

THE PREVENTION
OF LITERATURE



IN THE SAME SERIES

I. Why I Write

II. Politics and the English Language

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*The Prevention
of Literature*

GEORGE ORWELL



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THE PREVENTION
OF LITERATURE

A BOUT A YEAR AGO
I attended a meeting
of the PEN Club,* the
occasion being the tercentenary of
Milton's *Aeropagitica** – a pamph-
let, it may be remembered, in
defence of freedom of the press.
Milton's famous phrase about the
sin of 'killing' a book was printed
on the leaflets advertising the
meeting which had been circu-
lated beforehand.

There were four speakers on the platform. One of them delivered a speech which did deal with the freedom of the press, but only in relation to India; another said, hesitantly, and in very general terms, that liberty was a good thing; a third delivered an attack on the laws relating to obscenity in literature. The fourth devoted most of his speech to a defence of the Russian purges. Of the speeches from the body of the hall, some reverted to the question of obscenity and the laws that deal with it; others were simply eulogies of Soviet Russia. Moral liberty — the liberty to discuss sex questions frankly in print — seemed to be generally approved, but political liberty was not mentioned. Out of this concourse of several hundred

people, perhaps half of whom were directly connected with the writing trade, there was not a single one who could point out that freedom of the press, if it means anything at all, means the freedom to criticise and oppose. Significantly, no speaker quoted from the pamphlet which was ostensibly being commemorated. Nor was there any mention of the various books which have been 'killed' in England and the United States during the war. In its net effect the meeting was a demonstration in favour of censorship.¹

1 It is fair to say that the PEN Club celebrations, which lasted a week or more, did not always stick at quite the same level. I happened to strike a bad day. But an examination of the speeches (printed under the title *Freedom of Expression*) shows that almost nobody in our own day is able to speak out as roundly in favour of intellectual liberty as Milton could do 300 years ago – and this in spite of the fact Milton was writing in a period of civil war.

There was nothing particularly surprising in this. In our age, the idea of intellectual liberty is under attack from two directions. On the one side are its theoretical enemies, the apologists of totalitarianism, and on the other its immediate practical enemies, monopoly and bureaucracy. Any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution. The sort of things that are working against him are the concentration of the press in the hands of a few rich men, the grip of monopoly on radio and the films, the unwillingness of the public to spend money on books, making it necessary for nearly every writer to earn part of his living by hackwork, the encroachment of official bodies like the

MOI (Ministry of Information)* and the British Council, which help the writer to keep alive but also waste his time and dictate his opinions, and the continuous war atmosphere of the past ten years, whose distorting effects no one has been able to escape. Everything in our age conspires to turn the writer, and every other kind of artist as well, into a minor official, working on themes handed down from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth. But in struggling against this fate he gets no help from his own side – that is, there is no large body of opinion which will assure him that he's in the right. In the past – at any rate, throughout the Protestant centuries – the idea of rebellion and the idea of intellectual integrity were mixed up.

A heretic – political, moral, religious or aesthetic – was one who refused to outrage his own conscience. His outlook was summed up in the words of the Revivalist hymn:

Dare to be a Daniel
Dare to stand alone
Dare to have a purpose firm
Dare to make it known

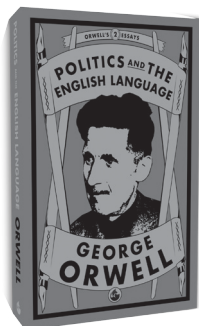
To bring this hymn up to date one would have to add a ‘Don’t’ at the beginning of each line. For it is the peculiarity of our age that the rebels against the existing order – at any rate, the most numerous and characteristic of them – are also rebelling against the idea of individual integrity. ‘Daring to stand alone’ is ideologically criminal, as well as practically

dangerous. The independence of the writer and the artist is eaten away by vague economic forces, and at the same time it is undermined by those who should be its defenders. It is with the second process that I am concerned here.

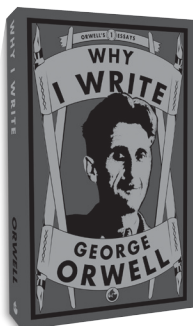
Freedom of thought and of the press are usually attacked by arguments which are not worth bothering about. Anyone who has experience of lecturing and debating knows them off backwards. Here I am not trying to deal with the familiar claim that freedom is an illusion, or with the claim that there is more freedom in totalitarian countries than in democratic ones, but with the much more tenable and dangerous proposition that freedom is undesirable and that intellectual honesty



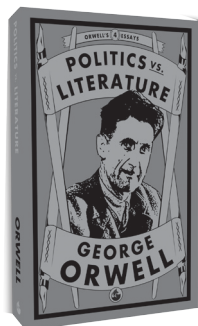
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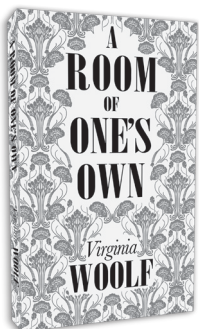
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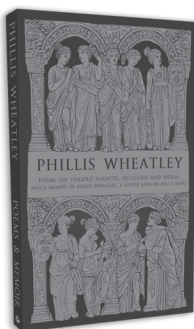
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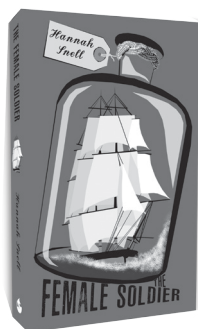
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