

Can Censorship Edit Our Past?



Can the present influence the past?

Let's take a jaunt through literary theory for a moment to answer this question, and eventually wiggle our way back to censorship. James Wood, the English literary critic, sketches a fun little dynamic between two great critics: T. S. Eliot and Harold Bloom, regarding the relationship between the individual and the tradition. Check it out.

Eliot, in one of his most celebrated pieces, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," argues that when a new work of art (or words of Torah?) is created, the tradition that precedes it is forced to shift the slightest bit: "something ... happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." The new shapes the old which then shapes the new, each eternally remaking the other, as the past is "altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."

This is to say that when a new insight or paradigm enters the world, it is not just the product of its own past and tradition, but it also forces us to reconsider the past—the tradition from which this novelty emerged—anew. Put more simply, one can say that at each moment our understanding of the present invites us, challenges us, demands us to think of the past differently—the present changing the past. Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, a contemporary Talmudist and thinker at Yeshiva University, jokes (in my rough paraphrase) that: *The Written Torah, or Torah Sh'Bichtav, is really a commentary on the Oral Torah, the Torah Sh'Baal Peh*. Rabbi Rosensweig's point is more germane to the intricate relationship between the textual nuances of the Written Torah and the later debates of the Talmud, which he sees as often attempting to work through the very same textual challenges that we often gloss over. However, his formulation helps: just as the present is a commentary on the past, so too the past is a commentary on the present, as each rework and rethink each other.

For Eliot, we are engaged in a reconstruction of our past every time we birth something new.

Enter Harold Bloom. Bloom, a very literary sort of literary person, writes about the “anxiety of influence.” (*For those anxious about how this connects to censorship, we are getting ever so closer now.*) The anxiety of influence refers to our steering away and around the influences with which we disagree. This influence is apparent in our rejections, avoidances, and willful forgettings, in our anxiety to not be influenced. By ‘strongly misreading’ our predecessors—in our attempted escapes from the river of history and influence—we trace a path that is equally as influenced as those that embrace the influence.

If for Eliot, the past can't escape the influence of the present, for Bloom it is the present that can't escape the influence of the past—no matter how hard he might try. And yet the past and present run away from/towards each other, escape-chasing each other until they clash together in a sweet explosion of time.

This brings us to censorship. Both Eliot and Bloom are right, when applied to censorship. For Eliot, we are engaged in a reconstruction of our past every time we birth something new. It isn't only censorship that creates the narrative of our history, but it is every creative endeavor that we engage in. But Bloom cuts deeper—it is through the anxiety of influence, through the ways we lean away from uncomfortable words, narratives, ideas, institutions, and individuals, that we shape our own narratives. Importantly, the shadows and edges of the undesired narrative is often remnant, marking the edges and urges under the surface of our stated narratives.

To think more about what this set of ideas might tell us about censorship, we will leave the rest to you. We've included some readings that might just guide your way. Each article focuses on an underappreciated moment of contemporary censorship: Naomi Seidman's "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage" and Avinoam Rosenak's "Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries: The Life and Thought of Rabbi A. I. Kook." Each tells a story about censorship, and self-censorship, that the paradigms of Eliot and Bloom are useful in utilizing.

We hope you enjoy and don't fall asleep too deep into reading. And always—let us know what you think!
