Acad. Quest. (2022) 35.2
DOI 10.51845.35.2.11

Articles

What, After Speech Is Free, Shall We Say?

Michael Platt

I

Has there been another "incident" on campus? Has a visitor been disinvited? Has a speaker been howled down, taken flight, been roughed up? Has a mob surrounded a faculty member? Has he retired early? And how many others are sighing to? What's going on? Has discussion of certain issues, touching certain topics, even asking certain questions, been forbidden? Are things being judged not by their character, but their color? Has even Shakespeare been cancelled? And have those who speak well of our civilization, our country, and our Constitution, with its protections, been vilified? Have some been reprimanded, suspended, even fired? And how many, many others, have, for fear of the same, fallen silent?

We hear many such reports. I sigh, I grumble, and I write my Harvard, my Oxford, and my Yale, and if any resolute band took up the fallen banners of Veritas, Dominus, and Lux, to found a University, I'd smile. Naturally I get invitations to join meetings to declare, with others, our support of free speech. However, travel is wearing, time precious, and I stay in my *tour arrière*. Still, I wonder what those meetings must be like, surely making one feel less vulnerable and solitary, but after we gather together and declare "I'm for free speech!"— what will we then say?

I am reminded of Tocqueville, who in tome II of his capacious examination of our democratic ways, reports that in America men meet to declare "I shall not drink." Writing for a French audience, some of whom knew as least 246 kinds of wine, he must have been smiling. What! Spend an evening repeating "I won't drink a drop" when you could be home smiling at your wife, on your third glass.[1]

1 Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol II, part 2, Chapter 5.

After enjoying study at Harvard, Oxford, and Yale, and the augmented happiness of teaching, at Dartmouth, the University of Dallas, Heidelberg, and elsewhere, Dr. **Michael Platt** continues, with mostly former students, via the internet, every Tuesday. His *Mighty Opposites: Machiavelli and Shakespeare Match Wits* is on Amazon and his *Seven Wonders of Shakespeare* will appear soon at St. Augustine. His "Truth in American Academe" appeared in these pages in the Summer 2020 issue. For more visit Friends of the Republic or email him at DrMichaelPlatt1942@gmail.com.

To be sure, temperance is worth embracing—for some it is "live free of drink, or die"—but just as the cessation of drunkenness only starts you on a good life, so the cessation of academic incivility would only begin to revive the university. The cows munching silently in the fields, though they refrain from hindering other cows from mooing, do not a university make. Yes, rid the campus of the hate that silences speech, but only good speaking, and some elevated kinds of it, will revive American Academe.

II

Three of the greatest speakers are surely Socrates in Plato's dialogues, Jesus in the Gospels, and then after them, all the others trying to see how Socrates and Christ might come together. In the first, with Socrates, we have the search for truth; in the second, with Christ, we have the depths of it; and in the third, we have those like Thomas Aquinas discerning harmony, but others, such as Nietzsche, vowing eternal enmity. How we would like to have been present, to ask a question or just listen to them, beside Aristodemus at the *Symposium*, or John at that Last Supper. You cannot but wish there were more, a dialogue of soldier Socrates and general Thucydides, a time when Christ said, "He who is near me is near the fire; he who is far from me, is far from the kingdom,"[2] and John responded, or a chance to ask Matthew how he knew Christ stayed awake the whole night, if *all* the disciples slept. Or if after class we could have strolled with Thomas on the Street of Straw, or with Nietzsche in Sils Maria, past that pyramidal rock.

These are the great conversations at the heart of our civilization, but there are also the good ones, with speech flowing freely, not without truth, but merry with jests, well led by the likes of Dr. Johnson. How we would like to join when "The Club," including Burke, Reynolds, Sheridan, and Johnson, got going on Shakespeare, and in walked Goethe and the conversation went on all week. Such thoughts might tempt one to compose a dinner party with all three, Socrates, Jesus, and Johnson, were it not checked by the recognition that we are not equal to Plato, the Evangelists, or even James Boswell. Best to just thank them for recording these famous suppers, otherwise lost to us.[3]

2 Quoted by Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah*, XX, 3.

3 Would that someone had recorded the conversations of Machiavelli, Leonardo, and Cesare Borgia all that winter of 1502-3 in little Imola.

These I cite are dominated by the best speaker, who doesn't always observe Sydney Smith's caution: "Take as many half-minutes as you can get, but never more than half a minute without pausing, and giving others an opportunity to strike in," and yet that's why these dominators are cherished; they really are the best. But since some are not always amiable (Socrates often embarrasses some knowledgeable adult; Christ is harsh on the Canaanite woman,[4] and Dr. Johnson's seignorial pronouncements sometimes rebuke), we should also appreciate other conversations, worthy of our imitation, with more play, more to-and-fro, smacking of a republic more than a monarchy, perhaps more liable to contention, and thus more in need of gentlemen and especially ladies, whose manners enforce respect for everyone, as so pleasantly in Castiglione's *The Courtier*.

