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In Defence of the Professor Who Publishes

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IN DEFENCE OF THE PROFESSOR WHO PUBLISHES

I

At the present time, when our whole educational system is under criticism, it would be remarkable if any tendency in university life were to escape the searching scrutiny of laity and schoolmen. University ideals and university organization have been exploited in books and articles without number. Everybody has taken part in the work of defining the respective powers of president and board, of determining the scope of student self-government, and the appropriate relations of the university to the community at large. With these large problems discussed to the point of universal exhaustion, we may well turn our attention to others, apparently, at least, of minor importance. Of these one that has long excited concern in the faculties and has occasionally received cursory treatment in the general press, is that of the professor who publishes.¹

One who has a statistical turn of mind might well question why a class so small, relatively to the numbers engaged in teaching, and a mere vanishing point, relatively to the general population, should be elevated to the rank of a "problem." By many this class is supposed to represent a tendency which, if not checked, will sap away the vitality of our higher institutions of learning. Preoccupation with literary and scientific composition, so it is alleged, diverts the attention of the teacher from his primary function. He is likely to scamp his class work in order to reserve all his energies for his private researches. It is asserted, further, that there is a certain incompatibility between the teacher's temperament and the writer's. The true teacher must possess that congeries of characteristics known as "personality," while the academic writer is characterized by an aloofness from the ordinary interests of men, a homing impulse of the mind toward the world of the unseen. A university that encourages publishing on the part of its faculty members will naturally

¹ In academic speech, *to publish* is used intransitively, like *to skate* or *to dance*. This is indicative of the general judgment, that the value of the results of publishing activity is negligible.

select the writing type, to the utter demoralization of its instruction.

Another point in the indictment is that junior members of faculties are subjected to a frightful pressure "to publish." This not only reduces them to a condition akin to that of the peasants under the *corvée* system, but also forces them into a premature espousal of doctrines that in later years they must either abandon, to the prejudice of their reputation for consistency, or spend themselves in defending, to the prejudice of their scientific development. There are cited instances of men whose lives have been devoted chiefly to the buttressing of positions they had thus inconsiderately occupied; and other instances of men who have escaped this unhappy consequence, but who are none the less forced to plead guilty to the charge of having added to the mass of worthless books—books that cumber the library shelves and retard the progress of all subsequent investigators, who, according to academic rule, must survey the existing literature before venturing upon original research.

II

One who attacks a tendency is justified, morally, in the use of exaggeration. A tendency, by its very nature, is destined to grow; describe it in its existing state, and you suppress most of its meaning. The suppleness of the tiger cub, the precocious alertness of the savage child are properly to be interpreted in terms of future disembowelings of cattle and burning of villages. Accordingly, it is no satisfactory disposition of the issue to say that they who view with alarm the increasing mass of academic publication greatly exaggerate the present evil. Still, the fact that they do exaggerate is worth emphasizing. There is not, in any university, a considerable body of professors who permit their literary activities to detract seriously from their teaching efficiency. Some execrable teachers, it is true, are distinguished writers; but so also are some of our best and most inspiring teachers. There are few universities that do not harbour a certain number of unsatisfactory teachers who never publish a line. A pressure to publish does exist, in the sense that many universities take published writings into account in balancing the competing claims of their faculty members to promotion. Yet there is probably not one American university in which a

brilliant record for success in the class room or for efficient administrative work is not rewarded by the highest honours in the gift of the university. Junior members of departments are often urged by their superiors to undertake serious work, with a view to ultimate publication, but they are seldom urged to publish in haste. "A good book won't make you but a bad book will break you," is a saw in general use among department heads.

More serious is the pressure exerted, not by one's immediate colleagues or by the university authorities, but by the opinion of the rank and file of one's special branch of the profession. A teacher of English literature is called to a chair in a great university. At once every teacher of literature in the country, from the oldest department head to the newest instructor, demands, "What has he done?" And this usually means, "What has he written?" If he has written nothing, he may safely assure himself that the next question bandied about in the learned societies will be, "*Why* was he called?" And this is equivalent to the political query, "Where did he get it?"

