

# On Candor

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (October 2024)



Bust of a Young Jew (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1663)

A recent biography of John Milton observed that, in the seventeenth century, if an author wanted to write a polemic,

but feared that the rabble (what Ben Jonson termed “the sluggish, gaping auditor”) would get their collective panties in a bunch, the polemicist would simply write in Latin, thereby guaranteeing that the text’s audience would be restricted to those capable of actual thought. Since “cancel culture” swelled, pustule-like, into visibility, I’ve learned that those bygone thinkers had it right. Hysterical, vindictive ninnies can’t call for some poor adjunct instructor’s excommunication if the hysterical, vindictive ninnies in question can’t even understand the broadest outlines of what the guy has written. Henceforth, I decided, all discussions of sexuality, gender, race, economics, and foreign policy should be conducted in Latin—or Walloon, or Abkhaz, or paleo-Corsican. “Learning survives among us,” H.L. Mencken observed, “largely because the mob has not got news of it.”[\[1\]](#) Why not tacitly agree to keep the secret?

It gradually dawned on me, however, that such extreme measures might not be necessary. While the average American can’t conjugate a verb in Thracian, he’s unlikely to be capable of doing it in English, either. Whether Nature or Nurture is to blame, most people aren’t that bright. For instance, if you write “Muslims are savages,” you’ll promptly end up in the proverbial soup—“knee-deep in the bisque,” as P.G. Wodehouse put it. If you make a parenthetical remark about “unlettered Saracens,” however, you’ll be much safer. Better still to write something like the following by *NER* Senior Editor Theodore Dalrymple: “Why [do progressive professors] not fulminate against Syria and call for a boycott of a government that has, after all, killed many more Arabs than Israel ever has? The first reason, no doubt, is that a boycott of Syrian science would not require much in the way of positive activity: Syrian science is self-boycotting, as it were.”[\[2\]](#)

Dalrymple’s writings are treasured because, although they’re almost uniquely elegant, they’re never evasive or euphemistic. This quote is, nevertheless, utterly indecipherable to many

who'd claim English as their mother tongue; it could just as well have been written in Ugaritic. My educated comrades look skeptical when I report that, statistically speaking, so very few of their countrymen know that Syria is a country, or that Israel is her neighbor, or that Arabs and Muslims are often two different things—or that the al-Assad clan (rulers of Syria since 1971), being Alawite, aren't *quite* either of these. Many Americans wouldn't even be able to tell you what a "boycott" is. A collapsable bed for young males?

I've been reflecting on such things since realizing that, although I've published a half-dozen books (all generally candid about what I stand for), I'm still opaque, and not only to those of below-average cognitive brawn. People who claim to have read my books ask me questions that (I'd thought) were preempted by the books themselves—questions about my ethno-religious background, the tenor of my current spiritual life, etc. Venantius Fortunatus (530 – 610) quoted Avitus I of Clermont's message to Jews unwilling to accept Christ: "[Y]ou are not really reading the things that you read." [\[3\]](#) It's a style of reading I see regular evidence of in my Gmail inbox. And all the while, I thought I was being so unguarded! If a man is candid in the forest, and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?

At a rural music festival I attended this past July, I saw an instance of candor occurring (literally) in a forest. It was a food-truck offering "Pro-American Coffee"—or rather, "PRO-AMERICAN COFFEE," which isn't quite the same thing. While, to the best of my knowledge, there's nothing intrinsically patriotic about coffee, we're led to assume that it can osmotically absorb the patriotism of those preparing it. Perhaps this explains the message on the truck's side, set in the sort of sans-serif font suggestive of the provincial, blunt, dead-eyed earnestness that (reasonably or otherwise) so unnerves me. "We are..." it reads, using an ellipsis for dramatic tension, "Pro God / Pro Gun / Pro Flag / Pro Liberty

/ Pro History / Pro Constitution / With Zero Equivocation / Or  
Mental reservation[.]”

Although I wholeheartedly share these convictions, it seems daft to limit one’s customer base to Republicans. After all, Capitalism is as American as apple pie, and growing rich off the patronage of those you abhor has something vaguely John Philip Sousa about it.

American-style virtues often flourish abroad, and I can’t help but recall the 2004 assassination of Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin, a wheelchair-bound ghoul whose physiognomy bore a troubling resemblance to Saruman, as played by Christopher Lee. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported: “An Israeli is making a killing by manufacturing memorial candles for assassinated Hamas leader Sheik Ahmed Yassin. Don Avni, a candlemaker from Mitzpe Ramon, said Monday, April 5, that the Israeli air strike that killed the terrorist leader last month saved his business. ‘Thanks to these candles, my factory managed to survive financially. The orders are massive,’ Avni told the *Ma’ariv* newspaper, adding that the 3-foot-high candles bearing Yassin’s image were selling briskly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.”[\[4\]](#)

The chutzpah involved here is so epic that it verges on the sublime. In its volatile combination of secrecy (i.e. anti-candor) and terminal-velocity brazenness, Mr. Avni achieved a triumph that shall forever elude the coffee vendor, who, with his signage, seemed inclined to mark his territory with all the ambiguity of a pissing terrier, come what may. It recalls Ronald Knox’s remark about Edwardian poet Patrick Shaw-Stewart (1888 – 1917): “He did not make truth an idol, but he had almost a mania for candor.”[\[5\]](#) The coffee guy’s signage really did suggest a certain mania.

