

A Footnote on Academic Freedom

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SOMETIMES I long for academic freedom, because a novelist's freedom to think it all out for himself wears me down.

Perhaps academic freedom means something like this: you let me teach Marx and I'll let you teach Burke; we will defend each other's right to teach opposing ideologies, and may the gods preserve us both from the terrible burden of being free to think for ourselves.

I have had the shocking experience of real freedom to teach. For two years at Columbia University I taught courses in short-story writing and in novel writing. I came to it with some years of experience as a novelist, but none as a teacher. I had only two confining orders: first, I signed the old King's College oath of loyalty to the State of New York, and second, Professor Donald Clark, who was head of my department, after a brief meeting and general conversation, said, "All right, Raynolds. Go ahead and teach."

I had the appointment and the order to teach, but no ideology or textual authority to furnish my mind with what to teach. I had some twenty-five years of experience as a practicing writer to draw on, but no curriculum. And each class lasted two hours.

The stark freedom to teach is appalling.

Compared with this stark freedom to teach, the academic freedom to present your chosen and preferred authorities, with perhaps an occasional witty gloss, is an easy comfort. I groaned in my heart for some easy way out, for an escape from this almost absolute freedom to teach. As a resident of Connecticut, I had no lively or concealed desire to overthrow the State of New York, so that that negative inhibition was not even a hair for guidance, and Professor Clark's "go ahead and teach" was boundless license.

I had to come to each class and each

time try to be myself—not Plato, not Aquinas, not Einstein, but myself—for I had nothing else to teach. For true freedom to teach lays it upon a man to teach what he is. Not for him is there an ordered subject matter, with a text book handy and choice authorities to hedge off the mystic anguish of making up his own mind and committing his own spirit, as an escape and shelter from pure freedom to teach.

Of course, by the end of two years, using my wits, I had begun to compound a corpus to teach, which is the oldest of intellectual felonies, and the way out of freedom. But then I quit teaching, and went home to write a novel, which was that awful freedom again.

Now when I hear that academic freedom is threatened, I do not think it means that teachers are going to be thrown back on their own creative intelligence, but only that someone is trying to herd them out of the shelter of one authority into that of another. To do this would be to place a silly and stultifying restriction on intellectual types and groupings. Carried far enough, it would narrow education down to the stupidity of one authority, one intellectual felony, one compounded corpus.

But what would happen to our schools and colleges if, beginning tomorrow, each and every teacher were relieved of text, authorities and pre-determined subject matter and told, "You're free. Go ahead and teach. . . ."?

Know thyself, indeed!

How many are prepared for the stark freedom of teaching what they are?

And yet, for a man to teach what he is, is for him to teach the greatest subject in the human curriculum.

But be of good cheer, for nobody is threatening teachers with the stark freedom to teach.