

**Speech by Lisa Appignanesi for the launch of
CRITICAL VOICES 3
at the RHA Gallagher Gallery, Dublin,
14 March 2006**

VERY Pleased to be here and to be launching a wonderful festival of events and discussions which place writers and artists where it seems to me they are needed once more – engaged AT THE CENTRE OF THINGS, ENGAGED WITH ALL THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE IMAGINATION, in the very midst of conversations, and campaigns about what it is that we want our society to be - with perhaps a glance or two at what it has become without our quite noticing.

Now you may well ask – with a disbelief which is always legitimate and which the press in Britain is all too happy to emphasize – what it is that writers and artists - those notoriously selfish beings, have to offer the public sphere, apart from perennial entertainment and a perhaps too occasional flourish of beauty.

I do think there's more. The more, and today I'll focus on a particular aspect of it - has to do with an understanding – perhaps most of all, but not only, for those of us who create characters in fiction – of varying and often disputatious points of view, of vulnerability in the face of power, of what it feels like to be human in various kinds of skin or size or gender.

Writers also know what it's like to be on the outside, to feel like a kind of Martian or anthropologist - watching what seem to be the not altogether believable antics of our politicians, watching what begin as mere differences catapult into battles that suddenly take on the heat of wars. Watching, sometimes with a mounting sense of injustice, the aberrations of power, big or little.

This critical perspective on power is something children too, have - perhaps because as small beings they have to get used to, adapt to, the ways of those bigger than them.

I suspect, since on the whole my generation in the west has led, so far at least a fortunate life that my own sense of 'dissenting' against the reality around me and of being aware of the unjust workings of power comes from childhood.

That became clearer to me a few years back when I was working on *Losing the Dead*, my family memoir. A scene, a repeated scene, kept coming back to me.

My parents were immigrants - immigrants from Poland, where they had managed somehow to get through one of the more hideous and shameful periods of the 20th century – I'm talking of the Nazi occupation. They had come to Canada in the early fifties and worked hard to build a new life, repressing, as so many migrants do, the worst of the time before, making the best of things, hoping the scars didn't show, or the habits learned under terror didn't affect their new lives. Or course, in a transmuted, often incomprehensible and unconscious, way some of those old fears, habits, humiliations, were inevitably present and were passed on to their children – which is something I explore in the book.

The scene that came to mind when I was thinking about this evening and the launch of Critical Voices is one that was repeated over several summers, perhaps from my 8th & 9th year - the new Canadian family were driving into the United States for a holiday. It was about 100 miles away and the closer we got to the border, the quieter and tenser my father became. What I remember distinctly is how he would grow pale, then, waxy white. Beads of perspiration would gather on his brow, and his shoulders would tense into ramrod position. By the time we arrived at the border crossing, he was incapable of speech. When, at a gesture from the uniformed guard, he would roll down his window and thrust out our passports, he was closer to heart seizure than to anything which would result in the naming of a destination or the purpose of a visit.

The less my father could speak, the harsher the border guards became – as if they smelt fear on him. It was even worse on the way home, when my father

would regularly be made to come out of the car to be asked questions his condition rarely allowed him easily to answer.

The guards it seemed to me – and I can still picture them clearly, though I couldn't tell you the route I took to get here - always grew nastier and nastier, as my father retreated into the stony stubbornness that accompanied his attack of nerves. Only much later of course did I realize quite where his fear came from – since we had certainly done little more wrong to elicit fear here than buy an extra pack of cheap cigarettes. The fear had firm origins which had little to do with this particular situation in Canada: any need to show documents, any men in uniform, brought back Nazi Poland for my father.

For me, as a child, it was all gruelling to watch. Border crossings, the officials that attend them have ever after made me nervous.

I've also learned a rather healthy scepticism about power, in its lower petty manifestations, as well as in its higher ones. And perhaps this sense of the sheer weight of power and ways of dealing with it have played through much of my fiction.

But the reason I say this to you now, is less to do with myself than with a generalized sense of the way the child in us is the being that makes us alert to a tampering with or curtailment of freedoms. The child in us gives us a sense of injustice, of the vagaries of right and wrong. The child challenges free expression, and of course learns its limits in the parental edict: shut up.

