

Writing and Silencing

by Henry S. Bienen

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.”

— *Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass*

Writers, and more generally artists, historically have posed a danger to authority. Whether by direct or indirect challenges, they have questioned authority and political leaders. Of course, artists have supported authority and leaders by virtue of praise, flattery, and support. But when, in unfree societies, they have been questioners or adversaries, they have been dealt with harshly all too often. How do writers question authority? By satirizing individuals, questioning edicts, direct attacks and contempt for persons or laws. Authorities have responded by ridiculing, censorship, imprisoning, killing.

In the United States some writers of fiction, poetry and history lately have faced a so-called “cancel culture.” They even have been censored and have had their works taken down from websites or publishers have walked away. Given the history of repression in many societies, this, while extremely unfortunate and to be condemned if one cares about freedom, is, in the scheme of things, mild repression.

Poetry, literature, and historical works are often seen as political, and thus, dangerous to those who hold political power or who aspire to that power. Insisting on freedom of expression or refusing to self-censor has brought down the wrath of authoritarian regimes or movements who will not tolerate free expressions. We can fill pages with the names of great (and less great) writers and poets who suffered for their art under the Soviet Union. Mandelstam died in the Gulag. Pasternak and Akhmatova were silenced for many years. Brodsky was expelled from his country. Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned and exiled. And on and on.

In China after the Communist Revolution and especially during the Cultural Revolution, Huang Xiang was arrested six times and sent to labor camps and prisons. Ba Jin (Li Yaotang) was persecuted. Guo Morou was persecuted but survived. We can go back to the French Revolution where they guillotined the poet André de Chénier. And of course, earlier history gives its many examples.

The autocrats of the Right did their share of imprisoning writers and poets. Pavese and Gramsci in Italy. Even writers of the Right were not spared: for example, Malaparte. In Germany, Clementine Kraemer, Debora Vogel, Erich Knauf. Many were killed for who they were by ethnicity and religion, and not necessarily for what they wrote. Writers have been political threats or deemed so both as political figures and as symbols of opposition. In Spain, Lorca is a prominent example. In Iraq, Tal Al-Mallouhi.

Writers have been political figures, not only by their work but by explicitly contesting for political parties or entering political movements. Both Yeats in Ireland and Neruda in Chile served as senators. Malraux, novelist, not poet, served as a Minister in France. Milton served as

a civil servant under Oliver Cromwell. Byron joined the Greek War of Independence against the Ottomans.

We can go back to antiquity and read the political work of Sophocles, Euripides, Homer. Leadership, authority, politics, have been themes for poets, bards, playwrights from the earliest oral and written records we have. War, kingship, revolution, political strife, have been the subjects of the world's greatest writers, among them Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Grass, Dickens and Cervantes, Hemingway, and contemporary greats such as Morrison, Oates, Soyinka.

Pointing out all of the above is not new or surprising since literature is about the human condition. In times of stress and change, of violence, the simple humanity of people categorized by race, class, religion, country, neighborhood is called into question. The politics of culture, ethnicity, race, can lead to the clash of nations and to vast movements of people. These great dramas are grist for the mill of writers. Thus, politics and literature, power, authority, all the written and spoken words, have always been intertwined. Words are used to bludgeon or to reinvent meaning or to mobilize people to causes.

One of the consequences and perhaps causes of "cancel culture" has been the heightened concern with language and meaning of words. People are considered good or bad depending on words they may have used even decades ago. Some go to Twitter or something written and taken out of context to judge whether an individual is "OK," or racist or sexist or "anti" a gender persuasion. Acts of pronouncement and apology and self-abnegation are considered "virtue signaling." 'I'm really all right, don't you know?'

Social media has heightened effects of cancel tumult. No doubt the pandemic, with the relative absence of face-to-face relations, has left lots of time, especially for people in the arts

and cultural spheres, to engage in petition signing, Twittering, and joining the fray to reassess people, works of art and literature, and institutions themselves.

As one of my friends has said: “Writers and poets who dwell in ambiguity, as in textural subtleties, will always be targets for the reductive-minded.” Very true. Social upheavals have claimed their fair share of writers who were not “something” enough; not enough committed to a social cause or to a party or to a leader.

