to reach an intimate understanding of others through language. And, like other motifs of unattainable presence, it is linked with a form of mystery, a desire to know more about Jacob than what remains of him in the written text of the novel. The experience of violence and sexuality is linked with what Minow-Pinkney calls the “motif of the quest” in Woolf’s style: they stand as forms of “hermeneutic provocation, goading the reader into a sense of tantalizing but never quite delivered significance” (84).
- 10 This is why I assert that, far from being a simple coincidence, the recurrence of a stylistic and narrative pattern within modernist texts dealing with the obscene is meaningful. It is part of an array of artistic strategies, to change events and scenes that could otherwise be disturbing or disgusting to some—and perhaps quite banal otherwise—into tantalizing absences, which influence how the entire work is read. The term “tantalizing” is particularly apposite here, in that it stresses the dynamics of desire and frustration. Tantalus’s plight comes from the fact that the foodstuffs are in plain sight, that he can imagine them and project his desires onto them (a feature which pictorial takes on the scene of his torments tend to highlight), so that they come to stand for his very drives. Instead of having a value in themselves, since they cannot be grasped, they become mere forms of appeal to him, calls upon his hunger and thirst. Likewise, since they are not shown, the obscene events only exist inasmuch as they manage to evoke thoughts and emotions, and trigger some form or other of mental reconstruction on the part of the reader.
- 11 The motif of the nightingale and the myth of Philomel in *The Waste Land* is particularly revealing in that respect. Her rape is neither shown nor explicitly stated: it only appears through understatement (“by the barbarous king/So rudely forced,” l. 99-101) and antitheses such as the nightingale’s “inviolable voice” (l.101). But, as Anne Tomiche notes, her singing, the very “inviolable voice” of her changed self, continues to carry sexual connotations: ““Jug Jug” to dirty ears” (125). Once again, the hidden scene seems to influence the rest of the poems, adding possible innuendos and sexual tension to a bird’s melodious singing. But most importantly, it also seems to bear on its own reception: the people hearing the nightingale and thinking of Philomel—and by extension, the readers of the poem—are accused of having “dirty ears” (l.103) and twisted thoughts. When, later in the poem, the singing recurs, this effect is emphasized. The text reads: “Twit twit twit/Jug jug jug jug jug jug/So rudely forc’d./Tereu” (l. 203-206). “Tereu” is the vocative form of Tereus, the rapist: “You, Tereus”. We are made to hear the scene, to witness the call itself, from which we can reconstruct the violence of the interaction. Not only does this way of dealing with the obscene question the limit between what is explicit and implicit in the text, the scene and the “off-stage”

aspects: it also subverts the relation between the written word and our reconstruction of it. To use another dramatic metaphor, it breaks the “fourth wall,” appealing directly to us as readers. As Vicky Mahaffey explains, the figure of Philomel, through her appeals, “challenges the reader to hear the silenced voice and see the hidden image” (137). Through this process of interpellation, the obscene becomes an instrument, used to reveal the limitations of artistic conventions and social norms, and to propose new forms of interactions with literary texts.

Breaking the frame

- 12 Changing the obscene into a mysterious facet of the text implies that something worthwhile has been left out. It intimates that previous conventions on what to say and what to hide have lost their pertinence, and that their blind spots might be artistically more fecund than their framing. That is for instance what Eliot asserts in his early poetry, through the changes in perspective, the focus on the dingy backstreets and darker corners of the city: the poet, like the women at the end of the “Preludes,” finds inspiration by “gathering fuel in vacant lots” (l.54), going where there seems to be nothing, in order to find the paradoxical fertility of what is left—the waste. David Bergdahl, in “T. S. Eliot’s Waste Land as a Bakhtinian Carnival,” emphasizes the presence of “freaks” and “rejects” in Eliot’s poetry, linking it to a carnivalesque reversal in poetic standards (2). This also implies a form of accusation against what Benoît Tadié describes as the “hypocrisy” of those who cling to a lost innocence (159). The poetic mind in Eliot’s early poetry is as “sordid” as the world around it (“You dozed, and watched the night revealing/The thousand sordid images/Of which your soul was constituted,” “Preludes,” l.26-28). In “Rhapsody on a Windy Night,” for instance, the sexual urges of the speaker, although they are never mentioned *per se*, seem to take hold of the world around him, making “the street lamp sputt[er],” calling to direct his attention towards prostitutes (l.14). The mechanics of arousal, sexual tension and possible impotence also seep into the world around:

