

WHAT EVERY YALE FRESHMAN SHOULD KNOW

By EDMUND S. MORGAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following talk was presented to this year's freshman class at Yale University. Dr. Morgan is a professor of history at Yale.*

THE WORLD does not much like curiosity. The world says that curiosity killed the cat. The world dismisses curiosity by calling it idle, or mere idle, curiosity—even though curious persons are seldom idle. Parents do their best to extinguish curiosity in their children, because it makes life difficult to be faced every day with a string of unanswerable questions about what makes fire hot or why grass grows, or to have to halt junior's investigations before they end in explosion and sudden death. Children whose curiosity survives parental discipline and who manage to grow up before they blow up are invited to join the Yale faculty. Within the university they go on asking their questions and trying to find the answers. In the eyes of a scholar, that is mainly what a university is for. It is a place where the world's hostility to curiosity can be defied.

Some of the questions that scholars ask seem to the world to be scarcely worth asking, let alone answering. They ask about the behavior of protons, the dating of a Roman coin, the structure of a poem. They ask questions too minute and specialized for you and me to understand without years of explanation.

If the world inquires of one of them why he wants to know the answer to a particular question, he may say, especially if he is a scientist, that the answer will in some obscure way make possible a new machine or weapon or gadget. He talks that way because he knows that the world understands and respects utility and that it does not understand much else. But to his colleagues and to you he will probably not speak this language. You are now part of the university, and he will expect you to understand that he wants to know the answer simply because he does not know it, the way a mountain climber wants to climb a mountain simply because it is there.

Similarly a historian, when asked by outsiders why he studies history, may

come out with a line of talk that he has learned to repeat on such occasions, something about knowledge of the past making it possible to understand the present and mold the future. I am sure you have all heard it at one time or another. But if you really want to know why a historian studies the past, the answer is much simpler: he wants to know about it because it is there. Something happened, and he would like to know what.

All this does not mean that the answers which scholars find to their questions have no consequences. They may have enormous consequences; they may completely alter the character of human life. But the consequences seldom form the reason for asking the questions or pursuing the answers. It is true that scholars can be put to work answering questions for the sake of the consequences, as thousands are working now, for example, in search of a cure for cancer. But this is not the primary function of the scholar. For the scholar the consequences are usually incidental to the satisfaction of curiosity. Even for the medical scholar, the desire to stamp out a dreaded disease may be a less powerful motive than the desire to find out about the nature of living matter. Similarly Einstein did not wish to create an atomic bomb or to harness atomic energy. He simply wanted to find out about energy and matter.

I said that curiosity was a dangerous quality. It is dangerous not only because of incidental effects like the atomic bomb but also because it is really nothing more or less than a desire for truth. For some reason this phrase sounds less dangerous than curiosity. In fact, the desire for truth sounds rather respectable. Since so many respectable people assure us that they have found the truth, it does not sound like a dangerous thing to look for. But it is. The search for it has again and again overturned institutions and beliefs of long standing, in science, in religion, and in politics. It is easy enough to see today that these past revolutions brought great benefits to mankind. It was less easy to see the benefits while the revolutions were taking place, especially if you happened to be quite satisfied with the way things were before. Similarly it is

not always easy today to see that the satisfaction of a scholar's curiosity is worth the disruption of society that may result from it. The search for truth is, and always has been, a subversive activity. And scholars have learned that they cannot engage in it without an occasional fight.

You may therefore find them rather belligerent toward any threat to the free pursuit of curiosity. They are wary of committing themselves to institutions or beliefs that might impose limitations on them or deliver ready-made answers to their questions. You will find them suspicious of loyalty oaths, religious creeds, or affiliations with political parties. In particular they will try to preserve their university as a sanctuary within whose walls any question can be asked.



THIS wariness of commitment can sometimes degenerate into a scholarly vice, a vice that paralyzes curiosity instead of preserving it. A scholar at his worst sometimes seems to be simply a man who cannot make up his mind. Every classroom from here to Melbourne has echoed with the feeble phrases of academic indecision: "There are two schools of thought on this question, and the truth probably lies halfway between them." When you hear this sentence repeated, or when you are tempted to repeat it yourself, remember that the truth may lie between two extremes, but it assuredly does not lie halfway between right and wrong. Don't short-circuit your curiosity by assuming you have found the answer when you have only made a tidy list of possible answers.

Dedication to curiosity should not end in indecision. It should, in fact, mean willingness to follow the mind into difficult decisions.