III

A pressure to publish exists; and it is a growing pressure. In the course of this essay an attempt will be made to show why such pressure is inevitable; for the present, let us examine some of its more obvious consequences. What of its effect upon the scholarship of those who are subjected to it? It is almost inevitably salutary. If you want to know how many gaps there are in your knowledge of a subject, try writing a book on it. If you want to demonstrate your capacity for giving impartial asylum to the most antagonistic doctrines, write a book. It is true that after writing it you may still remain unconscious, for a time, of the lacunæ in your reasoning and the contradictions in your system. But your critics will help you to discover them. You may never attain to perfect knowledge, but under the lash of criticism, applied vigorously at successive exposures of yourself, you will yield to improvement.

There are, to be sure, less painful methods of self-improvement than this. Informal discussion with one's colleagues, the questioning of one's students, serve to clear up many doctrinal obscurities. Yet it is astonishing how many gross errors survive the assaults of oral debate. One's colleagues are occupied with

their own problems, and have little time for plucking motes, or even beams, out of their neighbours' eyes. And students do not, as a rule, take seriously the duty of educating their professors. Granting their competence, students are by nature polite and generous; and besides, the professor has in his own hands the machinery of marking. If informal criticism is ever effectively administered, it is likely to follow upon a published work well mangled by the critics.

We have learned that it is unsafe to leave our public accounts unaudited. Once we believed that our public officials were almost universally honest and efficient, and that the general vigilance of good citizens was so keen that occasional lapses from rectitude would quickly be detected. But we found that we had reason to rue this fatuous confidence. Is it presumptuous to suggest that our university teachers should, from time to time, open their intellectual accounts to an expert auditing? Nobody suspects that, in the great majority of instances, the reports would be other than highly creditable. But it is not merely an idle surmise that many irregularities, of which the subject under investigation may himself be unaware, would thus be eliminated. And now and then, conceivably, a huge defaulter, a persistent falsifier of his books, would be whipped into the open. Publication, from this point of view, is not a private indulgence, but a public obligation. It is our one adequate safeguard against intellectual defalcation.

IV

A faculty community appears, to the superficial observer, like the nearest approach to Eden that can exist in this age of steel. It is an association of men of like mind, devoted to the most congenial of all pursuits, enjoying, as a rule, a fair degree of leisure, security of position, and liberty of thought. But alas, there are very few of these Edens uninfested with the serpents of discontent and envy. The source of the evil appears to be the slowness and irregularity of promotions. Our navy, it is said, is seething with discontent because, as conditions stand, an ensign cannot hope to attain to a lieutenantcy before his fortieth year. But it is the exceptional case where the university teacher rises, by his fortieth year, to a position comparable, in dignity and emoluments, with that of a naval lieutenant. The situation is

unfortunate, but nobody in particular seems to be responsible for it. Our universities are competitive institutions, and each one is forced to present a well rounded curriculum. Since funds are limited, and the curriculum must expand with the times, it is frequently necessary to fill the place of a retiring professor by the appointment of several instructors, at low salaries, for whose regular promotion no provision can be made. It is accordingly inevitable that many faculties should contain strata of officers suffering under a chronic feeling of legitimate hopes deferred.

But not all in the same class fare equally ill. One is offered a chair in a competing institution, and the authorities stretch a point to retain him. Another succeeds in winning a wide following among the students—one point, but not a conclusive one, in the record of efficiency. He, too, is promoted. A third gains the general esteem of the community through his social graces, and is advanced. A fourth wins promotion through bitter need, not too stoically borne. The rest—many with the consciousness of equally valid claims—are put off with promises. Is it to be wondered at that there are faculties in which almost every man's hand is raised against his colleagues?

But even in such unfavoured groups you will find some who are ever serene. Pour your own grievances into their ears, and their eyes focus upon the distance; their faces assume a fixed expression of sympathy, less consolation than animated indifference. Call their attention to their own grievances; it is hate's labour lost. It is superfluous to say, these are the men with books on the stocks. If I were a university president, loving harmony, but forced by financial straits to pay my professors, in part, with promises, I should take pains to make the proportion of mere promise large in the case of men who are writing books. Those who never write at all I should endeavour to pay in hard cash. Thus could I barter justice, a great good, for peace, the greatest good of all. Or better, I should try to man the institution entirely with writers of books. Thus could I dispense altogether with justice—excellent, but expensive commodity!

