Thoughts On Censorship And The Freedom Of Thinking In Early Modern Age

An Example of the History of Ideas:
John Milton's *Areopagitica**

Béla MESTER
Research Fellow
Institute for Philosophical Research,
Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest

I have recently dealt with the structure of political communities characterized by the dominance of certain media of human thinking in some of my writings.[1] During my investigations, I always considered that my major purpose was to map the possibilities of free individual thinking, and, as a framework, I sketched the following historical pattern: (1) purely or primarily *oral* societies, in which the *listener*, avoiding *professional rememberers*, is unable to create texts which are incompatible with the canon, or to interpret existing texts in a non-canonical way; (2) *chirographic* societies – the cultures of scrolls and codices – the bequeathing and interpretive practices of which are based on manuscript texts. It is here theoretically possible to create new texts, or new interpretations for old texts, avoiding the *scripturists*, but these

* The following study is an edited, and in several places modified, version of two of my recent articles in Hungarian. In this English version I provide more details about certain parts of Milton's work, but I pass over Hungarian historical parallels or examples. Both articles which made the basis of this study were delivered at the conference-series *Nyelv, megértés, interpretáció* (Language, understanding, interpretation), organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (Hungary), in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Publication data: Mester, Béla, "A cenzúra és az elmék fölötti uralom. Elmetartalmakra vonatkozó metaforáink gondolatszabadságot érintő következményeiről" (Censorship and rule over minds. Metaphors on mental contents, and their consequences for the freedom of thought), in *Világosság* (Light), 5-6 (2003), 55-63.; Mester, Béla, "Néhány sajátos szókép John Milton Areopagitikájában" (On some particular tropes in John Milton's *Areopagitica*", in *Világosság* (Light), 11-12 (2003) 33-40.

[1] Most recently in "Politikai közösség, kommunikáció és a médiumok" (Political community, communication, and the media), which was first delivered at the aforementioned conference-series. Published in the *Világosság* (Light), 2-3 (2001), 88-93.

are likely to be dangerous for their authors, and their success or mere subsistence largely presupposes the birth of a new interpretive community in which *new scripturists* would regard these texts as standards, and ignore the old ones; (3) *typographic* societies, in which it is every *reader's* right and possibility to become a writer, to produce and interpret texts, and the once hidden power of *professional rememberers* and *scripturists* over minds is taken over by *censoring instances* – at least in the largest part of the history of European printing –, based on clearly outlined, at least theoretically explicit rules; (4) the so-called (in the lack of better words) *post-typographic* society of our times, in which the various contents of electronic media are regulated similar to the former methods of *professional rememberers* and *scripturists* of *oral* and *chirographic* societies. (I call the *post-typographic* counterparts of writer and reader, *editor* and *user*).[1] I stressed in the description, and illustrated with several examples, that there are practically no pure cases of the above schemes; in fact, it is an essential component of the *rule over the minds* that the elite who possesses spiritual power is capable of moving and mediating between different mentalities defined by different media. A classic example thereof is the case of the *scripturist* who is able to persuade his largely illiterate audience by a previously written oration, and employing adequate rhetorical devices, of the ideas that he himself had reached through serious theoretical readings, and on the basis of rational convictions. In spite of this, I consider it important to speak about the clear types of communication sketched above, since they are, on the one hand, useful patterns for research, and, on the other, often define the way that the elite of different societies view their own thinking. The consideration of this self-image may take us closer to the understanding of a certain social elite's communication patterns.

In the following, I will present certain elements of a characteristic, *mono-medial* self-image, and their consequences effective even today: the view of early modern, *typographic* societies on the freedom of press and censorship. As an example of the numerous contemporary theories and literary works, and the reference literature of an even larger quantity, I will only refer to the pamphlet of an author committed to the freedom of press: John Milton's *Areopagitica*.[2] In the

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[1] My choice of words employs common terms, supplying them with a more general meaning than they have in everyday speech.

[2] Milton's *Areopagitica* was published in 1644. I will quote the texts preserving the original spelling; instead of the page numbers of any of the several modern editions, I will refer to the number of the paragraphs, which are also referred to in

background of this work, one may emphatically find present the *typographic* approach, connected to the way of creation of spiritual goods, and dominant in the entire modern Europe, appearing characteristically and with a poetic strength as a necessary presupposition.

Book printing in Milton's century

It cannot be my aim here to discuss, or even sketch the circumstances, textual context, or precedence of the creation of Milton's text either in the author's work or in 17th century English pamphlet literature. However, knowledge about two factors is imperative for understanding his work.