The memory throws up high and dry [...] A twisted branch upon the beach [...] Stiff and white./A broken spring in a factory yard,/ Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left/Hard and curled and ready to snap (l.23-32)

- 13 The stiffness, the power to “snap,” are both still latent in the entire scene, all the while being threatened by wreckage (“high and dry”) or abandonment (“Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left”). Although these poetic constructions are not entirely new, and the influence of Laforgue is strongly felt (particularly in his musings on his illness), in the context of Eliot’s development as a poet, this evocation of unspeakable bodily powers constitutes a form of manifesto. They herald a new form of poetics, which implicitly attacks Eliot’s forebears. In “Cousin Nancy,” the new trends that the young woman follows are pitted against the poetic tradition, in the guise of “Matthew and Waldo, the guardians of the faith,/The Army of unalterable law,” keeping watch from the bookshelf (l. 12-13). Hinting at sexual urges through metaphors found in “vacant lots” is undoubtedly a way to liberate poetry from the frame that poets such as Matthew Arnold and Ralph Waldo Emerson had adopted. And, like cousin Nancy’s behaviour, or that of aunt Helen’s servants in “Aunt Helen,” courting each other in the house when the old lady is dead, this new perspective fosters a form of

dissent, a breach in the consensus on what can be expressed and what must remain hidden. It sows the seeds of scandal.

- 14 In *Modernist Fiction and News*, David Rando stresses the influence of New Journalism on modernism, especially its insistence on scandals and breaking news. According to him, modernist writers tended to show interest in the mechanics of "scandalous disclosure," but with a certain ambivalence. Indeed, they also "resist disclosure, by making readers more aware that experience itself is a difficult thing to represent," "whereas newspapers obviously court readability". This "dialectic of revealing and concealing" (Rando 48) makes use of the modernist trope of the obscene, linking it to wider cultural and political strategies. In Joyce's *Dubliners*, the woes of the city and its inhabitants appear as a sum of more or less hidden scandals, half-told stories that the protagonists must follow in order to reach an understanding of the world they live in. The obscene comes to represent the moral decay of the inhabitants. In "An Encounter," the two children who have not gone to school meet a man, whose speech sheds light on the implicit sexual tension in the chastisement of students and on the desire that it awakens. It takes the form of an enigma, a mystery to unravel: "He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery [...] and seemed to plead with me that I should understand him" (17). The desire to unveil the meaning behind the whipping of boys becomes a locus of sexual tension in itself: the man lusts after the child's understanding. Conversely, in "The Sisters," the boy protagonist has erotic dreams about hearing the strange priest's confession: "It murmured; and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region" (4). Knowledge of what is unspoken becomes an erotic prospect, because it breaks the frame of silence and innuendos that stifles the characters, and reveals the hidden ills of Ireland—in the case of "The Sisters" and "An Encounter", the perversion of priests and educators. This dynamic echoes what Jean-Michel Rabaté calls the "perversion" of Joyce's writing in *Dubliners*: by describing the characters' search for truth, or their encounter with secrets that threaten them, the narration aims at having "a certain number of effects on the reader" (19-20). This in turn fosters a desire for reversal, for a questioning of the figure of authority, like the one that the protagonist of "The Sisters" experiences. Just as the child wants to hear the confessions of his confessor, the style of the short stories is made to kindle the reader's desire to interrogate the text, to go beyond what is said and peer into its secrets. Thus, *Dubliners* attacks the secrecy and hypocrisy of Irish society by promoting curiosity and the search for the hidden, obscene truth. Rather than merely showing the scandals that plague the Church and education system (among others), it changes them into obscene, tantalizing secrets, that we have to search beyond the text to uncover.
- 15 Furthermore, this duality, both hiding and hinting at scandals within society, also calls into question the instances of censorship, the social and political framing imposed upon public and private life. Indeed, while the obscene leaves the underlying secret hidden, the obstacles—those who want the scandal to be hushed—appear all the more starkly as they stand between the readers and what they want to know. We have already seen how Tiresias's posture, his role as a "peeping Tom," was part of what made the undisclosed sex scene in *The Waste Land* so disturbing. But perhaps the most biting indictment of the censor in modernist literature is to be found in *Orlando*, around the transformation of the protagonist into a woman. Indeed, that scene is interrupted

