

Free Speech

(Cantos IV, XII, and XII)

Michael Ceraolo

cc&d 2007 chapbook

freedom of speech

Free Speech Canto IV

Alton, Illinois

November 7, 1837,
and

YOU ARE THERE

-This is your
portentous pretentious
roving reporter
Walter Crankcote-

-It is a cold night here
on the banks of the Mississippi River,
but
the passions of the town have been heating up for months
And the man of the moment is Elijah Lovejoy,
a preacher/publisher,
and
a resident of this rising city for a little over a year
Let's take a few moments
for some background on Mr. Lovejoy-

(scroll info:

Lovejoy had left St. Louis in the summer of 1836
having been told by the word and deed
of all segments of its society
that freedom of speech did not permit
the free and open discussion of the slavery question
Lovejoy:
"I am threatened with violence and death
because I dare to advocate, in any way,
the cause of the oppressed"
His first printing press was destroyed
soon after his arrival in Alton)

(flash forward to July 4, 1837,
nearly a year after his arrival
in a putative free state:

“What a bitter mockery is this
We assemble to thank God for our own freedom,
and to eat and drink with joy and gladness of heart,
while our feet are on the necks
of nearly three millions of our fellow men
Not all our shouts of self-congratulation can drown their groans
Even that very flag of freedom that waves over their heads
is formed from materials cultivated by slaves,
on a soil moistened with their blood”

And then on August 21st
a second printing press was destroyed

And then again on September 21st
another printing press was destroyed
just after its arrival in Alton)

-Just a few days ago,
the town of Alton held a meeting
to chart the desired course of action
should the rumor that yet a fourth press
was on its way to Alton prove true
The featured speaker at the meeting, Usher Linder,
the Attorney General of Illinois,
implied strongly that Lovejoy was insane-
(any advocate of emancipation and equality
was considered insane in those days)

-Mr. Linder also proved prophetic when he said,
“Elijah Lovejoy will be killed within two weeks”
for that is indeed what has occurred here tonight
Details forthcoming-

-We have been told by reliable sources
that Mr. Linder piloted himself, Pilate-like,
out of town this very morning
Here is what we know of the assault on freedom:
Mr. Lovejoy and some of his supporters

had gathered at a warehouse by the river
to defend this press against being wrecked
A mob of men made up mainly,
though very far from exclusively,
of those who can't afford to kill any more brain cells
had been heavily ingesting alcohol
and had also gathered by the warehouse
Shots were fired,
and one of the mob was hit
The mob then tried to burn the warehouse,
but

the ineptitude of the alcohol-addled
precluded such a possibility
In attempting to fend off the firestarters
Lovejoy stepped outside and was shot dead
Their enemy extinguished,
the mob allowed the rest of the press defenders
to escape to safety in exchange
for the chance to wreck the hated press
The 'honor' of the drunken mob could not be relied upon
and more shots were fired at the fleers;
again

only the ineptitude of the alcohol-addled aim
prevented more deaths
And then
yet another press was wrecked
Justice is probably not a possibility,
since the prosecutor is the aforementioned Linder
Alton, Illinois
November 7, 1837
and You Are There
This is Walter Crankcote
Good Night

(Poetic justice:
the City of Alton,
which seemed poised to supplant St. Louis
and become the eventual Gateway to the West,
so offended the sensibilities of its fellow citizens
that it went into a decline from which it never recovered
And not even the birth of Miles Davis there many years later
could make up for the Lovejoy episode)

Free Speech Canto XII

It was early in the spring of 2007
and a no-talent jackass with a face made for radio
(though strangely enough he did have a TV show)
did a humor-impaired and comically-challenged bit
that continued his long history of race- and gender-based 'humor'
(he used to do his schtick in my hometown,
and
when he got his call-up to the 'major league' of media
Cleveland's gain was New York's loss;
call me crazy,
call me old-fashioned,
call me elitist,
but
I like my comedians to actually be funny)
Mr. NTJ insulted a women's college basketball team
and there was justifiable outrage
and the predictable war of words back and forth
Mr. NTJ even had the women on his show,
and apologized,
and showed to everyone (as if there had been any doubt)
the ludicrousness of his observations
People rightly exercised their right not to listen;
people rightly exercised their right to try to persuade others not to listen;
but then,
showing the truth of these definitions

