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Mightier than the sword: the power of Thomas More and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

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ABSTRACT

Thomas More and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, both men of letters who were imprisoned for political motives, are examples of the adage “the pen is mightier than the sword”. Their stories demonstrate the remarkable power of the writer—even when he is silenced; even when his vindication comes only in the eyes of subsequent history. This paper argues that there is a close connection between the metaphorical “pen”—the power of language, of the word—and these higher powers that Solzhenitsyn says must be recognized: in explicitly Christian terms, we could say “God.” The connection is this: we recognize these higher powers with the faculty of reason which is the highest power of our own soul. And these higher or spiritual powers of our soul are driven by ideas, which in turn are expressed in words and images, which are communicated by “the pen.”

One hundred years ago, in 1918—the year of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s birth—just months after the Russian Revolution, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, had an obelisk raised in the beautiful park along the western wall of the Kremlin, the famous Alexandrovsky Garden. Eventually taken down by Vladimir Putin in 2013, that obelisk was one of the very first monuments erected after the Revolution. It was known as the Obelisk of Revolutionary Thinkers, and it listed the names of people whose writings had been part of the noble struggle against oppression and had contributed to the glorious Russian Revolution. The ninth name on the list was that of the still-uncanonized Sir Thomas More.

This remarkable honor was paid to More chiefly because of his abolishment of private property in his imaginary island of Utopia. In the enthusiastic afterglow of the post-revolutionary moment, the fact that the name of More’s island meant literally “No-Place” did not seem to give Lenin and his colleagues pause.

Many years later, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was born in the year that the obelisk went up, would offer an eye-opening and hair-raising account of another island nation—a chain of islands, really—that was not on most people’s maps either. In the
preface to _The Gulag Archipelago_, Solzhenitsyn introduces us to the “amazing country of _Gulag_ which, though scattered in an Archipelago geographically, was, in a psychological sense, fused into a continent—an almost invisible, imperceptible country inhabited by the zek people.” And in that same massive work, Solzhenitsyn refers to Thomas More as “the great grandfather of Socialism” (Solzhenitsyn 1973). In most senses, of course, there was little similarity between More’s fictional Utopia, inhabited by a singularly happy populace, and the all-too-real Gulag Archipelago, inhabited by wretched prisoners (the zek people), but Solzhenitsyn was struck by the fact that More was tragically prescient in making forced labor, which Solzhenitsyn saw as part and parcel of Soviet Communism, a characteristic feature of Utopia.

Some 40 years after the author of _Utopia_ made his appearance as a proto-communist on the Obelisk of Revolutionary Thinkers, Solzhenitsyn managed to get a manuscript that he had been working on since 1959 to the editor of _Novy Mir_ (New World) magazine, the official organ of the USSR’s Writer’s Union in Moscow. The manuscript was the original version of _One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich_, and the year was 1961.

Around the same time—in fact, the previous year—in London, the English playwright Robert Bolt brought to the stage _A Man for All Seasons_, the drama about Sir Thomas More that he had been working on, in one form or another, for at least 5 years. It opened at the Globe Theatre (now the Gielgud Theatre) on 1 July 1960.

It would take over a year, including editing and debate within the Politburo, before Solzhenitsyn’s novel was finally published, with the crucial support of Nikita Khrushchev, in 1962. By that time, _A Man for All Seasons_ was in the middle of its premiere run on Broadway. The publication in Russia of Solzhenitsyn’s account of a day in the life of a prisoner in the Gulag created a sensation, inside and outside of Russia, both because of its revelatory content and because of the mere fact of its publication, making Solzhenitsyn an international celebrity overnight.

We could say, then, that what the historian Marvin O’Connell has referred to as the “standard” modern figure of Thomas More—the one played by Paul Scofield in Bolt’s play in London, on Broadway and later in Fred Zinneman’s award-winning film, which is as iconic in its own way as the portrait of More by Holbein in New York City’s Frick Collection—and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn stepped onto the world stage at almost exactly the same time.

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Even though he never utters the famous words—“I die the King’s good servant, and God’s first”—Robert Bolt’s version of More is a perfect example of the importance of recognizing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s “unchanging Higher Power above us” (Solzhenitsyn 1993). Thomas More was ready to lose his own life out of loyalty to that Higher Power, and he did so with grace and good humor.