I say all this not because the child needs sentimentalization, or is particularly innocent - but because it's a fact: relative impotence in a world of adults breeds a perhaps unconscious knowledge of the workings of power in us all.

The wide-eyed, dissenting, curious, sometimes unruly, child in us, that child who might use language rather freely, is so often what the writer and artist keep alive for longer than most - though of course growing up means acquiring a sense of agency in the world...

Finally, one more thing to say about the writers' critical voice – which I think needs particular emphasis in our time. Writers are aware of the vagaries of language. They're aware that it lies. That meaning is slippery. That it depends on context and reception. That it can be manipulated. They are rarely literalists. They know that there is more than one book. Hence the need of them in a political landscape where the voices of literalists and of absolutists are too often – particularly of late in our politically correct ethos - deferred to.

All this by way of introduction to why I think it is necessary and particularly necessary at this historical moment for writers and artists somehow to make their voices heard – and these days on the subject which concerns us most nearly, the right to free expression in its fullest sense - free expression which is being challenged from powerful religious lobbies, and also by good old fashioned, well-intentioned political correctness – which is not really very different from what the French call the *bien pensant*, the virtuous bourgeoisie.

Way back in 1989, when *The Satanic Verses* was given a burning review followed by the killing one of the Fatwa, I was a director of the ICA, the Institute of Contemporary Arts - a place not unknown for its adventures with censors, whether because of Picasso's erotic drawings, or gay films such as *Taxi zum Klo*. But we'd never done battle with this particular kind of long-distance censorship before – and the nature of it was a little difficult to think through.

Here we had on the one hand an author who had for the last ten years stood out against the injustices done to immigrant populations in Britain, a man who was known for his active contesting of the racism which was then still so casually a part of British society; and now the very people whose cause he had championed had turned against him, attacking him on grounds of 'blasphemy', though of course, blasphemy pertained legally in Britain only to the Christian faith.

Already when the Muslims of Bradford burned *The Satanic Verses*, we knew that something had to be done. As the German writer Heinrich Heine, had warned –

wherever they first burn books, they will soon burn people – a thought which seems rather too apposite in these times of violent uprisings and cartoon wars.

On the one hand there was the need for solidarity for a writer who was in danger and under attack from rabid youths stirred by clerics. Neither it was clear had read the book (which is about the humiliation of Asian immigrants, the doublings they're forced into) – if they had, the clerics might have felt rather more offended by the insidious figure of the puritanical mullah who sits, rather hamsa like, at the unnaturally tropical London centre of the book; than by the surreal dream sequence of one of its characters.

On the other hand, it was important not to target all Muslims - while deploring the heinous actions of the Ayatollah Khomeini, a powerful man whose use of the fatwa was utterly instrumental, or the communal riots in India and Britain. This is difficult to do in a media culture which prefers a polarized pro and anti rather than a complicated statement about complex issues.

What I did at the ICA was to try and widen the debate beyond the media polarities, by getting writers to speak about *The Satanic Verses*, about Salman Rushdie, about literature and faith, and migrant sensitivities;

We also helped in the solidarity and lobbying network set up and which – under the leadership of Frances d'Souza – became an important way for Salman Rushdie to speak to government, and ensure his protection from very real threat.

We produced a book, *The Rushdie Affair*, at first bought by a large publisher who then got frightened, so that we went to a smaller one. The book charted the way in which *The Satanic Verses* had moved step by step from being an ambitious novel from a leading writer to becoming a tool in the conflict between east and west; between a radical and authoritarian, literalist version of Islam which attempted to speak in the name of all believers, including the now infidel Rushdie, and a secular world which read imaginative literature imaginatively.

It seems distant now and at the time – I should underline - it felt hugely dangerous: publishers were frightened, unwilling to publish anything to do with the case, people were being targeted around the world, there were riots in which many were killed, Rushdie was in hiding under guard – and so on.

If I go into all this here, it's of course because the parallels between the Rushdie Affair and the recent cartoon wars, though hardly exact (as to the point of origin of an offence), are certainly there. And I think the lesson for writers to learn is that it is indeed useful for them to counter ideas, legislation, with the tools they have closest to hand – their writing, which can of course change the climate of opinion.

