

OF HIGH AND LOW PROFESSIONS

RECTORIAL ADDRESS

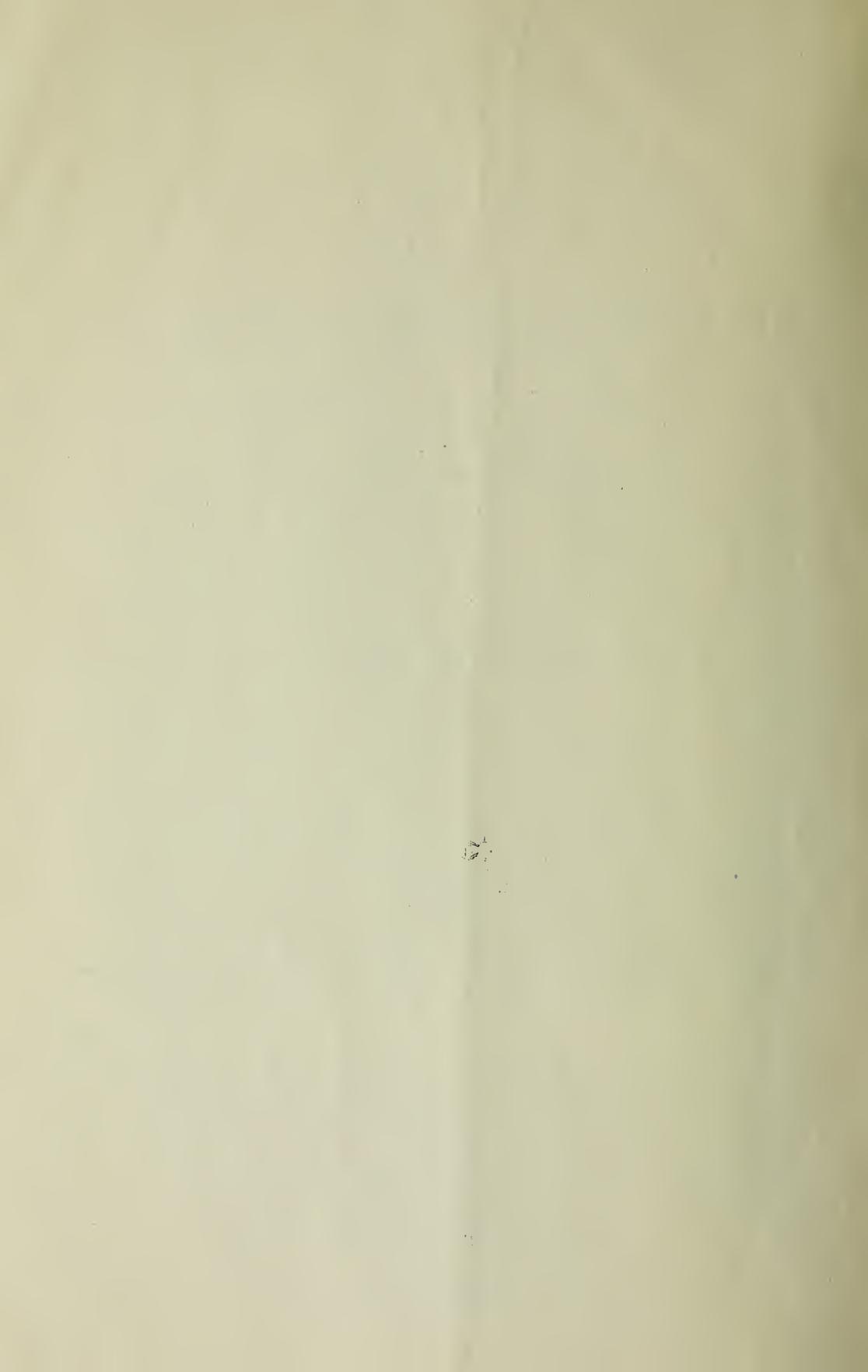
by

B. K. SANDWELL, LL.D.



Delivered in Grant Hall, Queen's University

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8th, 1944



OF HIGH AND LOW PROFESSIONS

Rectorial Address Delivered by B. K. Sandwell, LL.D. '42,
in Grant Hall on December 8

THE responsibilities attaching to the position of Rector of Queen's University in the city of Kingston on the old Ontario strand are obviously enormous. My predecessor in this office was no less a person than the Governor-General of the Dominion, who, if he found his own unaided wisdom too weak for the task, could presumably seek the advice of his ministers, the cabinet committee of His Majesty's Privy Council for Canada, that notable aggregation of statesmen who have been thrown up by the process of parliamentary democracy for the purpose of ruling the nation and who receive so little thanks for doing it. I shall not be able to bring any such collective sagacity to bear on the problems that may arise during my term of office, but on the other hand I shall be free to consult with members of all political parties and of no political party, and thus to form my own national government and give everybody a share of the responsibilities.