Writing in 1960, Bolt saw More as a dramatic contrast to the dominant tendencies of the age: conformity, prevarication, cowardice. When Solzhenitsyn gave his Commencement Speech at Harvard in 1978, it seemed that little had changed, for there he said: “A decline in courage may be the most striking feature which an outside observer notices in the West in our days ... Such a decline in courage is particularly noticeable among the ruling groups and the intellectual elite, causing an impression of loss of courage by the entire society.”
Robert Bolt himself was intrigued by the idea of a higher power that might provide a stable grounding for the kind of personal certainty—what one might call courageous selfless selfhood—that enabled More to stand fast when so many of his contemporaries wavered. In his introduction to the play, Bolt wonders explicitly whether “a clear sense of the self can only crystallize around something transcendental”. Of course, that “something transcendental” is exactly what Solzhenitsyn is referring to when he speaks of “the unchanging Higher Power.”

Just as More’s witness to a power higher than the self or the state is perfectly captured in his final words—“God’s first”—so too Solzhenitsyn, over time, would have no problem in giving a name to the “Higher Power” that, for our own good, we need to recognize:

Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.” Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened. (Solzhenitsyn, quoted in Ericson 1985)

Robert Bolt, however, unlike More and Solzhenitsyn, was not a believer. In the remarkable introduction that he wrote to his play, he suggests that it should be the special task of men of letters—thinkers, artists and men of science, he says—not to bear witness to God, but rather to find some grounding for selfhood that does not depend on the divine or mystical. To his credit, Bolt recognizes that this is an enormous task and that success is not guaranteed:

A man takes an oath only when he wants to commit himself quite exceptionally …. Of course it’s much less effective now that for most of us the actual words of the oath are not much more than impressive mumbo jumbo …. [T]hough few of us have anything in ourselves like an immortal soul which we regard as absolutely inviolate, yet most of us still feel something which we should prefer, on the whole, not to violate. It may be that a clear sense of the self can only crystallize around something transcendental, in which case our prospects look poor, for we are rightly committed to the rational. I think the paramount gift of our thinkers, artists and … men of science should labor to get for us is a sense of selfhood without resort to magic. (Bolt 1960)

Despite his obvious admiration for More, the words he uses to describe More’s substantive beliefs—magic and mumbo-jumbo—make his position painfully clear: if we are, as he says, “committed to the rational”, we are unable to find a grounding for selfhood where Thomas More found it.

Bolt wants to be like More without believing what More believed, without recognizing Solzhenitsyn’s “unchanging high power above us.” And he admits that his prospects for doing so may look poor.

The pen is mightier than the sword

But in More and Solzhenitsyn, we see two men who really were loyal to a power higher than themselves and higher than the political regimes of their day. Their witness to this
Higher Power took the form—among others—of writing, of wielding the pen, rather than the sword. It was their voice—and also their silence—that spoke volumes and exhibited a force that was itself a higher kind of power.

Both More and Solzhenitsyn, men of letters who were imprisoned for political motives, are examples of the adage “the pen is mightier than the sword”. Their stories demonstrate the remarkable power of the writer—even, on occasion, when he is silenced; even when his vindication comes only in the eyes of subsequent history.

I believe that there is a close connection between the metaphorical “pen”—the power of language, of the word—and these higher powers that Solzhenitsyn says must be recognized: in explicitly Christian terms, we could call them “God”, His revelation in Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ’s mystical body which is the Church, truth, conscience, beauty. (And much of what I say about the pen of the writer or the composer could be applied equally well—mutatis mutandi—to the painter’s brush and the sculptor’s chisel.) The connection is this: we recognize these higher powers with the faculty of reason which is the highest power of our own soul. And these higher or spiritual powers of our soul are driven by ideas, which in turn are expressed in words and images, which are communicated by what we are loosely calling “the pen.”

So, naturally, the pen is the weapon of choice when dealing with questions of the spiritual realm, of truth and falsity, of the nature of man, of persuasion in the realm of good and evil.

Oddly enough, the expression “The pen is mightier than the sword” is a commonplace of relatively recent coinage. We owe the expression to the English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who, in an 1839 play called Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy, put it in the mouth of the famous French cardinal. It was immediately accepted as a particularly felicitous and pithy formulation of a very ancient idea, for there is a very long tradition of comparing the sword and the pen, arms and letters.

