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THE WRITER'S FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

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SINCE a writer is not a special being, and since writing is but one human activity among many, it follows immediately that a writer's freedom of expression should be the same as an ordinary man's freedom of expression—no more, no less. A writer because he is a writer does not enter a privileged class, any more than a painter because he is a painter, a wharf labourer because he is a wharf labourer, or a farmer because he is a farmer. Because of his Man-hood, each and every man ideally possesses an equality, before the law and before God. No one because of special gifts or special office merits favoured treatment. Indeed, there is a warning, that "to whom much is given, of him also is much expected" which applies to the especially gifted and to those in influential posts. It would seem to bestow on such men not a favoured liberty, but to require of them an even more rigorous standard of conduct than the ordinary. But I do not press for that here, only for an equality the principle of which is undeniable, however much application of it may fall short of full realization.

Man is a social being, no law to himself; and the coherence of each society derives from authority whose correlate is obedience, "the bond of rule"—as Tennyson finely calls it. In turn, authority bases itself upon the human power everywhere and everywhen possessed of recognizing right and wrong. The right should be done, the wrong should not be done. Those in authority, if they are really endeavouring to discharge their trust, reward what is considered right and protect it; they punish what is considered wrong and destroy it—all in an attempt to establish "the good life" throughout the body politic. In different times and places, ideas as to what constitutes right or what constitutes wrong have varied, but man of his very nature affirms Right and Wrong. A classic example of this occurs where the tragic Antigone speaks concerning what she calls

The unwritten and unalterable laws of God
And Heaven, that are not of Yesterday
Nor of Today, but come from Everlasting,
Whereof none can declare the mysterious hour
That saw their birth. . . .

Such a noble pronouncement from the work of a pre-Christian dramatist bears witness to something very clearly and definitely held

to and taught later throughout all Christian times. I shall, however, call in witness no Christian exemplars, but two movements of revolt against Christian traditions—two revolutions, the French of 1789 and the Bolshevik of 1917.

To be brief, there was in the former, among other veins, one of naturalism and anarchy. "How does it come about?" cried Rousseau, "that men, though free-born, are everywhere in chains?" A few years after, and partly because of his writings, what he termed chains were broken; a prostitute sat enthroned as the goddess of Reason in the Cathedral of Notre Dame; all kinds of restraint were flung to the winds. One would envisage Utopia, the land of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, the land of Please Yourself. . . . Nothing of the sort was manifested. Republicanism, convinced of its own rightness and of the wrongness of Monarchy, deluged first France and then all Europe in blood. Next, it set up as idol not Reason but that Man of Destiny whose smallest finger was more weighty upon his subjects than the right hands of all the Bourbon kings combined—whose Code Napoleon insisted more firmly than ever that Right was Right and that wrong-doing would be more swiftly and more severely punished than ever before.

So with the Bolsheviks. After the nightmare of a civil war, under that Lenin who possessed certain attributes of greatness, Soviet life, Soviet art, promised a burgeoning of freedom such as had never been dreamed of under the paternal and severe authority of the Tsar. But the ensuing harvest presented a spectacle that belied its promise; not freedom was reaped but a rigid totalitarianism. He who was not enthusiastically with the government was very soon dubbed a saboteur, a kulak, a bourgeois, and the penalties imposed on him were a hundredfold more crushing than those that the Tsars had ventured upon. The Lenins, the Stalins, the Trotskys of the old régime, all lived to become victorious over their oppressors; they suffered, yet lived. But against the tremendous Right of the new régime, dissidents never survive; they are liquidated. And this rigour invades the field of Art. Under the Tsar, a Tolstoy, a Gorki lived; under the sterner Bolsheviks the writer of today, the musician, the dramatist—all chorus the party-propaganda line of the moment, all follow the road dictated to them, all conform—or perish.

Therefore, I would say even such aberrations as these two bear

witness to the fact that for men there is always a Right and a Wrong, and the only result of attempts to discard the unwritten and unalterable Divine Laws which are from Everlasting is the imposition of an inhuman and brand-new tyranny of Today. There is seen not limitless liberty for the artist, not the non-resistant anarchy of a Tolstoy—not the graciousness of a Madame Roland, not even the “noble savage” of a Rousseau, but terror, power naked and unashamed, the secret and omnipresent police of a Fouché or of a Yogoda.