The office of Rector dates from the earliest days of university institutions, away back in the Middle Ages, a period which in my youth was regarded as somewhat unenlightened because it was excessively addicted to wars. The simplest considerations of etymology make it clear that a Rector is a much more important person than a Principal or a President, for the Rector derives his title from the Latin *regere*, to rule, govern, direct, or guide, while the Principal is merely one who goes first and the President merely one who sits further forward. There are, I find also, several kinds, grades or degrees of Rector. I myself belong to the lowest kind, the common or garden Rector, *Rector vulgaris* or *Canadensis*. But in Germany there is the Rector Magnificus, which sounds like a very good grade indeed, and even the Rector Magnificentissimus, a title bestowed when the officer in question is also the ruling head of the state, so that I suppose we may assume that the Herr Doktor Adolf Hitler, if still alive, is Rector Magnificentissimus of several once great and flourishing but now *gleichgeschaltet* universities. In Scotland there is of course the Lord Rector, but Canada having abolished lords along with knights and baronets must obviously get along with a more democratic sub-species.

But there is one drawback, or limitation, about the Rectorship of Queen's University, and that is that all its tremendous responsibilities are limited to the one hour for which I stand before you today. There is no machinery, outside of the Rectorial Address, by which I can rule, govern, direct, or guide this university in the way it should go. If I do not set it in the right path today I shall never do so. You will pardon me therefore if I approach

my task with a certain solemnity. I feel somewhat as a missionary must feel who, on his way to the district of Central Africa to which he has been assigned, is invited to preach one sermon to the more coastwise tribes through which he has to pass, and knows that unless in that one sermon he can show them the error of their ways they will still be wallowing in heathen darkness when he returns on sabbatical leave seven years hence. Opportunity knocks but once, and Rectorial opportunity is knocking now.

I would not have you think, however, because of the simile, that I regard Queen's University as completely heathen and unconverted in regard to the doctrine which I wish to preach. It is in fact probably less in need of my preaching than almost any other university on this continent, and it is only because no other university has asked for my missionary services that I come here to preach to you. For the doctrine which I wish to preach is that of the deceitfulness of riches, and the students and I think most of the faculties of Queen's have always been somewhat less tempted than those of other universities to put their trust in riches, because they have had so little of them.

The great truths of human existence commonly reach our minds at a very early age—or used to when I was at an early age—in the form in which they are expressed in the sacred literature of our faith, with the consequent drawback that these forms have become over-familiar and have lost some of their power to impress the mind by the time we are of an age to apprehend their meaning somewhat fully. This is one of the advantages of studying the religious and philosophical works of other faiths and other types of mind than our own; it brings us into contact with great truths expressed in forms which are not only forcible but also new to us and therefore effective. That is the chief reason why all the students in this university ought to be compelled to study Latin and probably also Greek—that and not the fact that they are difficult to learn, which is only a reason for studying Old English and Differential Calculus.

It was therefore a great delight to me, a few months ago, to come across a statement of a profound truth about human existence, expressed by a contemporary Chinese philosopher in language which even when translated into English still has exotic flavor, not merely of a strange language, but of an entire system of thinking radically different from our own. A contemporary Chinese professor of political science, by name Li Shu-ching, wrote very recently an article containing a paragraph which when rendered into English reads as follows:

“People of high profession in a normal society generally represent widely learned, highly trained, respectable, and disciplined men. As these qualities are not easily obtainable in society, they form the object of endeavour, and this contributes in no small measure to the establishment of a good social system and the maintenance of sound social standards. But when changes come about in which low professions become far more profitable than high professions, the people will leave their difficult jobs for easy ones and forsake righteous spirit in favor of material gains, which practice, if allowed to continue unchecked, will bring about social disorder . . . social justice will

disappear and morality will deteriorate . . . respectable and upright people will be ignored, while unscrupulous and mercenary persons will be highly regarded by society."