The oldest version of it seems to come from a 7th century Assyrian sage named Ahiqar, who is quoted in a later text, from the 5th century BC, as teaching: “The word is mightier than the sword.”

In Thomas More’s day, in the 16th century, the idea played a prominent role in the popular debate between arms and letters, in which pen-pushing humanists strove to demonstrate their superiority to the knightly class.

In 1528, Baldassare Castiglione published The Courtier in which he wrote about how letters were more noble than arms: “I believe that for all of us the true and principal adornment of the mind is letters; although the French, I know, recognize, only the nobility of arms and think nothing of all the rest; and so they not only do not appreciate learning but detest it, regarding men of letters as basely inferior.”

The following year, 1529, the year that Thomas More became Lord Chancellor of England, Antonio de Guevara, in his Reloj de príncipes, a famous handbook for princes, contrasted pens and lances, books and weapons, a life of studying and a life of war, observing: “What a difference there is between dipping one’s pen in ink and dipping one’s sword in blood, between being surrounded by books and being weighed down by arms, between studying how each one of us must live and leaping into war to kill one’s neighbor.” [“¡Cuánta diferencia vaya de mojar la púa de la tinta a teñir la lanza en la sangre, y estar rodeados de libros o estar cargados de
In the United States, Thomas Jefferson, on 19 June 1792, encouraged Thomas Paine to:
“Go on then in doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword: show
that reformation is more practicable by operating on the mind than on the body of man.”
(quoted by Holmes 2002)

Closer to Bulwer-Lytton’s own day, Napoleon Bonaparte (1839, d. 1821), speaking
with some authority on the subject, is said to have remarked: “Four hostile newspapers
are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.”

Central to this debate is the idea that the pen is more refined than the sword, and
there is an implication that the sword is for the crude and vulgar. Indeed, ordinarily
the position of the men of letters is understood as a boast. There are excellent reasons
for this, for the pen transmits language, ideas, thoughts. It influences minds and souls
and hearts. It can address itself directly the man’s own higher powers, his spiritual side.

All this regarding the might of the pen is true… and especially true of More and
Solzhenitsyn.

Although More eventually exercised an official political power that Solzhenitsyn
never had—any power that Solzhenitsyn exercised was always purely of the pen—both
of them first acquired power, authority and prestige as men of letters. More did so,
above all, through Utopia, and Solzhenitsyn did so through One Day in the Life of
Ivan Denisovich.

The force of A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was recognized immediately by
Solzhenitsyn’s contemporaries. Nikita Khrushchev saw it as a part of his larger effort to
root out the Stalinist inside the Soviet soul. Khrushchev championed its publication
before the Politburo, insisting: “There’s a Stalinist in each of you; there’s even a
Stalinist in me. We must root out this evil.”

Ironically, when they declined to make a decision, Khrushchev allegedly said:
“There’s a Russian proverb that says silence is consent”—words, as we shall see, that
Thomas More had used in his own defence four centuries earlier.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich was a monumental success. The
poet Anna Akhmatova said that the story should be read by “every one of the 200
million citizens of the Soviet Union”. Within the Soviet Union, it was a crack in the
dike of silence that had surrounded the Stalin era and the Gulag in particular. Looking back, we could say that it represented the beginning of the end of the
Soviet Union.

Soon enough, the Soviet authorities realized—too late, it turns out—that they had,
so to speak, created a monster. After 1963, Solzhenitsyn couldn’t be published in his
own country. But he remained a powerful and inconvenient presence throughout the
60s and into the 1970s—during this period, his novels The First Circle, The Cancer
Ward and August 1914 were being published abroad—until he was finally arrested and
deported to West Germany in 1974, shortly after the long-awaited publication of The
Gulag Archipelago in Paris.