This obvious principle of scientific management has never, in the knowledge of the writer, been acted upon by any university president. Possibly it has wholly escaped the notice of the university authorities; in which case it is treasonable to call their attention to it. But the point at issue is one to be enforced, *per fas et nefas*. Discontent in the instructing staff is one of the most

serious evils in our university system. The discontented teacher cannot possibly display that enthusiasm for ideals without which the most perfect pedagogic technique is machinery fit for nothing but the scrap heap. Now, discontent cannot flourish in an institution where the customary salutation is not "How do you do?" but "How does the book?"

V

It was not necessary, in the golden age of the old American college, either to pay the professor well or to open to him the pursuit of literary achievement. Mark Hopkins and his disciple, securely established on a log—what was lacking in this perfect educational institution? There are those who say that Mark Hopkins is a myth, like Lycurgus and Romulus and Remus. I refuse to believe it. At all events, the relation of master and disciple, illustrated in the story, is not mythical. That relation did once exist. From the time when Aristotle walked and taught until within the memory of living men, it retained its vitality. It still retains it in India and Thibet. Possibly, too, in many a remote fresh-water college in our own country. But in our great universities of to-day, the relation of teacher and student has undergone a transformation. It is no longer that of master and disciple, but that of master workman and apprentice. A consequence, perhaps, of the grafting of the practical upon liberal education.

According to the ancient tradition, liberal education was best given by word of mouth. The disciple seated himself at his master's feet and garnered the golden words falling from his master's lips. Practical instruction was given by example. An apprentice seating himself at his master's feet would have instantly been subjected to severe discipline. Master and apprentice worked side by side, and only through work well executed could the master win the respect of the apprentice.

To command the respect of his students the teacher of to-day must execute some work of his own. Students of engineering expect their instructors to build substantial bridges and serviceable retaining walls. Students of surgery expect their instructors to perform miracles with the knife. This, of course, is nothing remarkable; such disciplines are closely analogous to the crafts. But what is really remarkable is the tendency of the modern

student to extend the requirement to the liberal disciplines. If you keep your ears open as you pass through the corridors you will hear, "He knows all about the technique of poetry, but he can't write even a limerick." Or, "He can pull down any philosophical system, but he can't put up a system of his own." Or a garbled quotation from Shaw, "Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach."

The student of to-day has lost faith in golden words. The gold will come off, he is quite sure. Works he believes in. In this he is in accord with the spirit of the age. The booth of the seer is deserted; the wizard draws the crowd. The teacher's performance must extend beyond his teaching, or he is no longer sufficiently respected to be fully effective.

Must his activity take the form of writing for publication? Not necessarily. He may hold a governorship, organize a trust, stage an opera. But for the great majority of teachers "publishing" is the indicated mode of doing. Besides, it answers best the practical ideal of a master teaching his proper craft by example as well as by precept.

In short, the "good teacher" of to-day must present characteristics other than those of the days of Socrates and Mark Hopkins. It is said that when the guilds were in their prime, a tongue-tied master was eagerly sought after, as one likely to train his apprentices exceptionally well. The writer numbers among his acquaintances a professor, who, if not tongue-tied, is hardly more intelligible in his discourses than a man thus curbed in speech. He is a prolific writer, and has been successful, far beyond the ordinary measure, in inspiring in his students a sincere love of science and a zeal to contribute to its advancement. Another acquaintance of the writer's has the gift of tongues. Even in these unenthusiastic days, students will cut other classes, under serious penalties, to hear him lecture. But of the thousands who have listened to his words, not one has risen to continue his work. Which is the better teacher, according to the need of the time?

