

CLASS ORATION

by Alex Robert Seith

IF a class orator reflects upon his mission with any degree of candor, I believe he must, as I do now, feel somewhat tremulous. For he as-

sumes a task which, by nature, approaches the impossible. He is expected to assess the meaning of the Yale experience with the sagacity of a vet-

eran historian and to prescribe a course of action for the future with the penetrating vision of a classical prophet. I think, then, that you will not accuse me of undue timidity if I submit my remarks with a certain measure of caution, indeed, even reticence.

Perhaps my diffidence is inspired by the realization that we are able now to pose questions which are incapable of easy answers. We want to know what a Yale education was intended to achieve, how much it should have made of us and what, in fact, it did make of us. We can ask, with justified seriousness, whether there is any predominant mark of the Yale experience which we can all affirm as a common possession. All of us, I am sure, have at some time been concerned with these or similar questions. And there are, I am equally sure, as many answers as there are members of the class. What is revealing about our individual evaluations of Yale is not the diversity nor the content of our respective ideas but, rather, the recurring fact that we have been able to so evaluate. In the four years since we last gathered together as a class the Yale environment has exerted a distinctive influence upon us. As a pre-established environment it has both shaped our lives and at the same time sharpened our minds to analyze its influence.

There is something special about this kind of analysis. For we do not analyze with the perspective of the critic who is outside the experience nor with the perspective of time that comes with middle- or old-age. But rather we must think through our experience while—even now, on the eve of commencement—we are caught up in it. And this, the ability for simultaneous involvement and reflection, is a faculty which has at least been enhanced, if not acquired, by a Yale education. Through the use of this critical faculty I suggest that we are not altogether incompetent to make certain judgments. Firstly, we can judge the impact of a Yale education upon us. And secondly, we can judge how this education equips us for the future.

Of course, I do not mean to imply that our evaluations are by any means infallible. But granting our due share of mis-judgments and errors, let us proceed.

In our more querulous moments there have surely been many thoughts about the significance

of this institution. Where, in such a big place, does the individual fit? No doubt each of us wonders what he has, or should have, received from this Yale education.

To begin with, education, above all else, is a personal experience. It is the exciting story of the growth and change, the trials and travails of the individual. Education can never be given; it always must be attained. And I hardly need remind you that every such attainment is the result of a sustained private struggle. I do not, of course, neglect to acknowledge the public accoutrements of education. There are, to be sure, the activities of the lecture hall and the classroom which are by no means private affairs. But I think my meaning is clear when I say that education occurs only when there is an acquisition of knowledge by the individual.

Knowledge is an acquisition different from any other. Perhaps in a deeper sense it is not an acquisition at all. For it is not like a material possession which can be taken or disposed of with indifference to the owner. Knowledge is a part of the individual. Indeed, it molds and creates the individual. Having lived through four years of a university education no one of us can claim to be the same person upon graduation that he was at matriculation. Admittedly, any period of four years will be the scene of many personal changes, but under the influence of education the changes exhibit a very special nature. Consequently, we can pose this question: What are the distinctive sorts of change that the college student undergoes?

Firstly, I suggest that as a man becomes better educated he comes also to know himself better. His faculties of introspection become sharper and his powers of analysis are heightened. With greater perception than ever before he is able to discern and to exploit his distinctive characteristics. In this regard, it has been many centuries since a stoop-shouldered old man stood in the market place of Athens enjoining each of his companions to "Know Thyself." In all these ages no one has ever yet lived to the full measure of Socrates' simple injunction. Yet, to whatever extent this injunction is susceptible to fulfillment, the deepening insights of growing knowledge are certain to be of assistance. Yale has laid knowledge at our disposal, and so far as we have

exploited the opportunity we have acquired a deeper, fuller understanding of ourselves.

But self-development does not cease with the achievement of static self-understanding. There is too, as the word development implies, a dynamic increase of every and all intellectual faculties. Not only does a man understand better who he is, but he also becomes more than he was. In a quantitative phrase, it might be said that as a man becomes more educated he becomes more intelligently aware of more things. This heightened awareness is the result of a heightened sensitivity. And I am eager to stress the word sensitivity. For, being an educated man does not consist solely in acuteness of rational thought, in the narrowest sense. Man is not merely a cognitive being. He is also a sensitive, feeling being. From education he should achieve an openness to all experience. All the world and all that's in it should be his teacher. Let him know the thrill of a vivid sensitivity to the vast panorama of experience and he shall find, upon self-consideration, that he is a richer, fuller person than before.

I have, to some extent, indicated the effects of education upon personal development. Allow me to turn, for a moment, to some of the broader objectives of education. Education should, and at Yale I believe it does, equip the individual to be self-sufficient in a world of almost infinite possibilities and countless enigmas. A Yale education cannot present a handbook for life; for there are none. There is no simple set of rules for living. At best, education can only train a man's faculties and trust that he will act as wisely as the circumstances permit. There is a basic reason why education can do no more than this. And the reason, very simply, is that education is not in possession of an absolute Truth. Surely no one has failed to discern in these past four years that the realms of knowledge are so vast as to mock the pretensions of any man, no matter how great his ambitions. The imprecations of the most celebrated scholars are not sufficient to deliver us Truth—gift-wrapped for doctrinal distribution. On the contrary, the objectives of education, and in particular of a Yale education, are much less pretentious. The objectives are, in part, to teach a man a sense of proportion for what he knows and for what he has yet to learn. And further, Yale teaches a man to evaluate and to compare; it does not, to the dismay of one young man who spoke from this platform a few years ago, in-

culcate a dogma. For the dogmatists, after all, are but petty lobbyists in the halls of scholarship. And the truth, I am happy to say, is not the least intimidated by vested interests.

