

GALSWORTHY JOHN

STUDIES AND ESSAYS:
CENSORSHIP AND ART

John Galsworthy
Studies and Essays:
Censorship and Art

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ABOUT CENSORSHIP

Since, time and again, it has been proved, in this country of free institutions, that the great majority of our fellow-countrymen consider the only Censorship that now obtains amongst us, namely the Censorship of Plays, a bulwark for the preservation of their comfort and sensibility against the spiritual researches and speculations of bolder and too active spirits – it has become time to consider whether we should not seriously extend a principle, so grateful to the majority, to all our institutions.

For no one can deny that in practice the Censorship of Drama works with a smooth swiftness – a lack of delay and friction unexampled in any public office. No troublesome publicity and tedious postponement for the purpose of appeal mar its efficiency. It is neither hampered by the Law nor by the slow process of popular election. Welcomed by the overwhelming majority of the public; objected to only by such persons as suffer from it, and a negligible faction, who, wedded pedantically to liberty of the subject, are resentful of summary powers vested

in a single person responsible only to his own 'conscience' – it is amazingly, triumphantly, successful.

Why, then, in a democratic State, is so valuable a protector of the will, the interests, and pleasure of the majority not bestowed on other branches of the public being? Opponents of the Censorship of Plays have been led by the absence of such other Censorships to conclude that this Office is an archaic survival, persisting into times that have outgrown it. They have been known to allege that the reason of its survival is simply the fact that Dramatic Authors, whose reputation and means of livelihood it threatens, have ever been few in number and poorly organised – that the reason, in short, is the helplessness and weakness of the interests concerned. We must all combat with force such an aspersion on our Legislature. Can it even for a second be supposed that a State which gives trial by Jury to the meanest, poorest, most helpless of its citizens, and concedes to the greatest criminals the right of appeal, could have debarred a body of reputable men from the ordinary rights of citizenship for so cynical a reason as that their numbers were small, their interests unjoined, their protests feeble? Such a supposition were intolerable! We do not in this country deprive a class of citizens of their ordinary rights, we do not place their produce under the irresponsible control of one not amenable to Law, by any sort of political accident! That would indeed be to laugh at Justice in this Kingdom! That would indeed be cynical and unsound! We must never admit that there is no basic Justice controlling the

edifice of our Civic Rights. We do, we must, conclude that a just and well-considered principle underlies this despotic Institution; for surely, else, it would not be suffered to survive for a single moment! Pom! Pom!

If, then, the Censorship of Plays be just, beneficent, and based on a well-considered principle, we must rightly inquire what good and logical reason there is for the absence of Censorship in other departments of the national life. If Censorship of the Drama be in the real interests of the people, or at all events in what the Censor for the time being conceives to be their interest – then Censorships of Art, Literature, Religion, Science, and Politics are in the interests of the people, unless it can be proved that there exists essential difference between the Drama and these other branches of the public being. Let us consider whether there is any such essential difference.

It is fact, beyond dispute, that every year numbers of books appear which strain the average reader's intelligence and sensibilities to an unendurable extent; books whose speculations are totally unsuited to normal thinking powers; books which contain views of morality divergent from the customary, and discussions of themes unsuited to the young person; books which, in fine, provide the greater Public with no pleasure whatsoever, and, either by harrowing their feelings or offending their good taste, cause them real pain.

It is true that, precisely as in the case of Plays, the Public are protected by a vigilant and critical Press from works of this

description; that, further, they are protected by the commercial instinct of the Libraries, who will not stock an article which may offend their customers – just as, in the case of Plays, the Public are protected by the common-sense of theatrical Managers; that, finally, they are protected by the Police and the Common Law of the land. But despite all these protections, it is no uncommon thing for an average citizen to purchase one of these disturbing or dubious books. Has he, on discovering its true nature, the right to call on the bookseller to refund its value? He has not. And thus he runs a danger obviated in the case of the Drama which has the protection of a prudential Censorship. For this reason alone, how much better, then, that there should exist a paternal authority (some, no doubt, will call it grand-maternal – but sneers must not be confounded with argument) to suppress these books before appearance, and safeguard us from the danger of buying and possibly reading undesirable or painful literature!

A specious reason, however, is advanced for exempting Literature from the Censorship accorded to Plays. He – it is said – who attends the performance of a play, attends it in public, where his feelings may be harrowed and his taste offended, cheek by jowl with boys, or women of all ages; it may even chance that he has taken to this entertainment his wife, or the young persons of his household. He – on the other hand – who reads a book, reads it in privacy. True; but the wielder of this argument has clasped his fingers round a two-edged blade. The very fact that the book has no mixed audience removes from Literature

an element which is ever the greatest check on licentiousness in Drama. No manager of a theatre, – a man of the world engaged in the acquisition of his livelihood, unless guaranteed by the license of the Censor, dare risk the presentment before a mixed audience of that which might cause an 'emeute' among his clients. It has, indeed, always been observed that the theatrical manager, almost without exception, thoughtfully recoils from the responsibility that would be thrust on him by the abolition of the Censorship. The fear of the mixed audience is ever suspended above his head. No such fear threatens the publisher, who displays his wares to one man at a time. And for this very reason of the mixed audience; perpetually and perversely cited to the contrary by such as have no firm grasp of this matter, there is a greater necessity for a Censorship on Literature than for one on Plays.

