

## **Editorial Socialization of the Text and the Reader's Experience in the case of Bertram Brooker's "Nudes and Prudes"**

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*Siobhan O'Beirne's "Editorial Socialization of the Text and the Reader's Experience in the case of Bertram Brooker's 'Nudes and Prudes'" lays bare Canadian modernity's conflicting relationship to censorship and readerly expectations in Toronto. Brooker was Canada's first recipient of the Governor General's Award, and as O'Beirne notes, was "writing and painting before his time"; that is, he supported difficult – what some critics would call obscene – art in a city that had become known for strict morality laws and the moniker "Toronto the Good." Brooker's essay, defending nudity in art, was part of a larger discussion about censorship and obscenity in global modernism. In 1933 (two years after Brooker's essay appeared in Canada), a U. S. Federal Judge would rule that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was not an obscene work and could thus be imported to the country. O'Beirne deftly discusses the Canadian response to so-called obscene art using Jerome McGann's notion of the "social text." She exposes the various social responses to Brooker's piece through the years, from its original publication in 1931, to its modern versions online and in edited collections. O'Beirne shows that these texts – and the format in which they appear – tell us as much about our culture as we recover, rediscover, and redefine the shifting boundaries of propriety in art.*

– Dr. Matthew Huculak

In 1931, William Deacon and Wilfred Reeves edited a series of controversial essays in a collection entitled *Open House*. Included within the pages of that collection was the first publication of Bertram Brooker's "Nudes and Prudes," an essay reacting to the censorship happening in Toronto art galleries in the 1920s and 1930s. Societal norms in Canada during this time dictated the strictest of moral codes and prudish behaviour. Brooker exemplifies this in the opening section of his essay in a chance meeting with a Frenchman who is off put by the indecency of showing the naked female form to a class of students (Betts 179). Upon republication the reader of Brooker's essay encounters the text in a very different way. "Nudes and Prudes," as it is published on the web, becomes an essay about the advocacy of open sexuality and lewdity amongst younger generations as they are exposed to our current pop culture icons. The essay has since been published in a collection of Brooker's short stories and essays, *The Wrong World*, edited by Gregory Betts. It is this most recent publication of the essay that provides the readers with a greater insight into the socialization of the text itself and how it came to signify different things at different times: "Texts change under the pressure of immediate events" (McGann 74). Through consideration of the paratextual and the editorial alterations to each publication of "Nudes and Prudes," I will examine the social and relational context of the text on its reception and those implications in the greater framework of its readership.

In the early half of the twentieth century, Toronto was known as "Toronto the Good," named for its "blue laws, an eager Morality Department, and an active Social Punity movement" (Nicholas 314). In short, Toronto was seen as a city of high morals, upstanding citizens, and pure ideals. However, this idealistic view of the city obscured the diversity that existed at the time, a diversity that came to light in the 1920s when nude art incited debate in the artistic spheres. Jane Nicholas, in her article "Figure of a nude woman:

Art Popular Culture, and Modernity at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1927,” quotes Prime Minister MacKenzie King on his visit to the Canadian National Exhibition:

Russell had a figure of a nude woman which may be good painting but seemed to me an immoral exhibit & not the kind of thing we should seek to accustom our people to, there was an even worse allegorical painting of two figures which I think should be burned instead of exhibited. (314)

This drastic reaction to artistic expression presents the contemporary reader with a simple duality of ‘Toronto the Good’ in opposition to nude art. In reality there existed a vast array of artistic and moral reactions to the exhibition. The 1920s were a time when Canadian popular culture was becoming increasingly dominated by youth culture, “[f]rom the flapper and movies, to beauty contests and fashion, to marathon dancing and motoring” (337), all of which drew the attention of concerned citizens who saw this form of popular culture as dangerous. This allowed the artistic movement of the 1920s to disperse into greater areas. The nude artwork brought to light questions of gender, class, and age that all played an “important role in outlining the possibilities, pleasures, and anxieties” (337). In other words, the base issues that individuals had with pop culture were brought into the public sector by the mass publicity that surrounded these contentious paintings. Despite the calls for censorship from the public, the Morality Department of the Toronto Police deemed the artwork inoffensive. Nicholas quotes Inspector McKinney on this point: “it would be different if the pictures were shown elsewhere than in an art gallery” (343).

