Areopagitica

If Areopagitica is Milton's most resonant prose work, it may be because, first, its specific polemical purpose was one which still moves us today, and whose importance has not diminished, and, second, because its author evolved during the course of his argument a powerful vision of the moral life as embodied in the world of the intellect, and, particularly for Milton, in the representation of truth in terms of major fictions. Milton's essay is an address to Parliament on the subject of licensing—not censorship, to which he was by no means totally opposed, but the prior censorship imposed by requiring books to be approved before publication. Such approval had been entrusted in 1637, by Star Chamber decision, to a small group of churchmen; and a predominantly Presbyterian Parliament, in the ordinance of 1643 to which Milton is objecting, was in effect continuing the oppressive measure, which had

in plight in condition
in place at hand
given great personal licensing power to Archbishop Laud before. Areopagitica, like Milton's divorce tracts of the previous year, itself appeared without license. Its title derives from a famous address of the Greek orator Isocrates, to the Areopagus, or high court, which held session on the Athenian hill of Ares (Mars); like Milton's, that address was not written for oral delivery.

From Areopagitica

A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing,

to the Parliament of England

This is true liberty, when free-born men,
Having to advise the public, may speak free,
Which he who can and will, deserves high praise;
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State than this?

EUROPIDES, The Supplicants

They who to states 1 and governors of the Commonwealth direct their speech, High Court of Parliament, or, wanting 2 such access in a private condition, write that which they foresee may advance the public good. I suppose them, as at the beginning of no mean endeavour, not a little altered 3 and moved inwardly in their minds: some with doubt of what will be the success; 4 others with fear of what will be the censure; 5 some with hope, others with confidence of what they have to speak. And me perhaps each of these dispositions, as the subject was whereon I entered, may have at other times variously affected; and likely might in these foremost expressions now also disclose which of them swayed most, but that the very attempt of this address thus made, and the thought of whom it hath recourse to, hath got the power within me to a passion far more welcome than incidental to a preface. Which though I stay not to confess ere any ask I shall be blameless, if it be no other than the joy and gratulation which it brings to all who wish and promote their country's liberty; whereof this whole discourse proposed will be a certain testimony, if not a trophy. 6 For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth—that let no man in this world expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for. . . .

Nor did they stay in matters heretical, but any subject that was not to their palate they either condemned in a Prohibition or had it straight into the new Purgatory of an Index. To fill up the measure of encroachment, their last invention was to ordain that no book, pamphlet, or paper should be printed (as

1. The three estates of lords, clergy, and commons forming the parliaments of England and France.
2. Lacking.
3. Worried.
4. Result.
5. Decision; a neutral term.
6. Of victory in his argument.
if St. Peter had bequeathed them the keys of the press also out of Paradise) unless it were approved and licensed under the hands of two or three glutton friars. For example:

‘Let the Chancellor Cini be pleased to see if in this present work be contained aught that may withstand the printing.

Vincent Rabbatta, Vicar of Florence.’

‘I have seen this present work, and find nothing athwart the Catholic faith and good manners: in witness whereof I have given, etc.

Nicolo Cini, Chancellor of Florence.’

‘Attending the precedent relation, it is allowed that this present work of Davanzati may be printed.

Vincent Rabbatta, etc.’

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon’s teeth, and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. ’Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great loss; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse. We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of man, preserved and stored up in books; since we see a kind of homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdom, and if it extend to the whole impression, a kind of massacre, whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elemental life, but strikes at that ethereal and fifth essence. the breath of reason itself, slays an immortality rather than a life. But lest I should be condemned of introducing license, while I oppose licensing, I refuse not the pains to be so much historical as will serve to show what hath been done by ancient and famous commonwealths, against this disorder, till the very time that this project of licensing crept out of the Inquisition, was caught up by our prelates, and

7. Cadmus and Jason both slew dragons and sowed their teeth, from which sprang up a crop of soldiers (Ovid, Metamorphoses III.95 ff. and VII.121 ff.).
8. In the reader’s eye.
9. Beyond the four elements lay a fifth entity, ether, the heavenly essence (see Donne, “A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy’s Day,” l. 151n).
10. The church’s inquisitorial institution rooted out heresy and heterodoxy; its powers, Milton insists, were inherited by Rome’s Anglican opponents (“prelates”) and, in turn, by the latter’s Presbyterian antagonists (“New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large” Milton would write two years later).
hath caught some of our presbyters. [Milton now goes on to summarize the
history of censorship, in Greece, Rome, and in the early days of the church,
concluding with the introduction of prohibitions against reading heretical books
in the 15th century, and the activities of the Spanish Inquisition and the Council
of Trent (1545–63). A witty passage attacking ecclesiastical approval follows.]

