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Julian Symons*

Orwell's Prophecies: The
Limits of Liberty and the
Limits of Law

Let me say something first about the scope of this talk. As we approach 1984, George Orwell's book with that title seems to have increasing relevancy. It was not intended as a prophetic work — the very title came simply from the fact that the final version was completed in 1948, so that the last two numerals were reversed. And it was concerned less with conjectural futures than with the world Orwell saw around him. It was, he said, a projection of what might happen if totalitarian tendencies in several countries developed as they had been doing in the years since 1939. So one aspect of the work was concerned with the social politics of the time, especially those of the Soviet Union and its allies. But he was interested also in the problems of freedom and liberty considered as ideas, and it is over this aspect of his work that I shall start. What is the nature of freedom, what are our attitudes towards it, at the end of 1983? Do people ask for wrong kinds of freedoms at times? Is it possible that freedom in some contexts works against social good?

In the course of asking such questions, and discussing modern examples of freedom demanded by minority groups, I shall be referring back often to Orwell, for the absolute directness of his opinions and his refusal to take any orthodox view for granted constitute a large part of his value for our time as well as his own. If freedom of the press means anything important, he once said, it must mean freedom for people to say things we do not wish to hear. That is a phrase to which I shall return. Some of you may even find it exemplified in this lecture.

But it may be asked: how can there possibly be any argument about *freedom*? Where is the problem? Freedom? Naturally we're all in favour of it, never a dissentient voice in the house. Yet there *is* a problem, and it is essentially how to reconcile the demands made

*The author is a celebrated practitioner of the crime novel. In addition he has a reputation as a reviewer for the Sunday Times, a biographer, a poet, an anthologist, and a social and military historian. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he was a friend and correspondent of George Orwell's in his later life. This was the first in the 1983 Dorothy J. Killam Lecture Series, "Law on the Eve of 1984", presented at Dalhousie Law School on October 20, 1983.

by society upon the individuals in it, with the desire of those individuals for an ever-increasing amount of personal freedom in ordering their own lives. Should individuals and groups be free to drop out of society, as many young people in the West have done? And if they exercise such freedom, should society deny them the right to use all those services, the social benefits ranging from cash through the sewerage system to medical help, that are paid for by the majority who have not dropped out? That is one instance of the problems involved by the idea of freedom. Or rather by the practice of it, for the idea is one thing, the practice another.

As an example of the gap between theory and practice, consider the case of John Stuart Mill. Mill's essay *On Liberty* outlines an attitude towards freedom which seemed irrefutable to many liberal thinkers in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and still finds many supporters, whose pattern of thought follows Mill, even though at second or third hand. Mill was writing in mid-century, at a time when individual freedom was very firmly bound by social constraints. No lady could possibly take a paid job, unless she was in what were called distressed circumstances, and freedom of action for men was strictly ordered by their position in society. At the core of Mill's brilliant little essay is the view that it was wrong for heretical minorities of all kinds to be denied the liberties available to those who took a majority view. The only end for which society is warranted in infringing the liberty of action of any individual, he said, is self-protection. Power should be exercised to prevent the individual from doing harm to others, but that is the only part of his conduct for which he should be answerable to society. In every other way he should have freedom. Freedom of thought and feeling; freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical and speculative; freedom to publish and express any opinion; freedom of tastes and pursuits; freedom also for a number of people to combine for any purpose not involving harm to others. "No society", Mill says, "in which these liberties are not, on the whole respected is free, whatever may be its form of government, and none is completely free in which they do not exist absolute and unqualified."

The basis of Mill's viewpoint is that we can never be quite sure about the truth or falsity of any opinion, so that suppression is an assertion of infallibility that can't be justified. This is something he pursues at great length. Even if an opinion is false, he says, it should not be suppressed, because it is by the continual conflict of

opinion that we arrive at truth. If what we conceive to be truth must not be controverted, and as he says “fully, frequently and fearlessly discussed”, it will turn from living truth to dead dogma.