(1) Polemical literature of the Reformation.

The way that the most important questions of public opinion were discussed at that time in England by the mass publication and spreading of pamphlets, only had one preliminary in contemporary Europe: the formation and spreading of the ideas of the Reformation. English contemporaries were well aware of this fact and, considering themselves the devoted heirs of the Reformation, also made reference to it in their polemics. For reasons which are quite understandable, however, they ignored certain dichotomies of this wave of pamphlets, mostly perceivable in England. Of the great reformers, Calvin was always distrustful both about publishing in the vernacular, and about the idea of discussing complicated dogmatic issues in front of common people. Luther also, who did his best in publishing pamphlets, mostly in German, only thought at the beginning of his career that in his time, due to the "pleasing proliferation of good books", young people understand many problems better than their old professors. Later on he stressed that not all kinds of theological works should be published, because it is bad for the people to read all sorts of things without digesting them. It would suffice – in his opinion – to publish only "the good books", taking care that these would be consulted by everybody with due seriousness. It is evident from the attitude of the reformers that they considered the pamphlet dumping of their age something temporary: once they arrived at the truth, there is nothing for them to argue about, so they can return to the more archaic, authoritative way of reading, in which the compulsory reading of a text

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many modern editions.

will once again be determined by *authorized mediators*. In all the areas of Reformation, this attitude can best be perceived in the history of the Anglican Church. Henry VIII had serious concerns about printing the Bible in English, which he solved by differentiating between *public reading* for others – this meant interpretive reading, explanation as well – which was only intended for adult and noble males; and *private reading*, not necessarily silent, for personal purposes, which was also allowed for noblewomen and city artisans. Village commoners however, besides listening to passages from the Bible in the church, had to do with whatever the landlord decided to read to them through his own choice and interpretation. These restrictions were completed by exegetic and sermon-patterns prepared for Anglican clergymen, which were also employed in other Protestant confessions, but nowhere became so clearly obligatory and exclusive, and for such a long time, than in the case of the Anglicans. Another visible sign of the asymmetric communication characteristic for the Reformation is that Scandinavian statistical tradition, which, even well into the 19th century, differentiated between the population who could read and write, and who could only read, but not write. The ambivalent attitude of most trends of the early Reformation towards *typographic* culture can in fact be explained by the tendency to see their main purpose in the creation of a new interpretive community, closed (in a different way), and (again) authoritative. This attitude is confronted exactly by certain publicly acknowledged trends of the English revolution, while Milton, as he becomes involved in this debate, reaches the furthest in his age by the preceptive propagation of the freedom of the press, voicing in his argumentation theological views which exceed religiousness connected to institutional Churches.[1]

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[1] Milton's views, which almost entirely reject original sin and the consequently vitiated human nature, can best be paralleled with Unitarian (Socinian) thinking. Milton's well-known poetic expression of his views related to Unitarianism (Socinianism) is the *Paradise Lost*, less-known theoretical argumentation is his work remained in manuscript till as late as 1825, *De Doctrina Christiana*. Later interpretive tradition was less concerned about Milton's Unitarian (Socinian) views. The first serious modern interpretation of this problem is: McLachlan, H., *The Religious Opinions of Milton, Locke, and Newton*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1941. After the publication of this work, researchers refer more comfortably to the Unitarian (Socinian) theological background of Milton's anthropology.

(2) The flexibility of the contemporary hand press.

The circulation number of the pamphlets and books considered mass-publications in the 17th century only nearly reaches that of shorter institutional or university information leaflets today. Still, they had a considerable impact on contemporary public opinion, which is no wonder if one takes into account 17th century population density and literacy rates. Under the circumstances of the English civil war, the territory reached by the products of London presses was considerably changing, in accordance with the fortunes of the war, and sometimes it did not exceed a few shires in London's neighborhoods. Although these publications were considered quite expensive, despite their size, the acquisition of the hand press did not count as a very serious investment. In Milton's age, any personality or trend which had a certain impact on public opinion could easily find or found a printing house in London. Moreover, the hand printing press was an equipment quite easy to transport and install in its new place, and the number of copies customarily printed did not need a long time. These technical issues in the years of the revolution had the result that the authorities could hardly confiscate printing presses and the already published leaflets in London back-street labyrinths.[1]

Milton's reflections on book culture

The scope of this paper does not cover the detailed discussion of Milton's whole work, engaged with contemporary political debates, making use of particular classical and English cultural historical references; instead, I will only present the three directions of this work, most important for my topic.