It is also useful to band together in groups – like PEN – in order to have clout with governments.

Just briefly to recap, about the cartoon wars, you'll remember that at the end of September, last year, a right wing, anti-immigration Danish paper, Jylands Posten, published cartoons of the prophet, which some local Muslims found offensive. They inflated the portfolio of cartoons with more highly provocative and distasteful ones and took these to points east. At an opportune moment – the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Egypt – radicalizing Islamist forces decided to whip up east-west conflict and protest, in part of course using that wonderful medium Al Jazeera.

This has resulted in burning of embassy buildings, riots, many dead across the Muslim world from Pakistan to Libya to Iran; as well as demos by young offended radicals in London. Under the cloak of religious indignation, totalitarian regimes and radical movements tried to paint the west as an Islamophobic enemy and immunise their own population against liberalism; and simultaneously set out to win mostly young disaffected Muslims in the west to their cause.

This battle between authoritarian and illiberal regimes and the liberal west, has in the case of the Cartoon Wars, as in the battle over *The Satanic Verses*, been

interpreted as a battle between religion and free expression, between faith and reason, which of course is, in part, but only in part, what it is.

Here is Oxford Professor Tariq Ramadan's - a French Moroccan - description of events.

'One might ask why it is that three months later, some find it in their interests to pour fuel on the fire of a controversy, with tragic and potentially uncontrollable consequences? A few Danish Muslims visited Middle Eastern countries and ramped up the resentment: governments in the region, only too happy to prove their attachment to Islam - to bolster their Islamic legitimacy in the eyes of the public - took advantage of this piece of good fortune and presented themselves as champions of a great cause. On the other side, the controversy was just what some politicians, intellectuals and journalists needed to paint themselves as champions of the equally great struggle for freedom of expression and as resistance fighters against religious obscurantism in the name of western values.'

(The Guardian, 6 February 2006)

In Western Europe and America the debate is now on: is free expression something of an enlightenment absolute; or is it just a nice woolly concept to keep us warm in front of the telly showing Big Brother and a little soft porn at night, while what we really want is to respect all faiths and give them a sacred priority?;

or Is free expression a right basic to any possibility of plural society, a right we need constantly to be vigilant about, or those who prefer power (their own) and the silence of critical voices - will gradually take it away from us?

Like so many other writers in the west, I had, after the Fatwas of '89 in which the Tory Government had stood up for Rushdie, been quietly lulled into thinking that our local battles for free expression – first against the church, then the state,

and then its various arms – such as the Lord Chancellor’s office which censored theatre until ‘68 – had long been won. At PEN, the writers’ organization with a mission to protect writers under threat, we only needed to focus our attention outside the west – to Myanmar or China, Iran or North Africa.

With our happily enshrined freedoms at home, we were safe and away.

Then suddenly 9/11 burst on us all with its terror – and with an aftermath the ‘war on terror’ that threatened to curtail our freedoms in new ways. In America there was the Patriots Act, which made translators of texts from countries purportedly involved in terror, open to prosecution. There was also the rise and rise of evangelical Christianity with its creationist doctrines and its alert sensitivity to blasphemy, coupled with a large budget for litigation and well-trained lawyers, briefed to prosecute in every state.

In Britain, the Labour Government decided to try and make a crime of incitement to religious hatred; the pressure for the legislation came largely from the Muslim Council, a lobbying umbrella group. Recognizing that the war in Iraq, the terror legislation, might indeed make Muslims feel they were being stigmatized, the Government decided to give with one hand what it was taking away with the other. We’ll give you something which allows you to feel that your religion is protected from offence, while we carry on our anti-terror tactics.

Legal notables advised that the law was unnecessary and badly framed, that it would severely restrict basic democratic rights. Writers warned that it would be better to let sleeping dogmas lie. That religion was a system of ideas, and each religion was ready to despise another. That the respect being called for was something that had to be won, not asserted by criminal legislation.

Sleeping dogmas didn’t lie. They erupted.