Writers have been silenced or repressed or jailed or exiled throughout history. One paradoxical consequence is that the act of writing, fiction or poetry, is given a heightened importance by politicians or bureaucrats who may not have read a word that a poet or novelist has written. Indeed, some writers who may see themselves as in the vanguard of a movement often lead the band against other writers. All of a sudden people who have been ignored project themselves, or get projected, onto a political and cultural scene. This is itself a consequence of a politicized world where “nobodies” became “somebodies” either on the attack or attacked. As Yeats said in ‘The Second Coming’: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Of course, today, in the United States, writers are not exiled by the state or jailed for their political views. They are more likely to be attacked in the very universities in which they work or in the pages of newspapers or magazines by other poets or novelists who oppose their views or single out a particular poem or writing for virulent criticism.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* by Pankaj Mishra, “Struggle Sessions” (February 1, 2021, pp 61-65) asks what are the Cultural Revolution’s lessons for our current moment? Mishra means the West’s current moment. And she examines Western intellectual infatuation

with Mao and his attack on intellectuals. One of the striking aspects of the Cultural Revolution was the attack on elites and institutions per se. A consequence of this embrace of Mao and support of widespread attacks on, and destruction of, art and authority and individuals by parts of the Left in Europe and the United States was the very discrediting and division of the Left in these places. Indeed, the Right tried to claim the moral high ground by discrediting the Left on grounds of anarchy and for embracing wanton destruction.

Does this seem familiar? We see today the attempts by a populist Right to do the same by comparing the Cancel Culture of the intellectual Left and riots and looting over racial injustice to the January 6 attack on the capitol. Large-scale petition signing, letters to university presidents signed mostly by humanities and social science faculty (not often economists) are hardly the equivalent of making intellectuals in China wear dunce caps or beating them or killing them. But they stem from an impetus to cancel, humiliate, and force from the arena people with views anathema to some. And the singling out a word or a phrase in a poem or taking down a poem from a website after it is published in hard copy, reeks of censorship and Know Nothingism. And the signing of petitions by individuals who haven't read the petition carefully, or who object to large parts of it but "want to make a point," has historical precedents in pre-Soviet Russia when Liberals did not resist totalitarians.

To go from the sublime to the ridiculous, or from the ridiculous to the ridiculous, the Chicago Tribune reported (Arts & Entertainment, December 24, 2020, p 1) that the chef Stephanie Izard was accused of "cultural appropriation" for posting a recipe that she said was inspired by a Korean rice dish and a Japanese beef bowl dish. Among other things, she was accused of racist tendencies to conflate Asian cultures. Chef Izard felt the need to apologize not

about her recipe but her language in describing her dish. What was interesting about this story were the references to language and meaning and thus its relevance to writing in these times. Of course, the absurdity of the whole issue has its lessons also.

Let's be clear. The "Cancel Culture" is responding to serious and deep issues in United States' society and institutions and elsewhere in the world. The iniquities of racism, sexism, and gender discrimination are real and need to be faced and dealt with. Unfortunately, it is easier to turn on writers and artists and leaders of institutions who often share the very values of equity and equality and nondiscrimination than those who oppose these values and goals. This, too, is an old story.

Moreover, attacks on established writers are often attacks on authority and on the institutions in which a particular writer lives or with whom she or he is associated: magazines, publishers, universities. Such attacks are meant to silence or to reframe issues by the attacker(s). In the process of the attack, meanings are imputed, and sometimes distorted, and motives are questioned. Let me give a quote concerning meanings.

"Clarity is of no importance because nobody listens and nobody knows what you mean no matter what you mean, nor how clearly you mean what you mean. But if you have vitality enough of knowing enough of what you mean, somebody and sometime and sometimes a great many will have to realize that you know what you mean and so they will agree that you mean what you know, what you know you mean, which is as near as anybody can come to understanding anyone."

From *Henry James* by Gertrude Stein, 1932-3.

I stand firmly for free speech in the classroom; in published works of literature, including bad poems and poor fiction. We the reader can decide what we like or don't like what we see or read, and we can understand meanings as we choose, just like we can like Chef Izard's recipe and food no matter how she or anyone else describes them. I am not a First Amendment lawyer, nor any kind of lawyer. I understand that there are limits to and borders for free expression. I am against inciting riots or violence. I know there are legal condemnations for hate speech. I do not like name calling or offensive language but I am very leery of prohibiting it. When in doubt, I come down on the side of free speech and free expression. Universities especially need to be a place of free inquiry and debate. Let students and faculty and administrators come to their own conclusions about issues informed by their own analyses and their own experiences. Literary magazines and publishers should have wide latitude in publishing. That does not mean that a particular magazine must take a short story or poem. Of course not. Nor should a publisher have to publish Senator Hawley's book or anyone else's. At the same time, censorship and persecution of writers and visual artists always ends badly. The cancel culture folks often wind up, historically speaking, getting canceled themselves. And even if they don't get canceled, and even if what goes around may not come around back to them, a lot of harm gets done along the way.

I have no great objection if a writer wants to renounce something they have written if this is done without duress. I have great objection if the "*Mea culpas*," "*Mea maxima culpas*,"

are forced, under threat or intimidation. Self-abnegation appears unseemly to me. Forced recantation, elimination, censorship are dangerous for civil culture and for a free society.