The food truck to the immediate right had a bit more self-restraint, and, consequently, a much longer line. The truck sported a simple blue cartouche reading: “*Veteran Owned.*”

Could anyone have doubted its proprietor's political loyalties? Among the men with menacing tattoos, an Appalachian drawl, and a left arm rendered handless by a barbarian ambush, how many rejoice at the prospect of Kamala Harris commanding the Armed Forces? How many of Bernie Sanders' devotees rhapsodize about the pleasures of red meat and ATVs? Can it be that hard to deduce the proprietor's positions on transgenderism, D.E.I., federally funded student loan forgiveness, Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter, George Soros, Kyle Rittenhouse, colonialism, gay marriage, abortion, free markets, the Proud Boys, the inerrancy of Scripture, ANTIFA, or the appropriate relationship between Church and State?

In other words, the guy was almost certainly a MAGA Republican; however, by employing just the tiniest bit of reticence, he created a haze of plausible deniability allowing the nose-ringed, neo-Puritanical fussbudgets (never a rarity at music festivals nowadays) to buy an excellent lunch while maintaining an unclouded conscience.

A very bad poet called Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) circulated the adage: "Candor ends paranoia." Although I once swore by this dictum, I came to discover that paranoia is scarcely the worst affliction. *Merriam-Webster* defines "paranoia" as "[a] mental illness characterized by systematized delusions of persecution or grandeur, usually without hallucinations." But was the coffee vendor in any way saved by his candor? He had a choice, as we all do: be guarded (and suspect that people despise you), or be candid (and *know* that people despise you). And men generally don't engage the services of those they despise.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists five definitions for "candor," only one of which has anything to do with frankness. Much more characteristic is the second definition: "Stainlessness of character; purity, integrity, innocence." Our modern use of "candor" seems to have taken off only in the

nineteenth century. It's apparently soused in Romanticism, implicitly associating virtue with a lack of reserve, as if the contents of every man's heart were inherently good, and that it would be unforgivably stingy to keep all that goodness locked away.

Although Allen Ginsberg committed sins against good taste, he also sinned in ways that seem rather less abstract. He was (for instance) a semi-official spokesman for a loathsome outfit called The North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). In eradicating his "paranoia," the poet only confirmed what anyone with eyes would have long suspected: namely, that Allen Ginsberg was a degenerate. Is this really a step in the right direction? In being candid (in the new sense) he proved himself utterly *uncandid* (in the old sense).

When Ginsberg visited Buffalo in the 1970s, he found himself before a sedately bourgeois audience. It should surprise nobody that he opened his reading with "Please Master," a painstakingly detailed, 54-line composition on the purported delights of passive sodomy. It should also surprise nobody that many ticket-holders fled the auditorium. For Ginsberg's sake, I hope he collected his honorarium in advance. Otherwise, he'd share the coffee vendor's fate. As a matter of fact, were Ginsberg still alive, I'd love to see him stage a joint appearance with the patriotic coffee guy. They could stand behind adjacent podiums, being frantically candid with each other. If fisticuffs were to ensue, Ginsberg would receive a thorough drubbing. However, "Please Master" leads one to deduce that he might rather like that.

Pete Seeger set to music a lyric by Calvin Trillin, entitled "The Ross Perot Guide to Answering Embarrassing Questions." In addition to being funny, it's unexpectedly profound. "I lie," says the narrator, explaining: "I offer them no alibi, / Nor say, 'You oversimplify.' / I just deny, deny, deny. / I lie. / [...] I hate the weasel words some slickies use / To blur their pasts or muddy up their views. / Not me. I'm blunt. One thing

that makes me great / Is that I'll never dodge nor obfuscate. / I'll lie." The song establishes a conceptual distinction between (on the one hand) alibi-hustling, oversimplification, dodging, and obfuscation, and (on the other) straightforward lying.

Could there be something similar at work vis-à-vis candor? Are there some things that resemble candor, without actually *being* candor? Is English insufficiently subtle to capture the nuances involved? Furthermore, if candor is a subset of Truth, what's its relationship with Beauty?

Such questions are sadly above my paygrade. The best that I can do is to be as candid as possible. *Et proficiebam in Iudaismo supra multos coaetaneos meos in genere meo, abundantius aemulator existens paternarum mearum traditionum. Cum autem placuit ei, qui me segregavit ex utero matris meae, et vocavit per gratiam suam, ut revelaret Filium suum in me, ut evangelizarem illum in gentibus.*

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[1] *Notes on Democracy*. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., p. 61.

[2] "UK Profs Nix Israel". *City Journal* [online]. 4 February, 2003.

[3] Roberts, Michael, trans. *Poems*. Harvard University Press, 2017, p. 305

[4] "Shorts: Mideast." 9 April 2004. [online]

[5] *Patrick Shaw-Stewart*. William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1920, p. 5.

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