(free speech- what I exercise when you have power
sedition- what you exercise when I have power
censorship- what is exercised by whoever has power)

people went beyond their rights
and attempted to coerce and censor the offender
And the pimps who controlled the ever-consolidating corporate media
(where is the outrage at that?),
seeing that they had a whore who could no longer make them money,
got rid of Mr. NTJ

And
people celebrated their regrettable success,
forgetting
(if they ever knew)
that the same tactics had far more often
been used to silence their viewpoints,
and
that sometime (no one could know when)
the pendulum of history would swing back,
and
they would be hit over the head with their own precedent

Free Speech Canto XIII

1915

Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio

And

the nine old men who could ruin a wer dream
(also known as the Supreme Court),
in upholding the verdict of lesser dream ruiners,
decided unanimously

(in a decision

just outside the Top Ten List of Worst Decisions
and not overturned for nearly forty years)
that censorship of the movies was legit,

that

“There are some things which should not have pictorial representation
in public places and to all audiences”

because

“It cannot be put out of view
that the exhibition of moving pictures
is a business pure and simple
originated and conducted for profit”

(so unlike

the other media,

which at that time

enjoyed at least a little of the protection
of the First Amendment)

And thus,
from the department of
You Can't Make This Stuff Up,
we give you
(I kid you not)
United States v. The Spirit of '76

Robert Goldstein lived in Los Angeles
and ran a costume shop,
which
the burgeoning movie studios beginning to re-locate there
took full advantage of
Goldstein got in on the ground floor,
investing in
D.W. Griffith (the original Ed Wood)'s
Birth of a Nation

Perhaps repenting this,
he decided to produce his own movie about the real birth of the nation,
a big-budget spectacle entitled The Spirit of '76

(unfortunately
the movie was lost in the hazardous chemical stew
that many old movies disintegrated into)
The movie opened in early 1917,
before the United States was (officially) at war,
before the passage of the marvelously mis-monikered Espionage Act
(which started out to deal with actual espionage
but moved quickly to suppression of speech,

particularly
any speech critical of the government)
The movie showed such stirring storied patriotic scenes
such as Paul Rever's Ride
and Washington wintering at Valley Forge,

but
it also included scenes of the British troops
bayonetting women and children
in the Wyoming Valley Massacre

And there
was where the spirit of '76 clashed
with the spirit of 1917
Headlines across the country:

“BILLBOARD VERSION OF ‘SPIRIT OF ‘76’ RESENTED BY DAR”

“SPIRIT OF ‘76 MOVIE FAILS TO MOVE ITS CRITICS”

Except

for the critics in the Justice (?) Department:

they were moved to prosecute the producer, Robert Goldstein,
under that same mis-named Espionage Act

(why is it that the most creativity shown by government officials
is in the naming of the laws?)

Goldstein was caught

In a sinister synergy of his ethnicity

(both German and Jewish),

Which

combined with the sublime stupidity of censorship

to assure his conviction

“History is history and fact is fact

There is no doubt about that”

but this movie was

“calculated reasonably so to excite or inflame

the passions of our people of some of them

that they will be deterred that full measure

of cooperation, sympathy, assistance or sacrifice”,

that repeated showings of the movie could cause people

“to question the good faith of our ally, Great Britain”

Goldstein was sentenced to ten years in prison,

served three years of the sentence,

and was exiled

“I am merely a lone man suffering a great wrong for no reason whatever”

And

before you laugh at earlier generations,

remember that the law (and its little sister the Sedition Act)

are still on the books,

waiting

free speech

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