by the arrival of the “Three Deities,” “Purity,” “Modesty” and “Chastity,” who ask that the sex change be hidden, and do not want to see it. Their struggle against the trumpets of the Truth makes for a sort of comical interlude, which indeed obfuscates the process of transformation, but sheds a piercing light on their own motivations for not wanting to witness it. For these deities have vested interests: they are in connivance with other social forces, and their forced ignorance serves to buttress a wider political system:

We go, we go [to] those who honour us [...] those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. (97)

- 16 In trying to hide the scandal—the possibility of sexual fluidity—they end up showing their own reasons to adhere to the *status quo*. As Christine Reynier puts it, Woolf uses what goes beyond the accepted frames, using “what society rejects” in order to bring to the fore and satirize the arbitrariness, the aberrations and injustice of its codes (Reynier 2008). The comedic value of the obscene lies not in what is hidden, but in what is revealed around the blind spot, and the fundamental baseness of the instances of censorship.
- 17 But the political aspect of satire always rests on certain moral preconceptions, appealing to the personal common sense or humanity of the reader to arouse their indignation. It calls for a judgment. Indeed, breaking the frame, making new aspects of reality enter the ken of art, also fosters a need to break down and reconfigure moral codes. Dealing with *Ulysses* and Joyce’s attitude towards the reception of his works, Wolfgang Iser argues that “the undercutting of norms [...] will inevitably bring them above the threshold of consciousness and thus exhibit them for inspection” (136). As a matter of fact, in modernist texts the obscene, by stressing the limits of previous world-views, contributes to a change in perspectives and a reevaluation of moral standards. Stephen Dedalus’s moral “coming of age” in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is particularly eloquent on this issue. Indeed, faced with the strictures and hypocrisies of moral and religious norms around him, Stephen strays, entering the “Daedalian” maze of the city, and comes to face the obscene, in the form of sexual urges. Once again, the unspoken desire remains outside of the text, but it leaves traces. This leads to a form of quest, following such hints as the “echo of an obscene scrawl which [Stephen] had read on the oozing wall of a urinal” (83). Language, written and spoken, is overrun by sensuality: during Stephen’s first encounter with a prostitute, her “softly parting lips” “press[...] upon his brain [...] as though they were the vehicle of a vague speech” (85). Moreover, this contamination goes far beyond the moment of his sexual awakening. The rituals of the Jesuits, especially those that employ language, such as confession, become tainted by his newfound experience. When he wants to confess his sin of the flesh, the very discourse that Stephen is trying to formulate becomes a vehicle for spreading his perversion: he imagines writing his secrets on paper and leaving them in the street, adding that: “a girl might come upon them as she walked by and read them secretly” (97). Like the “not very nice things” that Gerty’s friend saw the lodger do, and which “you could imagine sometimes in the bed” (*Ulysses*, 476), his erotic drives seem ready to spread to others, using the very means that are meant to contain them. But this also reveals the erotic power of confession, the underlying hypocrisy of the Jesuits, who derive pleasure from their power over those that they listen to. This is partly why Stephen refuses to become a priest himself, and to “know the sins, the sinful longings

[...] hearing them murmured into his ears [...] by the lips of women and of girls" (*Portrait* 134). He is aware of the scandalous, hidden lusts for power behind the professed morality of the Church. Thus, his coming of age consists in facing the limits of accepted norms, in seeing what hides behind these barriers, peering into the obscene recesses of Irish society.