While these particular paintings remained on the wall, it was precisely these calls for censorship – and in many other cases, the active censorship – of nude art portraying the female body that sparked Brooker’s essay “Nudes and Prudes” in 1931. The essay outlines a series of censorship acts that took place in Canada during the early part of the century and leads to a much greater discussion of the implications of censorship in education. Just as was outlined in Nicholas’ article, Brooker reduces the morality of censorship to an issue of “protecting” the younger generation. He states, “the questions of nudity and lewdity become ‘questions’ only because of the young. Which means that prudery can be reduced to an attitude solely concerned with education” (Betts 183). For Brooker, the issue at hand is the presence of art in the educational system and its control by a school board that sees it as “trivial and unimportant” (184). His general attitude towards viewers of art is made clear in his introduction to *Yearbook of The Arts in Canada*. He highlights the importance of the audience’s expectations to the success of artwork, as well as their “demand for meaning or moral in a work of art” (xiv); the audience pulls from the painting a certain meaning that may not necessarily be present in the work itself. Furthermore, he writes, “Art has nothing to do with science or journalism – with facts or photos. Art is not – and should not be – *useful* to society, *in any sense whatever*” (xv). Art, for Brooker, “does not *aim to please!*” (xv); rather what is important about art is how and why it is created.

When first read in any of its editions, “Nudes and Prudes” is seemingly Brooker’s own criticism of censorship, any reader – with the mind to read more than the essay itself – may find that each edition of the text is surrounded by editorial intent. It is possible to glean Brooker’s own authorial intentions through a look at some of the other work he published during his lifetime, such as his introduction to *Yearbook of The Arts in Canada*. Just as the audience scrutinizes and imposes meaning upon art, so too do editors. Jerome McGann

writes, "Every new edition, including every critical edition, is an act of reimagining and redefining a text's audience(s) and its way of interacting with those audience(s)" (66). It is the editor's responsibility to present the work of the author rather than the author itself, which provides him or her with a great amount of manipulative power over the text's audience. In the case of Brooker's essay, each editor claims to have limited their interaction with the text, simply wishing to present it to the reader as a work solely of the author. However, as each edition comments on its predecessor, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the editors' presence and their effect on the reader's encounter with the text.

"Nudes and Prudes" was first published in *Open House*, a book edited by William Arthur Deacon and Wilfred Reeves in 1931, which contains a series of against-the-grain and thought-provoking essays. In the introduction, Deacon and Reeves provide their readers with the Canadian context in which the controversial book was published:

Canada is particularly without independent periodicals that encourage free circulation of ideas; that encourage the publication of radical or unusual opinions without undue censorship; that encourage the produce of the explorative mind without an eye on subscription lists and advertising columns. (9)

Their goal was to publish an invitation, an "open house," to the public allowing them to speak their minds and confront the conservative views and ideals that dominated public Canadian culture. At the time, there was no other medium do to so: "Here [in Canada], the man with an opinion to deliver, which does not fit into the confines of editorial approval or official sanction, will cast about in vain for a method to make it public" (9). Deacon and Reeves attempted to provide a public forum, in which people could express opinions without fear of censorship. The book itself provides very little evidence of editing – apart for the introduction, which allows for a relationship to exist between the various essays, there is no note on textual emendations or editorial technique. The editors do mention that "[e]ach chapter is the entire product of its accredited author .... The editors consider it no function of theirs to advance the ideas or suggestions of the contributors" (16-17). Deacon and Reeves did not wish to change the overall meaning of the essays. Their goal was clear: to provide an uncensored, essentially unedited collection of essays that distinctly went against popular ideals and thought.

"Nudes and Prudes" was next published online in *The Art History Archive* as part of the Canadian Art collection. Again the editor claims very little intervention with the text. In the "Editor's Note," Charles Moffat states, "Some grammatical spelling changes have been made to the following document, which was written in 1931," due to the difference in grammatical practices and educational standards (Moffat). The new online format provides this publication with tools and surrounding features that cannot exist in the print form. Moffat has chosen to place the article in a more contemporary context, comparing the nude artwork from the 1920s to early episodes of *The Simpsons* and the music of Ani DiFranco. The same controversy incited by the original artwork does not surround these newer forms of art and following the "Editor's Note," Moffat includes a satirical article by David Helwig

entitled “Scandalous!” Helwig provides a lighter introduction to Brooker’s essay and places the online edition within the contemporary, desensitized tradition in which censorship plays a much smaller role. The reader encounters the text not as a controversial or revolutionary stance on censorship and education, but as a reintroduction to the ridiculous – and apparently dated – nature of censorship.

The most recent edition of “Nudes and Prudes” was published in the 2009 collection *The Wrong World: Selected Stories & Essays of Bertram Brooker*. Editor Gregory Betts comments on the selection of predominately previously unpublished work: “Taken together, Brooker’s prose presents one of the richest bodies of writing on the experience, the anxieties, and the hopes of Canadian modernization” (xi). This edition provides a historical reference to a series of Brooker’s work published posthumously (xii). It is clear that *The Wrong World* is locating itself in the larger tradition of Brooker’s work and means to reflect his accomplishments as they are now recognized. Betts defends his decision to include Brooker’s lesser-known work by pointing out that despite the “groundbreaking activity” of recovering unpublished texts, “there remain many areas generally left untouched” (xii-xiii).