The truth, whether it is a single Truth or whether there are many truths, is a gem with an infinite number of facets. And its brilliance illuminates an infinite number of paths. If Yale has been unkind to our private absolutes it is because she did not want us to be so blinded by one path to truth that we could see no others.

I think, too, that our mentors here at Yale have been concerned lest we imagine that our education has taught us more than it actually has. Yes, I fear that we are susceptible to the danger of too little learning. Yet I realize it is difficult—indeed impossible—to drink deeply at the Pierian spring in a scant four years. I can only hope that we remain unquenched with this shallow draft of knowledge. For, in the final analysis, the task of self-education is no less incumbent upon the adult than upon the student.

In this connection there are, I suggest, two popular mistakes we can make about education. The first mistake is the assumption that one knows nothing about a subject if he has not taken a course in it. And the second mistake is the belief that he knows everything about a subject if he has taken a course in it. The classroom is only the beginning, not the fulfillment, of an education.

When I urge that education be a continuous process all through life I do not intend to stretch the meaning of the word out of shape, nor do I propose that every man become a scholar. I merely mean to imply that formal education has more than one aspect and that all of its aspects should be continued. In the multiple aspects of education the university discharges a three-fold function to the student. The university trains his intellectual capacities, it prepares him for a profession, and it equips him for a role in society. In spite of whatever criticism may have been levelled by some among us in the past four years, you must admit that Yale has conscientiously endeavored to fulfill this three-fold mission of education. And she has, I submit, done rather well. To be sure, there are education committees which recommend changes in curriculum, there are critics who deplore the lack of more living

space, and there are many voices which advise a different emphasis on extra-curricular activities. But for the most part these suggested changes would alter only the tactics, not the grand strategy of a Yale education.

But now, whatever the value of our years at Yale, they have come to an end. We must now undertake the second consideration I cited at the outset—the consideration of our future. For we leave these sheltered halls to confront full face the crucial issues of the contemporary world, and no matter where we turn we cannot escape the grand drama of our times. International and national affairs bear relevantly upon our lives if for no other reason than that we are subject to a military obligation in the near future. But our reason for concern need not be so specific as that. This is another of the periods of great crisis in American, and in world, history. The historians among us may not regard the Communist menace as the *greatest* crisis in history, but there is no doubt in any quarter that the crisis is sufficiently great to threaten the downfall of civilization. As the super weapons become constantly more devastating and diabolical we cannot be certain exactly how a third world war might be fought. But we can be certain, as Albert Einstein put it, that the fourth world war will be fought with clubs and stones.

That we must be concerned with world issues is inevitable. I think this inevitability is perhaps symbolized in a suggestive way. Our four years at Yale, from 1952 to 1956, are punctuated by two presidential elections. During the debates of these electoral struggles the air is filled with the language of crisis. Indeed, the grammar of our times is marked by the exclamation points of international power politics and the parenthetical phrases of ideological conflict.

Let there be no mistake. Communism is the most diabolical, most comprehensive and most relentless conspiracy which has ever beclouded this planet. The struggle against communism is philosophical, economic, diplomatic, military, political—it is, in truth, all-inclusive. Our success in this struggle depends upon the total success and the particular successes of every part of the American way of life. The manner in which we handle the problem of segregation in the schools, the problems of the welfare state, of juvenile delinquency, of the rising divorce rate or of fed-

eral taxation will indicate whether we shall emerge the victors in the titanic combat of the 20th century—already the bloodiest century. The problems I cite, you realize, are not the exclusive concern of the professional diplomat or the public servant. They are problems which touch upon the lives of every one of us and which demand the efforts of all of us.

To add to the stock of the crisis, the threat of communism comes at a time when there is a traumatic upheaval in human values. With the groundswell of erupting science and technology, especially in the last fifty years, the foundations of the old verities have been shaken. People want desperately to believe in *something*, but they are too uncertain to devotedly commit themselves to *anything*. Unlike the men of the 18th century we of the 20th century lack the conviction, for the most part, to commit ourselves even to a faith in reason. We have, for that matter, even forsaken our complete faith in science. This is not to say that we have forsaken science or the exploitation of its fruits. But it is to say that we seldom discover any more a man who makes a religion of science, a man who turns to science for ultimate moral mediation and final redeeming sanctification. On the whole, science is no longer a place of refuge from a world which has lost its values.

To speak in such generalizations is, I realize, to draw a caricature of our times. But the elements of confusion, I contend, are undeniably present. There is scarcely a speech or essay devoted to the contemporary situation which does not acknowledge the presence of these elements.

As we enter now into the open world we are called upon to face its problems. At Yale we have received a superlative education, in many ways no doubt the best in the nation. In consequence, we are better equipped than most of our contemporaries to struggle with and, we hope, to resolve the issues of our time. At all costs I implore you to become engaged in these issues. Let us become vividly concerned. I am afraid it is fashionable at Yale not to be passionate. But we should not confuse an adult and healthy disdain for adolescent ebullience with a mature devotion to thoughtful enthusiasm. The time has come when we must take up the responsibilities of action. Let us, then, not pray for a light burden, but only for a strong back.