Benefits of Non-Production: Part Two

by Theodore Dalrymple (January, 2018)

Golconda, Réne Magritte, 1953

Shortly before he died in 2000, the Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, wrote a poem, *Went to Prague . . .* , deploring 'the nothing [that] they were doing with their freedom'. In other words, that after decades of suffering—first under the Nazis, then under the Communists—the Czechs gave themselves over wholly and gleefully to the trivial, vulgar and unattractive fatuities of our consumer society, so, at any rate, it seemed to Thomas, who had spent fifty years of his poetic career decrying the superficialities of modern life.

Naturally, this was a sweeping generalisation, and could not

have been universally true. But to be universally true is not the function of sweeping generalisations, not does he who makes such generalisations expect to be taken literally. We object to sweeping generalisations on the grounds that they are not universally true only when A) we suspect that they are roughly true and B) when we find that truth that they express disconcerting or disagreeable. Of course, I generalize—sweepingly.

Thomas, like many others, must have hoped that the long experience of oppression would concentrate the mind of the population on higher things, as indeed it often appeared to visitors behind the Iron Curtain to have done before the Curtain was drawn aside. As Philip Roth remarked, in the west everything was permitted and nothing was important, while in the east nothing was permitted and everything was important. And I can personally vouch for the fact that human contacts between westerners and easterners that took place in the Eastern Bloc, truncated as they necessarily had to be, were of an intensity I have never known in other circumstances. Suffice it to say that when they took place, one did not discuss the weather or football results: one went straight to the deeper questions of human existence.

It is not only the recently-liberated Czechs, however, who do nothing or very little that is worthwhile with their freedom. Indeed, the abuse of freedom is often worse than the mere failure to do anything worthwhile with it; freedom is sometimes, or often, abused actively to pursue evil. I am now referring mainly to freedom of expression, and in the last article gave an article of such evil.

Perhaps I am unique in this (I have performed no survey to

find out), but my first thought on reading the lyrics that I quoted in my previous article was that 'This should not be permitted.' And indeed, the world would be a slightly better place without such lyrics, even if they had no practical effect on anyone's conduct, just as the world is a better place without a superfluous ugly building. In Somerset Maugham's short story, *Rain*, the missionary's wife, Mrs Davidson, tells Dr MacPherson, 'Mr Davidson says that the native dancing is not only immoral in itself, but it distinctly leads to immorality.' I hesitate to associate myself with so mean and unattractive a figure as Mr Davidson, even by means of an inversion of what he said: nevertheless, I would claim that even if the lyrics that I quoted did not distinctly lead to immorality, they are immoral in themselves.

In support of my visceral, that is to say initial, feeling that such lyrics should be censored, I could point out that the great majority of the world's great art was produced under conditions of censorship—at any rate, censorship of the proscriptive rather than the prescriptive kind, but censorship nonetheless. The removal of all censorship has not resulted in an unprecedented florescence of the arts, and certainly not in literature, quite the reverse. The golden age of Russian literature was certainly not one of an absence of censorship, nor was Shakespeare entirely free to write what he liked (or rather, might have liked, since we don't know what he would have liked). Anyone who wanted, in a disinterested fashion, to study the conditions under which great literature is produced would soon turn his mind to, among other things, the nature of the censorship that encourages it. Among other things, censorship makes necessary the implicit , which is always more powerful and moving than the explicit:

> Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—

Success in Circuit lies . . .

In short, if we were obliged to disregard that part of the artistic heritage of Man that was produced under conditions of censorship, there would be practically nothing left and if, conversely, we were obliged to regard only that part of the heritage that was produced under conditions of complete freedom of expression, we should have but little artistic sustenance from the past.

These things are perfectly obvious and hardly require much demonstration. It does not follow, of course, from the fact that great art is generally produced under conditions of censorship that conditions of censorship generally produce great art. But I have found that even to mention any connection at all between censorship and great art results immediately in a question that is half-inquiry, half-accusation: ‘So you believe in censorship?’

No doubt I would believe in censorship if I believed first that censorship was a necessary condition of the production of great art and second if I believed that the production of such art were the highest or only goal of human society. I do not believe either of these propositions, however great the importance that I attach to art. But I do not believe that there is one great end of humanity to which all other ends must always and everywhere be subordinated, so that the desirability of censorship would not be for me established even if it were the *sine qua not* (the without-which-not, as my friend’s father used to call it) of the production of great art.

But what if, in any case, great art *can* be produced without the aid of external censorship? Under what conditions is it produced?