Professor Li Shu-ching's article was drawn to my attention about a year ago by another Chinese, and it seemed to me that he had put his finger with considerable accuracy and in a most picturesque style upon one of the outstanding weaknesses of our western society. And when I was asked to deliver the Rectorial Address for the Alma Mater Society of Queen's University it occurred to me that there would be a certain measure of novelty in taking for one's text an utterance from the Chinese. Such Rectorial Addresses as I am familiar with have always been plentifully sprinkled with extracts from the dead languages, principally Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic, usually presented in their original form if the Address was delivered before 1914 and in a translated version, out of regard for the audience, if it was after that date. But the world has greatly changed in the last five years, and the Chinese have been, perhaps somewhat hastily, promoted to the position of the Fourth Great Power, with the result that it becomes almost as necessary to know what they are talking and thinking about as it is to know what the Russians are talking and thinking about; and what the Chinese are talking and thinking about is much more interesting because they are still allowed to talk and think. So I am asking you to consider the state of a society in which low professions seem to be becoming far more profitable than high professions.

Note that the results of this regrettable tendency are that "the people will . . . forsake righteous spirit in favor of material gains," also that "respectable and upright people will be ignored, while unscrupulous and mercenary persons will be highly regarded"; and in the long run "social justice will disappear and morality will deteriorate"; and all this because of what? Because of nothing more than that "low professions" have become "far more profitable than high professions."

What does Li Shu-ching mean by low and high professions? Well, he is pretty clear about it. The members of a high profession are, he tells us, by and large, widely learned, they are highly trained, they are disciplined, and he also adds that they are respectable. I do not think he means by that exactly what we should mean by it; respectability in China is probably not quite the same as in Ontario. He does not mean that they have a pew in church, go in for golf and curling, belong to Rotary and the Board of Trade, and violate no laws except those relating to motor traffic and the sale of alcoholic beverages. He means rather that they have as a class the power to command respect that ministers of religion used to have until about 1900, and professors until about 1920. They are, then, respectable, that is they are the kind of people who can make themselves respected. They are widely learned, which means that they have studied not only the subjects of their particular trade or calling but a lot of other subjects of learning also. They are highly trained, which means that they not only know their stuff theoretically but have practised it and can perform it. And they are disciplined, which certainly does not mean that they can form threes and fix bayonets and march in a perfect line, but rather that they are disciplined

as individuals, that each one of them has himself under control and allows himself no immoderation or excess or extravagance. In other words these men of high profession are precisely identical with the ideal body of university graduates, the men and women who have got out of their university course not merely a sheepskin and a hood but all those things which the university intends them to get out of it. And of course we must not forget that they will include also quite a number of men and women who have managed to do the very difficult job of making themselves learned and trained and disciplined and even respectable without the aid of a university.

And the members of a low profession are obviously those who are—not merely less learned; do not, I beg you, make the mistake of thinking that learning alone makes the marks on the thermometer of high and low profession—not merely less learned, but less everything, less disciplined, less trained, less respectable. They are persons on whom less time and effort has been spent to make them learned, disciplined, trained, and worthy of respect, or else they are persons (they are to be found among the graduates of every university) on whom that time and effort have been spent in vain. For remember that people do not become, or at least very rarely become, learned, disciplined, trained and respect-worthy without undergoing some process to make them so. We become learned by being taught, usually by others. We become disciplined by being subjected to discipline. We become trained by being put through training. And we become respect-worthy by being shown the example of other respect-worthy people.

So it is not necessarily the low-profession man's fault that he is a low-profession man. He may never have had the opportunity to become otherwise, or he may have had the opportunity but have been born without the qualities which are required to enable him to profit by it. He may be just as much entitled to a good seat in heaven as any high-profession man. But on this earth he is not entitled to as much remuneration or as much esteem as the high-profession man, because he is not of as much value to society. And yet who can deny that in the present state of our society low professions are often far more profitable than high professions, and unscrupulous and mercenary persons are often far more highly regarded than upright and respect-worthy persons?