- 18 Finally, the result of his maturation, the act that closes the novel, after the individual instances of judgment and choice, of doubt and self-doubt, is to endeavor to renew the norms themselves. In this light, his final statement of intent, "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" can be better understood (229-232). Having understood the failings of Ireland, as well as his own inadequacies, Stephen imagines himself as the architect of a new conscience, like Dedalus, the "Old father, old artificer" whose name he bears (*Portrait*, 217). He grasps the ethical implications of his acquired knowledge, his power to transform the world through his understanding, and the responsibility that this power entails. I now wish to affirm and demonstrate that this narrative arc very narrowly parallels the very experience of reading Joyce's texts. As Paul B. Armstrong puts it, "*Ulysses* points out [the reader's] limits, their inadequacy," but in doing so offers an "emancipatory" pleasure "by [...] liberating the reader's power to mean" (148). Hence, the trope of the obscene not only serves the political and aesthetic aims of modernism, but also leads into the realm of what Derek Attridge calls "reading and responsibility": the ethical side of modernist literature.

The ethics of obscenity and the role of the reader

- 19 Indeed, in the face of a shift in perspective and a subversion of accepted norms, the experience of the obscene requires that the reader adopt an ethical posture. Hans Georg Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, proposes what I consider to be a fruitful definition of this term in the context of reading and interpretation. Interpretation, Gadamer explains, not only consists in forming rules, but also in applying the received knowledge and norms to new situations. This is what is traditionally called "subtilitas applicandi," and the point where hermeneutics—the art of interpretation—encounters ethics (148). Taking up Aristotle's distinction between the realm of nature ("physis"), which is ruled by mechanistic laws, and the ethical realm, Gadamer argues that the latter is founded on, and constantly renewed by, human actions. No ethical act can be judged solely on the basis of preexisting or transcendent standards, for it must include its own effect on ethical conceptions as part of its value (153). As in the case of Stephen, whose perspective on his country and himself is the basis for a possible re-creation of Irish conscience, ethics intervenes when the application of knowledge necessitates an implication, a commitment to the result of one's actions (165). In the case of the obscene, the change of perspective and the reevaluation of norms that it entails are not objective: their extent relies entirely on a decision. We can always decide not to see, not to hear, not to go on a quest. The modernist use of the obscene puts the reader in front of their own power to construct meaning, and the possible consequences of seeing, or not seeing, what is hidden behind the limits of the written word.
- 20 Moreover, the obscene calls upon the ambivalence of desire: there is a drive to see, but it may be just as erotic to miss the scene, to remain at the threshold. Jean-Michel Rabaté calls this the internal contradiction of voyeurism: although the acme of power is

to see while remaining invisible, as Michel Foucault asserts in his reflections on the panopticon (203), voyeurism rests on the much more ambivalent intertwining of a desire to see with a desire to remain blind. This is what explains Bloom's cry: "Show! Hide! Show!" in the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*, when, in his dream, Boylan invites him to watch his cuckolding through the keyhole of his door (72). Voyeurism as a perversion implies a form of power, the ability to peer or not to do so—nobody would call someone who is forced to watch a scene a voyeur. This is all the more true when the instinct to know more is aroused through a text, which by definition the reader can stop reading at any time. It is frequent for modernist texts to present the very act of continuing to read them as bordering on the voyeuristic activity. In the second part of *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess," the description of the woman's room, which will lead to the evocation of Philomel as well as the intimate conversation between a couple, starts with the mention of a "golden Cupidon [who] peeped out/(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)" (l. 80-81). Hence, the entire passage is presented as what the "peep" sees, and what another might "hid[e] his eyes" from. *The Waste Land* not only features characters in ambiguous positions, like Tiresias: it also places the reader in front of scenes that some might feel more comfortable hiding away from.

