

the wild colonial boy 7

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THE FREEDOM TO READ

"Freedom, freedom, prison of the free."

So writes Lawrence Durrell (after due allowance for the vagaries of memory), and often it seems true that there is no place more prison-like than that stronghold of freedom, democracy, in which there supposedly exists a government 'of the people, for the people, by the people'. Too many are willing to allow that freedom should exist, but that freedom must be limited (to be appreciated) or that freedom leads upon licence. Freedom is generally considered under one of two headings; that illustrated above ("freedom to"), and its 'opposite' (freedom from.....). While the idea of freedom may in itself be considered liberal, there lies within it these two separate ideas - that freedom itself implies a freedom to read, think, speak, do, or that freedom in itself implies freedom from hunger, persecution et cetera.

Clearly both of these are part of a greater whole, a whole greater than the sum of its parts. For "freedom", that beloved thing, cannot be defined, and in our attempt to describe its meaning we are forced to resort to lesser meanings, to examples, even to distortions such as "freedom from persecution". Freedom, if it is to be defined in any way, must be handled 'pataphysically' - FREEDOM OF. Thus a person may speak of his freedom of person, freedom of spirit, but in essence there can exist only a freedom of. Employing Plato thus to define a thing in which Plato did not believe may be an historical joke.

But it is when we come to describe physical happenings it comes most easily to think in terms of "freedom to" or "freedom from", for this is how, in a capitalistic society, we are led to believe the world works - by give and take.

So when I wish to discuss the freedom of mind, or a particular aspect of it, I must resort to this old way, this way of untruth, in order to get at a truth which can stand on its own.

The law of any country is, with a singular exception, concerned with men's bodies, and this exception is included because some fear that it may have a physical effect - that is, society believes that a man may think any thing, but may not communicate it to another being for fear of breaking another law. Surely it is unnecessary, even in a society which

is only moderately advanced, to have laws which prevent persons from communicating certain concepts, which certain others believe occasionally might lead to an infringement of some other law. Specifically, if the reading of a certain book leads to a criminal act, then the person who has committed this crime can be held by the society. But the book has done no crime, committed no murder, no rape - but a book has no rights. Many have preached violence without prosecution - but a book cannot answer back.

No man has ever shown that the reading of a book has led directly to the commission of a crime - at best, it may be possible to show that a person having a certain type of mind may tend to search for a specific type of book. At best, all that could be produced would be a correlation, and a damnably small one at that.

Why then does the censorship of literature continue to exist, continue to plague the interflow of artistic concept just as the flow of scientific knowledge is hampered by secrecy and the unavoidable delay of translation? Beyond any doubt the concern of parent for young is the cause, but the motive is an unworthy one, a scapegoat, for no moral guidance is given, nothing positive is ever done, and the best which can be produced is a prohibition. There is never any attempt to demonstrate the virtues, only a repulsion from the supposedly unclean. And it is an authoritarian prohibition, because, as I have shown, there is no basis for it. And, as I have suggested above, the problems in a capitalistic society are unique. Consider these few facts. Alcohol, when consumed to excess, most often produces aggressive behaviour, and is physically addicting. Such drugs as marijuana and LSD produce passive behaviours and are non-addicting. Weapons are freely available to any citizen, on the weakest of pretexts, and there are few weapons which are used passively. Our society has two motives in smiling upon such behaviour. First, this is the way in which a capitalist society must operate - competitively, and aggression is essential in competition. Second, power corrupts. If there is no market for alcohol then a great deal of money will be lost. (I know this is not a particularly strong argument, but it applies to other fields of which the reader will be aware, and which I would rather not mention here). And in the case of the weapon-maker we have a valuable outlet for man's destructive outlets, or rather, the destructive outlets present in most men, for I believe that there are exceptional persons who have no such longings. But I am not concerned with the excuses of society for allowing certain kinds of behaviour, and not others, but rather with the effect that a particular kind of prohibition has on the society, and, more particularly, on the members of that society.