That is a brief, and, I hope, fair summary of the doctrine advanced in Mill’s essay, in his characteristically lucid and persuasive style. If what he says is regarded as an abstract statement of something desirable, not many people would disagree with it, but if we should go on to suggest *action* on such views Mill shows, almost casually and off-handedly, that he has no intention of applying the abstract phrases to the actual events of his own time. He says:

An opinion that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor, or that private property is robbery, ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob, assembled before the house of a corn-dealer.

In other words, an opinion may be tolerated when it is purely verbal; but if it is likely to lead to results in the field of action, it should be suppressed. And Mill was able also neatly to exclude from his conception of freedom and liberty Britain’s vast nineteenth-century colonial empire:

We may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage Despotism is a legitimate method of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.

But can we be sure that the despots will have in mind the improvement of the barbarians, rather than their continued subjection? There’s the rub. That is a possibility Mill, a man of high principle who assumed others to be equally virtuous, doesn’t even consider. And since thought and speech have their ends in action, is it not hypocritical to suggest that criticism of private property or of corn-dealers or anything else should be permitted — providing such criticism is made in circumstances when it can’t possibly be effective?

Mill was deeply conscious of the conflict between society and the individual, yet one must say that he evaded it. To find the true meaning of his fine words we must compare what he asks for verbally with what he requires in practice. He demands verbally an unlimited amount of “freedom”, setting no bound at all to it, and saying that no opinion should be suppressed even though it may be that of one man against the rest of the world. In practice, however,

he asks only that freedom should prevail in the section of society to which he belongs. The liberal intellectuals of Mill's day did not wish to change the nature of government, and therefore did not propose to grant practical freedom to those who wished to overthrow it. They had no intention of relinquishing British colonies, and therefore thought despotism to be "legitimate" in dealing with "barbarians". Of course no conscious hypocrisy is implied in Mill or his fellow-thinkers. The point I am making is that if you say, as so many liberals did in Victorian times and do to-day, "Freedom is a good thing, lack of it is a bad thing", without any qualification, then you cannot choose your freedoms. "Freedom" for Mill's barbarians would have implied the death of the despots who ruled them, as "freedom" for the Catholics in Northern Ireland now implies the death of British soldiers and civilians who are the present rulers of the province. Freedom, failing some further definition of it, is only a word.

It was such condemnation of freedom as an abstract idea, often used as a cover for something unpleasant, that Orwell had in mind in *1984*. On the white concrete pyramid of the Ministry of Truth, picked out in elegant lettering, are the three Party slogans: "War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength." And of the chief Ministries in Oceania, the Ministry of Peace concerns itself with war; the Ministry of Love with law and order; and the Ministry of Plenty with economic affairs. In case we should think these are merely easy paradoxes Orwell bodies out the full meaning of the phrases in the extracts from Goldstein's book that Winston Smith is permitted to read. The book says:

"The essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labour. War is a way of shattering to pieces, or pouring into the stratosphere, or sinking in the depths of the sea, materials which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable."

And:

"Much the same effect would be obtained if the three super-states, instead of fighting one another, should agree to live in perpetual peace, each inviolate within its own boundaries."

A peace that was truly permanent would be the same as a permanent war. This is the inner meaning of the Party slogan: "War Is Peace." And although we don't get Goldstein's explanation of "Freedom Is Slavery", the essentials of it are given by O'Brien, the Party interrogator who first tricks and then tortures Winston. O'Brien, a

Berkeleyan solipsist, forces Winston to accept that two and two may make four or five, and that the individual's freedom exists only when he makes submission to a superior power. "We are the priests of power", he says to Winston. "God is power." And he continues:

You know the Party slogan: 'Freedom Is Slavery.' Has it ever occurred to you that it is reversible? Slavery is freedom. Alone — free — the human being is always defeated. It must be so, because every human being is doomed to die, which is the greatest of all failures. But if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he *is* the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal.