No sooner had the public conversation about religious hatred legislation started, then Sikh protests against Gurpreet Karu Bhatti’s play *Behzti (Dishonour)* erupted as if released by the proposed legislation on hatred, which many interpreted as an extension of the blasphemy laws to all faiths. Rioters – insulted by the play’s

setting of rape in a temple - smashed windows, threw eggs, and with their violence forced the management to close the theatre out of fear of injury to staff. The government said nothing in defence of the writer, who was forced by threats into hiding, and declared the riots a form of legitimate free expression. Though violence is meant to be at the least a public order offence.

For us this was a clear signal of the intolerance of religious groups to artistic expression, not to mention the Home Office's blatant disregard for writers, artists, and their imaginative expression.

Quick on the heels of *Behzti*, as if the competition in the religious insult stakes was now on, came the case of *Jerry Springer - The Opera* – in which some 40,000 Christians emailed the BBC to prevent the opera being screened and printed the home address of controllers - following quickly in January.

It was clear that there was a new mood afoot and those of us who wanted a state in which artistic expression could thrive and all faiths live side by side rallied. PEN started a campaign, called on leading writers and figures in the creative community to join in protesting that "Free Expression is No Offence" in which this book played a part. And indeed I really believe helped to win the battle which after a year and a bit was finally won in the Commons, just recently.

I'll just read you the letter that started it:

Re: The proposed offence of 'incitement of religious hatred' in the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill.

On behalf of English PEN, the association of writers, we would like to request an urgent meeting to discuss the above. The proposed change to the Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill which introduces an offence of inciting religious hatred is something which touches us nearly. We trust you will be able to give us just a little

time in the next days before the Bill makes its way through the house.

On behalf of the members of English PEN and their affiliates abroad, we wish to state our opposition to the proposed legislation which would make it illegal to express what some might consider to be provocative views on religion.

Although we applaud the government's wish to make everyone in our multi-cultural, multi-faith nation feel that they have an equal stake in Britain, the proposed amendment to the bill is misguided. It is emphatically not the way forward. It creates a climate which engenders events such as the recent Sikh riot in Birmingham. Here a violent mob, on the grounds that a play offended their religion, successfully prevented its performance, acted as censors, and threatened the life of its author.

Fiona MacTaggart, the Home Office Minister, has contended that the remit of the proposed legislation is narrow. However, the signal the offence clause sends out to religious leaders is broad. It serves as a sanction for censorship of a kind which would constrain writers and impoverish our cultural life. Rather than averting intolerance, 'it would', as the Southall Black Sisters have pointed out, 'encourage the culture of intolerance that already exists in all religions'. To gag criticism is to encourage abuse of power within religious communities. The proposed legislation could also backfire on those very groups the government is keen to placate: some of their own literature could readily be prosecuted under the law's aegis.

We contend that under the proposed legislation the necessary freedoms of a mature democracy will be curtailed. The freedom to practise and believe for all religions can only be maintained within secular states. Religious leaders, alongside legislators, might like to take note of the historical fact that nowhere have so many different religions co-existed peacefully as in a democracy where freedom of

expression is a right. Looking beyond Britain will quickly show that where the state intervenes in religious matters, there is no possibility of a plurality of equals.

Finally, as writers of many faiths and none, we must emphasize that if religious leaders had their way, we would have little literature, less art and no humour. The religious can be quick to take offence. The Papal Index makes salutary reading: it has banned every great offender from Voltaire to Flaubert to James Joyce. On their side, some Jews have objected to Philip Roth and to Joseph Heller; while some Muslim clerics have been so severely offended by the fictions of Salman Rushdie and the Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz, as to issue fatwas against them - much to the distress of other Muslims. Now British Sikhs have succeeded in censoring the play *Behzti* and forcing Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti into hiding.

The new legislation encourages rather than combats intolerance. We do not need it. What we need is a signal from government that it wishes to defend true democracy and its many virtues, including those of dissent and the freedom of expression.

If the government feels more legislation is essential in this area, then it would achieve more of its ends by repealing the law on blasphemy, a relic of pre-multicultural times. Less, here, is more. The times are such that we need to champion the freedoms our democracy has fought hard to secure alongside the cultural riches we have the liberty to enjoy and create.

We hope the government will join us in this.