Now what is there in the structure of our present-day society which has made it possible for these unscrupulous and mercenary persons to do so well? What are the changes that have come about and have caused low professions to become far more profitable than high ones? The chief characteristic of our age is its enormous and highly diversified power of production. We can turn out, in our western civilization, not only all the things that we need to maintain existence, but a vast quantity of things which are not necessary at all and which merely add to our comfort or our pleasure or our safety or our dignity or our personal beauty; and we are free to choose among all these unnecessary things the things on which we will expend our surplus purchasing power and the things on which we will refuse to expend it. But the producers of all these relatively unnecessary things are in violent competition with one-another to get their product accepted instead of their rival's. Among the producers of the relatively

necessary things the competition is only in a limited field. Housing accommodation, for example, is in Canada a necessary thing. If I am working or studying in Kingston it will be necessary for me to have a roof over my head and walls around me and a furnace to keep the interior space warm in winter; but my freedom of choice is strictly limited. I must have this roof, et cetera, somewhere in or near Kingston, and there is no competition for my patronage except that of people who have roofs, walls, et cetera, to sell or rent in or near Kingston. But if after getting my roof and walls and the rest of my necessities I still have a few hundred dollars left at the end of the year the number and variety of the things on which I can spend that sum is absolutely unlimited, and all of them are competing for my patronage and trying to persuade me that their particular product will minister more to my comfort or pleasure or dignity or beauty than anything else.

And even among the necessities the competition is far from negligible. Breakfast, for example, is a necessity, at least to most of us. And as a part of breakfast some kind of breakfast food may be accepted as being more or less necessary. If this Rectorial Address were being delivered at St. Andrew's University at any time in the nineteenth century it would probably have contained some reference to oatmeal porridge, which would have been described as parritch and would I think have been followed by a plural verb. But, singular or plural, porridge or parritch had in those days no competitor for the position of chief dish at the early morning meal. Today how different is the scene! Innumerable patent-processed and trade-named articles compete with one-another for the right to replace porridge on the menu; innumerable brands of porridge compete with one-another for the privilege of keeping porridge there. And all the producers of all these different kinds of pabulum exert the utmost persuasive power to get their brand accepted in preference to all other brands, and the cost of their persuasive efforts is borne by the consumer of breakfast. Between the time when it gets out of bed in the morning and the time when it starts for work or lectures, the population of Canada every morning provides that day's living for a countless host of persons engaged in the sole task of persuading it to use one or another kind of soap to wash with, soap to shave with, scent to scent with, cereal to eat, beverage to drink, dentifrice to clean away the cereal and the beverage, powder to cover up the shine caused by the soap, and lipstick to—well, I don't know exactly what lipstick is for so I cannot tell you. But the sum of it all is that the art of persuasion, of persuasion to buy something, has become one of the major professions of the age.

The business of producing goods and services has become subsidiary to the business of persuading people to consume them. In fact there have been times in recent years when production had to be discouraged because people were not being sufficiently persuaded to consume. In my own student days, which occurred in the nineteenth century, it still used to be said that the man who made two blades of grass grow where one grew before was a benefactor to humanity, but today both he and his second blade of grass are liable to be plowed under unless an advertising man can be discovered

who can persuade horses to eat twice as much grass as they did before. Now this is obviously a condition which has never occurred in the world before. It is the result of the enormous increase in our power to produce, an increase which is enabling us to carry on far bigger and better wars than were ever possible to our poor benighted ancestors, and which actually puzzles us with the problem of how to get our excess production consumed when we haven't a war with which to use it up.

There has arisen therefore in these latter days an immense and very powerful and lucrative profession which we may define as the profession of commercial persuasion, or persuasion to buy things. It extends far beyond the mere advertising profession; it reaches back into and to some extent controls the processes of production. When, for example, a product is modified, not in order to make it more attractive or cheaper, but in order to make it more advertisable, the producer is functioning as a persuader rather than as a producer, for under persuasion we must include every influence brought to bear on the possible purchaser other than the natural appeal of the product itself. Thus, if I introduce honey into my patent breakfast food, not in order to make it more palatable or cheaper, but simply to enable the advertising department to talk about it as bee-kist bubbles, I am harnessing the production department to the persuasion department; and since my primary object is not to make breakfast food but to make sales there is bound to be a good deal of that sort of harnessing in any event.