Since, therefore, there is a Right and a Wrong, since the writer is not above the Law, and since Authority is essential and inescapable in the government of Society, it follows that it is the writer's duty to further the Right (that is—the good, the true and the beautiful), to obey Authority (when it is just and lawful), and to conform with the Law. And since individual man is ever prone to err, a writer should not only be amenable to the laws of the land with regards to libel, defamation, treason and sedition, but also he should be subject to a general censorship on moral grounds. To preach sodomy and to glorify adultery, for example, might be even more harmful to a community, if the advocating writer is clever enough, than if he were secretly to practise them. And so on. There is no doubt about it, either; such censorship in regards to morality will ever and anon make mistakes, such censorship will be abused (there has never existed an authority in human affairs, no matter how exalted and well-disposed, which did not at times go astray)—but abuse does not take away right use. And therefore, however fallible it may prove, the power of the censorship should exist and function. In times of war, such a power is imposed over many activities, and is then universally approved, though exerted for a lesser purpose. In times of peace it ought also to function, for a nobler end. Writers are the purveyors of food to the imagination, they are the nourishment of a nation's spirit, a possible source of its exaltation. And if censorship serves to the continuance of a nation's life as in war; if the Law takes care to prevent the adulteration of the body's food and the body's drink, so should Authority through a literary censorship have a greater care for what sustains and may ennoble (or debase) a nation's soul. Evil communications should no more be tolerated than a typhoid-infected water-supply.

Once the principle of literary censorship is conceded, as I think it must be, then the procuring of good censors must certainly be

grappled with as a practical difficulty, but it is a difficulty of the same nature as that of procuring good rulers in general. Because no governmental system has proved ideal, neither monarchy, nor aristocracy, nor democracy, nor any tried combination thereof, it is only seldom proposed (and then very foolishly) to be done with the lot and go in for anarchy. So with the literary censorship. It should be wielded, and could be wielded *in the moral sphere* by any well-educated citizen as effectively as by a specialist. The ordinary reader knows filth when he comes across it, and hence is competent to censor and to censure. The field of choice for censors is therefore a very wide one, and such a minor difficulty as the procuring of censors has little place in such a theoretical essay as the present.

Since the early nineteenth century, however, with its anti-social and attitudinizing romanticisms, the notion has been aired abroad in literary circles that what is desirable is not good censors but the abolition of literary censorship itself. It is held that for the writer absolute freedom of expression is desirable. But as with other men in other activities, freedom is a fine thing only when it devotes itself to proper ends and acknowledges lawful limits. Otherwise, it always degenerates into licence or tyranny, the freedom of the one to his own destruction, or to the destruction of the many. Few men ever enjoyed more freedom than Hitler in the days of his success; he recognized no confining laws, whether human or divine. Yet, his freedom, his selfish freedom, spelt an almost universal disaster. And comparable moral disaster can occur with powerful writers who scorn all restraints. A neat case in point is furnished by James Joyce, whose restraintless “Ulysses” was succeeded by a book, *Finnegan's Wake*, which might well have been the incomprehensible, disintegrated and disintegrating maunderings of a maniac.

So far, I have dwelt upon the limitations that a writer should acknowledge, should observe for his own and for society's good. To sum them up, however inadequately, I should say that, apart from obvious offences punishable at law, he should not depict sin in such ways as would lead others into it, even in a reading of his books. His work should not be pornographic—that is, revelling in sexual aberrations for the sake of sales and notoriety; it should not propagate lies, hatred, racial pride; it should not encourage gangsterdom. But at best all these prohibitions are negative. They warn of limits, but within them there is a positive terrain worthy of greater consideration.

Within them a writer has an astonishing range of freedom to express himself—the true freedom which, humbly acknowledging needful limits, can never degenerate into licence. As Jesus said, “You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free.” Without the Truth, no freedom; without certain limitations of a cognate nature (goodness, beauty and truth have since Platonic times been an inseparable trinity)—the writer is merely a slave to his own selfish perversities. His vaunted, fanciful “freedom” can but lead him to some moral fenland wherein too many of his readers may follow to their own hurt and the hurt of society.

The true freedom I am arguing for is very wide indeed. It does not mean that a writer should not depict vice, evil or sin, but it does mean that he should not falsify them. I have in mind Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield*, Dante, Shakespeare and the Bible as examples of a wonderful and unexceptional freedom. They will suffice for my present expository purposes, and I must point out the literary strength of the combination—the most graceful of novelists, the world’s greatest religious poet, the world’s greatest dramatic poet and the world’s best book.

Goldsmith’s novel deals, amongst other things, with the betrayal of an innocent woman, the buffeting of a just man in Jobian trials that seem unendurable, yet finally the book, in its warm humanity, remains a treasure-house of sweet and wholesome thoughts—such as nourish the soul and refresh it when it is weary. What real law could ever, or would ever, be invoked against Goldsmith’s freedom? And, what more freedom than Goldsmith’s could any writer ask? He is as unconstrained as Shelley’s Skylark.

