

Obsessions and Digressions¹

John Jay Chapman

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WHAT: Is it forty years ago?
Nay, forty-five? Who told you so?
I mean since last we met – for life's not dated,
But rushes by us in an overflow.
I can't remember when we graduated;
Though something tells me it was '84.
Yes, but what century? Chronology
Is scrapped. The chalk marks on the door
Of Time are jumbled. History is no more.
BC.; A.D.; A B C D.
So Rip Van Winkle stood before
The shutter and the tavern score
In blank perplexity.

 In Pharaoh's day,
When monuments were thought to be unshakable,
Men set up something unmistakable
To show a king or age had passed away.
But now an age just crumbles into sand:
The king was here last night, but can't be found,
Yet nothing shows it.
No time to make a bust of buried Cæsar!
He's with the Ptolemies before one knows it.
Perhaps he's living still, but underground.

 Think of the Kaiser!

It chanced when we were born there ruled on high
A dislocation in the starry spheres,
That gave the lie to all astronomy.
Time slipped a cog and ran three hundred years.
Our children find in us their ancestry,

¹Read at the forty-fifth anniversary dinner of the Class of 1884.

To them we are colonial pioneers;
 And looking on us they are moved to mirth
 That men so quaint had ever walked the earth.

 They think our minds are clouded by the sages
 Of Greece and Rome, by Emperors and Kings,
 By saints and martyrs of the Middle Ages
 And other vague, historic human things,
 Like torture and religious pilgrimages.
 For them the syren – the steam syren – flings
 Her dulcet benediction o'er the dell,
 To tell them they are born and all is well.

 Yes, they are born and they are satisfied
 That no one like them e'er appeared before.
 They view the action with a natural pride,
 Like a young champion resting on his oar.
 Yet, there's a point that others must decide –
 Those helpless parents standing on the shore.
 The point is this – what sort of education
 Will nourish this steam-whistling generation?

Among other things that have passed away and seem now three hundred years distant are Boston and Harvard and sea-going booby-hutches, that were on hand when you arrived from New York at the Park Square Station, and would dash you through a snowstorm to food and freedom. Yes, the old Harvard is gone. The only portion of Harvard College that is still standing is Park and Durgin's restaurant in Faneuil Market. I never visit Boston without going there alone for a lunch amid the clatter of the serving maids and the conversation of the clerks and market-hands and commissioners, the lobsters and apple pies of 1850.

Yet it was not there but at a beer shop on the Common, where one ate sausages after a concert, that I first met Josiah Royce. I think I was a Freshman at the time. He wore a thin pink overcoat and insisted on walking out to Cambridge on one of the coldest nights of the year. He was young, immature, and pumpkin-like, and I was much alarmed for his health. He was the only man I ever knew who had no social atmosphere, no approach, no preliminary; not more than a sacred insect might have – a scarab.

Twenty years later, when one of my boys was at Harvard, I wished him to meet Royce. The boy was interested in Greek, so I said: “You are interested in Greek. Have you ever heard of Prometheus? Well, you don’t know much about him, for nobody does. Just think up some question about him, as, for instance, ‘Was Prometheus of Asiatic origin?’ Royce is sure to have a theory about it. Royce undoubtedly keeps an open door at some time of the day – when he is accessible to truth-seekers. Go to him and put your question. He will thereupon stand and talk to you for half an hour. Don’t interrupt him.”

All this happened. Now that is the kind of thing that makes a university. It takes only a few great figures to make a university, but they must be accessible. Cut away the rubbish and don’t try to educate any one; just make it possible for a man to educate himself if he wants to. William James would stand on a street corner and talk to any man about anything. He was pretty near to an angel. If you felt doubts about the basis of morality, Palmer would receive you with the respect due to a better man than yourself. Shaler was a companion, Norton was a friend. There were lights burning at every corner – Gurney, Goodwin, Child – some of them with rays that shone over Europe. And there were sacred images and Termini. The most remarkable of these was Professor Sophocles, with his dressing-gown and his big shaggy gray head, who used to cut up his raw beef into gobbets and roast it on sticks, as described in the Iliad. Who it was that had fished him out of the Ægean I never knew, but he stood at a Holworthy entrance, a figure out of Poussin – Father Time, Hesiod, Homer himself. Think of a University that had had sense enough to plant him there!

Over the Law School loomed Langdell and Thayer and Ames. Beyond the College walls there were other anciani. Longfellow was at his desk in the Craigie Mansion. Charles Francis Adams, the elder, and John Holmes were to be seen stumping about Cambridge, and in the world beyond loomed old retired gladiators and sages, like Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Francis Parkman, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Wendell Phillips, and towering over them in the distance, Emerson, inarticulate and sublime.