Now I am far from suggesting that this new and powerful profession is an unnecessary one, in the present state of our economic structure. If we are to exercise freely the enormous range of choice that is offered to us by the expansion of our productive powers, and that enables us to determine whether we will use our surplus to satisfy a want for more face powder or more books, for more travel or a longer fur coat, for more beer or a better bath-tub—if we are to continue to have these choices freely set before us, there must, I suppose, continue to be people actively and persuasively engaged in doing the setting. But because a profession is necessary it does not follow that it is high; and a profession devoted to persuasion which puts its persuasive powers unrestrictedly at the disposal of anybody who wants to pay for them cannot claim to be engaged in a lofty public service. In India there are some very necessary occupations which are assigned by immemorial usage to the caste of the Untouchables; and some of the professions which we should regard as very unnecessary are assigned to the highest castes. This is a harsh system, and I should not like to suggest that our persuaders should be relegated to a state of Untouchability; I merely do not want them to treat me, or any other person of genuinely high profession, as Untouchable.

Our whole system of thought about the organization of human life, in the last century or so, has developed around certain basic assumptions which are those of a commercial society, based upon the ideas of property, specialization, competition, and exchange, the whole facilitated by a free market and a widely accepted monetary system. But that system of thought is not an old one; it does not go very far back into the past and it may not last very

far into the future. Even in the nineteenth century many of the best voices of the age were in protest against it—Carlyle, Ruskin, Emerson, all the great essayists whom students have been studying in English classes for forty years and whom they have found the world completely ignoring when they got out of their classes and into active life. It is a system of thought whose basic assumptions lead to some very curious results. They are not always pushed to their ultimate results by most thinkers, but they were, for example, by Malthus, who made no secret of his belief that the rights of property were ordained by God when he put Adam and Eve into the world.

“A man born into a world already possessed”, says Malthus, meaning thereby a world in which everything has been appropriated to somebody’s ownership, “if he can obtain no subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just claim, and if the society have no need for his labour”—that is if he is unemployed and cannot find employment—“has no claim of right to the smallest particle of food. At Nature’s bountiful feast there is no cover spread for him. She bids him begone.” And if the rights of property are absolute and God-given, that is obviously and inevitably true. But are they so? Does Nature, when she spreads her bountiful feast, do so with full knowledge of, and respect for, the laws of England, of Canada, of the United States, regarding property? These laws are man-made, not God-made. The rights of property have no real existence unless they are accompanied by the duties of property, duties toward the society as a whole, the society which made the rights of property and maintains them and can destroy them, and which maintains them only because, and so long as, it believes them to be helpful to the general good.

We have been accustomed to valuing the professions far too much by their profitability, and in a highly competitive society the profession of commercial persuasion is obviously a very valuable one—to those who employ it. It has attracted to itself on account of its profitableness quite a number of widely learned, highly trained, respectable, and disciplined men, including many university graduates. But it is open to question whether when engaged in it they are putting to the best use their wide learning, their training, their discipline, and their respectability. In that same highly competitive society the profession of education, which of all professions is that which makes the greatest call on these qualities, has become lamentably unprofitable, and is losing the services of a great number of people who are properly qualified but seek more remunerative employments, and these are being replaced by people whose qualifications are distinctly less than what should be required of those who have the moulding of all our future Canadians in their hands. The medical profession, in our highly competitive society, is shockingly under-remunerated in a great many districts, and yet we need for a proper state of the national health a vastly greater number of doctors than we possess or can in the near future hope to have. Of the ministry of religion I hesitate to speak; how men of character and accomplishment can be found to live the lives of many of the country clergy, not only in point of inadequate pecuniary reward but in point of inadequate social position and authority, I am at a loss to understand. And the whole tendency of the

time, except in regard to the medical profession, is to increase these discrepancies between the high profession and the lowness of the reward.