(Letter to Charles Clarke, Home Secretary, taken from Free Expression is No Offence, Penguin, November 2005)

In January, after much lobbying, writing of letters and articles and with a great deal of help from the Lords, our new champions of civil liberty, and a little from absent MPs who thought the bill would sail through, we won four crucial amendments to the bill. Incitement to violence on grounds of religion is now a crime – but any language which doesn't say "go strike down the man in the mosque or the woman in the hijab", in other words threatening language intended to incite violence – is not.

We are free to criticise the abuses of religion and to question; to make jokes; to describe contentious points of view; to create all those characters the religious may find offensive, but which can in fact simply be portraits. Never forget that most of French literature from Diderot to *Madame Bovary* to Simone de Beauvoir was put on the papal register for being somehow blasphemous. So the amendments now leave all areas of expression free – insult, ridicule, criticism and so on.

This is the first occasion in Britain in which the right to free expression has been put onto the face of a bill. The amendment which has done it was widely called the PEN amendment.... So as you see, writers can engage and actually make a legislative difference.

We're not sanguine. No sooner had we won a battle in a way which we thought was fair to all – in other words, Muslims had won a bill which gave their physical identity in their faith protection; and we had won the right to keep our plural democracy alive to the kind of criticism it always needs if power is not to get the upper hand and keep itself enshrined in its own sanctity – no sooner did this happen, than the cartoon wars burst upon us, once more polarizing Muslims - who feel implicated when their extremists are attacked – and western values.

But this time it seems to me, more British Muslims have been willing to say that while they honour the prophet, they also respect the values of the countries in

which they live and do not want the kind of puritanical authoritarian Islam which burns embassies and kills its own in the streets.

As for we writers, we need to stay vigilant.

It has long been clear to me that power of any kind is all too willing to close down the possibilities of free expression – since restricting it helps the powerful feel as if they can keep their power immune from criticism.

This book takes many perspectives on free expression. Hardly any of them are altogether absolute. After all free speech in Britain is already hemmed in by respect for the law – sub judice, by libel laws and race hate speech.

My own sense is that as far as legislation goes, one wants speech to be free. Without free expression, all our freedoms fall – political, imaginative - but also, as so many analysts have shown, you can gauge well-being in a society by its freedom of speech. It's an indicator of famine, levels of education and women's rights. All depend on it.

We now live in a difficult and plural world, and of course free speech issues are contentious. At one end there is the Austrian imprisonment of holocaust denier and rabble rouser David Irving. At the other there are French newspaper editors adamant that there should be no bounds to free expression, particularly where religion is concerned.

So English PEN is poised to launch a Free Speech commission which will take the debate further and try and test out, while also furthering the debate- how **free** expression can be in a complex world where nations and peoples with very different histories live at the proximity of Google or next door to each other.

Meanwhile just north of the border here in Eire, writers are intimidated on the grounds of their work, and go into hiding. It's something I hope all of you are aware of. I'm talking of course of Gary Mitchell.

It might be salutary to end with a quote from Voltaire – that great enlightener - who said... “I do not agree with what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it.”

A sentiment we at PEN have recently had to confront over the David Irving, Holocaust Denial Case

Dealing with historical distortion by imprisoning its author is self-defeating and wrong.

The distinguished classical scholar Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who lost both parents to the Holocaust, once wrote of Irving's French ally Robert Faurisson, “Confronting an actual Eichmann, one had to resort to armed struggle. Confronting a paper Eichmann, one should respond with paper.”

English PEN believes that the neo-Nazi views of Irving are those of a paper Eichmann and that the only appropriate response to him is on paper.

Thank you

Biographical note

Lisa Appignanesi is a writer, critic, translator and broadcaster. Having grown up in Paris and Montréal, she has lived in London for many years. Her books include a biographical portrait of Simone De Beauvoir; an acclaimed family memoir, *Losing the Dead*; a cultural history of cabaret; a study of Freud and women, and numerous novels. In recognition of her contribution to literature, she was made a Chevalier of the Ordres des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. She is the deputy president of the English branch of the international writers' organisation, PEN. Most recently, she has edited a volume of essays on censorship, titled *Free Expression Is No Offence*.