



Michael Wilding

OBSCENITY, CENSORSHIP AND DIVERSION

My first book, *Aspects of the Dying Process*, was about to be published by the University of Queensland Press. Then the manager of the press, Frank Thompson, taking another look at my manuscript, decided it was tricky enough publishing fiction with a university press without being charged for obscenity as well. The climate in Queensland at the time was less than progressive. He decided to show the manuscript to the vice-chancellor to ensure that he had support before going ahead. I can see why Frank did it, though the consequences annoyed me. The vice-chancellor, Zelman Cowen, took a dim view of the book. Two stories he particularly objected to: 'The Phallic Forest', which Peter Carey back then insisted was the best thing I'd written, and 'The Image of a Sort of Death'. I remember sitting lugubriously with Frank in the University of Sydney club as he, with some obvious anxiety, delivered the message. It was probably the time that the manager came up to me and told me I was no longer a financial member and was not entitled to be there, having been on leave and forgotten to renew my subscription. It just added to the general sense of being outside the law. The vice-chancellor had been some sort of legal academic.

The message, briefly, was to cut out the offending material from the stories, if I wanted the book to be published. I was outraged, of course. I often was in those days. My deathless prose to be mutilated! It was



unthinkable, unacceptable. How could writing still be treated like this in the 1970s? This was the sort of thing that had driven Lawrence into exile. I had already left Britain. I already was in exile. My whole literary career seemed to be thwarted before it had even begun. It was one of those long beery evenings with Frank of which I have no clear recollection. Indeed, no recollection at all. He was amazing in that he would always put up with long difficult sessions with his authors. Especially over a drink. In the end he made me see reason. I didn't withdraw the book. Where after all would I have withdrawn it to? Rather than rewrite and amputate and otherwise deface and dismember the two stories, I took them out altogether. The book went ahead. Frank swore me to silence, since he didn't want the series jeopardized by scandalous rumours of interference and compromise.

Those were the last years of the great taboos. The old four letter words. 'Would you want your servant to read these?' as the judge in the English trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* put it. And so, confronting taboos, as writers everywhere properly feel compelled to do, we confronted the great suppression of sexual terms, words that could be uttered round the bicycle sheds but not put into print. I suppose if this was still the 60s, I would list those words. But it isn't so I'll spare us all that. And of course, it was not only the words, but the activities and attitudes in which the words might be utilized. They were taboo, too.

For those of us beginning our writing careers then, these restraints were idiotic. The list of banned books contained titles by Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, Leonard Cohen, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, James Joyce and many more. Lawrence and Joyce had been writing fifty years ago. Copies of most of the banned books circulated. In our own practice we disregarded the taboos on four-letter words and sexual incidents. It meant, of course, that there were constant skirmishes with printers, publishers, editors, magistrates and such like. As Thackeray wrote in *Vanity Fair*, back in 1849, 'The curses to which the General gave a low utterance ... were so deep that I am sure no compositor would venture to



print them were they written down' (Chapter xxix). It was a grotesque situation and it put Australia in the category of Ireland and South Africa and Franco's Spain. But that was the dominant environment. And so we confronted the restrictions. Our stories were rejected, or published with mutilations and excisions. We kept on resisting. We held anti-censorship readings and rallies. We published in underground street papers. There were endless battles in the early seventies over four-letter words and sexual content.

Looking back on it all now, this issue seems to have been pretty much a diversion. The libertarians focused on taboo words, while substantive issues of political and economic change were displaced from attention. The censorship battles were a smokescreen behind which late industrial capitalism globalised. Much of what passed for the radicalism that developed along with the protest movement of the 1960s and 70s was in essence an agenda for cultural modernisation, a rejection of the religious based morality and ethics on which society was based. The ferment led to the dissolution of the co-operative endeavour of welfare socialism into a pluralism of self-interest groups, atomized consumers for the products of the backers of the good-for-business mainstream political parties. The new values were cash values. Sexual liberation and anti-censorship protest were readily exploited by media moguls to flood the news-stands with girlie magazines featuring full frontal nudity. Television offered bare breasts to encourage the replacement of black and white television sets with the newly available colour. Drugs were suddenly fashionable. Were they promoted and distributed in order to narcotize and incapacitate protestors and so preserve the existing order? Or were they the ultimate capitalist product, continued consumption ensured through their addictive potential? The drug culture provided a new cash crop for criminal elements and their establishment financiers.

And that brings me to a significant absence. The political. I will list these words since they are still pretty well repressed. Words like class and work and repression and exploitation and labour and unions and so



on. The literary tradition which was dominant when I began writing was at great pains to deny the political. I think the denial is even greater now. At least during the 1950s there were the public purges, the McCarthyite denunciations of leftists in the movies, in government, in the universities. There was clearly a battle going on, the cold war. There were clearly radical intellectuals and writers who were being harassed and dismissed and destroyed. Now that battle seems to be over. There is no obvious left left. Even through the literary festivals of the 1970s, there would be radical writers sitting in the audience, making derisive asides, committed interjections, or just heckling. But not any longer. During that cold war period, of course, the cultural pressure was to avoid the political in your writing. Fiction retreated from political engagement. That great tradition was silenced. The same was true of literary criticism. The problem with English studies in – and out of – the universities has always been that the focus is on a safe sort of formalism, on not looking at the work in its context of political history. The New Critics and Leavisites were dealing with language, subtlety, irony (all things that are certainly deeply part of literature); what was missed was any engagement with meaning, with ideas, with social context. The varieties of literary theory continue that same avoidance today.

Busily confronting the repression of four letter words, we were in danger of turning our attention away from political repressions. Looking back on it, with a more political analysis, that looks like a cunning political strategy. Sexuality proved to be profitable: there was money to be made in four letter words, in sexploitation: and more than money, there was the potential for control. An obsessively sexualized culture absorbed the energies of the consumers and distracted attention from political and social issues. Fortunately, or perhaps more correctly, tragically, there have always been political and social issues that couldn't be repressed. Despite all the sex and drugs, the issues would not go away, and we, or some of us, tried as best we could to engage with them. At the time, however, I was swept along in the anti-censorship struggle



along with many others.

The Filipino novelist Frankie José once asked me, 'What are the greatest injustices in your country?' It took me aback. This was not the sort of question novelists asked any more. That tradition of writing novels about social injustice, of engaging with political debate, which characterizes his work, is threatening to become lost to us. So now – as always – it is a matter of rediscovering ways in which to deal with those issues. Of attempting to recreate that role for fiction of being something other than distraction or diversion or evasion. Of finding ways of engaging, even obliquely, with substantial issues. It may be that engaging obliquely is the only way to do it. After all, that is one of the reasons people began writing fiction anyway. It has rarely been possible to write the truth. You have to pretend it is fiction, and then insert the troublesome ideas, the disturbing observations, the explosive words.