Solzhenitsyn was perfectly aware of profound effect that his writing had, of the
importance of breaking the silence, by bearing witness to the higher power of
truth and, as a consequence, making mature moral responsibility possible.
In *The Gulag Archipelago*, speaking of previous waves of mass arrests before his own, he writes:

Before it [the 1937—38 wave] came the wave of 1929 and 1930 [...] which drove a mere fifteen million peasants, maybe even more, out into the taiga and the tundra. But peasants are a silent people, without a literary voice, nor do they write complaints or memoirs. No interrogators sweated out the night with them, nor did they bother to draw up formal indictments—it was enough to have a decree from the village soviet. This wave [of people] poured forth, sank down into the permafrost, and even our most active minds recall hardly a thing about it. It is as if it had not scarred the Russian conscience. And yet Stalin (and you and I as well) committed no crime more heinous than this. (1973, ch. 2)

The power of More’s pen was equally obvious. Like the proscribed Solzhenitsyn in the 1960s and early 1970s, Thomas More remained a powerful and inconvenient presence in England even after he had been silenced and imprisoned. The very word “utopia”—still used and debated today—is his own creation. The obelisk in the Moscow shows the influence of his visionary writing about politics reaching into the 20th century. Even within his own lifetime, there was an attempt—by Vasco de Quiroga, the first bishop of Michoacan, in Mexico—to apply the ideas of Utopia to the real world among the Indians there. From Mexico in the 16th century to Moscow in the 20th, More’s *Utopia* has had an enormous impact.

But it is in the More of *A Man for All Seasons*, the writer and humanist who was silenced and eventually beheaded—both the historical figure and the character in Bolt’s play—that we see the true nature of his force and its connection with the “unchanging Higher Power above us.”

For, in *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt makes clear that the power that More holds over Henry VIII is fundamentally a moral power; it is a spiritual, higher power. When Henry asks More why he cannot see things the way everyone else does, and More counters that, if everyone else sees them thus, then there’s not much need for More’s own support, Henry explains why More’s opinion matters so much:

**HENRY:** Because you are honest. What’s more to the purpose, you’re known to be honest … There are those like Norfolk who follow me because I wear the crown, and there are those like Master Cromwell who follow me because they are jackals with sharp teeth and I am their lion, and there is a mass that follows me because it follows anything that moves—and there is you.

**MORE:** I am sick to think how much I must displease Your Grace.

**HENRY:** No, Thomas, I respect your sincerity. Respect? Oh, man, it’s water in the desert …

I believe it would be a mistake to see Henry’s words here as simply hypocritical. He really does think highly of More, and More has a real sway over Henry. Indeed, reading this passage, it is almost impossible not to be reminded of what, for me, has always been one of the most striking passages in the entire New Testament (by a strange coincidence, it also involves an adulterous marriage and ends with a beheading):

Herod had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Phillip’s wife; because he had married her. For John had said to Herod,
“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed: and yet he heard him gladly. (Mark 6:17–20)

Yes, Henry respects More’s honesty and sincerity, but he is clearly terrified of More’s pen and its potential effects. He shouts at More:

HENRY: … Lie low if you will, but I’ll brook no opposition—no noise! No words, no signs, no letters, no pamphlets—mind that, Thomas—no writings against me!

Henry, however, is naïve—about himself and about the situation, and so perhaps is Bolt’s More who reassures his family:

MORE … No, no, when they find I’m silent they’ll ask nothing better than to leave me silent; you’ll see.

The wiser head, the shrewder political tactician, who realizes the power even of More’s silenced pen—the Machiavellian who is not naïve—is Thomas Cromwell. In his conversation with the somewhat obtuse Duke of Norfolk, he explains the harsh reality of the situation:

NORFOLK says of More: But he makes no noise, Mr. Secretary; he’s silent, why not leave him silent?

CROMWELL: Not being a man of letters, Your Grace, you perhaps don’t realize the extent of his reputation. This “silence” of his is bellowing up and down Europe!

And finally, in his climactic confrontation with More in court, Cromwell explains to the jury the power of More’s silence:

CROMWELL: Consider, now, the circumstances of the prisoner’s silence. The oath was put to good and faithful subjects up and down the country and they had declared His Grace’s title to be just and good. And when it came to the prisoner he refused. He calls this silence. Yet is there a man in this court, is there a man in this country, who does not know Sir Thomas More’s opinion of the King’s title? Of course not! But how can that be? Because this silence betokened—nay, this silence was not silence at all but most eloquent denial.