You and I did not make pilgrimages to these men. We felt them atmospherically. They were as much ours as our own village and family. I am talking to you boys who remember these things. But just consider: If I should read this paper to the graduating Class of 1929, what abracadabra it would seem to them! They would be absolutely nonplused, and one of them would whisper to his neighbor, “I think he’s reading to us out of a book – probably Boswell’s Johnson.”

Yes, a very extraordinary thing happened in the United States during the period just before and during the Great War. As this is an intimate occasion, perhaps you will pardon a personal digression. During the first decade of the twentieth century, I wrote some trifling small books and pamphlets on literary and political subjects. I was surprised the other day, in looking over an old scrapbook of newspaper clippings, to find how favorably they had been received. My first book had 1800 readers; my next 1342; my next 811; my next 103, and after that I lost interest in details and was taken up with sheer curiosity as to the nature of the phenomenon. Evidently my old readers were dying off and no new ones were being born. I kept on printing more brochures of the same variety – out of habit, as it were, at my own expense – with what result may be imagined. They are in a garret in my country house. It would do your heart good to see the piles and boxes of them. Unless a fire breaks out, they will never be rare books. I have tried many schemes to palm them off on the public, but the public is too sharp for me. Then at length came the explanation, at present only too familiar to us all. All the newspapers had changed hands, all the magazines had changed their covers. There had been a transformation-scene and the waves of a New Age came roaring in. I was with the Ptolemies and you, my friends, are with the Ptolemies – though looking remarkably well, I must confess.

Out at Cambridge the Authorities are struggling with the deluge, like Hoover trying to stem the floods of the Mississippi. They put mattresses in the cracks and sluices in the rapids. They haul drowning students aboard of rafts and motor boats. They cry “Give us time! Help us to feed the starving thousands! Send clothes, send tents; we will save education in the end!” I see Mr. Lowell as a great practical engineer trying to make use of the material that is hurled toward him. If some one sends him a model of the Parthenon made in Omaha to use as a light house, can he refuse it?

Persons of the old-fashioned kind are apt to say to him: “Mr. Lowell, it seems to us that education is a quiet sort of thing – academic groves, ripe scholars lying on the green and reading Horace’s odes; the emulation of noble natures; holy, leisured aspiration.” “We are coming to that,” says Lowell, “give us time!”

Old Mr. Edward Silsbee, a quaint sea-captain, who was Shelley-mad, drank hard and talked well about British poetry fifty years ago in Boston, used to say, apropos of certain American poets, that the American believed that if you were only *smart* enough and *moral* enough, you could *do* poetry. A somewhat similar

belief was generated as to education during the late Vanishing Age, which, as I say, began when we were in college – a belief that if you had only *money* enough and *publicity* enough, you could *do* education. The graduates became richer and more enthusiastic and formed themselves into sporting clubs. The universities were their whippets. The graduates shouted, the whippets ran. Stadia and dormitories, towers, bridges, domes, libraries rose like exhalations. The royal sport of university-building was developed, and social joys were at an end.

Have you ever attended a large money-raising Harvard dinner? Some new circus or dormitory is to be launched. After a long, preliminary, perpendicular standing about, the heroes of the Alumni Association march in, headed by President Lowell, followed by a couple of Bishops, a few business magnates and LeBaron Briggs. Next comes a phalanx of giants, garbed in portentous dress suits and bristling with natural power and the will to prevail. These are the Managers of the Alumni Association. Their learning is engraved on geographical schedules, which give the bank balances of every one of the 40,000 graduates of Harvard. The diners shudder at them, for they know that a mausoleum of some kind is to be put over.

The importance of the affair precludes conversation. It is not an occasion for speeches from the floor. It is a serious political function. There is a motion to be carried – nay, roared – a motion that will waft Harvard's publicity to the utmost corners of the world. The suburbs of Buffalo will hear of her. The jungles of India will ring with her name.

You ought not to laugh. The enthusiasm of that dinner is real enthusiasm – expressed in the only symbols that our people understand – Arabic numerals. Indeed the decay of the old theologies and ethical systems of the world, and the discoveries of Einstein have left untouched the decimal system as the only reliable record of the world.

Some old Greek philosopher once said that Man was the measure of all things. Was anything ever so foolish! No! a thousand times No! *Money* is the measure of all things –

“Money is truth, truth money; that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”