A second quality that makes a scholar has no apparent relation to the first and yet is inseparably connected to it. It is a compulsion to communicate. A scholar is driven by a force as strong as his curiosity, that compels him to tell the world the things he has

learned. He cannot rest with learning something: he has to tell about it. Scholarship begins in curiosity, but it ends in communication. And though scholars may in a university take refuge from the world, they also acknowledge responsibility to the world, the responsibility to communicate freely and fully everything that they discover within the walls of their sanctuary. The search for truth needs no justification, and when a man thinks he has found any part of it, he cannot and ought not to be silent. The world may sometimes not care to listen, but the scholar must keep telling it until he has succeeded in communicating.

Now, there are only two methods of communication for scholars, writing and speaking. The scholar publishes his discoveries in books and articles and he teaches them in the classroom. Sometimes one or the other method will satisfy him, but most of us feel the need for both. The scholar who merely writes books falls into the habit of speaking only to the experts. If he works at his subject long enough, he reaches the position where there is no one else quite expert enough to understand him, and he winds up writing to himself. On the other hand, if he writes not at all, he may become so enamored of his own voice that he ceases to be a scholar and becomes a mere showman.

COMMUNICATION is not merely the desire and the responsibility of the scholar; it is his discipline, the proving ground where he tests his findings against criticism. Without communication his pursuit of truth withers into eccentricity. He necessarily spends much of his time alone, in the library

or the laboratory, looking for the answers to his questions. But he needs to be rubbing constantly against other minds. He needs to be tested, probed, and pushed around. He needs to be made to explain himself. Only when he has expressed himself, only when he has communicated his thoughts, can he be sure that he is thinking clearly.

The scholar, in other words, needs company to keep him making sense. And in particular he needs the company of fresh minds, to whom he must explain things from the beginning. He needs people who will challenge him at every step, who will take nothing for granted. He needs, in short, you.

You may have various purposes in coming here, and you may fulfill them: you may play football or tennis or the trombone; you may sing in the glee club, act in plays, and act up on college weekends. But what the faculty expects of you is four years of scholarship, and they will be satisfied with nothing less. For four years we expect you to join us in the pursuit of truth, and we will demand of you the same things we demand of ourselves: curiosity and communication.

Curiosity, of course, is not something you get simply by wishing for it. But it is surprisingly contagious. The curiosity we expect is more than a passing interest. We will not be satisfied by your ability to ask an occasional bright question, nor yet by your assimilation of a lot of predigested information. The accumulation of information is a necessary part of scholarship, and unfortunately the part most likely to be tested on examinations, especially those wretched ones called "objective examinations" where the truth is always supposed to lie in answer space

A, B, C, D, or E, but never apparently in X, Y, or Z. But the curiosity we expect of you cannot be satisfied by passing examinations or by memorizing other people's answers to other people's questions. We do not wish to put you through a mere course of mental gymnastics. We want you to be content with nothing less than the whole truth about the subject that interests you. Which means that we want you to be forever discontent with how little you know about it and with how little we know about it. We want you to back us into corners, show us up, make us confess we don't know. Does this sound formidable? It is not. We may tell you what we know with great assurance, but push us and you will find the gaps.

Follow your own minds into the gaps. Follow your minds where curiosity takes them. You will not get the whole truth, not about protons, not about the structure of a poem, not even about a Roman coin. Nobody does. But if you learn anything, it ought to change your minds, and hopefully it will change ours too. It will be a sign that we have both wasted four years if you leave here thinking pretty much the same way that you do now or if you leave us thinking the same way *we* do now.

We expect of you, then, that you will be curious for the truth. We also expect that you communicate whatever truth you find, and that you do it both in speech and in writing. Many people suppose that they know something if they can stammer out an approximation of what they mean in speech. They are mistaken. It is extremely unlikely that you have thought clearly if you cannot express yourself clearly, especially in writing. Writing is more than an instrument of communication. It is an instrument of thought. You should have acquired some competence in its use by now. I suspect from past experience that you have not. But even if you have, you have a great deal more to learn about it. And if you do not know much more about it four years from now, it will again be a sign that we have failed in part of our job, the job of making you communicate clearly.

Communication is a two-way process, and a university is a community of scholars, where questions are asked and the answers communicated, your answers to us, ours to you. For the next four years we will be engaged as scholars together in this community. After the four years are over, most of you will leave Yale, but if our community is a successful one, if we really do communicate with each other, I believe that you will continue to be in some sense scholars, asking new questions, looking for new answers, and communicating them to the world.



The Creative Spirit in the U.S.

By Granville Hicks

L EON HOWARD, who has written books on Herman Melville, James Russell Lowell, and the Hartford Wits, has addressed himself to an ambitious project in *"Literature and the American Tradition"* (Doubleday, \$4.50). The idea occurred to him in the course of his lecturing at various European and Asiatic universities. "Would it be possible," he asked himself, "to write a short history of American literature which would be comprehensive and at the same time analytic enough to seek out those attitudes of mind which controlled the creative imagination and helped shape the country's literature toward a recognizable national character?"

