

Homerton: On Self- Censorship

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Historically, self-censorship has provided a form of self-protection... against legal penalties...or worse. During the English Reformation, Catholics faced death if they refused to swear to the 39 articles of the Protestant faith. When I was a child in a Catholic convent, we were told about our forebears who had crossed their fingers behind their backs when swearing: the secret gesture undid the lie they were telling. They were called *equivocators* and Shakespeare alludes to them very disparagingly in *Hamlet* and in *Macbeth*. It was a question of survival, we were told, during a time of persecution and God would understand and forgive the lie.

These were cases of conscious and deliberate lying to protect yourself, but self-censorship can be more subtle, a deep, often unconscious leaning into the wind so that you won't get into trouble. Not only with the formal powers of the state but today with the informal authority of social media. And they have the opposite effect of silencing: self-censorship can take the form of joining in the hue and cry when you don't really endorse it, jumping into a twitter pile on when you know nothing about it or don't care... your response may not look like self-censorship as such, but you are suppressing your own views to be part of a crowd, because the mass offers shelter from ... exclusion, ostracism.

(...)

Freedom of expression also means freedom to praise and celebrate, advocate and support... as well as to criticise. Denunciation now dominates... fear of censure hobbles.

For someone who sees herself as on the left, the toughest task in these times of rising barriers is to feel my way into a position that defends freedom of expression but does not align me with the right-wing warriors of free speech. The continuing consequences of Salman Rushdie's writing – on himself above all but also on others – brings this dilemma into sharp focus.

Let us be clear, the latter do not defend everyone's right to speak, and it makes me angry and sad when writers do not support one another, especially in such grievous circumstances as Rushdie's.

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The larger question is what is literature for? And does self-censorship matter? The role of the writer has changed profoundly over time: but shadows of the past are long, and some aspects linger: the fool, the scribe and the bard are the three traditional parts writers played. The fool/clown/jester belonged to the courts of power, where they enjoyed impunity – they could say anything they liked and so they spoke truth to power under the guise of joking, fooling around. The bitter outsider, Jaques in *As You Like It* says,

Invest me in my motley; give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.

The fool in King Lear keeps warning the old man that his behaviour will lead to catastrophe. Stand-up comedians are among their most prominent descendants- in this country, we have many outspoken writers who take to the stage in this way, and manage to say things very few people say. Though they can get into trouble too. The problem with the role of the Fool is that people laugh and laugh and then nothing changes. We in the audience are laughing it off. But many writers have plunged on into territory bristling with signs saying “No Entry” and “Keep Off the Grass”.

The second role of a writer that is still important is that of a witness, recording what happens for their own contemporaries and for the future. Recently the Bodleian Library in Oxford made a surprise find. By digitally scanning William Camden’s *Annals of England*, his seminal history of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, they found that passages had been changed, pasted over with new texts and altering the report he had originally written. James I had come to the throne and Camden wanted to make sure he would not displease him. He anticipated disapproval and feared the outcome – in those days

beheadings were as common as flies - and so he acted to censor himself before something happened. This was a conscious act.

But writers are also *inadvertent* witnesses, and their testimony is invaluable, especially when uncensored by themselves.

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Thirdly, the writer as utopian dreamer – a prophet. (William Blake, W. B. Yeats). It is mostly writers of children's books take up this role today. In *Tyger* by S. F. Said (the title is a homage to Blake), the justice and liberation that has been dreamed of by the brave child protagonists comes true in a grand and metaphysical finale. And science fiction writers, such as the peerless Ursula LeGuin and China Miéville in his novel, *The City and the City* postulate fantastic scenarios, based on what they know, and project the possibilities into the future.

This is also a bardic role... and it draws on our ancestors and forerunners... it is an *echoic* form of literature - in which Homer's epic refracts present day wars --- borrowed from, imitated, metamorphosed and *trans-shifted*, in the term Alice Oswald the poet prefers. Nothing here is off limits. We writers are a collective body-like a flock of birds moving together, sometimes one will take up the position at the apex of the V formation when flying for thousands of mile, while the other birds rest on the thermals behind them and even sleep on the wing, then another takes that leading place...that is how I

see the individual writer in the skein of a multitude of others. (Among these clairvoyant, fearless writers I would name, Eça de Queiroz and his lacerating novel, *The Crime of Father Amaro*, Angela Carter for her daring explorings of sexuality, and Toni Morrison, especially *Beloved*.)

It's vital that no individual writer should be muffled or excluded on account of their class or ethnicity or any other aspect of their identity as perceived by others. Justice for those who are silenced will not gain by silencing others.

Long ago I read Ibsen's remark that 'the main task for a writer is to sit in judgement on himself – and I have pretty much attempted to do that over a lifetime of writing. That my subject position as a white, privileged, heterosexual and left-leaning woman excludes me from the ongoing struggle for equality and justice seems to me defeatist, forbidding the right to escape the conditions of one's birth, and denying some individuals the right to metamorphosis. Previously I held that fiction can go anywhere...and should. I have long argued that the primary dynamic of literature being imagination, overleaping my own lived experience was part of the calling. I wrote short stories and novels with characters like Caliban's mother in the *Tempest*, who lies very far from my circumstances. I voiced her inner thoughts. I wouldn't do that now, though I still believe that the freedom of literature – of these 'live artefacts' as Terence Cave has called them – depends on not closing doors or windows on the view from

elsewhere, or on elsewhere, wherever those elsewhere are. But I am now sensitised to the arguments about appropriation.

In literature itself however, free expression means that disturbing, repellent, shocking, morally reprehensible themes and people can be represented. Politeness and conformity are muzzles. Many women in the past, trained to be polite in society, have cried out against female gagging and muteness in their writings: the Brontës, Florence Nightingale in her passionate essay 'Cassandra', Virginia Woolf in her Diaries, Leonora Carrington, Ali Smith.

But where forms of mutual respect and self-control change into silence in the face of wrongdoing, into groups and individuals turning a blind eye, when, fearing a clash with superiors, or falling out with your peers, you do not own up to what you think and speak up; when 'the governance of the tongue', in Seamus Heaney's phrase, becomes a reluctance to tackle certain themes, those are manifestations of self-censorship that are occurring in societies like the UK, that undermine that right for all: no need for official censors if the citizens are willing to anticipate their actions and act on their behalf even second-guessing them and outdoing them? John Stuart Mill made an inaugural address at the University of St Andrews and said, "Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing." Writers are not the only citizens who are involved in such necessary vigilance – but the roles of witness and truth-teller were crystallised by the political horrors of the last century

and this one makes no lesser claims on us all. The need to speak out outstrips directives about who has the right to, or who might object.