Of course, all this is satirically meant. Freedom is slavery, indeed! The idea, we exclaim, is preposterous, mere playing around with words. That is true, but it is true also that such submission is demanded and readily given, not only in totalitarian regimes like Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, but also by some religious movements, and by countries like Victorian Britain where the nation's needs were placed always above those of the individual. Slavery can never be freedom, we say; but there are in many countries today people who are slaves in the sense that they have given up the desire for individual thought, and are happy in such abnegation. There are psychiatrists who treat political dissidents as people suffering from mental illness and "cure" those who have no disease, scientists who willingly play a part in preparing weapons that can destroy millions of people (or in the case of the neutron bomb kill people while preserving buildings and equipment for the conquerors), and these people do not think of themselves as doing anything wrong. Nor do they think that they are slaves. They are simply acting in accordance with the will of a particular state, and many of them would say that the work they are doing, even when it involves destruction and torture, is in the interests of freedom.

So freedom needs defining, it cannot simply be invoked. And freedom is not the only word to be treated as an abstraction of absolute good. In his essay on "Politics and the English Language", written in 1947, Orwell noted this. He said:

The word 'Fascism' has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'. The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like democracy, not only is

there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to one meaning.

The process he observed, with remarkable prescience just after the war, has developed greatly during the past thirty-odd years. In Britain today to call somebody a Fascist is simply a term of abuse, to say that an organisation uses fascist methods probably means only that they have refused a union request for increased wages. Opponents of Mrs. Thatcher often call her a Fascist, Tories say the same about some Labour and trade union leaders, and label any intellectual they dislike as a bleeding heart or a pinko. I have seen Mr. Trudeau called a Fascist in print, and I don't doubt that the same word is applied to his opponents. The word's use extends from politics to culture, and indeed to almost everything. Any limit placed on what may be said in a book, play or film, any job denied to a member of a minority group — denied, say, to a black or homosexual — is immediately called fascism. This use of the word to mean anything a speaker wishes can lead to absurdities — cases where something proclaimed as an extension of freedom in one year may soon afterwards be called fascism. One ludicrous instance relates to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In the famous Old Bailey trial of November, 1960, the book, which had hitherto been unpublished in Britain except in expurgated form, was found not to be obscene. Defence witnesses including clergymen, literary critics, the Tory MP Norman St. John Stevas, who was later to be leader of the House of Commons, said some things about the book that may make them blush a little today. They said it had great educational merit for the young, that every Catholic and Catholic priest would benefit by reading it, that it contained a moving advocacy of chastity, that it was a moral tract. There was universal rejoicing among progressives that the book could now be freely read, and in fact the paperback sales were well over a million copies. But at that time the feminist movement was in its infancy, and writers like Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin and Susan Brownmiller hadn't yet published their books maintaining (I'm quoting from Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*) that rape is the action by which men keep women in order, and — this is Dworkin — that women will be free only when pornography no longer exists. So what about Lady

Chatterley? For the most active and vocal feminists today it is a disgusting work, inspired by male chauvinism, and (whisper the word) fascist. I quote from a letter of December 1981 in England's most progressive paper, *The Guardian*:

Twenty odd years ago the degree of sexual ignorance in this country was so appalling that it was an easy matter for the academic establishment to promote a sexually repressive fascist novelette such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a beacon of enlightenment. Are we still prepared to accept this cheating obscenity?

The feminist movement sees nothing incongruous in asking for the greatest possible freedom for themselves, and at the same time demanding the banning of all pornography, including the "fascist novelette", *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Do you approve of freedom for militant feminism or freedom for Lady Chatterley? You can't do both.