MORE: (With some of the academic’s impatience for a shoddy line of reasoning) Not so, Master Secretary, the maxim is “qui tacet consentire.” (Turns to COMMON MAN) The maxim of the law is (Very carefully) “Silence gives consent.” If, therefore, you wish to construe what my silence “betokened,” you must construe that I consented, not that I denied.

CROMWELL: Is that what the world in fact construes from it? Do you pretend that is what you wish the world to construe from it?

MORE: The world must construe according to its wits. This Court must construe according to the law. (Act 1

In fact, both men are right. More is right about the immediate legal question. But Cromwell is right about More’s silence and its real significance and impact: More is dangerous.
Similarly, Solzhenitsyn understood that he and his books were dangerous. In the preface to *The Gulag Archipelago*, he writes: “And if freedom does not dawn on my country for a long time to come, then the very reading and handing on of this book will be very dangerous, so I am bound to salute future readers as well—on behalf of those who have perished” (Solzhenitsyn 1973).

He meant, of course, that the book will be dangerous for those who read it and hand it on, but it is also true that the reading and diffusion of the book will also be dangerous to the state it criticizes so devastatingly. Solzhenitsyn knew that he was in competition with the state, and that a clash was inevitable. In *The First Circle*, he wrote: “For a country to have a great writer is like having a second government. That is why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones” (Solzhenitsyn 1968).

In the end, perhaps, the most eloquent witnesses to the power of More and Solzhenitsyn were the efforts that were made to silence them. Both of them were imprisoned. One was beheaded. The other was deported and sent into exile. Some might see this as the sword’s getting the last laugh. Others might say that this shows that persecution is the compliment that political power pays to the pen.

**The pen can be dangerous**

The bulk of the old “pen is mightier than the sword” tradition is uncomplicatedly celebratory. The clear message is that the pen is mightier ... and good. Like Bulwer-Lytton who coined the phrase, those who made the claim were usually writers themselves, like the humanists of Thomas More’s day. They were blowing their own horn and, not infrequently, justifying their own employment.

Yet, while it is conventional to hear this expression as a celebration, it cannot be restricted to innocent or positive meanings. Put another way: if the pen is mightier than the sword, then Henry VIII was right to be afraid of More and his writings. It cannot be denied: the pen can be dangerous—both politically and personally.

If we take seriously the idea that the pen is mightier than the sword, if writers armed with words are at least as dangerous as soldiers armed with swords, then perhaps it should not surprise us that men of letters are imprisoned and killed. Maybe a sentence like “He who lives by the pen will die by the sword” shouldn’t sound paradoxical.

Furthermore, the pen can be dangerous and potentially harmful not just for the wicked but also for good. In other words, it can be used not only to bear witness to the higher powers but also against them. It can wreak havoc not only for evil men and bad governments but also for good men and good governments—and also for the Church. The Church of course responded to this reality in many different ways, including with the Index of Forbidden Books.

It stands to reason that, if the pen really is mightier than the sword, then it can do at least as much damage as a sword, and its damage, precisely because of its relation with the higher powers, the transcendental sphere, and the higher spiritual powers of the soul, will be worse.

One of the things that More and Solzhenitsyn share in common is that they were both, for a while at least, treated as heroes by both left and right. In More’s case, Bolt is partly
responsible for this. They were taken to be more liberal than they really were. But neither More nor Solzhenitsyn was naive about the danger that the pen posed for the good.

This is especially obvious in Thomas More’s case, because—in his own life—he was actually on both sides of the question. More was hardly a defender of the freedom of speech or of conscience for heretics. He attempted to stop Lutheran books from entering England and being printed there. During his chancellorship, six people were burned at the stake for heresy. More died not for subjective conscience, but for objective truth. What mattered to him was not whether he had a right of conscience, but whether he had a conscience that was right. And he was convinced that he did.

Bolt does not give us all of More’s final speech following the verdict against him, and there is a part that he left out that I cannot resist citing, because it shows so clearly More’s own understanding of his conscientious resistance.