'It may be printed, July 15.
Friar Simon Mompej d'Amelia,
Chancellor of the holy office in Florence.'

Sure they have a conceit, if he of the bottomless pit had not long since broke
prison, that this quadruple exorcism would bar him down. I fear their next
design will be to get into their custody the licensing of that which they say
Claudius intended,11 but went not through with. Vouchsafe to see another of
their forms, the Roman stamp:

'Imprimatur,12 If it seem good to the reverend master of the holy Palace,
Belcastro, Vicegerent.'

'Imprimatur, Friar Nicolo Rodolphi, Master of the holy Palace.'

Sometimes five Imprimaturs are seen together dialogue-wise in the piazza
of one title-page, complimenting and ducking each to other with their shaven
reverences, whether the author who stands by in perplexity at the foot of his
epistle shall to the press or to the sponge.13 These are the pretty responsories,14
these are the dear antiphonies,15 that so bewitched of late our prelates and their
chaplains with the goodly echo they made; and besotted us to the gay imitation
of a lordly Imprimatur, one from Lambeth House,16 another from the west end
of Paul’s;17 so apishly romanizing that the word of command still was set down
in Latin; as if the learned grammatical pen that wrote it would cast no ink
without Latin; or perhaps, as they thought, because no vulgar tongue was
worthy to express the pure conceit18 of an Imprimatur; but rather, as I hope,
for that our English, the language of men ever famous and foremost in the
achievements of liberty, will not easily find servile letters enow to spell such a
dictatory presumption English.19 And thus ye have the inventors and the
original of book-licensing ripped up20 and drawn as lineally as any pedigree.
We have it not, that can be heard of, from any ancient state. or polity, or
church, nor by any statute left us by our ancestors elder or later; nor from the

11. A license allowing one to fart at table: Milton’s marginal note quotes Suetonius’ Life of
Claudius to this effect.
12. "Let it be printed"—the phrase giving official ecclesiastical permission for publication of
manuscripts.
13. "To the sponge," meaning to have the contents wiped off, was an expression applied to
manuscripts unworthy of publication.
14. Sections of the Psalms sung between other biblical readings in the mass.
15. Hymns or anthems sung in responsive parts by two choirs.
17. This may refer either to the Bishop of London (at St. Paul’s), or to the home of the
Stationers’ Company, who urged the enforcement of the licensing order.
19. In English.
20. Revealed.
modern custom of any reformed city or church abroad; but from the most anti-
christian council and the most tyrannous inquisition that ever inquired. Till then
books were ever as freely admitted into the world as any other birth; the issue
of the brain was no more stifled than the issue of the womb: no envious Juno
sat cross-legged 21 over the nativity of any man’s intellectual offspring; but if
it proved a monster, who denies but that it was justly burnt, or sunk into the
sea. But that a book, in worse condition than a peccant soul, should be to stand
before a jury ere it be born to the world, and undergo yet in darkness the
judgment of Radamanth and his colleagues,22 ere it can pass the ferry backward
into light, was never heard before, till that mysterious iniquity, provoked
and troubled at the first entrance of Reformation, sought out new limbos and
new hells wherein they might include our books also within the number of their
dammed. And this was the rare morsel so officiously snatched up, and so ill-
favouredly imitated by our inquisitour 23 bishops, and the attendant minor-
ites 24 their chaplains. That ye like not now these most certain authors of this
licensing order, and that all sinister intention was far distant from your thoughts,
when ye were importuned the passing it, all men who know the integrity of
your actions, and how ye honour truth, will clear ye readily. [Milton then
attacks the notion that there is any good in licensing itself aside from its pro-
ponents’ vices, and adducing a remark of John Selden, the legal scholar (1584–
1654), that “all opinions, yea errors, known, read and collated, are of main
service and assistance toward the speedy attainment of what is true,” moves
to the imaginative center of his argument.]

