CENSORSHIP

2495 Redding Road, Fairfield, Connecticut, December 10, 1959

Dear Glenway:

I am sorry I have been so long in writing down my feelings after the meeting of our committee on censorship, but here at last is somwthing. Not being philosopher, lawyer, theologian, member of ADA or Civil Liberties Union, nor, need I add, the NODL, I can offer only some home-grown comments, somewhat hastily slapped together.

The question cannot be resolved by appeal to one absolute principle -- the rights of the individual or the rights of society. The creation of a piece of art (and its appreciation, too) is an individual andprivate transaction, but the object created has social and public effects. The question of one of prudential a justment of conflicting claims.

The artist has to have freedom to create, and he is going to get it in nooks and crannies if he can't get it in the open. We can recognize this fact, but at the same time recognize that, as Santayana has put it: "The bowels of the earth are full of all sorts of rumblings; which of the oracles drawn thence is true can be judgedonly by the light of day ... Art being a part of life, the criticism of art is a part of morals." In other words, society has the right to judge what is good for it.

But what is good for society? In the first place, is art, any kind of art, good for it? In reflecting on that question we would, I assume, take it that what is intrinsically "good" is of necessity, however indirectly, good for society. Here it occurs to me that most people who are hot for censorship would not, despite some pious lip-service, admit that art is a good. They take it for a decoration, a diversion, or at best an illustration explicating or promoting something worthy, like staned glass windows in church or the picture of a gray-hairedmother on an ice-box ad. (those things -- decoration, diversion, etc -- are goods, sure -- but they are secondary goods, we may say.) With a person who doesn't admit that art is a good in oursense, there is no possible argument; the appeal has to go beyond reason. To force.

But if it be admitted that art is a good, we can do business. At least, the question can be put as a problem of adjusting the claims between two goods -- art vs morality, or something. I have to start with my own prejudice that the freest society is the best society. Even if we assume politicsl freedom to be the essential thing in a free society, we are quickly struck by the fact that political freedom can't thrive except in a climate of cultural freedom. And herewe are struck, too, by the fact that freedom of culture -- in art as well as in science -- is the freedom to explore, to experiment. This is not to say that evefy exploration or experiment is valuable. Most are not valuable, and some are positively pernicious. But society has to take its risks, and a healthy society can afford to take its risks. The one risk no

society can afford is to throttle the exploratory process. Censorship is, by definition, a throttling device.

What can society, then, do to protect itself against the perversions and ,iscarriages of cultural freedom? It must ultimately depend on criticism, criticism in the broadest sense. Such criticism would aim not merely at refining the general taste and judgment. It would aim, by ling indirection, at a modification of the structure and valuesof society. But where is that criticism that, in its own slow and painful way, may best work toward this end? It appears in many of the activities whichwe recognize and applaud -- but we must not forget that the most abiding criticism is in the works of art themselves, continually issuing forth.

Criticism -- including the critivism implicit in any work of art -- is what we must depend upon, in the long pull, for the refinement of taste, the rectification of our pore human nature, and the reform of society. In other words, censirship merely attacks the symptom of the disease. It does not even recognize the disease -- and usually the censor himself is oneof the symptoms of the disease.

But, it may be remarked, synptoms must sometimes be treated, too. That is true. On this point, somerandom observations:

What is usually at stake is obscenity. At least, that is the usual point of attack, though I am convinced that many people who favir censorship are better Platinists than they realize and are more disturbed by the ideas that may be implicit in art, and by the implications of the mere fat that art exists at all, than they are by obscenity as such. On the point of obscenity, it seems clear that literature stands in a very different position from deama (movies, danece, etc) painting, and sculpture. The prurient reader has to get at the hot stuff through words. The incitation is not direct. He has to go buy, or steal, a book and ind a place to be comfortable before he starts reading -- usually moving his lips. (There are, no doubt, little reading circles. A friend of mine stymbled into a group of Hollywood high-brows reading aloud after dinner, for idealistic reasons, the passages of more purple juice in By Love Possessed .) This difference betwean literature and drama, etc. puts literature in a privileged position. The guy that reads a book for the kick may very well be improving his literacy and therefore be better able to read about the qualifications of various presidential aspirants. Or when the light begins to gutter low and the hour for repentance looms, he may be better able to find guidance in the Bible. To stop horsing around, itseems that we to recognize a prudential difference (the whole question is one of prudence anyway) between literature and other things, and the difference means that with the censorship of books any possible social gains are short-raneg and small and the damage long-range andgreat.

We jnow, of course, that there are going to be abuses, abortinns, and perversions conseauent upon freedom, but by and large such things have to be dealt with as they arise, not by sweeping general action. When we get to such things as obscene comic books and dirty postcards for the schoolyard trade, what is to be dealt

with is a special abuse, andit is to be dealt with specially. It should be perfectly clear that the cop on the schoolyard beat is not automatically privileged to barge into a book store to check on Peyton Place.

In the arts where the dangersof abuse are greater than in literature, more pressure is required to portect society. It is a cinch that if therewere no prssure, half the movies wuuld make Paris peep-shows look like Sunday afterboon in the parlor with Gramdma's stereopticon and the culture cards of European travel. But ecen here criticism -- including propaganda, agitation, etc. -- is the safest and in the long view the most effective method. Direct action should be at the police level and not at the level of high principle. And certainly any public agenciesof control should be under constant scrutiny and attack. The life of anybody who sets up as censor should not be allowed to become a happy one.

So:

(1) Keep all controls limited to clear and present abuses.

(2) Keep theemphasis on the limited and prudential aspect of things; control in one instance or one area doesn't imply control in another.

(3) Scrutinize the scrutinizers.

(4) Avoid the trap of "artistic success" as a criterion for freedom. Failures and frauds are necessary to produce "success."

(5) Keep firmly in mind that ultimately society cannot protect itself by censorship, and that censorship strikes at the root of cuktural freedom. Literary censorship is especially stupid and self-defeating, and is of special danger in a country which has long enjoyed a climate so benificent for the breeding of a race of brother's-keepers with blood-lust in the heart, a precinct captain's brains in the head, and the gleam of righteousness in the eye. Names, quick and dead, furnishedon request.

Here are the flounderings for what they are worth. I hope I haven't splashed all the water out of the bath tub.

Yours,