When the presiding judge noted that the bishops, universities and the most learned men of the realm had approved of Henry VIII’s Reformation settlement, More answered by invoking not his personal conscience but rather the great democracy of the living and the dead that is the Church:

I nothing doubt but that, though not in this realm, yet in Christendom about, of these well-learned bishops and virtuous men that are yet alive, they be not the fewer part that are of my mind therein. But if I should speak of those that are already dead, of whom many be now holy saints in heaven, I am very sure it is the far greater part of them that, all the while they lived, thought in this case that way that I think now; and therefore am I not bounden, my lord, to conform my conscience to the Council of one realm against the general council of Christendom. For of the foresaid holy bishops I have, for every bishop of yours, above one hundred; and for one council or Parliament of yours (God knoweth what manner of one), I have all the councils made these 1000 years. And for this one kingdom, I have all other Christian realms. (More 2011)

Reflecting on these words, the historian Marvin O’Connell comments:

These are not the words of a man for whom conscience, defined as the private grasp of the truth according to one’s lights, is the supreme tribunal. Conscience for More was the right to be right, not the right to be wrong. He did not refuse to “conform” his conscience to the Act of Supremacy for private but for public reasons…. Similarly, in the days of his power it had been irrelevant to him that those whom he called heretics and whom he pursued relentlessly with both pen and sword had considered themselves right. In his view it was neither irrational nor cruel to take away their lives, if need be, precisely because they were in fact wrong about the public good. (O’Connell 2002)

It could be that More is a hero of the self, of “authentic selfhood”, of conscience. But his selfhood and conscience were dependent on a knowable reality, an exterior objective truth that could be debated; they depended on his being right.

Solzhenitsyn too was keenly aware of the evil effects of the pen on the soul of contemporary mankind, and he was not a great admirer of the free press in the West.

Hastiness and superficiality are the psychic disease of the 20th century and more than anywhere else this disease is reflected in the press. Such as it is, however, the press has become the greatest power within the Western countries, more powerful than the legislative power, the executive, and the judiciary. (Solzhenitsyn 1978)

Here he clearly sees the Western press, its freedom notwithstanding, as the source of serious spiritual-psychic problems. And if he thought that hastiness and superficiality
and overweening power were a problem in 1978, one can only imagine what he would be saying now in the age of round-the-clock news and Twitter.

The fact that “the pen is mightier than the sword” is, then, not simply a cause for celebration. It is, in fact, itself a double-edged sword.

What is the message for us today?

The point, of course, is not that we need censorship today, but rather that we need to take seriously this idea that the pen is mightier than the sword—for good and for ill. In short, let us not be naïve.

More and his ideas did pose a grave threat to Henry VIII. Solzhenitsyn was a threat to the Soviet Union. Jordan Peterson—to cite a well-known contemporary example—is a threat to politically correct academia. Heresies—false ideas—are a threat to the Church and to souls. Bad philosophy is a threat to society. The internet is overflowing with threats to our minds and our souls. The pen can be a syringe that injects either medicine or poison directly into the spiritual bloodstream—of the individual first, but then of society, of the body politic.

Pope Francis has referred on various occasion to the dangers of ideological coloniza-
tion. Often that seems to refer to a geographical phenomenon: the “first world” imposing itself on the “developing world.” There is an element of truth in this. But how does it take place? Inasmuch as it is truly “ideological”, it takes place at the level of ideas, and therefore of words. Language is the vehicle for ideological colonization. And it takes place in government documents, international accords, speeches, articles and conversations that import or export criteria, categories, frames of reference … in short, ways of thinking, captured and transmitted by “the pen.”

Considering the power of the pen—the tool that is mightier than the sword—can, I think, illuminate some phenomena of our day. Above all, the various movements to control free speech.

Absolute freedom of expression has, I think, rarely if ever existed. There has always been a limit—at the very least when the speech in question caused immediate material damage or when it was seen as being incompatible with the functioning of society. The founding fathers of our traditions of tolerance and free speech were hardly absolutists. So, for instance, Locke, in his Letter Concerning Toleration did not call for toleration of atheists, and he had his doubts about at least some Catholics. Milton, in his Areopagitica, had no patience with “papistry” and “open superstition.” For them, athe-

ism was an unacceptable threat, something incompatible with a functioning society.

And so, the real question becomes: which things do we consider unacceptable threats to the integrity of persons or societies? And that is something that changes.

The contemporary changes in attitudes toward free speech could be analysed less as expansions and contractions of freedom than as shifts in the focus of our fears, as alter-
atations in what we consider existential threats to individuals and communities. As shift, in short, in what we deem “really”—really—intolerable.