(I) The new metaphors of thinking

One often finds in Milton's texts new images referring to spiritual goods, always in relation to book culture. Milton always emphasizes the importance of books by expressions which almost

[1] An interesting analysis of the London pamphlets of the revolution is offered in the book of Molnár, Gusztáv, *Ó Anglia, Anglia... Esszé az angol forradalomról* (Oh England, England... An essay on the English revolution), Bukarest [Bucharest]: Kriterion, 1984.

ironically remind one of Plato's texts, in which he depicts the futility of written works.[1]

Plato's much quoted comparison, in which he criticizes literacy, reads as follows:

> **Socrates.** He would be a very simple person, and quite a stranger to the oracles of Thamus or Ammon, who should leave in writing or receive in writing any art under the idea that the written word would be intelligible or certain; or who deemed that writing was at all better than knowledge and recollection of the same matters?
> **Phaedrus.** That is most true.
> **Socrates.** I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.
> **Phaedrus.** That again is most true. (Phaedrus 275c-e, Benjamin Jowett's translation.)

On the other hand, Milton writes:

> Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet on the other hand, unlesse warinesse be us'd, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good

[1] I will separately analyze Milton's reflections on Plato's opinions later on.

Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great losse; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the losse 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 publick men, how we spill that season'd life of man preserv'd and stor'd up in Books; since we see a kinde of homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdome, and if it extend to the whole imression, a kinde of massacre, whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elementall life, but strikes at that ethereall and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe, slaies an immortality rather then a life. (Paragraph 3)

In a later part of his work, Milton presents the creation of spiritual goods in the mind and in books by an original picture of contemporary London, not hiding his English national pride:

> Lords and Commons of England, consider what Nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governours [. . .] Nor is it for nothing that the grave and frugal *Transylvanian* sends out yearly from as farre as the mountanous borders of Russia, and beyond the *Hercynian* wildernes, not their youth, but their stay'd men, to learn our language, and our *theologic* arts. [. . .] Why else was this Nation chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclam'd and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all *Europ*. [. . .] Behold now this vast City: a City of refuge, the mansion house of liberty, encompast and surrounded with his [God's] protection, the shop of warre hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleaguer'd Truth, then there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and idea's wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty the approaching Reformation others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement. (Paragraph 27)

This text, which understands the revolution as a new Reformation, making use of war metaphors, strikes by the novel

description of spiritual ferment, of the creation of spiritual goods. These practically invisible processes only have two or three traditional ways of depiction both in literature, and in fine arts. It is possible to depict disputing people, some sort of *agora*; or, to depict people attentively listening to a speaker, whether this audience is a philosopher's circle of disciples, or the public of a preacher or orator; or, one of the "author with his work" stereotypes is also available, as well as – quite rarely, and more likely as a religious symbol – the description of a text's physical appearance, the information-carrying document itself. Each of these methods presupposes some kind of actual interpersonal communication, if not otherwise, than by representing *absence*. (The images depicting "the book without the man" may only gain sense by our background-knowledge, that the depicted book *might have*, or *usually has* a reader, even if absent from the depiction). However, Milton's choice is completely different: for him, the spiritual ferment of London that he was so enthusiastic about, is due to the fact that many people read and write here at night, alone in their studies. Being aware of the purpose of the *Areopagitica* and of contemporary circumstances, we can rightfully suppose that Milton thinks about people who write *for printing*, and read *printed* works. This is how the workshop-analogy should be understood: the "spiritual workshop" expression is not self-evident if one compares the obscure lights and sounds of a smith's workshop with the silent noise of discussions or the scratch of a quill-pen in a study illuminated by a night-lamp. It is evident, however, if one compares the workshops of a sword-cutler and a printer: they both forge the weapons of truth, one physical, the other spiritual. Milton's image of London at night can be perceived as the poetical composition of an imagined ideal republic's communicational pattern: the ideal political community is nothing else than separately thinking individuals' reflections on each other's thoughts, which becomes possible if *every thought appears as a printed document. What is in the books, that is – or will be – in the minds.*

(II) The new interpretation of "Christian freedom"