Such support of amity in conversation both rests and prepares us for the lofty conversations, of the mighty opposites, of Aristotle and Aquinas, of Montaigne and Pascal, and of Nietzsche and everyone, that it is the University's mission to carry on. "Truth springs from arguments among friends." (Hume) Some friendships are founded in the search for those truths, such as Goethe and Schiller, Erasmus and More, Michel de Montaigne and Etienne de La Boetie enjoyed, but most require the friendship before the search, and then more to keep it going. As the founder of the University of Dallas, Louise Cowan, used to say, "with faculty, you need to hold a party at the end of each week, so they get back to liking each other."[5] At such parties, both the vexed and the estranged, may recall the core and its purpose that once brought them together, and if a Babette is preparing the feast, so much the better.

Here is one such amiable conversation that was life-long:

> Many were the *wit-combates* betwixt him [Shakespeare] and *Ben Jonson*, which two I behold like a *Spanish great Gallion* and an *English-man of War*; Master *Jonson* (like the former) was built for higher learning: *Solid*, but *Slow* in his performances. *Shake-spear*, with the *English-man of War*, lesser in *bulk*, but lighter in *sailing* could turn with all tides, tack about and take advantage of all winds, by the quickness of his Wit and Invention.[6]

4 Matthew 15:21-28.

5 Likewise the class party should come early, so the amity that arises flows into the class for the rest of the term (as it did when Louise, an exile, and I, soon to be, held it for the 1984 Russian Novel."

6 Thomas Fuller's (1608-61) account of the wit-combats 'twixt Shakespeare and Jonson is reprinted in Frank Kermode's bargain *Four Centuries of Shakespearian Criticism* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 41.

There are many memorable ones: memorably witty as any dinner party with W. H. Auden, Oscar Wilde, or Sydney Smith presiding,[7] memorably sagacious as the table talk of Goethe and that of Kafka too, and memorably hilarious as Hal and Falstaff at the Boar's Head in Eastcheap. Of course, some conversations are venomous. One headed to enmity can sometimes be diverted by a question, either philosophic, such as "What is race?"[8] Or inquiring: "Does someone with a white mother and a black father pay or receive reparations?" Or ironic: "And do we test to the 512 or 2024 ancestor level?" Truth is important, but even Aristotle acknowledges that legislators value amity above justice, and many conversations with Lincoln, which began sharp, turned gentle after he told a story. Poetry sometimes accomplishes what questions, discussion, exhortation, and denunciation, do not. When Nathan told a story, and David denounced the villain, all Nathan had to add was, "thou art the man." (Some denunciations, we see from Nathan, may be required by justice, and even one leading to war.) What about peace? Within our time negotiations on nuclear arms were advanced by diplomats sharing their life stories, till they trusted each other to take a walk alone in the Swiss woods, but also by someone saying "no" in Reykjavik, and continuing to talk.

Mention of war, and peace, and Lincoln might remind us of another sort of worthy conversations: debate and argument, such as Lincoln and, yes, Douglas too, achieved in 1858. Nothing recently comes close to that elevated and amicable exchange of rivals, or to the newspaper series that was the *Federalist*. Its author, Publius, was three friends writing as one, and the Constitution twenty-five and more worthies, sweating all one summer, and finally agreeing as one.[9] Twelve years earlier drafter Jefferson, the committee including Franklin, and the General Congress Assembled all agreed on our Declaration of principles.

What of deliberations about justice? Exemplary is the "conversation" of the jury in Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*. There are all the infirmities of prejudice, passion, and impatience, but restrained by our ancient judicial practices, no hearsay, only evidence given, and examined, witnesses cross-examined,

7 All savored in Hesketh Pearson's *Smith of Smiths.*

8 The best demystifying and thus defanging answer I know is Jacques Barzun's *Race: A Study in Superstition* (1937 Harcourt, and 1965 Harper, with addition: "Racism Today).

9 Students can readily come to appreciate what it means to seek the good together, as Hamilton, Madison, Franklin, Adams, and Witherspoon did, by playing in the "serious game" of *The Constitutional Convention of 1787* by Prof. Patrick Coby (Smith College), in which students re-play, over weeks, and possibly to a different outcome, that summer's conversation.

the standard "beyond a reasonable doubt," and eventually the eleven for death come around to acquittal, but it is only because Juror No. 8 is there. He alone has the mind, and the tongue, and the patience needed.