I conceive, therefore, that when God did enlarge the universal diet of man’s
body, saving ever the rules of temperance, he then also, as before, left arbitrary
the dieting and repasting of our minds; as wherein every mature man might
have to exercise his own leading capacity. How great a virtue is temperance,
how much of moment through the whole life of man! Yet God commits the
managing so great a trust, without particular law or prescription, wholly to the
demeanour 25 of every grown man. And therefore when he himself tabled the
Jews from heaven, that omer,26 which was every man’s daily portion of manna,
is computed to have been more than might have well sufficed for the heartiest
feeder thrice as many meals. For those actions which enter into a man, rather
than issue out of him, and therefore defile not, God uses not to captivate under
a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason
to be his own chooser; there were but little work left for preaching if law and
compulsion should grow so fast upon those things which heretofore were gov-
erned only by exhortation. Solomon informs us that much reading is a weariness
to the flesh; but neither he nor other inspired author tells us that such or such
reading is unlawful; yet certainly had God thought good to limit us herein, it
had been much more expedient to have told us what was unlawful than what

21. She tried, with charms and spells, to prevent the birth of Hercules, whose mother was
in labor with him for seven days.
22. Rhadamanthus, Minos, and Aeacus, the three judges of Hades.
23. Would-be inquisitors.
24. The Franciscans called themselves “minorites,” alluding to their humility, with which
Milton here remains unimpressed.
25. Management.
26. A biblical measure, here, of manna (Exodus 16:16 ff.), the daily ration Moses was
commanded to distribute.
was wearisome. As for the burning of those Ephesian books by St. Paul's converts, 'tis replied the books were magic, the Syriac so renders them. It was a private act, a voluntary act, and leaves us to a voluntary imitation: the men in remorse burnt those books which were their own; the magistrate by this example is not appointed: these men practised the books, another might perhaps have read them in some sort usefully. Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discerned, that those confused seeds which were imposed upon Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixed. 27 It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil. 28 As therefore the state of man is, what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfarer 29 Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland 30 is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evil, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an increamental 31 whiteness; which was the reason why our sage and serious poet Spenser, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas, 32 describing true temperance under the person of Guyon, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bower of earthly bliss, 33 that he might see and know, and yet abstain. Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely and with less danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity than by reading all manner of tractates and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read.

27. In Apuleius' The Golden Ass, Venus set Psyche the task of sorting out a heap of mixed seeds, in anger at Cupid's love for her.

28. "Knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill" (Paradise Lost IV.222); in his great poem, Milton expands and elaborates this theme.

29. Wayfaring in the first edition, but there is strong evidence for the present reading.

30. The garland is the crown of virtue; being good is likened both to medieval knight-errantry and to Greek and Roman games.

31. Superficial.

32. Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, two great 13th-century logicians (the second, the master-theologian of scholasticism); they represent abstract philosophy here, as opposed to the concreteness of poetic myth.

33. See The Faerie Queene II. vii and xii. The Palmer does not accompany Guyon into the Cave of Mammon, however; Milton's memory failed him here.
Seeing, therefore, that those books, and those in great abundance which are likeliest to taint both life and doctrine, cannot be suppressed without the fall of learning, and of all ability in disputation, and that these books of either sort are most and soonest catching to the learned, from whom to the common people whatever is heretical or dissolute may quickly be conveyed, and that evil manners are as perfectly learnt without books a thousand other ways which cannot be stopped, and evil doctrine not with books can propagate, except a teacher guide, which he might also do without writing, and so beyond prohibiting, I am not unable to unfold how this cautelous enterprise of licensing can be exempted from the number of vain and impossible attempts. And he who were pleasantly disposed could not well avoid to liken it to the exploit of that gallant man who thought to pound up the crows by shutting his park gate. Besides another inconvenience, if learned men be the first receivers out of books and disreaders both of vice and error, how shall the licensers themselves be confided in, unless we can confer upon them, or they assume to themselves above all others in the land, the grace of infallibility and uncorruptedness? And again if it be true, that a wise man, like a good refiner, can gather gold out of the drossiest volume, and that a fool will be a fool with the best book, yea, or without book; there is no reason that we should deprive a wise man of any advantage to his wisdom, while we seek to restrain from a fool that which being restrained will be no hindrance to his folly. For if there should be so much exactness always used to keep that from him which is unfit for his reading, we should in the judgment of Aristotle not only, but of Solomon and of our Saviour, not vouchsafe him good precepts, and by consequence not willingly admit him to good books; as being certain that a wise man will make better use of an idle pamphlet than a fool will do of sacred Scripture.