The contradictions between speech and action are equally great if we consider the word "democracy". As Orwell says, every political group and party calls itself democratic, but sometimes this democracy is expressed in strange ways. In the recent election for leader of the Labour Party a major part was played by the trade unions, which had been allotted 40 per cent of the total vote. How did they decide which way those votes would be cast? In many cases, not by consultation with the mass of members but by decision of an executive committee, some thirty or forty people who said which way half a million or more votes should cast. The union leaders said, with straight faces, that this was a democratic procedure. In the British Liberal Party, which also claims to be democratic, the Party leader has an overriding veto over anything that may be decided by the members at the yearly Party Conference. Perhaps they have all been reading Lewis Carroll: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." Or perhaps we should give up using the word democracy.

There will always be some who ask whether any of this matters much. The English language, they say, is in a process of continual change, and if the use of words is altered, no doubt this is a reflection of their different meaning for a changing society. But this is mere sophisticated chat, used most often to cover with a sanctified word something the sophist dislikes. To call Lawrence's novel a fascist novelette is simply abuse without factual reference. To call the Labour and Liberal actions I have described democratic is a

reversal of the word's dictionary meaning. And of course these are only two examples out of hundreds where the accepted meaning of words or phrases is ignored or inverted by those who want to cover their actual intentions. We must look always for the reality behind the phrase. Two current misuses of the word democracy occur in the American claim that they are acting to support democracy in Central American, and the British Government's similar claim about their policy in Northern Ireland. In fact the Americans wish to impose local dictatorships congenial to themselves, and the British rule Northern Ireland through the Army. It may be that American-imposed dictatorship and British military rule are the best available possibilities for the people of those countries, but there is nothing democratic about actions which are dictated solely by national self-interest.

But this is really a long parenthesis, a demonstration of ways in which use of the word freedom is meaningless or contradictory. I return to the question of how, coming up to 1984, we can talk about freedom in a way that has meaning. I suggest that instead of using the word as an abstraction we should consider always instead particular, specific freedoms, and that all of those freedoms must have limits. Freedom, in fact, is relative, not absolute.

As an illustration of this, let me outline the course of an actual argument between Orwell and myself soon after the end of World War II. (In case anybody should think I am misrepresenting Orwell, perhaps I should say that the article was published in 1946, and that he read and commented on it.) It concerned the question of free speech for Fascists I am using the word correctly, to mean those who were members of the British Union of Fascists or supported Hitler or Mussolini. If you had power to suppress Fascist propaganda, I asked Orwell, would you do so? He replied:

“Not to-day. The Fascists are a negligible force in England now, and suppression is always a bad thing. First Fascists are suppressed, then Trotskyists, Stalinists, finally anybody who is opposed to the Government.”

And yet, I said, he had been in favour of suppressing Fascist propaganda during the war?

“Yes, because then they were working for the Germans — just as pacifists were, though most of the pacifists didn't intend to do so.”

But wasn't that wholly illogical? He said:

“Very well, then, it’s illogical. But two things are plain to anyone with common sense. First, suppression of political freedom is a bad thing. But second, when you’re fighting for your life against Fascism, you’d be a plain fool to allow a Fascist Fifth Column to flourish in your country.”

He was certainly inconsistent, and I thought then that Orwell was wrong but I believe now that his general argument was right. I said I would return to that remark of his about freedom of the press meaning the freedom to criticise and oppose. To suppress Fascist propaganda in wartime was a contradiction of that statement, yet Orwell was obviously sensible to say that a society which permits enemy propaganda to circulate in wartime must desire its own destruction. Is there a parallel here with Mill’s refusal to let those who thought corn dealers starved the poor to say so outside the house of a corn dealer? No, because perhaps the corn dealer did starve the local poor, whereas the enemy in wartime was intent on destroying every freedom valued by the British and other peoples in Europe. In such circumstances, Orwell was saying, freedom must have limits.