No doubt this is to a large degree a futile question. There are too many incalculables for a definitive answer. But one faculty seems to me to be essential or indispensable in the individuals who would produce great art: namely, the faculty of self-censorship, that is a sense not merely of what should be left out, but of what should not be said. Without self-censorship, complete freedom of expression is destined by a kind of inner logic an arms-race of vulgar sensationalism.

Self-censorship does not at the moment enjoy a very happy reputation. It is associated in our minds with an avoidance—a cowardly or dishonest avoidance—of difficult or dangerous subjects: the intellectual nullity of contemporary Islam, for example, or the nature of transsexualism. There are several subjects that I avoid myself because I do not care enough about them to subject myself to the abuse that I would be likely to receive if I expressed my real opinions on them. My life, after all, is more than the expression of the sum total of my opinions. The danger comes when *everyone*, or at any rate large numbers of people, avoid the same subjects for the same reasons. That is the way that untruth may become deeply ingrained in a society, by default.

Shortly after the February revolution in 1917, the Russian writer, Leonid Andreyev, wrote an article in which he said that self-censorship was worse, far worse, than any other kind:

> Censorship of expression is not so terrible, it is not fatal: what is today forbidden can remain for years or even centuries hidden under the bushes, in archives, in notes taken by amateurs, in the basements of private or even princely libraries, and emerge into the daylight when a more liberal age arrives . . . but censorship of thought, the self-censorship which one exercises over that what one does not express—that, that is terrible.

This is true if the reason for the self-censorship is fear: fear, for example, that what one really thinks will inadvertently slip out and lead to trouble, so that one attempts to forestall the possibility by not even thinking the dangerous thought. One turns one's mind away from the thought, and what originally takes conscious effort becomes, like all habits, second nature. One becomes what one perseveres to do.

But if there is a harmful side to this, there is surely also a beneficial side. The person who prides himself on his own frankness, and who says the first thing that comes into his head, is in my experience rather inclined to be over-sensitive when other people do the same. He likes frankness only so far as it his own. And surely an important part of being a civilised being is to censor what one says, and eventually what one thinks. A person who habitually thinks in vile terms of others is not only likely to require and even thirst after every-viler terms, but to lose all sense of proportion in his conduct. If I think of people as lice, I will end up treating them as lice; and therefore, when I catch myself thinking in these terms (if I ever do), it is my duty to censor my thoughts and resolve not to think such thoughts again. It can, and ought to, be done, until such time as the thoughts no longer enter one's mind in the first place.

Is this an argument against frankness in itself, and does it necessarily conduce to interchanges that lack all capacity to offend, to conversations that confine themselves to uncontroversial observations on the weather? Do I contradict myself when I say that, if I enter a discussion, I have said nothing worth saying unless I have said something with which somebody would, or at least could, disagree? Far from it, I hope; and certainly I do not shy away from saying things that I know will offend some, or even many, people. I cannot be held responsible for the fragility or morbid sensitivity of others. It is our mutual duty to censor our reactions to one another. No doubt this is easy for some than for others: to return for a moment to the physiology of the four humours, it is easier for those of phlegmatic temperament to do than for those of choleric temperament. But the fact that it is easier for some than for others does not make in any the less a duty.

I once wrote an article in which I claimed that George Bernard Shaw was not only an ignoramus when it came to medical matters, but a militant ignoramus. We are all ignorant of many things, of infinitely more things in fact than those that we know; but there is a culpable type of ignorance that refuses to inform itself properly, and GBS was guilty of it in full. (Chekhov, incidentally, accused Tolstoy of the same kind of ignorance, though he retained his esteem of Tolstoy as a writer, as surely anyone must.)

An eminent professor sent me a very insulting e-mail (via the publication) and seemed to imagine that he had thereby refuted what I had written. His insult was his argument; and I acknowledge that there are some views so preposterous that they are not properly worth arguing with. But if they are not

worth arguing with, the authors of them are not worth insulting either: unless, that is, they are in a position to impose their views on others by the exercise of political or other power, and even in such a case argument is much preferable to insult. An article by me on the subject of George Bernard Shaw is hardly the kind of thing of which dictatorships are made; and while I naturally enough think that what I said was true, and indeed quoted chapter and verse to demonstrate, to my own satisfaction at any rate, that it was true, I could not claim to have had the last word on the subject. But I did not think that the illegitimacy of my birth alleged by the professor in his e-mail was much of a disproof of what I had said.

There was a time when I might have answered him in kind, and enjoyed doing so; but I had by then for so long censored my thoughts that I had not the slightest inclination to do so, and even felt a certain sorrow for the professor: for evidently (or so I surmised) my little literary pasquinade had acted like salt on a wound whose existence was previously unsuspected.

Censor your thoughts, but with pusillanimity.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *The Proper Procedure* from New English Review Press.

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