For if we be sure we are in the right, and do not hold the truth guiltily, which becomes not, if we ourselves condemn not our own weak and frivolous teaching, and the people for an untaught and irreligious gadding rout, what can be more fair than when a man judicious, learned, and of a conscience, for aught we know as good as theirs that taught us what we know, shall not privily from house to house, which is more dangerous, but openly by writing publish to the world what his opinion is, what his reasons, and wherefore that which is now thought cannot be sound? Christ urged it as wherewith to justify himself that he preached in public; yet writing is more public than preaching; and more easy to refutation, if need be, there being so many whose business and profession merely it is to be the champions of Truth; which if they neglect, what can be imputed but their sloth, or inability?

Thus much we are hindered and disenured by this course of licensing toward the true knowledge of what we seem to know. For how much it hurts

34. Tricky, liable to backfire.
35. At the end of the Nicomachean Ethics, rejecting the possibility that philosophy can influence ordinary men, instead of guiding the best of them.
36. Throughout the Book of Proverbs, as for example 17:24 and 26:5.
37. "... Neither cast ye your pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6).
and hinders the licensers themselves in the calling of their ministry, more than any secular employment, if they will discharge that office as they ought, so that of necessity they must neglect either the one duty or the other. I insist not, because it is a particular, but leave it to their own conscience, how they will decide it there.

There is yet behind of what I purposed to lay open, the incredible loss and detriment that this plot of licensing puts us to, more than if some enemy at sea should stop up all our havens and ports and creeks, it hinders and retards the importation of our richest merchandise, Truth: nay, it was first established and put in practice by anti-christian malice and mystery on set purpose to extinguish, if it were possible, the light of Reformation, and to settle falsehood; little differing from that policy wherewith the Turk upholds his Alcoran, by the prohibition of Printing. 'Tis not denied, but gladly confessed, we are to send our thanks and vows to Heaven, louder than most of nations for that great measure of truth which we enjoy, especially in those main points between us and the Pope, with his appurtenances the Prelates: but he who thinks we are to pitch our tent here, and have attained the utmost prospect of reformation, that the mortal glass wherein we contemplate can show us, till we come to beatific vision, that man by this very opinion declares that he is yet far short of truth.

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who (as that story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris) took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming; he shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection. Suffer not these licensing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing them that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyred saint. We boast our light; but if we look not wisely on the sun itself, it smites us into darkness. Who can discern those planets that are oft combust, and those stars of brightest magnitude that rise and set with the sun, until the opposite motion of their orbs bring them to such a place in the firmament where they may be seen evening or morning. The light which we have gained was given us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover

40. Matter of particular concern.
41. Mystification.
42. Mirror (see 1 Corinthians 13:12, and comment on it in The English Bible section).
43. Typhon, Osiris' brother, murdered and dismembered him; the body floated down the Nile and was reassembled by his wife, Isis, and Horus, their son. As early as Plutarch, this was read as a myth of the mangling and scattering of Truth, and its reconstitution, both eternal processes (compare Bacon's essay, "Of Truth").
44. Full of cares.
45. "Burnt up," figuratively, by closely approaching the sun; an astrological term.
onward things more remote from our knowledge. It is not the unfrocking of a priest, the unmitring of a bishop, and the removing him from off the Presbyterian shoulders that will make us a happy nation, no, if other things as great in the church, and in the rule of life both economical and political be not looked into and reformed. We have looked so long upon the blaze that Zwinglius and Calvin hath beaconed up to us that we are stark blind. There be who perpetually complain of schisms and sects, and make it such a calamity that any man dissent from their maxims. 'Tis their own pride and ignorance which causes the disturbing, who neither will hear with meekness, nor can convince, yet all must be suppressed which is not found in their syntagma. They are the trouble they, they are the dividers of unity, who neglect and permit not others to unite those disjuncted pieces which are yet wanting to the body of Truth. To be still searching what we know not by what we know, still closing up truth to truth as we find it (for all her body is homogeneal and proportional), this is the golden rule in theology as well as in arithmetic, and makes up the best harmony in a church; not the forced and outward union of cold and neutral and inwardly divided minds.