The end result is that shifts in society can effectively “outlaw” what was once unexceptional speech. And this can happen fairly quickly. Recall that in the 1660s Milton and Locke were already treating Catholicism, the faith that had built their
own culture over the course of sixteen centuries, as somehow, suddenly, beyond the pale. This helps to explain a peculiar phenomenon of our times: the sense that we have lost control of what is said in public discourse and the simultaneous fear that “language-police” are lurking everywhere. Relativism and doctrinaire ideological control seem to co-exist.

In More’s day there was a commonly-accepted grounding for a sense of selfhood, of identity, of who we are and why we are here. But now we are left with a subjective self, constructed often on the shifting sand of various competing accounts of human nature and society.

The now-nearly-classical formulation of this view is Justice Kennedy’s declaration in Planned Parenthood vs. Casey: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” (United States Supreme Court Decision 1992).

If Justice Kennedy is correct, it follows inevitably that we are also free to define what constitutes an existential threat as well. If this is the case, then, as our accounts of existence become more various and subjective, it will become nearly impossible to know when, by our words, we are endangering someone else’s identity or existence, when we are engaging in abuse or hate speech.

Furthermore, Justice Kennedy’s language may sound very high-minded, even Promethean perhaps, but what if—as is entirely likely—you are not up to the challenge of defining your own concept of existence? What if your sense of meaning and of the universe remains confused, vague, inchoate, changing from day to day, based on the vagaries of boredom, will and desire … the “personal imperatives” with which Solzhenitsyn says we fill the empty space left by an absent High Power. As Solzhenitsyn said at Harvard in 1978: “Mere freedom does not in the least solve all the problems of human life, and it even adds a number of new ones.”

One of the added problems is how this weak, modern sense of self “interacts” with pens that are mightier than swords, with words that can wound. It may well be that they cannot play well together. It may be that, in the presence of a generation of fragile selves, the mighty pen, in all its freedom, finds itself provoking anxiety, fear and grievance, that it is unwittingly guilty of innumerable insults and threats, causing others to feel “unsafe.” We may be amused by the so-called “snowflakes” of today, but they are probably not to be blamed for their insecurity, which may well be perfectly genuine. Their cries of outrage or pain may be perfectly sincere.

We saw, at the beginning of this article, how Solzhenitsyn looked upon Thomas More, the author of Utopia, as the great-grandfather of socialism, but what is more interesting for us is how the More of A Man for All Seasons, who burst open the scene at the same time as Ivan Denisovich and Solzhenitsyn himself, fits into Solzhenitsyn’s diagnosis of modernity.

Clearly, More is a moral example of someone—and one who belonged to “the ruling groups and the intellectual elite” mentioned by Solzhenitsyn at Harvard—who did not lack courage. But Solzhenitsyn’s diagnosis is also an historical analysis:

[T]he mistake must be at the root, at the very basis of human thinking in the past centuries. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was first born during the Renaissance and found its political expression from the period of the
Enlightenment. It became the basis for government and social science and could be defined as rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, with man seen as the center of everything that exists. (Solzhenitsyn 1978)

In short, Solzhenitsyn locates the beginning of the problem—the anthropocentric humanism that he saw underlying both Western liberalism and Communist ideology—precisely in More’s time. If More is the antithesis of the moral problem—the lack of courage—that Solzhenitsyn decries, he is the epitome of what can happen when the modern state encounters a man who is truly grounded in a Higher Power.

More was a victim of modern statism in its infancy. Four hundred years later, Solzhenitsyn was a victim of modern statism taken to its logical extreme, made into a terrifying system.

**Conclusion**

I would like to end with a call to arms—given my topic, perhaps we should call it a call to “letters” or “pens”—and a call to hope.

First, I believe that the example of the difficulties and the heroic efforts of Thomas More and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn should inspire us to seize our opportunities. We have chances to speak and to write—to be heard and to be read—that they could only dream of. We have freedom. We have technology. We cannot let these chances go to waste.