21 This poses the question of the reader's implication in the text, what is at stake in reading and interpreting different passages, in accepting or refusing to follow some hints. In *Dubliners*, Joyce often uses the mechanics of narrative tension to place his readers in very awkward positions, as the accomplices, or at least the knowing witnesses, of disturbing actions. The short story "Two Gallants," starts with Lenehan praising a story which, according to him "takes the biscuit" (36). In order to know the exact nature of this story, we have to read on, gathering hints from the discussion, as well as cultural references: "'You're what I call a gay Lothario,' said Lenehan. 'And the proper kind of a Lothario, too! '" (38). We are made to picture a scene between Corley, Lenehan's friend, and a young woman ("In his imagination he beheld the pair of lovers walking along some dark road; he heard Corley's voice in deep energetic gallantries", 42), and guess at his intentions, from Lenehan's own perspective: "He might yet be able to settle down in some snug corner and live happily if he could only come across some good simple-minded girl with a little of the ready" (43). And the story ends on a narrative climax with the revelation: "[Corley] extended a hand towards the light and, smiling, opened it slowly to the gaze of his disciple. A small gold coin shone in the palm." (45). On the one hand, this reveals the baseness of the character, capitalizing on the woman's desire to con her and get money from her. But the narrative pleasure that we as readers derive from the story parallels the outcome of Corley's actions. We cannot judge without understanding what has happened; and if we understand it, we are on the side of the conman. Our posture mirrors Lenehan's: we have done nothing ourselves, but we profit from the crime, at least in terms of literary build-up and payoff. We take on the role of Corley's public. Kershner remarks on the parallel between Corley's ostentatious behavior, making Lenehan wait before he shows him the coin for instance, and the pacing of the story itself. In creating suspense, "Joyce has encouraged the reader's collaboration in the degrading ritual" enacted by the two gallants (86). This sort of trap reveals the dangers in adhering to a story's structure: sometimes, by accepting to read on, we make ourselves the accomplices of some very cruel narratives.

22 On the contrary, certain modernist texts hint at the wrongness of averting one's eyes, of accepting the social conventions which isolate or hush up certain facts. It is

interesting to see how all three authors attack the social taboos around mental disorder, for instance. This appears in the reactions around Kernan's alcoholism in the short story "Grace" in *Dubliners*, in Woolf's vision of psychiatrists as censors throughout *Mrs Dalloway*—in the description of William Bradshaw's activities ("[he] secluded [...] lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views", 84), or even Rezia's final vision, linking Dr Holmes to an obstacle in front of the light, closing off access to the window from which Septimus's body can be seen: "She saw the large outline of his body standing dark against the window. So that was Dr. Holmes" (27). But in the poem "Sweeney Erect," Eliot questions the visibility of hysteria, the indifference that it creates, by appealing directly to the reader's powers of interpretation. Indeed, the woman's seizure on the bed is only half-described, hinted at like an obscene event: "Gesture of orang outang/Rises from the sheets in steam./This withered root of knots of hair/Slitted below and gashed with eyes, [...] The sickle motion from the thigh/Jackknives upward at the knees [...] Pushing the framework of the bed" (l.11-19). The animalistic and mechanistic metaphors ("gesture of orang outang", "sickle motion") as well as the violence of the verbs ("slit", "gash") both hide and reveal the violence of her frenzied gestures. However, they also bypass the woman's humanity. Furthermore, the behaviors of witnesses tend to shed light on their lack of interest in the actual event: they stress either its banality (Sweeney "knows the female temperament", l.23) or its social consequences (women "deprecate the lack of taste", l.36; "Observing that hysteria/Might easily be misunderstood; /Mrs. Turner intimates/It does the house no sort of good", l.37-40). Hence, everything in the text contributes to focus our attention away from the terrible scene. If we choose to do so, however, we are as base and inhuman as the caricatures that surround the poor woman. By challenging us to either reconstruct the woman in pain ourselves, or to accept the horrible indifference of the other characters, "Sweeney Erect" presents a concrete case of ethical appeal to the reader. Interpreting this poem, acting as readers to re-establish the obscene suffering, is a matter which involves our ability to see beyond what is written, our courage in piercing through social indifference, but also, simply, our humanity.