Further, if there were but a Censorship of Literature, no matter how dubious the books that were allowed to pass, the conscience of no reader need ever be troubled. For, that the perfect rest of the public conscience is the first result of Censorship, is proved to certainty by the protected Drama, since many dubious plays are yearly put before the play-going Public without tending in any way to disturb a complacency engendered by the security from harm guaranteed by this beneficent, if despotic, Institution. Pundits who, to the discomfort of the populace, foster this exemption of Literature from discipline, cling to the old-fashioned notion that ulcers should be encouraged to discharge themselves upon the surface,

instead of being quietly and decently driven into the system and allowed to fester there.

The remaining plea for exempting Literature from Censorship, put forward by unreflecting persons: That it would require too many Censors – besides being unworthy, is, on the face of it, erroneous. Special tests have never been thought necessary in appointing Examiners of Plays. They would, indeed, not only be unnecessary, but positively dangerous, seeing that the essential function of Censorship is protection of the ordinary prejudices and forms of thought. There would, then, be no difficulty in securing tomorrow as many Censors of Literature as might be necessary (say twenty or thirty); since all that would be required of each one of them would be that he should secretly exercise, in his uncontrolled discretion, his individual taste. In a word, this Free Literature of ours protects advancing thought and speculation; and those who believe in civic freedom subject only to Common Law, and espouse the cause of free literature, are championing a system which is essentially undemocratic, essentially inimical to the will of the majority, who have certainly no desire for any such things as advancing thought and speculation. Such persons, indeed, merely hold the faith that the People, as a whole, unprotected by the despotic judgments of single persons, have enough strength and wisdom to know what is and what is not harmful to themselves. They put their trust in a Public Press and a Common Law, which deriving from the Conscience of the Country, is openly administered and within

the reach of all. How absurd, how inadequate this all is we see from the existence of the Censorship on Drama.

Having observed that there is no reason whatever for the exemption of Literature, let us now turn to the case of Art. Every picture hung in a gallery, every statue placed on a pedestal, is exposed to the public stare of a mixed company. Why, then, have we no Censorship to protect us from the possibility of encountering works that bring blushes to the cheek of the young person? The reason cannot be that the proprietors of Galleries are more worthy of trust than the managers of Theatres; this would be to make an odious distinction which those very Managers who uphold the Censorship of Plays would be the first to resent. It is true that Societies of artists and the proprietors of Galleries are subject to the prosecution of the Law if they offend against the ordinary standards of public decency; but precisely the same liability attaches to theatrical managers and proprietors of Theatres, in whose case it has been found necessary and beneficial to add the Censorship. And in this connection let it once more be noted how much more easily the ordinary standards of public decency can be assessed by a single person responsible to no one, than by the clumsy (if more open) process of public protest. What, then, in the light of the proved justice and efficiency of the Censorship of Drama, is the reason for the absence of the Censorship of Art? The more closely the matter is regarded, the more plain it is, that there is none! At any moment we may have to look upon some

painting, or contemplate some statue, as tragic, heart-rending, and dubiously delicate in theme as that censured play "The Cenci," by one Shelley; as dangerous to prejudice, and suggestive of new thought as the censured "Ghosts," by one Ibsen. Let us protest against this peril suspended over our heads, and demand the immediate appointment of a single person not selected for any pretentiously artistic feelings, but endowed with summary powers of prohibiting the exhibition, in public galleries or places, of such works as he shall deem, in his uncontrolled discretion, unsuited to average intelligence or sensibility. Let us demand it in the interest, not only of the young person, but of those whole sections of the community which cannot be expected to take an interest in Art, and to whom the purpose, speculations, and achievements of great artists, working not only for to-day but for to-morrow, must naturally be dark riddles. Let us even require that this official should be empowered to order the destruction of the works which he has deemed unsuited to average intelligence and sensibility, lest their creators should, by private sale, make a profit out of them, such as, in the nature of the case, Dramatic Authors are debarred from making out of plays which, having been censured, cannot be played for money. Let us ask this with confidence; for it is not compatible with common justice that there should be any favouring of Painter over Playwright. They are both artists – let them both be measured by the same last!

But let us now consider the case of Science. It will not, indeed cannot, be contended that the investigations of scientific men,

whether committed to writing or to speech, are always suited to the taste and capacities of our general public. There was, for example, the well-known doctrine of Evolution, the teachings of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russet Wallace, who gathered up certain facts, hitherto but vaguely known, into presentments, irreverent and startling, which, at the time, profoundly disturbed every normal mind. Not only did religion, as then accepted, suffer in this cataclysm, but our taste and feeling were inexpressibly shocked by the discovery, so emphasised by Thomas Henry Huxley, of Man's descent from Apes. It was felt, and is felt by many to this day, that the advancement of that theory grossly and dangerously violated every canon of decency. What pain, then, might have been averted, what far-reaching consequences and incalculable subversion of primitive faiths checked, if some judicious Censor of scientific thought had existed in those days to demand, in accordance with his private estimate of the will and temper of the majority, the suppression of the doctrine of Evolution.

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