

Truth and Absurdity



Jane Austen

by Michael Curtis

The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made.

It is still astonishing that people of sound mind refuse to condemn the barbarity and war crimes committed by the Russian Federation in its unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, or its previous invasion of Crimea, and to defend the cause of Western civilization. Don't search, advised Albert Camus, for the absolute meaning of life, because of the discord between human needs and the unreasonable silence of the universe, between the search for the meaning or order of the universe and the reality. It is wise to resist the temptation for complete answers or explanations in life. Indeed, life is full of strange absurdities and unanticipated consequences, serious or diverting.

The most pressing current absurdity is the unprovoked

aggression by the war criminal Vladimir Putin against the independent state of Ukraine, his fantasy that Ukrainians defined themselves as part of the Russian nation, of its history, culture, and spiritual space, and declared he was seeking to rid the area of Nazism. Accompanying absurdities are the resolutions of international organizations. On March 3, 2022, the vote by the UN General Assembly condemning the gross and systematic violations and abuses of human rights by the Russian Federation, carried 141-5 but there were 35 abstentions, including 16 African countries that have close ties to Russia.

Again, on April 7, 2022, the UNGA suspended Russia from membership of the UN Human Rights Council, itself an absurd body, by vote of 93 to 24 which included China, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Belarus, with 58 abstaining. The number of negative votes and abstentions indicate the deficiencies of the international community. Indifference, as Elie Wiesel wrote, is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor, never the victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten.

Absurdity can be farcical. Thousands of tourists visit the bronze statue built in 1972 of the character of Juliet in Verona, Italy, in the courtyard where Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is played. Over the years many have rubbed her bosom for good luck, so now her dress has literally faded. Juliet was a teenager, perhaps only aged 13 in the play, and the question arises whether the touching playful tourists are guilty of sexual harassment.

Sexual awareness is all too present in images of Marilyn Monroe, reflections of the American Dream. It is currently aroused by the 40 inch square silkscreen image of Marilyn by Andy Warhol which is to be auctioned in New York in May 2022. This is one of ten variable portraits of the Blonde Bombshell by Warhol, shifting colors and effects. This one, the iconic "Shot Sage MM," has its bizarre elements. The image, created

by printing ink onto a screen over stencils, has a bullet hole, patched up, struck by a woman who visited Warhol's New York studio, who drew out a pistol and shot Marilyn's forehead between the eyes.

Ironically the bullet hole, instead of ruining the image, has seemingly added millions to the price. The auction house, Christie's, has enthusiastically described the portrait of Marilyn, with striking bright yellow hair, blue eye shadow, parted red lips, pink skin, against a blue-green background, as a rare, transcendent image, comparable to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and Leonardo's "Mona Lisa." The previous highest price for a Warhol was \$105 million for his Silver Car Crash image. The auction house now estimates a possible price of \$200 million for MM, a larger sum than the existing record price for a 20th century artwork, which is \$ 212,500 million (equivalent to \$2 million today) for Picasso's series of paintings and drawings, "Les Femmes d'Alger," inspired by Delacroix, sold in June 1956.

The Warhol event has coincided with events, one seemingly absurd, concerning two other important figures, Charles Darwin and Frank Whittle. This new absurdity is that two notebooks of Darwin, in which he outlined his theory of evolution and which contained his famous 1837 tree of life sketch, which were missing in 2001 from the Cambridge University Library, were recently returned in a pink plastic bag packaged with a message of Happy Easter. The note books were placed on the floor of the Library, returned anonymously.

Less curiously, at an auction on April 7 2022, top secret letters written by British engineer, inventor, RAF officer, daring pilot, Sir Frank Whittle were sold. Whittle invented the turbojet engine during World War II. At first, his project which began in the 1930s was not taken seriously and he couldn't find a donor to fund his work, until Royal Air Force, RAF, in 1938 signed a contract with him for an engine

that outperformed piston engines, 100 m.p.h. faster than those in conventional fighters like the Spitfire. Whittle succeeded and the first jet engine was used in the Gloster meteor that first flew in May 1941. General production began of the jets that reached speed of 600 mph, helping save Britain against the Luftwaffe.

Fortunately for British security and survival, this one man working with a small but dedicated team succeeded in producing what the British air ministry had called "impractical." It was fortuitous for Britain that Whittle was ahead of the activity of a rival German physicist and engineer, Hans von Ohain at Gottingen who worked on a similar prototype of an operational jet engine and was in fact the designer of the first operational jet engine. The first flight of a German jet-powered plane took place on August 27, 1939.

Back to absurdity, Stirling University, Scotland, has removed Jane Austen from her special author module and her book *Pride and Prejudice* from the university literature course to help "decolonize" the curriculum. Apparently relating Austen to the more appropriate American author Toni Morrison, the university principal declared Stirling must support an anti-racist agenda in higher education. This agenda is said to discuss racial difference and critical race theory, as well as gender and sexuality. It will, said the principal, make students aware of the language of colonialism, enslavement, violence, racism and sexism.

Stirling University is shameful. Morrison herself is not only a celebrated person, who has won a Nobel Prize, for her novels concerned with themes of racism and slavery, but is important in modern literature as a major figure and even an icon. It is disgraceful that Morrison, who died in 2019, is being misused as a weapon in the pursuit of "decolonization."

What would follies be without Harvard and Yale? Woke Harvard

students complained about a police department substation at a residential hall. It was closed as a result of concerns that the police car outside the hall every night for safety, had an intimidating effect on the sensitive students. They felt they were being watched and policed, not being kept safe. The students were also uncomfortable and complained that police officers regularly took their meals in the university student dining room,

At Yale, which has as its motto "Lux et Veritas," light and truth, more than 120 students at its Law School protested the decision of the Federalist Society to bring an individual, a member of the Alliance Defending Freedom to speak at a campus meeting which was supposed to be a bipartisan panel on civil liberties. They found her objectionable because of her position on LGBTQ rights. The Law School Dean, Heather Gerken, said that some of them had engaged in unacceptable behavior, rude and insulting, they did not violate the free speech policy of Yale. The Law School permits speech even when the content inconsistent with the community's core values. The issue remains unresolved. On one hand, protestors has the right of free speech and objected to the fact there were at least four armed Yale police officers at the event On the other hand the key facts were that the protestors interfered with the ability to hear the speaker and disrupted nearby events, and that they were not punished, although they did violate some of Yale's free speech rules, including making noises that interfered with hearing .

Apparently, everyone survived the Yale event. A more uncertain outcome for a speaker is apparent with the death on April 5, 2022, of the Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky aged 75. He is said to have died from Covid -19 though he said he had had eight Covid shots. On December 22, 2021, in a speech in the State Duma he disclosed the date of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. He told the members that the invasion would start on February 22, 2022, though it actually began on the evening of

February 23. Evidently, this disclosure must have angered Putin and the Kremlin. A few days after his speech he was admitted to hospital “seriously ill” with the virus, and on April 5 he died after a “serious and prolonged” illness. On being informed, the members of the Duma held a minute of silence, to honor him. He would have been better off at the Yale Law School.