THE WRITER'S FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

By MARTIN EDMUND HALEY

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-ness, 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 everywhere 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 or 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. "What does it come about?" cried Rousseau, "that men, though free-born, arc anywhere 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, combining of its own rightfulness and of the wrongness of Monarchy, delayed first France and then all Europe in blood. Next, it set up as ideal not Reason but that law of Destiny whose smallest her 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 burgconing of freedom such as had never been dreamed of under the paternal and severe authority of the Tsar. But the ensuing hatreds 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 Trotsky's of the old régime, all lived to become victorious over their oppressors; they suffered, they 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 sternest Bolshevik 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
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As a practical difficulty, but it is a difficulty of the same nature as that of procuring good rules in general. Because no governmental system has proved ideal, neither monarchy, nor despotism, nor democracy, nor any tried combination thereof, it is only seldom proposed (and then very futilly) to be done with the bit 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 right when he corrects it, and hence is competent to censor and to correct. The field of choice for censors is therefore a very wide one, and such a minor difficulty as the persecuting of censors has little place in such a theoretical essay as the present.

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 rules in general. Because no governmental system has proved ideal, neither monarchy, nor despotism, nor democracy, nor any tried combination thereof, it is only seldom proposed (and then very futilly) to be done with the bit 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 right when he corrects it, and hence is competent to censor and to correct. The field of choice for censors is therefore a very wide one, and such a minor difficulty as the persecuting of censors has little place in such a theoretical essay as the present.

Since the early nineteenth century, however, with its anti-social and individualizing transmission, 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, sped an almost universal disaster. And comparable national 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 hook, Finnegans Wake, which might well have been the incomprehensible, disintegrated and dissegregating mumblings 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 offenses punishable by 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 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 him a writer has an astonishing range of freedom to express himself—the true freedom which, honestly acknowledging needful limits, can never degenerate into licentiousness. 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 cogitate nature (goodness, beauty and truth have since Platonic times been an inseparable trinity)—the writer is merely a slave to his own selfish perversity. His vaunted, fanciful "freedom" can but lead him to some moral freefall 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 gracefiil 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 wary. 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, 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.

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"We were alone, and without any dread,
Sometimes our eyes, at the world's secret call,
Meet, and our cheeks a changing colour wore.
When we read how that smile, so thirsted for,
Was kissed by such a lover, he that may
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 overthrown house of temptation.
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 pure, all that is lovely, 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 dynamic, man-made and rootless construct of yesterday and today.

The spirit for 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. Incomparable 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 debasing 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 everywhere and everywhere. Authority has a noble function, and should never shrink from discharging it, in the literary as in every other sphere.