George Orwell, “The Prevention of Literature” (1945)

(excerpts adapted from http://georgeorwellnovels.com/essays/the-prevention-of-literature/)

[Orwell starts with a brief account of a conference honoring John Milton’s Areopagitica, a groundbreaking defense of free speech which we will read next week. At the time England was fighting for its life against Germany in World War II; and Orwell observes that, while speakers at the conference praised “freedom” in general, there were some things they did not discuss: Milton’s essay itself, and the obvious practice of official censorship during the War.]

[In England] Any writer 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 [unusual or disturbing] books, the encroachment of official bodies like the Ministry of Information, which help the writer to keep alive but also … 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 government official, working on themes handed down from above and never telling what seems to him the whole of the truth.

In the past, 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.

The controversy over freedom of speech and of the press is at bottom a controversy of the desirability, or otherwise, of telling lies. What is really at issue is the right to report contemporary events truthfully, or as truthfully as is consistent with the ignorance, bias and self-deception from which every observer necessarily suffers….The writer who refuses to sell his opinions is always branded as a mere egoist. He is accused, that is, of either wanting to shut himself up in an ivory tower, or of making an exhibitionist display of his own personality, or of resisting history in an attempt to cling to unjustified privilege. [But] freedom of the intellect means the freedom to report what one has seen, heard, and felt, and not to be obliged to fabricate imaginary facts and feelings. The familiar tirades against ‘escapism’ and ‘individualism’, ‘romanticism’, and so forth, are merely a forensic device, the aim of which is to make the perversion of history seem respectable….The argument that to tell the truth would be ‘inopportune’ or would ‘play into the hands of’ somebody or other is felt to be unanswerable.
Totalitarianism demands the continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth. Totalitarianism usually tends to argue that since absolute truth is not attainable, a big lie is no worse than a little lie. It is pointed out that all historical records are biased and inaccurate, or on the other hand, that modern physics has proven that what seems to us the real world is an illusion, so that to believe in the evidence of one's senses is simply vulgar philistinism. A totalitarian society would probably set up a schizophrenic system of thought, in which the laws of common sense held good in everyday life and in certain exact sciences, but could be disregarded by the politician, the historian, and the sociologist. [Many] people would think it scandalous to falsify a scientific textbook, but would see nothing wrong in falsifying an historical fact. It is at the point where literature and politics cross that totalitarianism exerts its greatest pressure on the intellectual.

In England the immediate enemies of truthfulness, and hence of freedom of thought, are the press lords, the film magnates, and the bureaucrats, but on a long view the weakening of the desire for liberty among the intellectuals themselves is the most serious symptom of all.

Literature is an attempt to influence the viewpoint of one's contemporaries by recording experience. And so far as freedom of expression is concerned, there is not much difference between a mere journalist and the most 'unpolitical' imaginative writer. The journalist is unfree … when he is forced to write lies or suppress what seems to him important news; the imaginative writer is unfree when he has to falsify his subjective feelings, which from his point of view are facts. He may distort and caricature reality in order to make his meaning clearer, but he cannot misrepresent the scenery of his own mind; he cannot say with any conviction that he likes what he dislikes, or believes what he disbelieves. If he is forced to do so, the result is that his creative faculties will dry up. Nor can he solve the problem by keeping away from controversial topics. There is no such thing as a genuinely non-political literature…. Even a single taboo can have an all-round crippling effect upon the mind, because there is always the danger that any thought which is freely followed up may lead to the forbidden thought.

Political writing in our time consists almost entirely of prefabricated phrases bolted together like the pieces of a child's Erector set. It is the unavoidable result of self-censorship. To write in plain, vigorous language one has to think fearlessly, and if one thinks fearlessly one cannot be politically orthodox.

To be corrupted by totalitarianism one does not have to live in a totalitarian country. The mere prevalence of certain ideas can spread a kind of poison that makes one subject after another impossible for literary purposes. Wherever there is an enforced orthodoxy — or even two orthodoxies, as often happens — good writing stops.

To exercise your right of free speech you have to fight against economic pressure and against strong sections of public opinion, but not, as yet, against a secret police force. You can say or print almost anything so long as you are willing to do it in a hole-and-corner way. But what is sinister … is that the conscious enemies of liberty are those to whom liberty ought to mean most. The direct, conscious attack on intellectual decency comes from the intellectuals themselves.

The imagination, like certain wild animals, will not breed in captivity. Any writer or journalist who denies that fact — and nearly all the current praise of the Soviet Union contains or implies such a denial — is, in effect, demanding his own destruction.