Perhaps I should add, as a pendant to this argument, and to show the complexity of it, that Orwell and I were both members at this time of a body called the Freedom Defence Committee. During the war quite a lot of Fascists had been imprisoned without trial, and when the war ended some of them remained in prison, along with a few pacifists and other dissidents. The National Council for Civil Liberties had become at that time a Communist front organisation, and showed no interest except in Communist prisoners. The Freedom Defence Committee took up cases of people whose opinions we might detest, but who were being kept in prison for no reason. Freedom, in this case, demanded that we should campaign for the release of those who had no interest in freedom. Orwell took an active interest in the Committee, and drafted a manifesto for a larger grouping that never developed. It’s relevant to what I’ve been saying that he thought the first task of the group should be to redefine the word “democracy”, which he said had to go beyond what it meant to nineteenth century liberals.

So, freedom is relative. But, more than that, freedom depends on law. It is significant in *1984* that Oceania is a country where “nothing was illegal, since there were no longer any laws”. Were the inhabitants free, then? Not at all. Keeping a diary was punishable by death, or a long term in a forced labour camp. No

doubt Orwell had particularly in mind here the Soviet Union, which had a model constitution guaranteeing all sorts of so-called rights, rights which didn't prevent millions of people being imprisoned without trial. And today they are still imprisoned, or sent to labour camps or psychiatric hospitals — or they simply disappear. There are many countries now in which a discussion like this one would be impossible, and where any use of the word freedom must be ironical. They include, obviously, the Soviet Union and its satellites, but also many dictatorships in Africa and South America with quite different political approaches. But those imprisoned because they have put on paper ideas about possible changes in their society (putting things on *paper* is the cardinal sin, all dictatorships fear the written word) are not inclined to make nice distinctions between one kind of dictatorship and another. They would be likely to greet with bitter laughs the situation of those lucky enough to have the luxury of arguing about whether freedom is absolute or relative. Their own deprivation of many freedoms, they might say, has certainly been absolute.

One can only express sympathy and sorrow, while asserting that the distinctions *do* matter. It is widely known that almost all the dissidents who have escaped from or been expelled by totalitarian regimes have been dismayed, and often disgusted, by what seems to them the triviality and the consumer-oriented greed of Western countries. Our desire for more automobiles in every family, better TV sets and videos, a wider range of convenience foods, seems to them trivial. But the nature of freedom is not trivial. It is among the matters that the Czechoslovak adherents to Charter 77 and the writers of Russian samizdat would be arguing about if they were allowed to do so.

Orwell was not concerned only, either in *1984* or in his essays, with the Soviet Union. He took up the point I have made about the interdependence of freedom and law in an essay called "Politics versus Literature", stressing a totalitarian tendency which he found in the anarchist and pacifist visions of society. "In a society in which there is no law and in theory no compulsion", he wrote, "the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals, is less tolerant than any system of law."

This was certainly true at the time he was writing, but it is no longer so today. Orwell lived in a period when there was a consensus of feeling about what might be said within the bounds of

decorum, good taste, or even the law. Mill, nearly a hundred years earlier, was of course even more firmly bound by conventions of speech and behaviour. But there is now no such consensus, and all sorts of freedoms exist that Orwell did not even imagine as possibilities. Some concern the freedom to write and to publish. In several countries it is now possible to publish anything of a sexual or what would in the past have been called blasphemous nature without fear of prosecution. In Britain the Lady Chatterley trial played a large part in securing this freedom. In the United States a cat's cradle of complications involving the possibility that a publication otherwise obscene might still be for the public good, has been solved by almost total permissiveness. In some other European countries there has been for a long while a tradition of almost completely free speech.

Let me return for a moment to the Lady Chatterley decision, and its results. I was present throughout the trial, reporting it for the London *Sunday Times* as a matter of literary and social importance, and along with the other reporters I had no doubt that the book would be found obscene, especially after a summing-up wholly against it by Mr. Justice Byrne. The nine men and three women who made up the jury were in appearance wholly ordinary, yet their verdict contradicted Orwell's idea that public opinion is less tolerant than any system of law when they voted unanimously for acquittal. The surprised commentators said hurrah at the verdict, and the freedom it gave to writers.