Second, Solzhenitsyn saw this as a battle that *everyone* can fight:

>[T]he simple step of a simple courageous man is not to partake in falsehood, not to support false actions! … But writers and artists can achieve more: they can CONQUER FALSEHOOD! In the struggle with falsehood art always did win and it always does win! Openly, irrefutably for everyone! Falsehood can hold out against much in this world, but not against art. (Labedz 1974)

Solzhenitsyn may exaggerate the inevitability of art’s victory over falsehood, but he is right to suggest that sometimes our response to this call to arms will be silence. Like More and Solzhenitsyn, we need to be steadfast in our refusal to bend linguistically, in our refusal to say or write the easy things that are not true, in our perhaps inarticulate refusal to sign on to half-truths for fellowship’s sake.

Ironically, Robert Bolt, the author of *A Man for All Seasons*, offers a small, almost comical, example of our modern tendencies. In September of 1961, while his play about Thomas More was running in London, Bolt was arrested and jailed for engaging in a political protest against nuclear arms in Trafalgar Square. He was part of a group of intellectuals and artists called the Committee of 100, chaired by Bertrand Russell, who opposed the nuclear arms race through civil disobedience. He was sentenced to a month in jail, but, at the time, he was writing the script for *Lawrence of Arabia*, and the producer, Sam Spiegel, desperately wanted Bolt to be released. But the release came with a price. And the price was paid. Spiegel prevailed on Bolt to sign a statement forswearing further protests, which allowed him to be released from jail after only two weeks.
Of course, no great principle was a stake. No lie was involved. But there was very little heroism either. Very little standing up for principle. It is said that Bolt never forgave Spiegel for pressuring him to renounce his protest. As he himself had written just a year earlier, “It may be that a clear sense of the self can only crystallize around something transcendental, in which case our prospects look poor.” Cowardice, human respects and simple mental laziness make it all too easy, but when we fall into the phraseology of fashionable falsehood, we risk becoming ourselves vehicles, carriers and transmitters of ideological colonialization.

The examples of More and Solzhenitsyn show that resisting that temptation—whether by courageously wielding the pen or by maintaining a silence that, like More’s, bellows—can be costly but is well worthwhile.

And finally, a call to hope.

It is true that the pen can be dangerous. But it is as dangerous to evil as it is to the good. The pen can and should be a mortal threat to evil, to falsehood, to ideology and to despair. It is dangerous not only for the believer, but also for the unbeliever.

Let us never forget the power of good reading, of good books. I am a professor of literature. I am a witness, on a daily basis, of the power of the pen—not just in the life of nations, as we have seen with England and the Soviet Union, but also in the life of individuals. In my class, I see the power of the great texts—from Ephrem the Deacon, to Dante, John of the Cross, Flannery O’Connor, and a fortiori the Bible itself—to shape and alter for the good our sense of self and of human existence.

I originally thought of entitling this article on Thomas More and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “Let Us Now Praise Dangerous Men.” For they were and they remain, in the best sense of the word, dangerous men. In this regard, it may help us to recall the famous words of C.S. Lewis in Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life: “In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for… A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading” (Lewis 1955).

So, while it is true that the enticements of evil will remain seductive, that we are morally weak and intellectually limited, nevertheless there is a trinity of higher powers that Solzhenitsyn referred to in his Nobel speech—the Good, the True and the Beautiful—that can come to our aid. Solzhenitsyn put it this way: “Perhaps the old trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty is not simply the decorous and antiquated formula it seemed to us at the time of our self-confident materialistic youth (1970). Perhaps, he suggests, the “old trinity” has not lost its power.

In the end, this is the “trinity” he is referring to: the Good that Ivan Denisovich begins to glimpse in his conversation with the Christian prisoner Alyoshka in the final pages of Solzhenitsyn’s novel; the Truth of clear, courageous, sincere words of spoken and written wisdom; the Beauty of noble actions like those of Thomas More that can attract the admiring pen of a non-believer like Robert Bolt and capture the imagination of contemporary audiences; beyond that, the Beauty of the extraordinary vision of every man and woman who ever existed as a beloved child of a God who both created us and redeemed us on the Cross.

We have to know and take heart in the fact that, in spite of everything, all of this remains seductive and wonderfully dangerous today.
Notes

1. Jordan Peterson is a Canadian psychologist, who has become famous for his refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns. https://www.jordanpeterson.com/ Accessed August 10, 2019
2. Just one of many examples: https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2019/05/02/modern-forms-of-ideological-colonization/ Accessed August 10, 2019.

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