- 23 Ultimately, the modernist take on the obscene questions the responsibilities of the reader of literary texts. Deciding whether to see or not to see some things is not only a matter of aesthetics or technique: it can also call upon our sense of duty and morality, what we must do and what we should not do. In *Ethical Joyce*, Marian Eide links the incompleteness of the frame in "The Sisters"—the insistence of what we have in this essay called the obscene—with a broader appeal to the reader's "bad conscience" (39). More generally, it seems to me that modernist authors tend to bring to light and question the conventions of reading in terms that are not only aesthetic, but also moral.
- 24 A particularly memorable instance of this are the final lines of "The Burial of the Dead", the first part of *The Waste Land*. Conjuring up an apocalyptic scene where the dead walk through London, the speaker suddenly turns to one named Stetson, and starts a form of enigmatic and disturbing line of questioning ("That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?", l.71-4) which ends with a sudden change in interlocutor, echoing a quotation from Baudelaire's address to the reader at the start of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!" (l.76). The underlying accusation of "hypocrisy," especially with the intertext of Baudelaire's poem, hints at a form of

shared knowledge, which we are accused of rejecting. Here, once again, the obscenity of the ideas contained within the morbid image—the corpse turned into a tree, blooming with some uncouth flowers—is both glossed over, and seems to call to us as readers, to evoke something that we know but do not wish to formulate. The violence of this assertion, the discomfort it creates, also encourages us to examine our “bad conscience”, and wonder whether indeed we might not have some idea of what he means, some stake in the poem’s endeavor. It asks us to accept the power of words to question who we are, and, in return, to implicate our own mind and imagination in the reading of the poem. Reading *The Waste Land* in a detached, intellectual way, it argues, might be hypocritical, when the text aims at speaking directly to you. Harriet Davidson links the passage and the notion of “hypocrite lecteur” to what she calls the reader’s “improper desire,” which is both a desire to go beyond what is proper, towards what is socially unacceptable—for instance the obscene—and a desire to go beyond property, to appropriate the imagery of the text and bend it to our own quest for meaning (Moody 122, 128). Hence, the evocation of our kinship with the poet also suggests that we are entitled to take part in the construction of meaning, that it is our place, and that refusing to act upon this desire of ours is the real hypocrisy.

25 These two aspects of the modernist stance with regards to the obscene—the questioning of our power to see and not to see, as well as our ability to interact with the written word, and interpret its meaning according to our desires and moral imperatives—coalesce in Woolf’s conception of reader involvement in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”. This is where the meaning of the obscene as “inauspicious” and “adverse” appears alongside that of what is left “off-stage”. Indeed, as Rachel Potter shows, the shift in the notion of obscene also led to a form of push back, pointing at the fact that what was truly indecent was “the atrocity of the system” and social oppression (Potter 3). In her essay, Woolf uses the dialectics of showing and hiding to lure the reader into paying attention to what is left unsaid in a seemingly banal scene, and to hint at the possibility of another kind of “obscene”: that of unspoken human suffering. While the narrator is sitting in the train, she spots Mrs Brown with a man named Smith, and the pair stop short of evoking “a secret, perhaps sinister business, which they did not intend to discuss in [her] presence” (4). Mrs Brown has a secret trouble, perhaps linked to her son or daughter’s immoral behavior. However, it seems that the true obscene, what has no place in literature, is her own misery. Musing upon this encounter, the narrator skips to the imaginary adventures of the son (“I was also strongly tempted to manufacture a three-volume novel about the old lady’s son, and his adventures crossing the Atlantic” 15) while leaving Mrs Brown herself out of the narrative. Likewise, contemporary authors according to the essay would be unable to speak of her actual lived experience: “Mr. Galsworthy would only see in Mrs. Brown a pot broken on the wheel and thrown into the corner” (11), “With all his powers of observation, which are marvelous, with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner” (13). Like the other instances of the obscene, she remains hidden, all the while giving birth to many potential stories about everything around her—all but herself. As Michael Tratner puts it, Mrs Brown’s suffering is that of the “unaccounted for” woman, the suffering that is left out of the text, like that of Mina Purefoy giving birth to her child in the “Oxen of the Sun” episode of *Ulysses* while the narrative focuses on the men downstairs (52).