Another important element of Milton's rhetoric is, that it opposes the idealized image of London, the almost rebuilt Sion, living in Christian freedom and thus enjoying the previously unknown prestige of a European spiritual center, with the sad continental situation which is the consequence of censorship. Leaning on a particular understanding of Christian freedom, he also wishes to persuade the audience of his fictive

speech, the "Lords and Commons of England", that is, the two Houses of Parliament, that book censoring is (1) an un-Christian thing; henceforth (2) its existence can only be explained by some Papal guile; since (3) there is nothing similar mentioned in either Biblical, or Antique pagan tradition, so it cannot be legitimated on this basis. Thus, Milton is forced by his own line of thought to frequently quote classical and biblical texts, examples, but he cannot offer comfortable examples for a *typographic culture* from Antique sources. It is impossible to find classical texts in which the judicially understood freedom or banning of books appears in exactly the same way as for a 17th century Englishman reading printed books. Furthermore, the hands of the author of *Areopagitica* are tied also by the cultural environment, by contemporary political discourse: if he wishes to persuade his audience, he cannot make use of just any elements of his considerable classical and theological erudition, but only of those which are more or less known, and thus persuasive, for his audience as well. Moreover, he also had to quote certain scriptural fragments, frequently quoted in contemporary debates, and thus turning into almost compulsory citations.

(1) The first main idea of the *Areopagitica*, important for my subject, is the reference of *Christian freedom* to the freedom of reading. Milton draws on scriptural fragments which primarily referred to eating rules and ecclesiastical regulations, and which were often quoted since the debates of the Reformation. Milton transfers the meaning of scriptural fragments to the freedom of reading books with reference to *spiritual food*:

> To the pure, all things are pure, not only meats and drinks, but all kinde of knowledge whether of good or evill; the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequently the books, if the will and conscience be not defil'd. For books are as meats and viands are; some of good, some of evill substance; and yet God in that unapocryphall vision, said without exception, Rise *Peter*, kill and eat, leaving the choice to each mans discretion. [Acts. 10: 9-16.] Wholesome meats to a vitiated stomack differ little or nothing from unwholesome; and best books to a naughty mind are not unappliable to occasions of evill. Bad meats will scarce breed good nourishment in the healthiest concoction; but herein the difference is of bad books, that they to a discreet and

> judicious Reader serve in many respects to discover, to confute, to forewarn, and to illustrate. (Paragraph 13)

This analysis even better emphasizes the theological content of this train of thought. In order to argue for free press, Milton does more than just borrowing a way of representation well-known to everybody in that age. He is clearly aware of the theological weight of the ideas he exposes in his work, and it seems that he considers his ideas about the freedom of the press deducible from his theological anthropology. Touching on the question of sin, Milton does not falter to discuss the most delicate theological problems in a primarily secular work; he even focuses on these issues. (The ideas quoted below about the original sin are also present in a more detailed manner in the *Paradise Lost*, and the *De Doctrina Christiana*; it is exactly these ideas that relate Milton's thinking to Unitarianism {Socinianism}, as previously mentioned):

> It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbeare without the knowledge of evill? 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 wayfaring Christian. (Paragraph 13)

One must notice that Milton here does much more than give a free interpretation of scriptural fragments. If we take into account the discourse of the age of the Reformation and the author's age, we find reason to believe that these references and the emphasis on the concept of *Christian freedom* will recall in the 17th century learned Protestant reader the terminology and issues of the *adiaphora* debates accompanying the Protestant cultures of the 16th- and 17th century. Milton intends to do nothing less than reformulate this debate, which deeply interested contemporary Europe, for the benefit of spiritual freedom, and within it especially the freedom of culture of the printed books. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to say that Milton wanted his public to accept that Christian freedom was a process and an attitude continuously improving, which started somewhere in Zurich, in the 16th century, with

demonstrations such as Ulrich Zwingli's sausage frying in the Lenten period,[1] and led to the freedom of the press in England. (Or the other way round: the freedom of the press in England is nothing else than one of the significant consequences of the true, "once again reformed Reformation"[2].) The freedom of sausage frying and the freedom of press are not so distant from each other in these *adiaphora* debates than we might think today. As I have recently argued[3], the world of the *adiaphora*, not regulated by divine power, and thus confined to human judgment – individual and/or community, or secular political power – is the first space available for the early modern political community, and consequently the debate on these issues is the first debate of political modernity. Milton's connection with this discourse adds further details to this statement. The importance of *adiaphora*-debates in political philosophy is completed by the fact that 17th century non-clerical thinkers in these debates always differentiate between masses and the elite, literacy and orality, and gesture-language. Re-reading Locke's texts in this respect, it is easy to notice a certain contempt and irritation: no matter how the problem of *indifferent things (adiaphora)* is solved, it is clear that the problem is not his own personal matter, but the matter of uneducated commoners. (*He* would surely never engage into fierce fights for or against the *Geneva toga*, and is astonished to see what others are capable of doing for it.)[4] Milton also inherits this twofold discussion of

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[1] The first polemical writing of the Reformation in Zurich is Ulrich Zwingli's *Von Erkiesen und Fryheit der Spysen* (On the freedom of food), 1522.