Of the comprehensiveness of the book, although it has only 329 pages, there can be no question. Howard begins with Captain John Smith and ends with Wright Morris, and in between he discusses every major writer America has produced and scores of minor ones. In his first section, which covers the period from 1608 to 1828, he talks about Roger Williams, John Cotton, Thomas Shephard, and many other Puritan worthies, about such figures of the eighteenth century as Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, John Dickinson and Thomas Paine, and about the men who domesticated romanticism—Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau, Irving and Bryant, and especially Cooper.

His second period is from 1829 to 1867, the Golden Day, and all the expected names are encountered: Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman. In addition there are discussions of Longfellow, Holmes, Alcott, Lowell, Whittier, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

The third section is thick with names. Howard begins quietly with Emily Dickinson, Sidney Lanier, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Henry James, but soon he is rushing through the local colorists, the naturalists, the muckrakers, the new poets, the sentimentalists, the rebels against the village. Then in an epilogue he looks at some of the socially-conscious novelists of the Thirties, discusses a number of poets, and winds up with Faulkner and Hemingway.

The question one has to ask is

whether Howard hasn't been too much concerned with comprehensiveness. He is never perfunctory, never a mere cataloguer; he has read the works he talks about and read them thoughtfully. But in the third section and the epilogue the reader grows dizzy: London, Sinclair, Churchill, Robinson, Frost, Lindsay, Sandburg, for instance, in a dozen pages. Obviously, Howard felt that he must be inclusive in order to be fair. As he remarks in his preface, the canon of literature for the past half century is unsettled, and he did not want to select only writers whose work supported his thesis. Yet it does seem that he might have devised a plan of selection that would have enabled him to deal more adequately with a few writers. The very fact that his comments are so often fresh and authoritative makes it annoying that he does not give himself a chance to develop his insights.

And what is the upshot of all this? Does Howard find a pattern, something that he is willing to call the American tradition? Of course he does or he wouldn't have given the book the title it bears. He finds it in "a belief in the creative power of the human spirit to endure and to prevail and to exist in the meanest and queerest of individuals."

This [he goes on] is the belief which budded beneath Puritan orthodoxy, found its way through eighteenth-century reason to a Declaration of Independence, transformed the symbols of European literature into something new, and became established as an American tradition which could survive the impact of an almost overwhelming materialism, the disillusionment of false hopes, and the charms of new dogmatisms. Tacit rather than rational in its pervasiveness, its expression has been shaped by so many intellectual contexts that it refuses to become a part of any system of orthodoxy and exists only as a sort of intangible national quality in American literature and an under-the-surface source of that power which contemporary literature—and perhaps America itself—derives from the past.

Certainly this is a belief that has been held in America, but it has also been held elsewhere. I can think of British, French, German, and Russian novels that pay as eloquent tribute to

the creative power of the human spirit as anything written in this country. Faith in the individual may have been given a particular form by American conditions, but in its essentials such a faith has inspired a considerable proportion of the world's great literature.

In the second place, Howard himself presents plenty of evidence—and this is to his credit—that American literature is not all of one piece. Some of our great writers have been dogmatists, some have been determinists, some have been pessimists. Jonathan Edwards does not belong to Howard's tradition nor Henry Adams nor Eugene O'Neill. Hawthorne, Poe, and Mark Twain are by no means staunch adherents. Most of the moderns, even Faulkner, whose Nobel Prize speech Howard's statement echoes, are waverers. American literature belongs not to one tradition but to many.

Sometimes a generalization leads to valuable insights even though it is in itself open to question, and up to a point this is true of Howard's conception of the American tradition. It suggests, for instance, a fresh appreciation of Henry James as a quintessential American: "He was devoted to careful observation of the world around him, skilful in drawing inferences, indifferent to the prevailing rationalistic notions of necessity, and convinced that reason was choice and that individuals could freely choose to follow some supreme intellectual light within them." Many writers' values become more apparent when we see them in relation to the particular setting Howard's theories create for them.

On the other hand, his theories do not serve particularly well as an organizing principle for American literature as a whole. Many of the writers he talks about, particularly in the present century, bear no significant relationship to the American tradition as he conceives it. Their achievements seem to have nothing to do with their belief or lack of belief in the creative power of the human spirit. Again it is to Howard's credit that he refuses to force the literary materials with which he is dealing into conformity with a set of ideas, but he cannot complain if the reader remains skeptical about the utility of the ideas.

Howard's integrity, his erudition, and his sensibility are all admirable. So, too, is the boldness of his aim, and yet I cannot help feeling that he tried to do too much. If he had not set out to define the American tradition, and had limited himself to those writers he finds congenial, he might have said something very important about an American tradition.