

Yale Daily News Banquet Address

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Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen.

There can hardly be a person less fitted by nature than myself to the honour of addressing a university dinner sponsored by a newspaper. Until the year 1933 I never opened a daily paper, and, I must confess, that, for me, Utopia would be a place and time where I no longer felt it my duty to read one. Again, reflection compels me to admit that my undergraduate years were, in a quiet sort of way, the most unhappy years of my life, and those in which, in a positive sense, I learned least. Needless to say this was not the fault of Oxford, but my own. For the youth who is neither an aesthete nor a scholar, the years between eighteen and twenty-one are, perhaps inevitably, years of melancholy, uneasiness and self-distrust. Conscious for the first time of all the possibilities of the intellectual life, and in some cases of latent powers of his own, he rushes forward without plan or patience to storm the fortress of wisdom and knowledge, only to be repulsed time after time with nothing gained but bruises and the knowledge that he has made a fool of himself. Conscious for the first time of the importance of personal relationships, he must suffer many humiliations before he learns that, unlike his relation to his parents, love and friendship have to be worked for, carefully nourished, and, above all, deserved. As I speak to you this evening, therefore, it is of that young man, outwardly arrogant but inwardly timid, gauche, careless, intolerant but eager to learn and be liked that I think and to whom my remarks are primarily addressed.

This young man at Yale in 1941 is probably much the same creature that he was at Oxford in 1928, but he is confronted by a very different world. Many aspects of the revolution of the last twelve years have parallels in every previous revolution, but in one respect it is unique. For the first time in history a revolution, i.e. a mass social change within civilisation itself, not an invasion of the primitive from without, has displayed an open hostility

to the intellect. For the first time the assumption of the last two thousand years that dispassionate observation coupled with abstract reasoning was the basis of all organised social life, has been expressly denied. For the first time, Rousseau's reasoned accusation that Reason was the arch enemy of unity and happiness has been taken seriously and attained political power.

I think it may be taken as axiomatic that no attitude however absurd or evil is without a cause; it is always a protest against some real abuse. If then today, we are to resist successfully this mass attack upon the intellect, nay on consciousness even, we must ask ourselves what is the nature of conscious behaviour, what are its dangers, and in what ways has it in fact been abused by our predecessors and by us.

To begin with, how does conscious action differ from instinctive action? Confront a bee with honeysuckle, tap yourself gently just below the knee, say the word Roosevelt to a staunch Republican, and the response is immediate. The objective stimulus and the subjective reaction form a single inseparable unit of experience. Secondly the responsive action is not affected by other surrounding facts: the flower may be enclosed in a paper bag, the leg may be in close proximity to a valuable piece of china, the word Roosevelt may refer on this occasion to a horse, the insect will still move, the leg kick, the face grow crimson.

Now compare this with conscious behaviour. Like the instinctive it begins with involuntary perception. As I stand here an image of a hall full of people, the remains of an excellent meal, a manuscript falls on my retina, quite independent of my will; equally independent is my subjective condition – full and afraid. But there is a new element, my awareness of the image and of my feeling of fear, an awareness moreover that they are two different facts. Conscious apperception, then, implies the experience of at least two differentiated facts and of a relation between them. Following on this apperception, there is a third element of decision. Though I cannot will away my fear, I can refuse to react to it, and, concentrating my attention on my visual experience, study you all like a painter. Though I cannot without more alcohol alter my visual image, I can refuse to react to it and, concentrating on my fear, get under the table. Or again, refusing to react to either,

I can concentrate upon reading the manuscript in front of me. Which I do will depend upon the kind of pattern I make of the facts I experience, facts of memory, feeling, perception, etc.

Now these facts are infinite in number and can therefore provide an infinite number of patterns, so that in choosing one as the most satisfactory to act on, now, I thereby reject all the others, and deliberately ignore the facts that are not pertinent to the one I choose. In doing so I can never be certain until too late that I have made the right choice. For instance I am short-sighted and cannot see you clearly. It is conceivable that the Yale Daily News has played a practical joke on me and filled the hall, not as I believe with intelligent undergraduates and famous men of learning, but with rows and rows of stuffed shirts, in which case I am taking the wrong decision in trying to make a speech, and should be going round the room pinching you one by one to see if you are real.

The point I want to make is that all conscious behaviour is the result of a decision taken upon incomplete evidence. In instinctive action there is no such decision; if certain facts are present the evidence is complete and the act occurs; if they are not, there is no evidence and nothing happens at all. Conscious behaviour implies decision, and decision implies both doubt and faith. Without the element of doubt, consciousness would be unable to postpone reaction while it considers this fact and that and forms its pattern; without the element of faith, it would be unable to reach a point where it ignored further facts and possibilities of pattern and began acting.

Now in judging the actions of others, we do not care if they are instinctive or conscious, we only ask that they be appropriate to the situation. If consciousness produces fewer appropriate reactions than instinct, we should unhesitatingly reject it.