VI

It is a mistaken view that academic duties and academic honours ever filled the professor's life completely. Even in the best period of the old college, the professor's position in the

community at large was of vital concern to him. That position was an enviable one. The colleges were intellectual oases in the midst of a desert of the scarcely lettered. The young graduate went forth into the desert with infinite regret, feeling that he might never again enjoy the benefits of enlightened society. If ever he did return to drink at the Pierian spring (delicious phrase, which nobody dares to use nowadays) his respect for his old preceptor was in nowise abated. But the yearly sending forth of ever increasing graduating classes from ever more numerous institutions has at last saturated the community. There is scarcely a city so small that it does not boast its "university club," capable of satisfying all reasonable demands for intellectual society. And the intellectualism of these societies is stronger and more human than that of undergraduate days as the man is stronger and more experienced than the boy. The alumnus of to-day looks back upon college life, not as to a white peak surmounted in the strength of youth, but as to a grassy foothill, appropriate to the boy's immaturity. The world has grown so big that the college, though it burst itself in its attempts at expansion, remains small. Small, the great wits of the class. Small, the splendid victories of the college teams. Small, the devoted teachers who were heart and soul with the boys, in their games and loves and hates, as in their tasks in library and laboratory.

It is not that the returned alumnus intentionally makes himself a mouthpiece of the world's estimates. Did returned alumni ever praise more fervently or shout more loudly? They praise too fervently and their voices crack. And now and then you hear the genial inquiry, "Are you still teaching the boys so and so?" No hostile criticism is intended; indeed, your questioner is likely to add: "It did me lots of good; I think it's just the right kind of dope, at that stage." At that stage? We were once the end of the intellectual process, but now we are a stage in it, and an early one.

And the students, who are so slow to catch what you are trying to teach them, are quick to catch what the world thinks, but, for their good, tries to keep from them. They know they are in an early stage, more or less a play stage. And their faculty playfellows, who are devoting themselves without reservation to the game—these they consider to be in an amiable state of arrested development.

It has long been known that the profession of college teaching

is securing its recruits from the lesser colleges. The graduates from the greater universities go into law, journalism, medicine, business—anything—but not into teaching. It is alleged that the reason is that modern youth is materialistic, and demands greater rewards than college teaching affords. But youth is never materialistic. Youth demands a career of promise. And what kind of promise is arrested development?

The main current of intellectual life is now flowing outside of the college dikes. The hundreds of thousands of college-trained men in the general community surpass overwhelmingly in numbers the students now in the colleges. Some of them have forgotten all they learned in college, and have acquired no new wisdom; but these are the exceptions. As a body, the graduates make up the really significant intellectual public; and only through his ability to establish relations with this public can the professor regain his old position of intellectual leadership. The problem is difficult, but a solution must be found for it if our institutions are still to be manned with the ambitious. It is possible that preoccupation with this problem may involve loss in efficiency of instruction. This would be unfortunate; but would we choose the alternative of a body of university teachers who have renounced their claim to intellectual leadership in the community?

VII

Not merely the conditions of the material environment and the character of the intellectual world, but the truth itself, the object and meaning of all academic activity, has been subjected to metamorphosis during the last generation. Time was when truth was marble, changeless, eternal. To gain a vision of it, in its full beauty, was difficult indeed; but once you were possessed of it, the truth was yours by right of ownership. Thereafter your duty was plain: patiently to fit glass after glass upon the myopic eyes of the disciple until he, too, saw the truth plain, as you saw it. But James taught us that truth works, and Bergson is teaching us that it lives. And therewith all vested intellectual interests have become abrogated. For what works and lives, ceaselessly renews itself with the generations and must be forever reconquered. You cannot win the truth and keep it. It is your lot tirelessly to pursue it; through all the ins and outs of appear-

ance. And if you do grasp it, and subjugate it to your uses, the chances are that it dies in your hand.

Such, at all events, is the truth we live by, and the world knows it well. What then must be the world's estimate of the man who has abandoned the quest, in order to display effectively the truths of a bygone age? To the world he is a museum attendant, expatiating upon the habits of a thing he has never seen living, nor even newly dead. The world is charitable, and willing to grant that some of the abundant hours of the youths should thus be spent futilely. But the urbane father urges his son not to take his class work too seriously; there are other features of college life of greater importance. And this is true if the college is anything other than a guild of masters and apprentices, seriously bent upon the work of finding and fashioning new truth.

