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## French Literature after Censorship

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

French Literature after Censorship Elisabeth Ladenson IN 1861, SOME FOUR YEARS after the trial of Les Fleurs du mal, the critic Armand de Pontmartin wrote the following in La Revue des deux mondes: "Que serait une société, que serait une littérature qui accepteraient M. Charles Baudelaire pour leur poëte?"<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that this was meant rhetorically, that is, not as a question to be answered but rather as a statement the force of which derives from its being framed in the form of a putatively unanswerable question. If we were to translate Pontmartin's rhetorical question into a declarative statement, it might read as follows: "Une société, une littérature qui accepteraient M. Charles Baudelaire pour leur poëte seraient unimaginables: unimaginablement corrompues, elles ne seraient plus une société, ni une littérature reconnaissables." Pontmartin, well known for his royalist views and a general conservatism that extended loquaciously into both political and aesthetic realms, a member of the Assemblée nationale for some years as well as a respected critic for La Revue des deux mondes and other periodicals, was a man of his time, representing one of the major ideological currents of the mid-nineteenth century. I bring up the

views of this now-forgotten critic because it is important to bear in mind his time—specifically the moment when both *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du mal* were put on trial, thus inaugurating both modern literature and attempts to stamp it out—when considering our own. In order to consider the implications of Pontmartin's question for our time, it is pertinent to note that it survives exclusively in the guise of an entry in a dictionary of stupidity and errors of judgment. First published in 1965 and again in 1991 in a revised and expanded edition, *Le Dictionnaire de la bêtise et des erreurs de jugement*, a fascinating, entertaining, and useful volume in the tradition of Flaubert's *Sottisier*, lives up to the first part of its title by including hundreds of solemnly idiotic pronouncements, such as "Un cheval est noir lorsqu'il a tous les poils et tous les crins noirs" (from the 1937 *Manuel de grade d'artillerie lourde*), or Jules Renard's assessment of Nietzsche, "Ce que j'en pense? C'est qu'il y a bien des lettres inutiles dans son nom."<sup>2</sup> Presumably we can all agree—even Armand de Pontmartin might well have agreed—that the definition of a black horse as one having a black coat, and that Friedrich Nietzsche's most notable characteristic was the recondite spelling of his name, are stupid pronouncements in any era or cultural climate, transcendental idiocies, as it were. It is the "erreurs de jugement" part of the dictionary that poses a problem, and by the same token lends it an interest beyond that of mean-spirited diversion. The volume is filled with perfectly cogent and intelligent statements that have in common the characteristic of violating the received ideas of late twentieth-century Western culture. (As a result, while it resembles Flaubert's *Sottisier*, this book reads at the same time like a negative version of the latter's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.) Under the rubric *censure*, for instance, we predictably find a number of arguments in favor of that practice evidently included only because they violate late twentieth-century received opinion, according to which censorship is by definition a bad thing. In this way the *Dictionnaire de la bêtise et des erreurs de jugement* represents a detailed negative template of our current *idées reçues*. It is like a collection of fashion photographs or drawings from decades or centuries past: very amusing to look at, but inevitably inviting the question of what our own sartorial excesses will look like in a few years. One of several errors of judgment under the rubric of *censure* in the dictionary furnishes an especially pertinent example of this phenomenon. René Fauchois, writing in *Les Marges* in response to a survey on literary freedom in 1923, had this to say: Je suis personnellement partisan d'une censure. Entre plusieurs, une raison me...

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Elisabeth Ladenson

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Pontmartin, well known for his royalist views and a general conservatism that extended eloquently into both political and aesthetic realms, a member of the *Assemblée nationale* for some years as well as a respected critic for *La Revue des deux mondes* and other periodicals, was a man of his time. Representing one of the major ideological currents of the mid nineteenth century. I bring up the views of this now-forgotten critic because it is important to bear in mind his time—specifically the moment when both *Madame Bovary* and *Les Fleurs du mal* were put on trial, thus inaugurating both modern literature and attempts to stamp it out—when considering our own. In order to consider the implications of Pontmartin's question for our time, it is pertinent to note that it survives exclusively in the guise of an entry in a dictionary of stupidity and errors of judgment.

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