Such a thoughtful man, able to converse well with others, even to teach them, must have first conversed well with himself. Alone in his tower, Michel de Montaigne, was such a man. "The incomparable author of the art of conversing," as Pascal observed. In his *Essais*, he is conversing both with himself, and with the great ancients, Plutarch, Lucretius, Socrates, Cato, and Tacitus. He hosts them all. No wonder Montaigne is the author readers would most like to go visit. There in Montaigne's presence, in his tower with the maxims of the ancients carved in the rafters, you would meet those engaged in the great ancient conversations, Xenophon and Plato taught by Socrates, Alexander brought up by Aristotle, and Cicero listening to the friends, Scipio and Laelius, all conversing, in their books, just as Montaigne himself is with them.

III Would You Trust an Academic?

These speakers, whose great works a university will have in its core, and all its faculty never stop sharing, provide the "true pitch" of greatness, to judge all the merely good things, specialized professions, gainful careers, or just useful things, such as jobs, university studies lead to. After speech on campus is once again free, great speech must follow, but even more than good studies depends on it.

Academe, the brainy center of our modern, enlightened, scientific, conquesting civilization, has the power to sway, preserve or destroy, all else. Consider one, merely vital but convincing, thing. Since democracy means one day a group of your fellow citizens, conversing in a small room, might vote you dead, we, each of us, have a lively interest in the education of our fellow citizens. In truth, our whole nation, its life, its future, unto the ages, depends on the same virtues that finally prevail in *12 Angry Men.* Are the rules governing that conversation respected in academe today? Are the virtues of Juror 8 admired and cultivated? Are students taught them? Do the faculty care?

Judging from reports, the worst are screaming, the majority cheering, and the best whispering. Some confirmation of those reports came to me from someone, at one of our elite colleges, where he (I give no name—to protect the virtuous, from the "signalers") heard student after student in office hours saying things they said they would never express in class. My friend worked, persuaded

some to speak, and the others to listen. And though we've voted differently, I say my friend is who I want in that small room, like Juror No. 8, and thus what's revealing is what happened next: when my friend spoke of this success to fellow teachers, trusted ones, friends, in the evening over a beer, they were indignant, they grew silent, they crept away, never to meet again. Such disappearance of conversation and of friendships are as revealing as all the furious silencing of others. It's a desolate scene, smoldering and hushed.

Bruegel thou shouldest be painting at this hour. His panorama of Academe, would feature the STEM Tower of Babel, around it the Enraged Leading the Blind, and in the tiny center the Massacre of the few Innocent teachers by Administrators Mad Meg and Black Alba—no Wedding Banquet, no Children's Games, no scythers in Summer, or hunters in the Snow. How has the university become a hell?

IV Do You Have a Curriculum?

The immediate features of the decline of academe are well known, but one deep cause, long advancing, and supporting all the others, deserves attention. Up to 1964 or so, when I graduated from Harvard, the faculty had always addressed the fundamental question, "what does it take to become educated?" and answered with an orderly course of shared study, called a curriculum. Now the enormously expanded course catalogue says "We don't know, maybe it's here, you figure it out." That betrays a great shift, one with transforming consequences. In those days, when the faculty was united enough to provide a curriculum, and thought teaching it was important, it ruled the institution. No longer. Now at one elite college I know only one-seventh of the total payroll are in a classroom, and ruled by the many more not. As one wrote me recently, "When I came here, I felt like a citizen; thought with time I'd be a magistrate; but soon I'll be an employee."

Teachers think a class is a place to learn lots now, become a better student while doing so, so you'll learn better next term, and ultimately live a better life and promote it in others. Genuine teachers, though they do enjoy the approval of students, have as their aim, to deserve it, and maybe only hear it twenty years later. Administrators think the point is satisfaction now, of someone already a perfect judge, a customer, to be humored, indulged, and stroked with an

inflated grade.[10] In the old days, those who administered the institution came from the faculty, wanted to return to teaching, and even kept their hand in. My Doktorvater Al Kernan, when he moved to Provost at Princeton, still taught Shakespeare, and in my time at Dartmouth, President Kemeny taught a section of freshman calculus every year. Today how many college presidents can give a talk on learning and teaching that those in the midst of learning and teaching would find worth listening to? Ruling academe today are persons not qualified by learning to teach a single course. Many of those with a degree in "Education" do seem qualified to teach derision, discontent, and division.

Nor is the diminished faculty a whole body, with a shared purpose, and communal bond. Though thankful for a university paycheck, most faculty only feel at home in "my department," and truly cozy in "my specialty." Even more alienated are the numerous temps, paid a fraction of the tenured, doomed to prove and re-prove themselves each term. All this division of interest, and lack of shared purpose, does not make for amicable, let alone elevated, conversation on campus. Tocqueville said that the secret passion of citizens in a democracy is envy, expressed in cries for "equity," and nowhere more so than in academe. Bruegel painting this Academe would acknowledge that teaching and learning still goes on, but as in *Christ's Procession to Calvary*, you have to look hard; hidden in the center, tiny compared to everything else, are the dedicated teachers, dragging crosses, which envy will crucify you on, for teaching better than others.