I don't think any of us envisaged this particular freedom as one that would bring true a minor aspect of Orwell's book, that of Pornosec. This, in case you don't recall it, is the production of cheap pornography for the lowest section of the population. Pornosec is not produced by individuals. (In 1984 almost no activities are individual.) It is produced by a group working to instructions, on novel-writing machines which issue "booklets in sealed packets with titles like *Spanking Stories* or *One Night in a Girl's School*." At the time Orwell wrote, this sort of group book production, whether pornographic or not, was a fantasy. Now the novel-writing machine, in the form of a book produced by several hands, is very much a reality. The blockbuster, or best-seller, is often conceived in the mind of a literary agent who thinks of an idea which seems to promise immense sales. The agent approaches a publisher, agrees on an enormous advance — and then, and often not till then, a writer is called in to produce the book, with the

critical help of publisher and agent. As for Pornosec it is very much with us, not as a propaganda function of government but as big business. Big criminal business too, linked to the Mafia.

This extension of literary freedom has posed social rather than sexual questions. Social questions are also posed by the treatment of homosexuals in Western society. Few people nowadays would think it right that Oscar Wilde should have been sent to prison. Probably a large majority would agree that it is humane and right that consenting adults should do whatever they wish together in private, something that in Britain happened as a result of legislation enacted on the basis of a report made by Sir John Wolfenden. If we look back at Mill, we find him saying that society has no right to interfere in "that portion of person's life and conduct which affects only himself, or, if it also affects others, only with their free, voluntary, and undeceived consent and participation." But male homosexuals and lesbians now demand much more than the mere consent of the majority. Like feminists, they have gone on the attack. The newspaper extract I am going to read is not exceptional, but typical of many others. It concerns a plan by a London borough council to allow homosexuals to look after children in the council nurseries and children's homes. The Council spokesman said:

It is important for the personal development of children and young people that they are aware of different sexualities and the possible choices available to them. The council will therefore recruit lesbians and gay men to all council posts.

The statement produced hostile reactions from many families, for reasons that I need hardly describe. Nevertheless, it is now in practice. There is among homosexuals and feminists, as in all minority groups, a strong impulse to proselytise. Often this is harmless or trivial. Nobody will feel particular concern if proponents of vegetarianism, opponents of vivisection or members of religious groups like Jehovah's Witnesses campaign strongly for their cause, because they do not interfere with the desire of the majority to eat meat, use the scientific knowledge obtained by experiments on animals, and pursue their own attitudes towards religion. The case is obviously different where lesbians and homosexuals are looking after those of an impressionable age, children whom they will attempt to guide into a way of life that seems good to them, but is not one that the majority of parents would wish for their children.

I have been speaking about this with almost unseemly moderation, but you may have gathered that I am now approaching directly the question: are some freedoms undesirable? I believe that this is so. I think we should never talk about “freedom”, but should consider instead each individual freedom as it affects society. As an example, the *idea* of trade unionism, that groups of people should be free to join together to obtain improvements in the conditions of their work that they could never achieve alone, and thus realise greater freedom throughout their lives, is clearly a good one in any industrial society. The practical operations of trade unions, on the other hand, are open to various objections, all of which could be comprised in their tendency like other minority movements (for individual trade unions, large though they may be, are always a small minority) to limit freedom for the majority in the course of improving their own position in society. I don’t want to consider here the nuts and bolts of trade union practice, like the closed shop, the compulsory contributions to this and that, the withdrawal of a union card as a punishment. Some of these may be justified in particular times and places, others not. The same arguments cannot be applied to well paid printing workers and semi-starving Mexican grape-pickers, even though both are striking for higher wages. The point is that trade unions arose as a curb on the unjust authority of employers, and that a similar curb is necessary to-day on many of the unions themselves. If one accepts that both freedom and order are necessary elements in society, then the kind of freedom trade unions demand and the kind of order they impose are sometimes unacceptable. On the other hand, if anybody doubts the need for unions to exist independent of government control, the example of the Soviet bloc countries, where they are merely agents for carrying out government instructions, should be a sufficient warning. Free trade unions are essential: complete freedom for trade unions is not.