[2] Milton's enthusiastic sense of situation is expressed by this formulation in the *Aeropagitica*: "God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his Church, *ev'n to the reforming of Reformation it self*: what does he then but reveal Himself to his servants, and as his mannaer is, first to his English-men" [Italics mine, MB] (Paragraph 27).

[3] See my article, "Az "adiaphoron" fogalmának átértelmezése a reformációban, avagy az állampolgári erények sajátos újrafelfedezése" (The re-interpretation of the concept of "adiaphoron" in the Reformation, or the specific rediscovery of citizens' virtues), in Dékány, András and Laczkó, Sándor (eds.), *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz 1. Az erény* (Footnotes on Plato 1. Virtue), Szeged: Pro Philosophia Szegediensi Foundation – Librárius, 2003, 199-215.

[4] I discussed this characteristic of the debates on *indifferent things (adiaphora)*, on the basis of Locke's political philosophy, in my article "Az ételek szabadságától a polgári szabadságig. John Locke és a koraújkori protestáns diskurzus" (From the freedom of meals to the civic liberty: John Locke and early modern protestant discourse). In Dénes, Iván Zoltán (ed.), *A szabadság értelme az értelem szabadsága* (The meaning of freedom – the freedom of mind),

Christian freedom, depending on whether he speaks about the book-culture of the learned, or the gestures and rites of the illiterate, and, as we shall see, he polarizes the question even more than it has previously been.

(2) In the following, Milton – in accordance with his Protestant tradition – derives his time's censorship from the Papacy. The problem and its solution is quite clear for a 17th century English Protestant: if censorship is a non-Christian thing, but is still existent in the Christian world, than the reason for it can only be the Papacy, meaning both the real Pope and the Papistical spirit which has not completely been cleared from the Anglican Church. (At the same time, there was of course Papistical censorship as well, Milton's inaccuracy only lies in the fact that he disregards the existence of secular censorship, which existed in Europe since the beginning of book printing, and worked independently from the church's one, especially in kingdoms with such a strong centralized power as England.)

Milton at this point considers his time's censorship as an institution not too old, almost modern, appearing together with book printing, and which is the dark side of Christian freedom spreading with Reformation and book printing, Rome's new *answer* to something. At this point a possibility opens up for re-thinking tradition. The question rises: if censorship is something new, but there was no spiritual freedom in pre-censorship times, before the Reformation, then what prevented it if not censorship?

(3) It is not only theoretically that Milton tries to show the illegitimacy of Papal censorship, but he also strives to dispute the legitimacy of *any* tradition, considered valuable by itself and by its public, for *any kind* of censorship. First, he lists and explains from his own point of view certain scriptural fragments – all about harmful readings – which seem easily usable for censorship:

> *Salomon* informs us that much reading is a wearines to the flesh; but neither he, nor other inspir'd author tells us that such, or such reading is unlawfull [Ecclesiastes 7:12]
> the burning of those Ephesian books by St. *Pauls* converts, tis reply'd the books were magick, the Syriack so renders them. It was a privat act, a voluntary act, and leaves us to a voluntary imitation: the men in remorse burnt those books which were

Budapest: Argumentum, 2004, 81-96.

> their own; the Magistrat by this example is not appointed; these men practiz'd the books, another might perhaps have read them in some sort usefully. [Acts 19:19] (Paragraph 13)

(III) Milton's confrontation with the bimedial tradition of antique literacy

While explaining the previous scriptural fragments, Milton has to continuously face that these *speak about something else* than the subject of his debates with his contemporaries, and still, he has to find some kind of guidance from these. In my interpretation, while explaining these fragments, and mainly in his reflections on Plato, Milton gradually exceeds his time's *typographic* way of thinking and expression, conceiving surprisingly modern theses about the freedom of thinking and speech. However, in the *Areopagitica* these new conceptions – as we shall see – can only be perceived on the level of ironic remarks. Apparently, it does not occur to Milton to consider the same rights for freedom necessary for the various forms of non-written communication that he is just claiming for books.