A great deal of education consists very rightly in the inculcation of instinctive reactions, the training of babies in clean habits, the training of oneself to drive on the right side of the road, etc. As long as the situation to be met is an unchanging one, such reactions are the best because the quickest and most dependable. But they must inevitably fail if the situation

changes. It was a common saying of the ancient world that outside their own country, a Spartan could always be bribed.

His evolutionary past, however, his natural laziness and fear of being wrong, makes man perpetually homesick for the rapidity and certainty of the instinctive reflex, so that he has always tried to make consciousness have the same characteristics, i.e. to eliminate from it the necessity for decision. Sometimes he does this by assuming that the number of facts is finite and that if only he can collect them all, then his reactions will be perfect. Such was the view of the Liberal Enlightenment. Unfortunately the number of facts is not finite so that the process of collection is never finished, and such an attitude results either in the narrow pedantic specialist who knows more and more about less and less, or in a nihilism which regards one fact as good as another. Sometimes, again, he has concentrated not on the collection of facts, but on the construction of a perfect and absolute abstract pattern. If only, he thinks, he can find the correct formula for the laws that govern all facts, he need not waste time observing them, because he has the magic key which guarantees that whatever they are his response will be perfect. Such was a common attitude among Greek intellectuals, in the latter Middle Ages and today among Communists. But since all such patterns are incomplete, and observation has been abandoned, occasions will arise sooner or later to which they are inadequate, and such an attitude, by denying the reality of time, ends in unreality, tyranny and rebellion.

All the attacks upon the intellectual from Rousseau down to Nietzsche, D. H. Lawrence and the Nazis have been directed against either the pedant or the man with ready-made *idées fixes*. They point to the illiterate peasant who by living generation after generation in a certain kind of environment has developed an instinctive wisdom within it, and contrast him with the scholar who knows all about Hieroglyphics, but can neither make love nor boil an egg, or with the city bohemian who glibly repeats the fashionable intellectual opinions of the moment, but has neither personality, joy, nor morals.

I think it is impossible to deny, ladies and gentlemen, that they have a strong case. When I hear, as I heard the other day, a college girl ask for a

best seller because she said she wanted to be able to talk about it, I feel a sympathy with the fascist slogan *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*. When I discover the literary taste of some great textual scholars, I also wonder.

One reflects, of course, that both these types only fulfill one part of the intellectual life; that the pedant lacks the faith to make a pattern of the facts he observes, and that the half-baked lack the doubt and industry to criticise a ready-made pattern by comparing it with fact, but the uneasiness remains. What is the matter with our education that in the great majority of cases, it produces one or the other, that it so seldom succeeds in doing its job completely?

If one defines education as the training of the young in how to respond adequately to the needs of their own nature and of their environment, then its first problem is to separate what is constant for all natures and all environments from that which varies. The necessary prerequisites, not only for intellectual life but any life at all, are certain virtues, courage, honour, honesty, patience, industry, etc. Because they are prerequisites they cannot be taught intellectually. No man who had not previously acquired the habit was ever made virtuous by reading the philosophers. At the same time they are not inborn in the higher mammals, as insect behavior is unborn. A kitten or a child is not born brave and clean; it has to be taught by its mother or its teachers impressing upon it that these are unconditional commands. On this, I think, Liberalism has gone astray. In attacking the reactionary for reducing the intellectual to the moral, it has not separated them but merely stood the confusion on its head. In very rightly exposing hypocrisy and prejudice, it has tended to deny that there was anything to be hypocritical about, that there was nothing which was unconditional. Observing the psychological damage often done to the young by faulty techniques in teaching these virtues, it has come to think that it is wrong to try and teach them at all, that the child is born good, and if allowed to express itself will develop them.

I believe this to be dangerous nonsense. We hear much about education for Democracy. What should this mean? That from the time it can walk a child is taught, firstly to recognise superior ability in others of whatever

kind and to show its reverence, secondly to know that in any situation where it finds itself superior to another, its right to lead carries with it an absolute obligation to tell the truth to the led, thirdly a hatred of both injustice and envy, and fourthly a capacity both for social intercourse and solitude. And the child must be taught these things so thoroughly that they become conditioned reflexes about which he does not have to think. Because they are required in every conceivable situation it is the duty of society to insist upon them, and we should employ every psychological resource, every trick of advertisement and propaganda, to teach them as effectively and safely as possible. For until they are learnt no amount of courses in Civics or Constitutional History will be the slightest use.

On the basis of these the very different business of intellectual education can begin, i.e. a training in observing facts and relating them into patterns. And now the problem becomes a dialectical one, for, while observing facts, it is necessary to inhibit the pattern-making function, and while making the pattern it is necessary to inhibit observation of further facts. Since the decision when to do one or the other is different in every situation and for every individual, this cannot be taught as a reflex; indeed the whole effort of the educator is to prevent the pupil taking what he says for gospel, or from developing intellectual reflexes of his own, to keep the mind flexible and ironical, to help him understand enough about his own nature to know what facts he can absorb and for what biases he must correct.