Can elite wealthy American academe be reformed? President Bush the elder and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev thought the Soviet Union could be reformed, but as those suffering it knew, it could only explode or collapse. Is elite wealthy American academe the same?

V Elders, Speak

Despondent as we might be about reform, because it requires restoration of a curriculum and a core, and I find the news of academe best bearable through the filter of humor, from the likes of the *Babylon Bee*, nevertheless, let us be of good heart. We are still free to gather in cafes, clubs, and homes, and carry on the great conversations, of reason and revelation, ancients and moderns, philosophy and poetry. For nine years now, my seminar, Friends of the Republic, of

10 On how "evaluations" ignore truth, corrupt students and teachers, fell the faculty, and allow "administrators" to usurp rule, read my "Truth in American Academe," in the Summer 2020 *Academic Questions*.

mostly former students, has each week carried on; at dusk, from home, united via Zoom, perhaps dressed *degni di una curia e di un re*, we join those great conversations, sharing the likes of Shakespeare and Cervantes, Solzhenitsyn and Bandi, Montaigne and Pascal, Bruegel and Rembrandt, Manzoni and Mann, Monteverdi and Isak Dinesen. Such "convives," as we call them, could become, to the current dark age, what St. Benedict's outposts were to those Dark Ages. However, because academe, now the darkest of our institutions is the cause of darkness everywhere, we should ask: how might we help academe?

Let me propose a start, beneficial principally to colleges with some curricular core, but threatened. Why not gather faculty from different disciplines to share in discussion a work worthy to belong to a core curriculum? For many years I conducted long weekends, with fifteen persons, from different disciplines and walks of life, meeting solely to converse (no papers), having read the likes of Aeschylus, Coolidge, or Solzhenitsyn, in six long sessions, with meals, drinks, and walks in between.[11] Those new to the experience would marvel: "We have nothing like this on my campus, and you know, when I was a student I thought my teachers must always be having such conversations, but now even with my friends, we have nothing like this." To which I respond: "Yes. Faculties don't share studies anymore, or even read the same things, especially the works that belong to humanity." Sometimes, I add: "Many a time, when a serious question arises, I've heard one say 'oh that's not my field' and to themselves they must sigh, 'I'm only understood at the national meeting.'" To myself, I think: never great-hearted perhaps, their training has limited their minds, especially the scientists. At the Humboldt alumni days I attend, the Nobel Laureates spend lunch speculating on the next winners. Then sometimes I venture: "On one of my early visits to a "great books" college, in one long weekend, I enjoyed more hours of conversation about learning, about teaching, and about the books that spark and reward such study, than in the previous two years where I was teaching." If you share the books, you will share the teaching, and increase the learning. "We knew reading great works makes you melancholy," said Louise Cowan, and went on, "that's why we do it together." That way of "acquiring what you have inherited" (Goethe) makes students and teachers friends forever.

What memorable times those are. I suppose everyone reading this essay must recall the lectures, that special seminar or tutorial, and those

11 Thanks to the Liberty Fund, I participated in forty such conversations, and conducted ten.

conversations over dinner, or strolling after class, that meant so much, and for the rest of your life. For myself that's Paul Tillich's two-year course "The Self-Interpretation of Man in the West," Alvin Kernan's Shakespearean Tragedy seminar, and everything Marvin Kendrick said during my last year at Yale and we four friends shared all the days and all the nights of Thanksgiving 1969.

Many readers of this essay must recall similar speeches you too are grateful to have heard. In gratitude we should talk about them to younger teachers, whose prospects are so diminished, since their professors have not provided them with a steady teaching life.[12] Bless them for carrying on. Though it is the known infirmity of the elderly to lament the passing of good things, we the elderly should not fail to encourage the young, by talking about how much better it was within our lifetime, and still is in our seminars. The conversations we carry on, of reason and revelation, ancients and moderns, and poetry and philosophy, have it in them to restore our civilization.[13] Every present is a prison. All Renaissances and Reformations start with the recollection of something great, by the elders, and the discovery of how great it is by the young.

12 How good it is that grad students, with only "adjuncting" at colleges, can look to teach in schools, private or charter, Christian, Classical, and Great Hearts.

13 For sources not dependent on our personal testimony, I recommend, *Dialogues with Alfred North Whitehead*, Wilmore Kendall's letters from his time at Oxford in the '30s, and Jacques Barzun's *Teacher in America*, and any of the old Great Teachers anthologies. For education through experience, there are the great Bildungsromanen, by shaggy Goethe, peaceful Stifter, merry Keller, and learned Mann. For the sheer ardor of intellectual desire, read Stefan Zweig's *Confusion*; for liberating satire there is Julie Schumacher's *The Shakespeare Requirement*; and for refreshing humor, Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution*.