There have been not a few since the beginning of this Parliament, both of the Presbyteries and others, who by their unlicensed books to the contempt of an Imprimatur first broke that triple ice clung about our hearts, and taught the people to see clay. I hope that none of those were the persuaders to renew upon us this bondage which they themselves have wrought so much good by contemning. But if neither the check that Moses gave to young Joshua, nor the countermand which our Saviour gave to young John, who was so ready to prohibit those whom he thought unlicensed, be not enough to admonish our elders how unacceptable to God their testy mood of prohibiting is, if neither their own remembrance what evil hath abounded in the Church by this let of licensing, and what good they themselves have begun by transgressing it, be not enough, but that they will persuade, and execute the most Dominican part of the Inquisition over us, and are already with one foot in the stirrup so active at suppressing, it would be no unequal distribution in the first place to suppress the suppressors themselves: whom the change of their condition hath puffed up, more than their late experience of harder times hath made wise.

And as for regulating the Press, let no man think to have the honour of advising ye better than yourselves have done in that order published next before this, 'that no book be printed, unless the printer's and the author's

46. Concerning household management, thus, here, private affairs.
47. Ulrich Zwinglius (1484–1531), of Zurich; John Calvin (1509–64), of Geneva—the two Swiss reformers.
49. All of a piece throughout.
50. Harmoniously composed in relations of parts to whole.
51. The Long Parliament, which first assembled November 3, 1640.
52. Putting on, and nevertheless seriously alluding to, the aes triplex ("triple bronze"), needed, says Horace (Odes I.3), to gird the heart of a man setting out, for the first time, to sea.
53. Hindrance.
54. An order previous to the one (of June 14, 1643) which Milton is disputing.
name, or at least the printer's be registered.' Those which otherwise come forth, if they be found mischievous and libellous, the fire and the executioner will be the timeliest and the most effectual remedy that man's prevention can use. For this authentic Spanish policy of licensing books, if I have said aught, will prove the most unlicensed book itself within a short while; and was the immediate image of a Star Chamber decree to that purpose made in those very times when that Court did the rest of those her pious works, for which she is now fallen from the stars with Lucifer. Whereby ye may guess what kind of state prudence, what love of the people, what care of Religion or good manners there was at the contriving, although with singular hypocrisy it pretended to bind books to their good behaviour. And how it got the upper hand of your precedent Order so well constituted before, if we may believe those men whose profession gives them cause to inquire most, it may be doubted there was in it the fraud of some old patentees and monopolizers in the trade of bookselling: who under pretence of the poor in their Company not to be defrauded, and the just retaining of each man his several copy, which God forbid should be gain-said, brought divers glozing coloured to the House, which were indeed but colours, and serving to no end except it be to exercise a superiority over their neighbours, men who do not therefore labour in an honest profession to which learning is indebted, that they should be made other men's vassals. Another end is thought was aimed at by some of them in procuring by petition this Order, that having power in their hands, malignant books might the easier scape abroad, as the event shows. But of these sophisms and elenches of merchandise I skill not. This I know, that errors in a good government and in a bad are equally almost incident: for what Magistrate may not be misinformed, and much the sooner, if liberty of Printing be reduced into the power of a few? But to redress willingly and speedily what hath been erred, and in highest authority to esteem a plain advertisement more than others have done a sumptuous bribe, is a virtue (honoured Lords and Commons) answerable to your highest actions, and whereof none can participate but greatest and wisest men.