Today the number of facts which are accessible are prodigious. Newspapers, radios, libraries pour over us every moment of our lives their stupendous floods of information so that perhaps the greatest educational problem of today is how to teach people to ignore the irrelevant, how to refuse to know things, before they are suffocated. For too many facts are as bad as none at all. Were I ever to write a volume for that famous How To series, it would be on How not to read more than 1500 words a day.

On the whole, I fear that our schools are making this worse. Our distrust of language and mathematics, those two great instruments by which we relate the particular to the universal, fact to pattern, our fear of making children learn by heart, our indulgence of the visual sense, as exemplified by

Life Magazine, are alarming symptoms. I read last week of a school teacher who has invented a method of making model volcanoes really erupt, which is having a great class-room success. What lies behind this sort of thing? Is it not the theory that it is too difficult for the child to learn the laws of physics and chemistry, that a general law, in fact, is unintelligible, only its separate concrete instances can be grasped, that, to carry it to its logical conclusion, a class cannot be expected to appreciate *Macbeth* until they have all committed murder?

And is not the result that the student reaches college without having ever learned to concentrate on anything, his mind a rag-bag of miscellaneous unrelated information? Then, what is the poor professor to do? Either he must set the young man down to some simple stenographer's task such as a Ph.D. thesis on Railroad Imagery in Tennyson's Verse, or realising that he has read nothing and probably never will, turns propagandist and tries to establish some kind of sketchy order in his muddled head in a few brief survey courses?

And then what? Out goes our young man into the world with all its bewildering chaos of facts, a world which is changing every minute. Never having learned to relate observation to selection and discrimination, unaware that general notions can only be derived from concrete facts but that concrete facts are meaningless without them, never having understood the role that decision plays in the act of knowledge, is it to be wondered at that, in self-protection, he soon accepts the current attitudes and ideas of whatever social group he may happen to find himself in, that he should become, whether his income be ten thousand dollars a year or ten, a member of the masses, i.e. a passive instrument of a general fate, that he should never succeed in being what education intended for him, the conscious agent of his individual fate, with the added disadvantage that, unlike the child, he now imagines himself to be free? For, in the face of the Void, a ready-made attitude, an *idée fixe*, an intellectual reflex, however silly, is better than nothing. Is it to be wondered at that an increasing number of people are beginning to feel that society must return, by force if necessary, to the static environment

formerly enjoyed by the peasant, to the blind obedience of the soldier, who if he lacks freedom at least is certain what he is to do?

It is of course extremely easy to criticise, and extremely difficult to offer any constructive suggestions. I have only two and I offer them very tentatively.

(1) In realising that inequalities are not necessarily inherited or economically conditioned, democracy is always in danger of denying that real inequalities exist or, if it does admit them, of being suspicious of the superior. A democracy which aims at educating everyone to the limit of their capacities must provide special opportunities, scholarships, special schools, etc., for those whose abilities are above the average.

(2) The popular idea that an all-round education can be secured by teaching a few facts about a lot of subjects is, to my mind, unsound. The general vocational training required by everyone is moral, not intellectual, and cannot be acquired by intellectual methods. The intellectual faculties of observation of facts, the relation of the particular to the universal, of judgement and decision can be learned through the study of almost any subject, but only if that subject is studied thoroughly enough for the pupil to learn through personal experience what these problems mean. In my opinion neither the Elective System nor the Hundred Best Books can do this. I do not see how it can be done except through a specialisation from quite an early age, say fifteen, in one of the principal intellectual disciplines, Language – and by that, I mean Language. I do not mean Literature, Mathematics, or Science.

There is a good kind and a bad kind of specialisation. The bad kind detaches the field to be studied from every other field of experience, personal or impersonal; the good kind sees the chosen field as a symbol of the whole of life, and attempts always to use the general principles which have been thoroughly grasped through an intensive study of a finite set of facts, to illuminate other fields where one is less certain.

The right kind cannot be secured nor the wrong kind prevented by legislation. What kind we get will depend upon our moral conception of the intellectual life, what we think knowledge is for, our beliefs concerning the nature and destiny of man.

For it is not by his score in *Information Please* nor by his erudition in some little corner of scholarship, though he will often qualify in both, that we recognise the Educated Man. Is it not rather by his behaviour when confronted with an unfamiliar problem that the pedant is betrayed by his frightened "I couldn't say; it's not my subject," that the half-baked highbrow is revealed by his glib generalisations, while the man of real intellectual quality shows that patient humility about learning the facts, that honest skepticism about the finality of his answer, yet that courage and faith to give the best one he can, that are the qualities upon which are based any culture that it is worth our while to defend today against a *ressentiment* and despair which are all the more barbaric and dangerous for being, not primitive, but the latest degenerate chic of our mechanised age.