

A HINT TO LECTURERS

NORMAN ANGELL

FOR over a century the lecture has been a very widespread and powerful agency of adult popular education in America. Mrs. Trollope in her travels a century ago notes the fact of the frequency of lectures; Dickens, dealing with a generation later, bears witness to the same thing, both in his notes and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; and many a foreign observer since has added similar testimony. In America, more than in any other country, has the use of this educational institution been developed. And it has survived the competition of cheap books, a wider dissemination of the newspaper and the magazine, to say nothing of the cinema, the phonograph, and the radio.

But there are more than a few signs now that its vitality is beginning to yield, not so much, it is to be feared, to the alternative agencies of exposition and education, but to counter interests which by no stretch of language could well be called educational; and to yield also, it must be confessed, to the fact that the lecture field is being invaded more and more by those who have no special quality or equipment for dealing with the subjects with which they deal, their lectures being often the recitation of a mere learned lesson. That type is even encouraged, because such a visitor is not likely to say anything which might disturb some existing idea, provoke some speculation or controversy, — “complete sterilization guaranteed” as it were.

But even if this handicap were less than it is, the decline of the lecture would be inevitable so long as it adhered to the form with which we are familiar, so long as it merely made by word of mouth a statement or description which, so far as matter is concerned, could as easily be made in writing. It is true that the author of the statement or description is there in the living flesh, capable of giving, by tone or emphasis, shades of meaning not to be transmitted on paper. But the rôle of the audience is as passive as that of the readers of a book; and, in a sense, even more passive.

Unless we can give the lecture a new form it is likely to decline very much indeed as an active instrument of education and

enlightenment, and to survive, if at all, merely as a sort of raree-show, exhibiting some new notability. And this would certainly be a loss to popular enlightenment in America. For it is not the book or the more pregnant printed word which would usually take its place, but the comics of the Sunday supplement; not the fine drama, but the cinema and the noisy end of the wireless program.

It is here suggested that the form of the lecture could be so adapted as to correct its present weaknesses and develop that element of vitality which has kept it going so long. This could be achieved if we came to look upon the lecture as something in the nature of a conversation with the audience, in which the latter can freely avail itself of the opportunity furnished by the actual presence of an author, playwright, or authority on any given subject to ask questions about his craft or art, or some aspect of the matter he has made his own.

Any one who has lectured much on an idea or an interpretation which is a little unfamiliar to the general public, and afterwards had questions from the audience, will have realized that very often those aspects which seem to him the simplest and least needing elucidation are precisely those which many of the public find difficult to understand. And if he has written books on the subject, the painful reflection occurs: "No wonder the books were misunderstood if *that* point needed explaining." How often do we not hear the remark: "What I do not understand is how the Free Trader, — or Christian Scientist, or psychoanalyst, or inflationist, or deflationist, or pacifist, or socialist, or dramatist, or novelist, or Arctic traveler, or Indian mystic, as the case may be, — explains that, defends the other, gets over such and such a difficulty." For the average busy man to get an answer to his question would mean his going through books he has not the time to go through, and then probably not getting the right answer.

Well, does not the use of the lecture come in precisely at this point? To be able to interrogate the author himself would be of the greatest possible help to the casual student of a subject, — and we all have to be casual students of some subjects, and subjects too on which, as voters, or parents, patients, employers, we have to give decisions, — and give to the lecture a real value.

It is true that of late years a large number of "Forums", where questions and discussions after lectures are part of the entertainment, have been established, and, on the whole, these Forums do very good work. But two points are to be noted. First the questions are quite secondary to the lecture, and secondly, the atmosphere of this type of gathering is not so favorable to clarifying and enlarging ideas as would be the atmosphere of such assemblies as clubs and chambers of commerce, for reasons to be explained in a moment.

As to the former of these points, often after the question period at a Forum it has struck me that if I had had these questions before the lecture, the whole scope of treatment would have been different. And the questions serve no purpose for the next lecture, for the audience is almost certain to be of totally different composition. The questions should come before the lecture instead of after. This is not as difficult as it sounds. The lecturer might state in ten or fifteen minutes the outline of his subject, thesis, plan, reform, suggestion, and then put it to the members of the audience to say what they thought, and where they supposed it would not work, what their objections to it were. A half dozen or a dozen questions would arise, and the lecture would be an answer to them. The lecturer would largely in this way be his own chairman by omitting to deal with those questions which were not germane to the subject.

This main method could be varied and modified indefinitely, according to circumstances. The atmosphere of a club dinner is more favorable to the method of pure conversation than is the atmosphere of the Forum. Usually at the Sunday afternoon Forum are one or two talkative cranks, — and it is more difficult for the chairman to keep the discussion in the straight and narrow path of relevancy on this occasion, than it is on the occasion of less public functions. The rule should be for chairman, lecturer, and questioners alike to remain seated and talk. Where the thing has been done in this informal way, I have known the function to go on until one in the morning, everybody making his contribution, each getting help and benefit from this full exchange of ideas. Without the presence and lead of the lecturer, — of some one a little more filled with the subject than the others discussing it, — the conversation would not have taken that

fruitful and instructive turn. The lecturer should be a point of crystallization.

Incidentally, of course, it is plain that such an institution, if widely disseminated, would develop in America one of the greatest of all social arts, — the neglected art of conversation. For it is implicit, of course, in the suggestion that the lecturer should drop the attitude of the schoolmaster, that he should never try to score off the questioner, but show himself receptive, and by so doing make his audience similarly receptive.

It will be said, of course, that there are two fundamental difficulties. First, it will be pointed out with some truth that many a man can deal efficiently with a subject when the phase he is treating is limited to what he has prepared beforehand, but whose qualities do not run to dealing with unexpected questions. Then that man's medium should not be the spoken, but the written word.

Another difficulty, it will be urged, is the audience. American audiences do not readily ask questions. But there again the art of the lecturer comes in. If his tone is conversational, with the decent implication that he is making suggestions on a subject and not laying down the law, if it does not plainly imply that he intends to browbeat any one who questions him, the members even of an American audience soon begin to take their part in the conversation.

And need it be added that the real education in such a process would come not so much from the actual "new facts" an audience might acquire, but from the habit of open-mindedness, other-mindedness, the realization that nearly all questions are open questions, that the price of wisdom and understanding is a certain temper of the mind which can only be acquired by cultivation, a cultivation to which the acquisition of an art of conversation is an immense aid? Let the American lecture become an incident in the acquisition of that art.

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CHARLES WILIMOVSKY



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