Following the above scriptural examples, which are relatively easy to explain, Milton's explanations and references in the interpretation of tradition have a more nuanced approach to the world of book culture, hitherto considered unified. It is revealed that the content of books is not equally harmful or fruitful for educated and uneducated people, and thus their interdiction or allowance may have different consequences. The difference between the two types of readers lies exactly in their ways of reading and interpretation: an uneducated man only understands his reading if it is explained to him in words; if the logic of censorship is taken seriously, this means that not only books, but also *ways of interpretation* considered harmful should be interdicted in order to achieve the desired effect:

> But on the other side that infection which is from books of controversie in Religion, is more doubtfull and dangerous to the learned, then to the ignorant; and yet those books must be permitted untoucht by the licencer. It will be hard to instance where any ignorant man hath bin ever seduc't by Papisticall book in English, unlesse it were commended and expounded to him by some of that Clergy: and indeed all such tractats whether false or true are as the Prophesie of *Isaiah* was to the *Eunuch*,

> not to be *understood without a guide*. [Acts 7: 27-31] [. . .] evill doctrine not with books can propagate, except a teacher guide, which he might also doe without writing, and so beyond prohibiting (Paragraph 13)

In the course of his argumentation, Milton discovers almost by chance the *bimediality*[1] preserved since the Antiquity and the Middle Ages in the world of his time's uneducated people. It is this not yet fully developed *typographic* culture which makes Milton consider book censorship inadequate as compared to its declared purposes.[2]

On the other hand, the *Areopagitica* itself continuously refers to its own *bimediality*: it is a fictive speech, addressed to the English Parliament, full of the stylistic elements of speech: it often addresses the audience, and its long compound sentences are actually coordinated connections of normal full-length sentences.[3] Milton seems to be fully aware of these stylistic features of his text: in the title he refers both to the similarly entitled fictive political speech of Isocrates, and to the words uttered by Paul the Apostle on the Areiospagos, in Athens, according to tradition. In the motto he refers to Euripides' *The Suppliants*, that is, a drama meant to be performed, the chosen quotation of which is itself a

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[1] *Bimediality* is a term which appeared in recent decades' research in the history of reading, and is used to describe such reading customs of pre-modern cultures and these customs' effects on the creation of texts, like systematic loud reading, or the reading of texts for illiterate or semi-illiterate audience by a literate person.

[2] It is a notable detail, that the text's scriptural example about the Ethiopian eunuch became a frequent reference for introducing *bimediality* in twentieth century research, for instance in the case of Jan Assmann. Assmann, Jan, *A kulturális emlékezet. Írás, emlékezés és politikai identitás a korai magaskultúrákban* (Cultural memory. Writing, remembrance, and political identity in early elite cultures), Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999, 95. Footnote 15. (Original title: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* Verlag C. H. Beck, München, 1992).

[3] Recent research in the history of reading understands this feature of the sentence structure of English prose in Milton's time as a partial preservation of orality, as a cultural *bimediality*. The regularly repeating semi-colons and "and"-s might be boring for a quickly and silently reading eye, but in the case of *loud reading* of the text they present the natural redundancy and rhythm of speech. The analyses which compare the sentence structure of early modern and contemporary English Bible translations are very relevant in this respect: it is apparent that the modern editions, mirroring a modern language state, and aiming more at the eye, than the ear, tend more and more to use subordinate compounds instead of the earlier, endless, yet rhythmical flow of coordinate clauses.

public speech, and at the same time a eulogy of free debate on the agora.[1] One may also consider Milton aware of the Athenian and democratic connections of his Antique references.

This is the point where Milton changes his line of thought. Here, on the basis of his aforementioned references to Plato, and besides the rethinking of the tradition of spiritual freedom, he says that censorship was unknown in the Antiquity, and what we are inclined to consider as such in tradition, is in fact something else. Now Milton analyses the consequences of interpreting an antique text according to the early modern way of thinking, that is, *typographically*. Milton notices in Plato's text that he does not suggest primarily the banning of books or concrete texts, but rather or those factors which influence the *interpretation* of a text, factors which mainly pertain to performing arts: forms of music and dance, types and tones of musical instruments, and even certain movements of physical jerks. Plato speaks here – employing a modern term – about an influence on interpretive communities, which form around texts, and especially on their elite, about the education of those who will be able to create such an interpretive "guidance" which Philip gave to the Ethiopian eunuch, and the importance of which for the commoners Milton himself acknowledged.