Those who are members of Queen's Alma Mater Society in this academic year of 1944-45 have a privilege which was denied to me in my academic years, ending in 1897, and to most of those who have passed through Canadian universities in the interval. It is that of emerging into a world in which the basic assumptions about which I have been talking are being more and more effectively questioned, and their more dangerous results are being more and more keenly realized. This does not in the least mean that we have to accept ready-made and complete the basic assumptions of a new set of economic principles originated in Germany and developed in Russia, assumptions which when pushed to the extreme are just as dangerous as those of the absolutist conception of property. It means only that the English-speaking peoples, with their genius for the practical, for compromise, and for freedom, will have to make the necessary adjustments to enable property, commerce, and competition to function for the best interests of the society as a whole. There will be some trouble in doing it. Men have always persecuted and often slain those who differed from them concerning the things of most interest to them at the moment. The Athenians punished those who differed from them about taboos. The authorities of the Middle Ages punished those who differed from them about God. We of today punish those who differ from us about property. In the long run the differences get themselves solved, and usually in the way advocated by the punished rather than the punishers.

A few years ago I used to be asked every few weeks whether I thought that the world could be saved by youth, or rather whether I did not think that it could not be saved by anything else. I am not asked that nearly so often now, and I have an idea that the question used in those years to be prompted largely by the Communists, who have such a brilliant technique of appealing to the latent but instinctive hostilities of human beings—the hostility of the wage-earner for the boss, of the young for the old, of the freedom-loving for the authorities, of the non-white races for the arrogant white, and so on. There was a very definite move in those days to make young people youth-conscious, to set them determinedly against the institutions established and maintained by the old. Now that the Communists have become so collaborative this business seems to have died down. But anyhow I used to reply that I knew that the world could be saved by youth and by nothing but youth, but only at the price of youth ceasing to be youth and becoming very, very old. It has always been saved in that way and always will be. Youth is a yeast which must constantly be at work in the more inert matter of the baker's dough. Without it the dough will not rise and the bread will be uneatable. Youth is the taper from which the great candles on the altar are lit. Youth is the sap that conveys life to the budding leaf and flower. But youth is not the loaf, and not the great candle, and not the roots and the stem and the leaf and the flower.

Robert Nathan has expressed this so much better than I can, in a poem entitled "To a Young Friend," that I cannot resist quoting him.

You asked me:
Cannot youth save the world?
Cannot the youth build here, on this earth, a shining house,
Out of our hearts, out of our good intentions?
And I made some stupid reply;
I think I said, No.

Now that you are gone, I think, as always, of the things I should have said to you:

How youth is a seed, falling across the earth,
Blowing over the land, forever blowing, forever falling;
How some of it finds good soil, and grows with beauty,
How some of it withers to death among the stones . . .
Here, in one spot, roses; and elsewhere, the desert.
(Someone else said that, long ago:—do you remember?—
Loam and sand, the seed falls, it cannot keep from falling.

But youth is a wave, rolling away in all directions,
Part of it to break against rocks, or die on the beaches,
Or in the great calms—
And yet how the wave itself must rush on, foaming, far out into the distance,
Into the darkness . . .
And the next wave,
And the next,
Forever rising, forever breaking . . .

Those are the things I should have told you.
I do not know why I did not remember them.

It is you who will make the new bread rise, who will light the candles, who will mix the sunlight and the soil for the flowers of this country of ours and of the whole world in the next twenty years, and with every candle that you light a little of your youth will pass from you, and long before the twenty years are over you will have ceased to think of yourselves as youth and to feel any hostility towards, or even any great difference from, such greybeards as your Rector and your professors and your Board of Governors and the Dominion cabinet, and so on.

It is you whose task it will be to rectify the distribution of rewards, both pecuniary and social, that has come about through the free and unimpeded workings of property and price and competition and persuasion, to so rectify it that low professions will no longer be far more profitable than high professions—that men and women will no longer be tempted to forsake righteous spirit in favor of material gains—that social justice will return and morality will recover.

You will not rectify it completely. You will not bring about a perfectly just system of distribution or a perfectly moral or perfectly happy world. It is most undesirable that you should. If you did you would leave nothing for those who will be young after you to strive after. I can imagine nothing more terrible than to be young in a world already perfect and containing nothing which needs to be improved. That is the condition in Heaven, but in Heaven I am sure there are neither young angels nor elderly angels, and the so-called young-eyed cherubim are really just the same age as the most dignified and authoritative seraphim. But on earth it is part of the inalienable right of youth that it should have evils to combat, wrongs to redress, dragons to be slain. I congratulate the Alma Mater Society of 1944-45 on the fact that it is unusually well supplied with all these things.

