

Courting The Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition,
John Durham Peters, (2005)

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Reviewed by Sue Curry Jansen - Muhlenberg College

Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed, 'One must be an inventor to read well'. John Durham Peters is a superb reader or, more precisely, re-reader. In *Courting the Abyss*, he brings that skill to bear upon the foundational texts of the liberal free speech tradition in the service of a radical rethinking of liberalism's basic tenet and conundrum: its intolerance of intolerance. That is, Peters seeks alternative groundings for freedom of expression that will allow liberty's defenders to escape the kind of hold-your-nose moral free-falls associated with the sort of free speech absolutism. For example, the American Civil Liberty Union's habitual embrace of what Peters calls 'abyss artists', Nazis in Skokie and elephant dung artists in Brooklyn.

Many contemporary students of censorship (including this writer) tend to view the headline-grabbing transgressions represented by such cases as exploitive sideshows, which deflect attention away from larger, systemic forms of censorship that are built securely into the institutions of modern society – into what Max Weber described as 'the iron cages' of instrumental reason. Unlike the anguished Weber, who could not find a way to rescue moral theory from the Nietzschean abyss, Peters plunges back into the deep prehistory of the Germanic gloom, which plagued Weber and still infects his intellectual heirs, to recover a figure that he describes as 'the surprising hero' of his book, a first century Jew, Paul of Tarsus, 'a libertarian who is also civil' (p. 13). As a result, Peters gets behind the sideshows without being distracted by them.

Peters' Paul is not, however, the same Paul of Tarsus sanctified by Augustine or Luther. For it is here that Peters, the inventive reader, is at his best, removing many of the layers of meaning that the centuries have imposed upon Paul and engaging in 'an exercise in anamnesis – unforgetting – that attempts to sound, banish, and rebuild the liberal tradition' (p. 27). At the time, however, and without apparent contradiction, Peters also reads Paul as 'a figure (typos) of things to come' by 'the principle of retroactive enrichment: the accumulation of intellectual residues makes texts richer in maturity than they were in youth' (p. 35).

But this is no evangelical tent meeting. Peters reads St. Paul as a theorist of communication and of public space, as a resource who can provide a moral warrant for free expression that does not require friends of liberty to forfeit their freedom to object to the contents of what is expressed. Paul's conception of communication privileges the receiver who remains free to reject the message, indeed to blanch and shudder with disapproval when confronted with repugnant messages. That is, the receiver can interrogate the moral contents and purposes of expressions; s/he can function, in Peters' terms as an 'abyss-redeemer', who looks into the face of evil and turns away. In contrast, Peters maintains, the ACLU drama, involves 'the co-dependence of abyss-artists and abyss-redeemers' (p. 86) and assumes

naively that the marketplace of ideas will provide a satisfactory resolution. In short, Peters rejects prior censorship, but seeks a rational, morally informed, platform that allows receivers, not just senders, full access to free expression. Receivers can then critique and reject noxious ideas without risk of being stigmatized as enemies of free speech.

To develop his receiver-based approach to free expression, Peters does not only rely on Paul. He also practices major feats of anamnesis on Milton, Smith, Mill, Dewey, and American free speech theory, and undertakes more limited re-readings of many other thinkers. Peters intends this book as a sequel to his *Speaking into the Air* (1999), affirming 'a deep kinship between the two books' (p. 28). Where the first book puzzled, dazzled, and provoked (in the good sense) but ultimately frustrated this reader because its emphasis on embodied, person-to person, communication (eros) seemed to signal a retreat from the analysis of the public sphere that has long distinguished Peters' work, *Confronting the Abyss* marks a return to questions of mass communication and the public sphere (democracy). It also explains the earlier retreat by affirming the unity of the Greek notions of eros and democracy. In an ideal scholarly world, the two books would have been published together as the second volume does much to explain the first, for example, Peters' affirmation of the idea of broadcasting and his rejection of dialogue as a utopian communicative ideal. In effect, *Confronting the Abyss* completes the argument, and launches a new one, which also remains incomplete – perhaps paving the way for a trilogy?

Peters acknowledges that he raises more questions than he can answer in the current book, but he explores these questions with remarkable interpretive skill, synthetic imagination, conceptual and verbal gymnastics, and wit that ranges from wry to slapstick. Who else could (or would dare) quote the Sermon on the Mount, Ben Franklin, and Kurt Cobain in the same paragraph and to the same point? Every few pages Peters delivers little bolts from the blue that take the reader on fascinating side trips, which cannot quite be called digressions. These bolts display Peters' intellectual virtuosity in unpretentious, always illuminating and often entertaining ways. For example, we learn about speaking in tongues, Sherlock Holmes, death bed confessions, the Jewish messianic tradition, homeopathic machismo, genocide, the Berliner Medizin-Historisches Museum of pathology, courage, critical legal studies, feminism, redemption of cynicism as intellectual virtue, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi, Vaclav Havel, and much more. In short, there are rewards for every serious reader here, generalist, free speech specialist, citizen – even those among us who will never wear Paul of Tarsus teeshirts.

Peters' mission is not only or even primarily theoretical. It is practical and urgently political: a response to the erosion of the foundations of liberalism in America as evidenced by the Patriot Act, the re-election of George W. Bush (see Peters' 'Afterword'), and the breakdown in mainstream consensus about the value of open-ended debate or its hijacking by neo-liberalism's embrace of market fundamentalism. Peters stated goal is to defend liberalism in a new way, substituting a tragic philosophy of history for Yankee optimism and meliorism, a social basis of solidarity, and a communicative norm of receptivity instead of championing inter-

activity or a utopian ideal of dialogue. Although he does not succeed in wrapping his defense in a neatly transportable package, Peters does present a compelling rethinking and reframing of the nexus of free speech and liberalism. He not only reinvigorates the debate, he also raises the bar for other inventive readers by providing them with a powerful new lens for their own retroactive enrichment.

Contributor details

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Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics, **Simone Murray, (2004)**

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Reviewed by Cynthia Carter - Cardiff University

Abstract

Simone Murray's book looks at the contribution of the second wave feminist presses to the advancement of feminist ideas in the United Kingdom from the early 1970s to the first years of the twenty-first century. These presses, she claims, have profoundly reshaped the publishing industries and the wider literary culture and education. To appreciate the complex interrelations between feminist politics, feminist presses, mainstream publishers, academic feminist publishing, and feminist bestsellers, Murray argues for the development of a publishing centred analysis. This approach enables movement beyond a focus on individual texts so as to contextualize them within the dynamics of the broader publishing industry. Such presses have experienced great difficulties (most are now defunct). Moreover, many mainstream publishers now have extensive gender lists. Nevertheless, Murray argues that feminist presses continue to be a crucial safeguard, against the vagaries of a publishing industry whose interest in feminist texts lies in their ability to generate profit rather than in any real commitment to a feminist political agenda.

Keywords

feminist presses
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publishing centred
analysis

Why is it, asks Simone Murray, that so little has been said about the history of the second wave women's movement involvement in the establishment of feminist presses? After all, such presses emerged out of the feminist commitment to ensure that women's voices would find spaces for public expression, thereby making certain that the mainstream, patriarchal cul-