

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Areopagitica (1644)

John Milton

The tradition of free speech In an age when such platforms as Elon Musk's Twitter declare themselves for absolute freedom of expression, it cannot escape notice that such freedoms are never easily secured, in communities where social timidity and commonplace insecurity easily repress free discourse. The development of the modern voice, and of independence of thought, in short of conscious modern man, has been evident in the thought of many of the makers of the western conscience—Bacon, More, Montaigne, Macchiavelli— and we can track that western tradition, of free expression, to us from the Greeks, not to mention from the boldness of the author of *Gilgamesh*, who dares to question the goodness of the gods, or from the makers of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, who dared to map the geography of the dead man's journey to homelands in the sky. The affairs of the Areopagus, *Areopagitika*, is Milton's title for the present pamphlet, and stand for the Greek tradition of a region for free speech, one of the holiest spots in the ancient city, an area (like Hyde Park in London) where anyone can freely proclaim his opinions.

Milton and Free Speech Seventeen centuries after the Christ asserted that 'the truth will set us free,' John Milton took his place in the center of the call for true human freedom of expression, and in so doing he picked up not only the special promise of the early modern tradition but the weight of the Hellene and Pauline traditions, which so vigorously pronounced the vigor of free speech from the Areopagus, through the oratory of such as Isocrates (4th century B.C.), and Saint Paul. (The Areopagus was a hill to the northwest of the Parthenon in Athens, and long served as the site of Athenian tribunals. Both Isocrates, in the fourth century B.C. and Saint Paul spoke from that bald eminence, in defence of freedom of spirit, so that it was natural that Milton, more than twenty centuries after Isocrates, should baptize his own lasting verbal monument to freedom under the banner of a lofty reference to ancient Hellenic freedom of speech. *Areopagitica*, the affairs related to the Areopagus, was to be Milton's testimony to the lasting tradition of free speech, which was initially sanctified by the Greeks.)

The Ordinance on Freedom of Speech Milton's special insistence on free speech was provoked by actions of the British parliament—of which he was not a member—which were passed as the Licensing Order of 1643 and bore the official title, *Ordinance for the Regulating of Printing*. The essence of the law stipulated that an official government license needed to be presented, by the author of any book written and published in England. Power was thus given, to government censorship, to determine what deserved to be printed.

Background to the Ordinance There was a long precedent behind Parliament's legislation—it went back to the regulations laid down by Henry VIII in the sixteenth century—and in fact the Catholic pressure of the Inquisition is the modern provocation the anti-papal Milton is most happy to confirm—though the enforcement of the law came now in the midst of the mid-seventeenth century struggle among different factors of the largely Presbyterian British Parliament. (Milton had himself suffered at the hands of the Parliament, for earlier tracts he had written in defense of divorce, for which the reigning authorities had little patience, and he was personally sensitized to the issue of free speech and liberty of personal behavior.) It was above all in Milton's broad human interest to contend on behalf of the large traditions of human expression and openness. (One might think of the perspective of Montaigne, in this regard. Such innately 'humanist' thinkers proceeded from an innate trust in humanity, though they were the first to spot the innate follies of mankind.)

The argument of Milton's Areopagitica Milton opens by paying tribute to all those who care intelligently about the commonwealths in which they live, and who take the trouble to enlighten it with valuable opinions. He puts it thus: 'When complaints are freely heard, deeply considered and speedily

reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained, that wise men look for.' The 'old and elegant humanity of Greece,' Milton continues, set the example for its posterity, by embodying honest and thoughtful critique in their arts of government and in their tragedies, in which such figures as Ajax, Neoptolemos or Oedipus reinforce our respect for the pursuit of honesty, truth, and frank critique. To which Milton adds that the suppression of scandalous or libellous opinions was never of value in actually suppressing those toxic attitudes. Books are not dead things whose vitality can simply be snuffed out by ordinance. Rather they are living organisms, says Milton, as he launches into the most illustrious, and brilliantly formulated, argument of this pamphlet.

Books as Life Blood Startling thought! 'As good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable person made in God's image; but he who destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of God... a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit.' (The renown of this formulation has carved it into the lintels of the New York City Public Library and the Library of the University of Indiana, to the knowledge of the present writer.) Aware of the nature of the book, though of course still ignorant of the skills, culture or economy of printing, the ancient Greeks of course made no moves toward banning books, a useless and self-defeating exercise, making exceptions only for works such as those of Protagoras, which argued against the existence of the Gods, a blasphemy under no conditions tolerated. When it came to high spirited literature, like that of Aristophanes, even a highly critical mind like Plato's could kick back and laugh, knowing that he was in the hands of an irreproachable master.

En route to repression Milton tracks the mediaeval background of Papal text-suppression, inquisitorial book-scrutiny, and the increasingly available—and repressible—out flowering of printed texts after the invention of printing had turned the book and manuscript world into an industry. Milton's whole body of work, especially in *Paradise Lost* (1667) turns around a mythography of loss, a narrative of the fall of man, our original sin:

'of man's first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree/ whose mortal taste brought sin into the world, and all our woe...Sing heavenly muse...'

The human condition, vulnerable from the start, as we ourselves are, is not to be nursed and coddled, but, given the values of robust challenge, exposed to the tough grit of social opinions and attitude; other reasons, thus, for avoiding the kind of society-overseeing that a patronizing government may incorrectly indulge. Milton explains how healthful it is for citizens to exercise their intelligence on material that is 'bad for them.' 'I can not praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue,' he says, 'one that never sallies out and sees her adversary...but slinks out of the race...that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary....' Even the Bible can be dangerous, thinks Milton, unless we read it with world-seasoned minds. In view of which, Milton recognizes, the enterprise of sealing off and locking away the dross that comes with any communication is completely impossible.

The elusive truth The truth, asserts Milton, is in the end pure quicksilver, and cannot be pinned down. Plato shows the absurdity of any effort to codify truth, and preserve it for future generations. He tries to declare, in the *Laws*, that if poets continue to write their poems those very poems should, prior to distribution, be vetted by the guardians of the laws. But of course that is, to Milton, philosophical mumbo jumbo, and will never result in inoculating the people against falsehood. (Not until the return of our savior, says Milton, will the truth be amply before us. It is enough, adds Milton, that we are freed from the scourge of the Papal, without demanding that the truth entire be known.) For all that, however, and the case it supports against Big Brother's domination of thought, we must admit that the State has an ongoing interest in promoting both healthy and innovative thought. Intrusion into that thought and expression is counter-productive, and the licensing of printing seemed to Milton a perfect example of such intrusion. Sadly, though, the original evil Milton fought is still very much with us, and the talent to evaluate it rarely aligned with the subtleties generated in serpentine propaganda.