26 However, this inability turns into a form of moral appeal, which seems to emanate from Mrs Brown herself, from the “lure” of her absence: “There was Mrs. Brown protesting

that she was different [...] and luring the novelist to her rescue by the most fascinating if fleeting glimpse of her charms" (17). The erotic undertones of the "fleeting glimpse of her charms" make it indubitable that Woolf is playing with the lure of the obscene, beckoning us forward through the oscillation between hiding and showing, the "glimpses", while ironically appealing to our interest in the old lady's "charms". But this mocking call of the flesh leads into a very different kind of quest, and the lure shifts to a moral imperative, a call upon our duty: like an old woman in distress, "Mrs. Brown must be rescued, expressed" (17). Averting our eyes from her would be to fail her, to let her symbolically die. And, as the narrator affirms, our means to save her have to do with our power as readers, our ability to spot what is left out, and, by seeing it, make it a part of the text: "[Let me] remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travelers with Mrs. Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her" (20). To quote Frédéric Regard, Mrs. Brown, the "will o' the wisp" (1), is also a form of Socratic *daimôn*, a call from outside the frame, asking us to rectify something. As such she conjures up our sense of ethics with the meaning that Badiou gives to the notion, that of a "faithfulness to the event" (11, 19). Her call to the narrator, which is also a call to us, is an encounter, and as such, it gives us a form of responsibility. She is there, waiting to be saved, and we must choose whether to see her and acknowledge her place in reality, her existence offstage, outside of canonical literature, or to avert our eyes and remain within the confines of previous conventions. That is what the modernist take on the obscene ultimately does: by confronting the readers with the margins of the frame, it stresses their own activity in setting and potentially transforming this frame. It forces them to acknowledge their own responsibility concerning what is and is not shown, what is and is not seen, within a work of art.

Conclusion

- 27 Certainly, modernism broke the fixed, social standards of obscenity, the limits between what should and should not be shown, as they had been fixed by previous generations of writers and existing institutions. It is historically and culturally important to wonder which rules it broke, to what extent, and with what kind of reactions. However, I believe this movement can only be understood in the light of how modernist artists actually acted upon the notion of the obscene: how they went back to the action of setting the margins, of leaving things out, and asked how this very act could become charged with meaning. They made playing with the mechanics of inclusion and exclusion a part of their art, each with different aims and ideas. But through this, they came to parallel conclusions, on the possibility to make absence mysterious and tantalizing, on the power of scandal to subvert the norms of an era, and, most importantly in the context of this reflection, on the underlying interaction with the readers, the consequences of luring them towards what the text does not state, and the responsibilities that befall both author and reader in this complex space at the margin of the written word. In doing so, they exposed another kind of cultural obscenity: what Lyndall Gordon calls the "confidence trick perpetrated by the middlemen of the book trade," who "persuaded common readers to surrender judgment" and "crave a diet of prestigious opinions, not true words" (262). Leaving the readers outside, making them a passive, subservient audience, and masking their power to react to texts and

participate in the process of signification, was a form of social hypocrisy—a marginalization which Eliot, Joyce and Woolf challenged from the very margins of the obscene.

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NOTES

1. See for instance Nicola Wilson's article on the self-censorship of circulating libraries, and the impact that their decisions had on the careers of authors like D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce (Wilson 52-70).
2. This analysis is particularly influenced by the reflections of Roland Barthes, in *Le Plaisir du texte*, on the erotic value of intermittence, and the seductiveness of the flesh "scintillating" between clothes (Barthes 17-18).