When we try to assess personal, as distinct from group, freedoms, we come back to that basic question of the balance to be maintained between society and the individual. Mill thought that in his time, as he put it: “Society has fairly got the better of individuality; and the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences.” In 1984 Orwell went further, and depicted a world in which individuality has been extinguished. One of the purposes of Newspeak, the language of Oceania, is to make heretical ideas literally unspeakable, because there is no language in which they

can be expressed. During the course of Winston's re-education by O'Brien, when Winston asks whether something exists as you or I exist, O'Brien says calmly: "You do not exist." And this gives further point to the slogan "Freedom in Slavery." Only through slavery can the individual escape from the troubles that exist through personal passions, beliefs and doubts. Slavery removes them all.

The picture is a true one for totalitarian society. On the dark side of the world, the side ruled by dictatorships of all kinds, society has got the better of individuality, although the struggles of dissidents proclaiming heretical views tell us that individuality survives. Even in the Soviet Union the nightmare of 1984 has not yet been realised. On what we think of as the light side, however, almost the contrary is true: individuality has triumphed, and in the name of freedom has in the past twenty years punched many holes in the fabric of society. With these personal freedoms has gone an inability to understand on the part of those who demand them, even a refusal to contemplate, what life is like on the dark side. Yes, yes, we say, things are terrible for those in the prison camps, dungeons, torture chambers of those countries: but we are far more truly outraged when somebody in our own country is unjustly imprisoned for a month, or loses his job because of his colour or religion, or is beaten up because he is a member of some minority.

Yet those who complain of such minor injustices are quite likely to be the same people as those who say of dissidents elsewhere that they knew what would happen if they opposed their government. A sense of proportion is too often lacking. In his Nobel Prize speech Solzhenitsyn underlined the vast difference in approach:

What, according to one scale, appears from afar as enviable flourishing freedom, according to another scale, near at hand, is perceived as vexatious constraint calling for the overturning of buses. What, in one area, could only be dreamed of as unattainable prosperity, in another area gives rise to indignation and is considered vicious exploitation demanding an immediate strike. . . There are different scales for punishment and for crime. According to one scale, a month's imprisonment, or banishment to the country, or to a so-called 'punishment cell' where they feed you with white bread rolls and milk, shocks the imagination and fills the columns of the newspapers with anger. According to another scale, people accept as reasonable prison terms of twenty-five years, dungeons where there is ice on the wall but where they strip you to your underwear, lunatic asylums for the

sane, and the shooting on the frontier of countless people who won't see reason and who keep running away.

Sometimes there is more than the indifference Solzhenitsyn talked of. One of the worst features of our time is an active hatred felt against those most helpless — the poor, the old, the handicapped, children — so that they are often the targets of vicious, meaningless attacks on the part of those who are themselves deprived. This hardness of heart, this desire to eliminate the dangerous emotion of pity, is again remarkably prefigured in Orwell's book. Winston, in his diary, writes things he is quickly ashamed of:

Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. Audience much amused by shots of great huge fat man trying to swim away with a helicopter after him, first you saw him wallowing along in the water like a porpoise, then you saw him through the helicopter's gunsights, then he was full of holes and the sea around him turned pink and he sank as suddenly as though the holes had let in the water, audience shouting with laughter when he sank.

Freedom of the pen, freedom of speech and action, are blessings, of course they are. Yet on our side of the world they have been used in recent years to promote a kind of nihilism that denies the need for *any* social order. In essence all of the "freedoms" such nihilism demands deny the importance of the intellect and the relevance of reason. Among them one that may seem very minor is particularly damaging because it affects the future: the demand for freedom from any set kind of academic instruction.