It is of course not essential that new truth should take form in published works. No master ever pursued the truth more ardently than Socrates, who never wrote books. There are original modern thinkers who expend their zeal wholly upon oral instruction, or even in secret communion with their own souls. So there are ardent hunters who do not stoop to pick up the birds they bring down. The economic waste is not serious, perhaps; but the art of hunting would not long survive if the practice became general.

VIII

Enough of metaphysics. In terms of common sense, our institutions of learning will be more effective in their work of instruction, more attractive to the ambitious, of greater weight in the whole intellectual world, when the right and the duty of productive scholarship receive more general recognition. But what of the need for the multitudinous contributions that would result? Are we not already groaning under the flood of books—ten thousand a year, most of them seriously intended? Are not our librarians clamouring for an armistice, our critics organizing a movement for “fewer books and better ones”?

To a visitor from the country New York appears to have altogether too many people. It is impossible to conceive the manifold social needs to be subserved by working humanity; accordingly any great multitude seems to consist chiefly of the superfluous. But let anyone master completely the relations

between service required and personnel properly equipped, and the sense of a general superfluity of population will fall away. And so, when we read publishers' statistics we are overwhelmed with a sense of the magnitude of the volume of printed matter; and we are likely to conclude that we have too many books. But what specialist can honestly say that the literature in his field is adequate?

"You would suppose," says the editor of a work of reference, "that such topics as the Noachian Deluge and the Exodus from Egypt would by this time have been completely wound up; that scholars would have said everything on them worth saying. Not so: these topics appear to be as alive as Syndicalism and the I. W. W."

Is it merely the problems of interest only to the few that receive inadequate treatment in the existing literature? Not at all. What can be more important than the fate of a great social class? For half a century the Socialists have been loudly proclaiming that the middle class is doomed to be crushed between the growing self-conscious proletariat and the steadily increasing weight of the plutocracy. Have you not yourself beheld the spectacle of middle-class neighbours engaged in a losing struggle to maintain their independence? A point in favour of the Socialist contention. But do you not see the increasing anxiety on the face of the man of millions, as he scans the world for an asylum where his possessions will be safe against the increasing exactions imposed by middle-class legislatures? Did you not hear the full-throated baying of "Big Business" ten years ago, and are not its plaintive whinings now in your ears? Should not you and I like to know how matters really stand with the middle class? Let us turn to the literature. What do we find? Unseasoned conjectures. Propagandist material. Museums of two-edged statistics. Of scientific inquiry, a little; but at the very cardinal points, where you feel certainty almost within your grasp, the literature fails you; you are thrust back into the waves of partisan hope and partisan despair.

Perhaps you are so broad in your views that the fate of a class cannot interest you. Should you not be interested in knowing something of the fate of your race? The white race, that just now plays so commanding a *rôle* in the world's history: what of its future? Can it persist in all the territories it now occupies; or is it to be overwhelmed, even in its original habitat,

by the growing masses of black, brown, and yellow? Will a future age merely conjecture its existence from ancient myths of fairies with blond hair, and cave-haunting wizards with uncanny eyes of cruel blue?¹ You and I would like, for an idle hour, at least, a reasoned horoscope of the white race. Not a stupefying bibliography from the Library of Congress, ten thousand titles of fact and myth. Just a book, to satisfy our curiosity, to warn us whether our children's children, to preserve our physical immortality and theirs, must take refuge in miscegenation. Of course there is no such book, you will say: nobody knows enough to write it. And that is the point I am making.

We need more books. Multitudes of recondite studies, of meaning only to the specialist, to be digested in a lesser multitude, by the great authorities; and these, in turn, to be reduced to just a few real books, for the use of you and me, who wish to learn, but have our own living to make and could not take time for all the painful survey of materials, even if our single minds could achieve the task.

