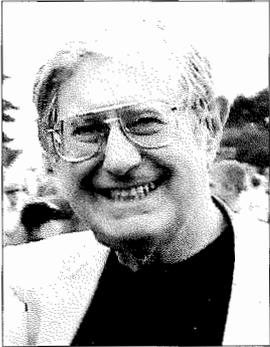


50th Reunion Poem



By David Slavitt

David—author of a whole bookstore's worth of books ranging from fiction to nonfiction to translations of the Classics to drama to poetry—is our Class Poet. Many remember his Class Poem in 1956, with its memorable line, "Life is not a collection of New Yorker ads." Over the years, LIFE has vanished and New Yorker ads are not what they used to be. Time for a new Class Poem!

WHAT IT CAN CLAIM beyond the mere sentimental attachment it ought to have taught us not to give into uncritically is a muddled set of ideals about which it cannot afford to be too specific: elitist and yet inclusive, maintaining the old traditions but welcoming others (almost any), and that sense we share of owning and belonging. Nevertheless, it's Yale, and if it is not ours, we are still its, beat up and taking pills, but happy to be here with one another. (Those who came are happy; I pray for the others, who couldn't or wouldn't, our brothers, uncomfortable here fifty-odd years ago or, for whatever reason, now, wherever they are: forgive us, forgive yourselves!)

What we know, we mostly learned later. Here, what we studied was how to learn and how to get on (at least as useful, if somewhat vulgar). Like-mindedness (whatever it was Yale looked for, we were the ones it chose, and we were and mostly still are not unlike) is an undervalued comfort, rare and, as we get older, more than ever convenient. They would not choose us now.

We were Eisenhower's students as much as Griswold's — his interstate system, badly in need of repair, couldn't, like our class, be built today.

The competition, they say, is keener now, but are present students better, or merely and oddly different, or, say, more diverse? Now, there are women — students and faculty, too — and that's a good thing, but not without its costs: fifty years ago, Yale was clubbier, even a bit stupid, but young men, on their own, can be pleasingly coltish. Women of that age are already grown-ups, and, as we have learned, there is plenty of time for that. The administration doesn't like to shine excessive lux on the veritas: fund-raising is what keeps us connected now, although they are rich, richer than any of us, and a center of power of the kind we learned here to suspect. Were these merely charming illusions, or more than that, legitimate expectations of how men should treat one another? An economist runs the place (as at Harvard, too) and because they are convinced that what they are doing is wonderful, and New Haven is depressed, they are thuggish now with even more thuggish unions. Face it: our Yale is gone, as my father's was when my son and daughter studied here. His classmate, Rudy Vallee, sang, "My time is your time." We'd like to believe it but we know better. Cole Porter, who still is Yale's pre-eminent poet, was closer to the truth — that "it was great fun, but it was just one of those things."

Traces of difference persist. Harvard was serious; Princeton was just a bit louche; but Yale was dapper, urbane, as even our grandchildren recognize, and still that's something to which they can aspire. It may be that aspiration itself is the heart that keeps the old blue blood circulating, a sense of high purpose, vague, but not for that reason contemptible. Taste, cultivation, learning are never secure but here still enjoy lip service and from time to time, at night, in some lighted window you can see from a quad looking up, in that room that was once ours many years ago, that something goes on that God and country need, now more than ever.