ABSTRACTS

Within the canon of postwar "high" modernism, the question of the obscene is often framed in terms of the artistic freedom to talk about sexuality and the body, and the status of indecency within literary works. However, this narrow focus only deals with the more visible facet of a broader tension, which pervades modernist aesthetics. Indeed, though such central works as *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses* are haunted by references to sexuality, scatology, perversity and violence, their relation to the obscene plays just as much on what is left hidden as on what is shown. Indeed, the word "ob-scene" may also refer to the boundary between the "scene" and its margins, between what is presented and what remains out of sight, and blurring such boundaries constitutes a fundamental modernist strategy. Artists such as Joyce and Eliot, but also the supposedly primmer Virginia Woolf, play with narrative or poetic framing, as well as the ambivalence of language, to signal towards what escapes the social and cultural boundaries of representation. Their works teem with veils and innuendos: cracks echoing behind closed doors (Woolf 1923, 124), cries disguised as the chirping of a bird (Eliot 1969, 58), or gasps and releases covered by the symbolic explosion of fireworks (Joyce 1922, 478), leaving traces from which another scene, another facet of the text, can be reconstituted. The obscene then becomes a form of appeal: through hints and enigmas, readers are called upon, led by curiosity or voyeuristic impulses to delve into sometimes fearful depths, where they can be confronted with mental suffering, alcoholism, rape and sexual aggression or the horrors of war, and made to reflect on their own blindness to these untold counter-narratives, hidden in plain sight. Without forcing these things upon us, the modernist aesthetics of the obscene break away from traditional framing, opening up the perspective towards what people want to hide, but also, crucially, to what we might have decided not to see.

Dans le canon de la littérature moderniste d'après-guerre, l'obscène est le plus souvent étudié à travers la question de la liberté artistique face à la censure, de l'intérêt d'exprimer ce qui choque ou scandalise au sein d'une œuvre littéraire. Quoique pertinente en contexte, cette perspective élude une tension bien plus globale, inhérente à l'esthétique moderniste. En effet, si des œuvres aussi centrales que *The Waste Land* ou *Ulysses* sont hantées par des images à caractère sexuel, scatologique, pervers ou violent, leur rapport à l'obscène se joue souvent autant dans ce qu'elles cachent que dans ce qu'elles expriment. De fait, outre sa valeur légale, telle qu'elle était définie notamment par l'Obscene Publications Act de 1857, le mot « ob-scène » renvoie également à la notion d'une limite entre ce que l'on peut montrer et ce qui doit rester hors de vue, limite que l'art moderniste ne cesse de remettre en question. Des auteurs comme Eliot, Joyce, mais également Virginia Woolf, jouent avec les cadres narratifs et poétiques, et avec l'ambiguïté du langage, pour faire signe vers ce qui élude les frontières sociales et culturelles du représentable. Leurs textes sont pleins de remarques voilées, de sous-entendus : des craquements derrière des portes closes (Woolf 1923, 124), des cris masqués par un chant d'oiseau (Eliot 1969, 58), des gémissements et des débordements recouverts par l'explosion symbolique d'un feu d'artifice (Joyce 1922, 478). En outre, tous ces événements laissent des traces, à partir desquelles il est possible de reconstituer d'autres scènes et d'avoir accès à d'autres facettes de l'œuvre. Ainsi, l'on peut dire que l'obscène prend la forme d'un appel. Le lecteur est interpellé, à travers des indices et des énigmes, mené par sa curiosité ou ses instincts voyeurs à explorer ce que cachent les silences du texte. Il doit alors se confronter à ce qu'il découvre de non-dit – sur la souffrance psychique, l'alcoolisme, le viol et les agressions sexuelles ou encore sur les horreurs de la guerre – mais aussi questionner son propre aveuglement, face à ces formes de contre-histoires du monde dans lequel il vit. Sans nous y forcer, l'esthétique moderniste de l'obscène nous propose

ainsi d'échapper aux cadres artistiques traditionnels, pour ouvrir notre regard à ce que l'on veut nous cacher, mais aussi, en dernière instance, à tout ce que nous-mêmes avons accepté de ne pas voir.

INDEX

Keywords: Modernism, Ideology and Discourse Analysis, Counter-History, Ethics

Mots-clés: Modernisme, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, idéologie et analyse de discours, contre-histoire, éthique, Hans Georg Gadamer

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