Plato in the third book of *The Republic* constructs quite clearly the elite interpretive community similar to the scribes of the East: he speaks about choosing persons who have the best memory (412e-413d), resembles their, and only their, relation to virtue to the engravement of letters (402a-b), and then leaves the task for this elite to interpret tradition for all the others, even if manipulating it for state reasons. (See the paragraphs about lying and about fictive *mythoi.*) Plato mostly exposes his thoughts quoted in the *Areopagitica* in the context of education, which he thinks of as being outside legal regulation, at least in his *Laws*:

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[1] Theseus says to the messenger from Thebe:
"This is true Liberty when free born men
Having to advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv's high praise,
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State then this?"
Euripides, *The Suppliants*, lines 437-440. (Milton translated these verses into English specially for his *Areopagitica*).

> [E]ducation [. . .] may be thought a subject fitted rather for precept and admonition than for law. Plato's Laws, book 7. 788a (Benjamin Jowett's translation).

In other places, however, Plato clearly admits the consequences of such a guidance of common culture: this means the need for a *re-sacralization* and *re-contextualization* of texts, and not only for the years of education, but for the whole duration of human life, and for all fields of culture:

> **Athenian.** Can any of us imagine a better mode of effecting this object than that of the Egyptians?
> **Cleinias.** What is their method?
> **Athenian.** To consecrate every sort of dance or melody. First we should ordain festivals-calculating for the year what they ought to be, and at what time, and in honour of what Gods, sons of Gods, and heroes they ought to be celebrated; and, in the next place, what hymns ought to be sung at the several sacrifices, and with what dances the particular festival is to be honoured. This has to be arranged at first by certain persons, and, when arranged, the whole assembly of the citizens are to offer sacrifices and libations to the Fates and all the other Gods, and to consecrate the several odes to gods and heroes: and if any one offers any other hymns or dances to any one of the Gods, the priests and priestesses, acting in concert with the guardians of the law, shall, with the sanction of religion and the law, exclude him, and he who is excluded, if he do not submit, shall be liable all his life long to have a suit of impiety brought against him by any one who likes. Plato's Laws, book 7. 799a-b (Benjamin Jowett's translation).

From the perspective of this article, Plato's quoted texts can be interpreted as the rules of a special elite's education. The Athenian philosopher means to maintain at the same time the authority of the *professional rememberers* of oral societies, and the *scripturist* elite of early written culture, and to teach this elite the thinking techniques developed by contemporary literacy. The education of this elite is rational and initiatory at the same time. These texts speak with a surprising openness about the meaning of this education and its later uses: the elite's thinking techniques enable rule over the commoners'

beliefs, which lacks such techniques. The reason of Milton's dilemma is that Plato does not speak about education in the sense of his term of pedagogy, well outlined in his other writings.

The irony of the Plato-references in the *Areopagitica* lies in the fact that, although the author notices that the interpretive context of the theses of the Athenian philosopher is not the culture of printed books, he can only express the transposition of these ideas into the 17th century if he presumes that Plato speaks *all along* about the censoring of texts and documents. However, what is in Plato's case the center of elite culture, for Milton it is only hardly noticed rurality. In Milton's time, the transmission of closed texts to the world of orality was partly found in the field of private life – that is why he speaks about the instruments and tunes of home music and singing, and young people's chatting and entertainment –, and partly in the case of uneducated commoners – that is why he sometimes mentions rustic instruments and refers to rural images. The result would then be a text in which everything that Plato has to say about the formation of an elite interpretive community appears as the censorship of the "books" of non-readers. And when the text, nevertheless, refers back to *bimediality*, then we fail to take seriously that it has important things to say about spiritual freedom, because the way of saying it is taken from elite culture into a rustic context.

> The Windows also, and the *Balcone's* must be thought on, there are shrewd books, with dangerous Frontispieces set to sale; who shall prohibit them, shall twenty licencers? The villages also must have their visitors to enquire what lectures the bagpipe and the rebbeck reads ev'n to the ballatry, and the gammuth of every *municipal* fidler (Paragraph 13).

The impossibility of censoring the elements of a building like books needs no further comment, but let us examine the following sentence: "what lectures the bagpipe and the rebbeck reads". For Milton, rural instruments not only *speak*, but *hold a lecture*, that is, a *lectura, a lecture in the Medieval sense,* for the audience of a country inn.[1] The

[1] On the genre of *lectura*, see: Hamesse, Jacqueline: *Az olvasás skolasztikus modellje* (The scholastic model of reading), especially the chapter *A "ruminatiotól" a "lecturáig"* (From "ruminatio" to "lectura"). Translated by Sajó, Tamás. In Cavallo, Guglielmo, and Chartier, Roger (eds.), *Az olvasás kultúrtörténete a nyugati világban* (A History of Reading in the West), Budapest

irony probably well understood in Milton's time lies in the fact that he raises for a moment villagers' performances to elite book culture, and all the things worth to be banned.