It is widely accepted that Brooker’s work was avant-garde. In 1927, he was the first to exhibit abstract art in Canada and in 1936 he was the winner of the first Governor General’s Award (Betts xii). Betts describes Brooker as, among other things, “distinctly revolutionary” (xxvi), “experimental,” “cutting-edge” (xxvii), and “multidisciplinary” (xxix). He contextualizes Brooker’s work through the chronology of his life: his emigration from England to Canada with an impoverished family; his early work on the railway tracks; his life in pre-World War One Canada; the Great Depression; and his work into the mid-twentieth century as a white-collar journalist/artist. Brooker’s life spanned one of the most interesting eras in Canadian history. It was a time when Canada was not only economically, but also culturally and socially, in constant motion. The reader experiences Brooker’s work in this edition as a compilation of his life experiences as outlined in Betts’ introduction. By placing “Nudes and Prudes” within this collection, Betts attempts to better frame Brooker’s political and social contexts.

Considering the vastly different publications of Brooker’s essay, we, as the readers of “Nudes and Prudes,” begin to recognize the interaction between editor, author, and audience. McGann states, “Authors’ relations with their readers and editors ... are highly interactive. The character of these interactions varies from situation to situation” (61). In every edition or publication of a text, the relationship between the reader, the editor, and the author varies according to shifting social contexts. By social context, I do not mean the external social condition in which the reader is living, but rather the social condition created by the author and the editor that construct the reader’s experience of the text in a certain way. Consider for a moment the context that the reader is placed in when reading each edition of “Nudes and Prudes.” When first published, the text offered a very controversial and anti-establishment opinion, especially as it appeared in a publication whose purpose was to promote freedom of speech and anti-censorship in Canada. When considered in the more contemporary context of Moffat’s web publication, the reader juxtaposes the essay with the satirical tone of the adjacent article, which ridicules the prudishness of early twentieth century Canada.

The different encounters with the same text can be drawn back to Gerard Genette's concept of paratext, which she defines as a "threshold" or a "vestibule" that exists between the inside and outside of the text (2). The paratext is everything that is not the text. In the case of Brooker's "Nudes and Prudes," it is the introduction, editorial notes, and title of the edition in which the essay appears – in short, it is everything that the reader encounters that is not the text of the essay itself. In Genette's terms, what Deacon and Reeves and Moffat are doing is creating a lens through which each reader must interpret the text. The reader's interpretation is socialized through the editor; each editor has created an interface for the reader to engage with the author.

What we come across in the newest publication is much more of what McGann calls critical editing. It goes beyond its own paratext to consider the previous publications of the essay: "The critical editor's task is to expose and clarify those interaction" (McGann 61). Betts looks for the socialization of the previous publications and integrates them into his own edition. Specifically, what Betts does differently is to provide textual emendations that compare all previous publications to the one currently being read. One of the more radical differences in the text is the inclusion of the "art galleries of the new College Street store of the T. Eaton Company Limited, Toronto," which previously read "art galleries of a Toronto department store" (Betts 277). That is to say, the first publication of the essay excluded particular details of censorship that Brooker sought to expose. It then becomes "the editor's task ... to cut through those diversions and corruptions in order to reveal, as purely as possible, the original artist's creative intentions" (McGann 73). Because Betts exposes the discrepancies in the previously published versions, his edition could potentially be considered the most authoritative to date.

Bertram Brooker's essay "Nudes and Prudes" has undergone a series of changes in editorial and publishing practices in the last eighty years. These changes have demonstrated the shifting pressures of socialization on a text. From its first publication in 1931, the essay has been relocated from the traditions of radical freedom of expression in *Open House* to a bibliographic account of Brooker's life and work in *The Wrong World*. Each edition of the text has been subjected to the relationships that exist independently of the author: the relationship between the editors and the readers. As McGann expresses, "Texts change under the pressure of immediate events" (74); it is impossible for a text to escape the conditions and events that surround its publication. The relationship between author and editor, author and reader, and editor and reader, are all shaped by the individual backgrounds of each party. Betts, in the most recent publication of Brooker's essay, provides the reader with a greater understanding of the socialization of the previous publications. Through his comprehensive and explicit editorial technique, Betts outlines the changes that have occurred to the text, not only in its physical presentation, but, more importantly, in its contextual presentation.

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