A third of Dante’s masterpiece is devoted to a journey through an imagined hell, wherein the sins of many sinners are narrated. Here I shall merely mention that adulterous tale of Paolo and Francesca, which Dante gives with perfect restraint and perfect freedom and clearness: Says Francesca:

“We were alone, and without any dread,
Sometimes our eyes, at the word’s secret call,
Met, and our cheeks a changing colour wore.
But it was one page only that did all.
When we read how that smile, so thirsted for,
Was kissed by such a lover, he that may
Never from me be separated more
All trembling kissed my mouth. The book I say
Was a Galahalt* to us, and he beside
That wrote the book. **We read no more that day.**”

*An overthrowing source of temptation.

In “we read no more that day” the great poet tells the rest of the tale with its moral disaster. There are writers living who would have been licentiously free with the incident for a whole chapter, and would in really saying less have debauched themselves and their readers. Dante draws the veil decently over frailty and powerfully awakens compassion, where others pander to lust.

As for Shakespeare there is much bawdy in some of his plays, but it is always by the way. It is neither corrupting nor central to any of his themes. The incest in *Hamlet* is shown for the vile thing it is—(for a contrast see what the less sure Shelley did with it in *The Cenci*) and the main theme is the psychological conflict in the mind of the Prince of Denmark himself. Shakespeare perceives incest, for such is in the world, but he does not revel in it. The play, *Othello*, too, is very free-spoken, Iago being a damned villain—“a bloody, bawdy villain”, to steal a phrase from another play—but what shines out is the moral beauty of Desdemona, the beautiful, the innocent, and—“the pity of it, Iago, the pity of it.”

What is censurable in Shakespeare and censorable is merely accidental to his art, not central thereto, and so men of the theatre today mostly cut the vulgar and naughty lines and scenes not from any puritanical motives, but simply because they are “dated” and of no dramatic value. It has been convincingly demonstrated on the boards themselves that artistic improvements are thereby effected even in the master dramatist’s work.

Lastly, I have chosen the Bible of set purpose because some assert that the Old Testament would fall under the ban of any strictly enforced moral censorship of books. This is fantastic sophistry. Parts of the Old Testament are very plain-spoken indeed, but however plain-spoken they neither commend vice nor recommend it, nor depict it in seductive colours. Not to beat about the bush, I shall go direct to that short story in the Book of Daniel, which is certainly one of the finest short stories in the world’s literature, and which is sometimes thrown up at defenders of literary censorship. I mean the story of Susanna and the Elders. It fixes our gaze, however, not on the crafty immorality of the elders, but upon the adamant purity of a moral heroine. And as with Goldsmith, so again: what writer could wish for greater freedom than Daniel enjoyed in his inspiration?

All that can be said to help a writer towards a rightful possession of freedom was, I think, comprised in the recommendation of one of

the most gifted authors that the world has ever seen—one of the most forceful, influential and successful—when he wrote: “all that is true, all that is seemly, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is loveable, all that is winning—whatever is virtuous or praiseworthy—let such things fill your thoughts.” For, a mind writing out of the fulness of such meditations will have the perfect liberty of a Goldsmith, a Dante, a Shakespeare and a Daniel, and against it the Law can never be invoked. I speak, of course, of that Law which is unwritten, unalterable and “from everlasting”, for it is quite conceivable that a liberty-inspired writer might easily be embroiled with, might vigorously attack the regime of a Creon-Hitler-Stalin, whose imposition is ultimately no law at all, but a tyrannic, man-made and rootless construct of yesterday and today.

The spirit has a freedom whose charter and sanctions and loyalty are in the ultimate not of this world: its compulsions are superior to any purely mundane authority, and the Antigones will bear witness to the truth that is in them at the price of life itself. Incorruptible themselves, they will not corrupt others. For the rest, let a writer prove himself by the use he makes of his “freedom of expression”. If the foremost results evident in any of his books are lying propaganda, impoverishment of intellect, disintegration of spirit and manifest depravity, the deluding and debauching of innocence, then Authority has a right and a duty to act through a certain power of censorship inherent in Its nature—sure that whatever minor injustices It may commit, It will have exerted power on behalf of Right and against Wrong, these two being the positive and the negative that men, even in their aberrations, acknowledge very mysteriously everywhen and everywhere. Authority has a noble function, and should never shrink from discharging it, in the literary as in every other sphere.