The persons who read books, and they are becoming less and less in number (while on the other hand the number of those writing books is going up and up, with a most disastrous effect on the literary standards of our time), are the passive ones. Reading is often a substitute for living, indulged in by persons who for various reasons may prefer an unreal world to a real one. This may be due to a weakness in the person concerned, or it may not. But this is not important.

What is important is that our world, or a part of it, believes that products of the human mind may be obscene in design. This is true, perhaps, in some very few cases, but just as beauty exists in the eye of the beholder, so does this "obscenity" - call not that which the Lord hath made unclean.

The whole concept of censorship is based on the contention that sex is, in any form, is degrading and depraved. This contention is disguised, or dressed up, but it can always be eventually discerned. Even if a book did have the effect that the censors claim, the reader could be prosecuted under other laws, the writer as a collaborator, provided that a cause-and-effect relationship, and not just a correlation, is proved.

All this did not just ooze slowly to the top of my mind and out of pen onto paper - it has been brought to boiling point by recent events in Australia. And having indicated some points in the general case, I proceed to the particular.

In Australia, which has often been likened to Eire when censorship is discussed, legislation was recently introduced to allow universities and "approved persons" to import banned books for the purpose of study. This is a step in the right direction, and could lead eventually to a far more liberal attitude on the part of the Department of Customs and Excise. However, the first book required (or at least the first one about which there has been any publicity) was LOLITA, which was (or is) to be used at the Australian National University in a Second-Year English course (study of U. S. Literature). One way and another it seems that permission was not granted, or that the gentleman in charge, R.F. Brissenden, took the wrong steps, and much discussion followed in the newspapers of Sydney and Melbourne (and possibly in other capital cities of this country).

Generally, these papers came out against this particular case of censorship, but the readers were not 100% against it. There were, however, a far larger number of people concerned about the state of literary freedom in this country than I would have expected.

But this discussion was never allowed to come to a head. The Victorian Police warned booksellers that they would risk prosecution if they continued to sell Mary McCarthy's THE GROUP. The brave booksellers of Victoria immediately backed down. And so argument has raged on this subject also. But no "progress" is made. There is much talk, and Australia remains one of the few countries remaining where one is not permitted to read LOLITA.

I know this to be true, for I have in front of me now Notices of Seizure for the following books -

JUSTINE by D.A.F de Sade.

TROPIC OF CAPRICORN by Henry Miller.

ONE HUNDRED DOLLAR MISUNDERSTANDING by Robert Gover.

CAIN'S BOOK by Alexander Trocchi.

LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER by D.H. Lawrence.

LOLITA by Vladimir Nabokov.

CLASSICAL HINDU EROTOLOGY (THE KAMA SUTRA)

by Swami Ram Krishnanada.

All these books are banned in this country, it seems.

Early in February I recieved an irate phone call from a gentleman in the Customs Dept. He was most upset, and informed me that he would send Investigators to see me. Six weeks later, they arrived. How many thousands of persons I must have corrupted in that time!! I intended to obtain a tape-recording of the conversation with these investigators, but was unable to do so. Little of interest was said. Suggestions of intimidation are not interesting. They left me with the pleasant information that this "crime" has a £A500 fine attached. Jim Dandy. So two weeks later I recieved a letter saying that there would be no prosecution.

Could I defend myself, if prosecuted, on the grounds that these books are not obscene? No, for the charge relates to the inportation of "prohibited" books, not obscene ones.

ULYSSES was once banned in this country - it no longer is. The book has not changed, only the social climate. By extension of this, no book is obscene, only ahead of its time, and what is evil about this?

And if obscene books tend to deprave and corrupt, why are these depraved and corrupt persons permitted to censor the reading-matter of the citizens, who are not - by this definition? For 'tendency' is a weaselling word; cannot the depraved person disguise his depravity?

QUIS CUSTODES CUSTODIET?

..... John Maxwell Foyster
Easter Day - All Fools' Day 1964

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