Milton's comments reveal the idea that the non-written, and even non-verbal forms of human communication may be equal with books; but then at the same time he claims this statement absurd. The theory of Milton's ideas will only be formulated in the 20th century. In the case of applying the freedom of speech also to non-verbal communication or gestures, significant changes in the interpretation of rights will only be reached by the decisions of the US Supreme Court in the 1960's and the following debates. In such an age, that is, where the relations of everyday book culture or other cultural fields appear in a completely different setup than in Milton's time.

Milton's line of thought in the context of the whole work means a return to an idea apparently closed, but now highlighted from the opposite direction: it is a contrary approach to the reformulation of Christian freedom from the *adiaphora* debates to the freedom of the press. Referring to Zwingli's aforementioned case, and according to the text's inner line of thought, time would now come to defend the legitimacy, freedom, and especially notability of actions similar to fried sausage-eating in the Lenten period, even if in the sphere of politics, starting from the already justified freedom of the press. While completing this task, however, Milton – though in a genial, thoughtful, and witty manner – fails. It is highly characteristic how he explains the quoted Plato-texts, guiding the discourse to fields familiar to him. In Milton's opinion, the Athenian master always thinks of education, and that is not a subject pertaining to the subordination of authorities and censorship. Regardless of this, Milton stresses from the very beginning, that he only refers Christian freedom to adult people, and even from them only takes into account educated males. (This is not evident from the very beginning because he always speaks about the *extension* of freedom, and not its *narrowing – at least* to the circle of competent lay males).

Milton's barrier to make one more, important step on the way of expanding the freedom of thinking and speech was in fact his own solution to include education in the debate: if the world outside book culture were a part of the life of children, women and common people,

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Balassi, 2000, 116-118. (Original title: *Storia della lettura nel mondo occidentale*, Roma: Laterza, 1995.; It is available in French, too: *Historie de la lecture dans le monde occidental,* Editions du Seuil, 1997)

then its ways of expression would have no role in the intellectual freedom of spiritually adult people.

The *Areopagitica* reveals for a moment the possible existence and freedom of a culture outside book culture, but Milton instantly identifies this world with the world of children, uneducated commoners, and women, that is, with the world of people who are incapable and unworthy of freedom. Any novelty he finds in human communication is exiled to the countryside, or confined to children's room, women's quarter, schools, kitchens, and the inns of lower classes. It is all the same to him where these apparently rudimentary *non-typographic* forms of expression of identity and opinion disappear as long as they stay away from the sphere of politics. Milton behaves here as someone who opens a yet unknown door only in order to close it with an even bigger lock.

Our typographic ideals after the time of typographic hegemony

All that is written before would need no more attention than a historical curiosity if we managed to create a new metaphoric language and legendary of spiritual freedom, more suitable for our media; still, there are few signs of this. Our sensitivity regarding spiritual freedom still very much depends on the medium, and this medium is still mostly the printing press. We unanimously defend freedom for the publication of printed books, or the sacred secrecy of handwritten letters, but often ask with the same enthusiasm for the filtering of e-mails and Internet content. Our blind spot regarding media is very similar to Milton's one: beside the world of *typography,* the free use of no other medium has any value in our eyes. Our situation however is exactly the opposite of Milton's: he fought for the freedom of the most dynamic, most flexible medium of his time. What we are defending is the ever less threatened freedom of technologies which we in our daily routine consider less and less important, and use less and less frequently, while due to our bad cultural reflexes we leave defenseless those technologies by which we manage our personal and business matters, and an ever growing part of our spiritual life. This mis-reaction of our society – meaning our entire modern world – is just like the disease of a person who is allergic, and has an immune deficiency at the same time. He so overreacts harmless things that this very overreaction becomes harmful, while really harmful matters can affect his organism facing no defense.

In order to cure our cultural disease, we would need the same amount of innovation of our metaphors referring to spiritual creation that Milton attempted at in accordance with his time's needs. The task requires more than a single outstanding poet; it also requires a new kind of reflection of humanities on the situation brought about by the change in communication technology in the last decades.

The freedom of modern media is not only a technical, economic, or legal problem. There will be no freedom of speech by only having infrastructure and money to gain access to the media (though we are still quite far from it); and it is not enough to have good laws for the Internet (which exist nowhere in the world). The most difficult thing is to change the metaphors within, and referring to, our culture – although apparently it does not cost any money.