

the film seized by customs was burned by impatient federal officials.

The *Ulysses* decision did not open the doors of American publishers to already contraband meritorious literary works, such as D. H. Lawrence's unexpurgated *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*, and it would not forestall the banning as obscene of new meritorious literary works, including Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre*, Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, and Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Helene*. In part this was because a federal rule, even one such as Woolsey's that was upheld on appeal, could not control the behavior of state legislatures in defining the obscene, nor the decisions of state courts in identifying the obscene. ■

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Stephen Spender remembers:

"Members of an older generation, like myself, remember the time when James Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned. When I was an Oxford undergraduate, if one went to Paris during the vacation and bought at Sylvia Beach's famous bookshop Shakespeare and Company a copy of *Ulysses* and attempted to smuggle it through the customs at Dover, one might well have one's purchase confiscated and have to pay a fine for being in possession of a notorious work of pornography." ■

Jack the Censor

A book review
banned in Boston
stirs up
a furor about political
correctness

IS JACK THE RIPPER A FIT SUBJECT FOR A NOVEL? PAUL West thought so when he wrote *The Women of Whitechapel and Jack the Ripper*. Jack Beatty, a senior editor at *The Atlantic* thought so when he commissioned Bill Marx to review it.

But Beatty had second thoughts. He turned down the completed review because a rash of novels dealing with the gruesome (citing works by Bret Easton Ellis and Paul Theroux) and the publicity they had generated had changed his mind. He acknowledged that West might have a different approach to the subject, but raised a wider issue: "Writers have to concern themselves with the moral consequences of their art, it seems to me, and magazines must be socially responsible — they cannot, we cannot, publish something that asks us to admire the literary merit of a book about chopping women up."

The suppressed review by Bill Marx praised West's "panoramic spectacle, chimerical ingenuity and cornucopian wordplay" and the "bizarre and beautiful images." He explained: "It's this imaginative omnipresence that makes *The Women of Whitechapel* vastly superior to other recent novels about slashes at the heart of darkness — Bret Easton

Ellis' snuff-happy *American Psycho* and Paul Theroux's artful bug one-dimensional *Chicago Loop*. Instead of being barbaric projections of a psychotic narrator, West's endearing streetwalkers, particularly the spunky Marie Kelly, are densely imagined characters made perceptible through their fantasies — of sex, love and freedom — rather than through the dialogue (there's not much) or their half-hearted attempts to cheat death."

Beatty did publish a review after all, raising questions about the consistency of his approach. It was a one-paragraph pan which appeared in the May issue of *The Atlantic*: "Not even royalty and a mad scientist can enliven his [West's] word-bogged tale."

West's novel was widely praised — but it also got caught in judgments about political correctness. David Slavitt in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* said "even...radical feminists are likely to be put off by such silly posturings as those with which Mr. West regales us," only to be answered by Andrea Dworkin in *Mis* magazine: "Paul West is an elegant, intelligent novelist who should be read by feminists. He has just published *The Women of Whitechapel* and *Jack the Ripper*, a novel about how men use women and how power destroys those who get in its way. The women are individuals: the sadism of men is not lied about; the complicity of the decent man in acts of atrocity against women is the underlying moral theme."

Perhaps the most eloquent attack on censorship came from John Vernon, author of the novel *Peter Doyle*, who wrote to *The Atlantic*:

"I read Mr. West's novel this summer. Mr. Beatty's glib and simple-minded dismissal of it does violence both to its complexity and its profound empathy for the women of its title. The book is not only relentlessly ethical, but feminist in its sympathies, and so far from the 'prurient,' 'sensational' and 'morally deplorable' work described by Mr. Beatty that I cannot believe he even read it."

"At no time in the past twenty years has the atmosphere of censorship been as threatening in this country as it is now. I am a recent recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and to my dismay have seen that respected agency under fire by people tossing around epithets like 'prurient,' 'sensational,' and 'morally deplorable' just as loosely as Mr. Beatty has. Of course, *The Atlantic* didn't censor the novel — only a review of it. But the practical effects are the same. It would be interesting to note whether *The Atlantic* published reviews of *Ulysses*, *Native Son* or *Lolita* when they first appeared. The silencing of commentary on books due to their subject matters knows no bounds. I can imagine any number of deplorable things in the final phrase of Mr. Beatty's

quoted sentence 'We cannot publish something that asks us to admire the literary merit of a book about...?' Child molestation? The homosexual rape of a u.s. president? The decapitation of a white woman by a black man? Then we may write off *Lolita*, *The Public Burning*, and *Native Son*. Indeed, any disturbing topic which reflects 'this terrible anarchy we are living in' — Mr. Beatty's phrase — is now off limits, according to his logic. Writers need no longer deal with news of the world; they would do best to confine themselves to stories about little boys and girls and their doggies and kitties in flower gardens.

"The moral responsibility of writers is to truth and language, a responsibility which Paul West carries out beautifully in his novel. Once any topic is forbidden to writers, the list of forbidden topics grows and grows, as does the list of forbidden words, attitudes, and political affiliations and opinions. Under the mask of progressive political opinion, the editors of *The Atlantic* have promoted a frighteningly regressive policy, one that resurrects all the old jokes about being banned in Boston (my home town). You ought to be ashamed." ■



Paul West: Would a favorable review of his novel about Jack the Ripper have sent out the message that mutilating women is acceptable behavior?