The work that needs to be done is vast; it will require the co-operation of persons of every class who have the taste for research and the leisure to gratify it. There is no class, however, which might be expected to furnish so many writers, in proportion to its numbers, as the college teachers. All of them have access to considerable collections of materials; they all have thrust upon them, in the course of their teaching duties, a realization of the inadequacy of the existing literature. When all is said of the manifold tasks resting upon them, it must still be admitted that they have a fair degree of leisure. Their financial resources are usually modest; and the writing of books is one of the cheapest of all means of employing leisure. The labour is one which, for the most part, will bring no other personal reward than a consciousness of work well done. Our college teachers are already schooled to work upon such terms. All that society needs to do, in order to enrol them as recruits in its

¹ The legends of the "brownies," it has often been suggested, point to the vestiges of a race of pygmies, once widely distributed in Northern Europe, and driven to caves and impenetrable forests by the advance of taller races. As for "cruel blue," a Japanese friend once remarked to the writer that he could not reconcile the prevailing mildness of character of North Europeans with the cruelty expressed by blue eyes. Travellers in Africa, Australia, and the Orient have occasionally noted the horror inspired in native children by a glance from blue eyes.

service, is to manifest its expectation that such work should be done.

IX

Were it possible here to set forth in detail all the advantages to scholarship, to teaching, to the general intellectual life of society, that flow from active participation by the teaching corps in the work of publication, it would appear altogether incredible that any one should attempt to discourage such work. In as far as opposition to writing takes its origin in the faculties themselves, the explanation is simple. It is a manifestation of the same spirit that makes the trade unionist detest a peace-maker. Unlike the taste for talking, which is innate, the taste for writing must be acquired. Not everyone who has leisure will be at the pains to acquire it. In most of our college communities a pleasant social existence is possible; most of them provide facilities for delightful, but time-consuming athletic pursuits. It is natural that many teachers should prefer the career of a "well-rounded man" to that of an assiduous devotee of the study. It is a preference that is entirely justifiable in itself. Who shall say that "life" is not worth more than books? But "life" is not subject to accumulation, like a row of books extending gradually across a shelf. One may cherish honest convictions as to the uselessness of accumulations, and still find it difficult to love those who have them.

But more fundamental is our natural hostility to those who assume an attitude of demanding that we give our attention to strange and apparently futile matters. There is a certain able scholar before whose face I flee, if avenue of escape offers. He is absorbed in the Geat question. Do I know what the Geat question is? No. Do I want to know what it is? *A fortiori*, no! Something very important may turn on the Geat question, for aught I know. But I intend to let it turn, before I waste any attention upon it.

And this example suggests the most fundamental of all reasons for hostility to general and promiscuous publishing activities on the part of professors. Most of the work will be mediocre, of limited value, if of any value at all. Only a genius can write a really important book. Now, genius is no doubt as widely distributed among professors as in the general population—say,

one in a half-million. But we have not half a million professors; nor even a fiftieth of a million.

Accordingly, the weary critics will say, let none of them publish. Let us have no books, if not the works of genius. Just so the weary traveller would wish away the interminable stretches of barren plain and monotonous foothills to be traversed before the high peaks of the Rockies can be attained. How glorious those mountains would be if they rose directly from the sea-level, sheer cliff above dizzy slope, to the white glaciers in the clouds! But geology tells us, without the uptilting plain, the Rockies would not even reach the snow line. Nor have we ever had works of genius rising from the sea-level of unorganized experience. Homer and Shakespeare are merely white peaks rising above lofty plateaus.

There was never an age so greatly in need of advancing knowledge as the present. Our material environment is infinitely more complex than that upon which our forefathers shaped their characters. Our movings to and fro upon the earth have brought us into contact with strangers of all races and have deprived us of the moral support of our kin. Our forefathers had a body of fixed values to live by; we, however, daily find every value we cherish called into question by those whose standards are other than ours. New values must be established, or the business of life will assume the form of a blind auction. Such values exist, but we have not yet the light by which to see them. The need of the time is a Prometheus. Of the appearance of a Prometheus there is no present hope; but we can, if we choose, provide ourselves with an army of Promethidia, each carrying a spark, and, in their collectivity, providing a sufficient illumination.

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