At its mildest this particular freedom can, in some universities, make it possible for a student to take an English degree without having read a word of Shakespeare. With the rejection in such places of a core curriculum — of certain works or groups of works that *must* be read by anybody taking an English degree — a student may take courses in a number of subjects which will give him a degree, even though he remains ignorant of all the major English poets and most of the major novelists. This is surely a freedom that is of no use to anybody. A small matter, you may think, although it indicates at the least a slackening of standards: but certainly it is small in comparison with the demand of students a few years ago that they, rather than the President and faculty, should control what is done in a University. Were they objecting to inadequate teaching,

or to a dictatorial rule? Not at all. Most of them, and the sizeable minority of academics who supported them, disliked rather what they saw as the feebleness of liberalism, expressed in administrators' reluctance to fight them with anything but the proper weapons in the customary way. The kind of freedom students asked for in the late Sixties and early Seventies was freedom to destroy the structure of the very institution in which they were being educated. Told to report to their deans for discipline they demanded instead in one case that the vice-President should appear before *them*. The case, as I'm sure some of you will recall, was that of Columbia University in New York, and the protesting students denied the right of the University's governors to govern. Under the slogan of participatory democracy (that word democracy, what weight it bears) these students demanded the right to take part in managing the University, the right to set their own courses. Their chief spokesman said, in a letter to the President: "We will destroy your world, your corporation, your University."

In her bright essay on the troubles at Columbia, Diana Trilling said truly that the students' "disaffection from the University represented the disaffection from modern society and its authorities of people everywhere to-day." It is true that the revolt at Columbia and the similar disruptions and acts against authority at many other Universities and colleges in the Western world, have not been repeated in the past few years, but the kind of nihilistic freedom demanded then has simply spread and been diversified, one powerful stream going into what is vaguely called the women's movement, another into racial struggle. In relation to the question of universities and revolt against them as institutions, Saul Bellow spoke what seems to me a final word. "You don't found universities in order to destroy culture", he said. "For that you want a Nazi party." Some of the Columbia students were taking on the role of the Nazi party. And there is a question vitally important to this whole argument about the nature and limits of freedom which Bellow says is a basic subject of his books. It is: "How can one resist the controls of this vast society *without* turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion?" His protagonists do not find complete or satisfactory answers, any more than the rest of us have done, but like him they understand the importance of the question.

Let me try to draw together the threads of what I have been saying. I have suggested that the word "freedom" should never be

used as a mere desirable abstraction. It should be considered always in the context of something specific. We should say: freedom to do *this* for one group means some restrictions on another group who wish to do *that*. Then we should ask: is group A's freedom worth group B's restriction? I have suggested also that, in the unending struggle between the rights of individuals and the needs of society the balance has in the West tipped too far in favour of individuals when they join together in minority pressure groups. I hope, without much confidence, that nobody will interpret this as a view that such pressure groups should not exist. But as propagandists demanding freedom for themselves they should always be aware of their minority position in society, and the fact that they cannot be granted too much freedom without changing and damaging the nature of that society. That fine phrase of W.B. Yeats: "In dreams begin responsibilities" might in this context be adapted to read: "In freedom begins responsibility". It is such responsibility that Solzhenitsyn had in mind when he asked in his Nobel Prize speech: "Who will explain to mankind what is really terrible and unbearable, and what only irritates our skin because it is near?" It is a fine freedom for the writer to be able to use any words and describe any actions without fear of prosecution: but that freedom carries with it a burden of responsibility which many writers have ignored, instead scratching away at the mere irritation of the skin.

Over much that I have been saying I feel the shadow of Orwell, not merely that of the author of *1984* (although many of the ideas advanced here are implicit in the argument about the nature and possibility of freedom conducted in that book), but also of the essayist whose commonsense cut away the verbiage from many of the theories of his own time to show the nonsense beneath. One of the things that Orwell knew, and looked at often in his writings, is that individual freedom must be controlled by reasonable law. In Oceania there were no laws, and so in theory no limitation on what might be done. But, as in any society where there is no apparent limit to freedom, there was in Oceania no freedom.