Editorial

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EDITORIAL

GAME OR COUNTERFEIT PRESENTMENT

IN THE article "Is Debating Primarily a Game?" published elsewhere in this issue, Professor Davis strangely confuses debating as an academic study, given in regular courses, like Latin, history, or algebra, and debating as an "outside activity," a student competition, like football, tennis, track, or chess. That a teacher of debating occupies his "academic position merely as an adjunct to a sport," or that colleges in establishing courses in debating "have simply been indulging the sporting instinct," is of course utterly ridiculous; and, I submit, there is nothing in the editorials and the review which Professor Davis mentions (or in anything else that I have ever written or said) which can legitimately be held responsible for driving anyone "to these absurd conclusions." Teaching debating as an academic study seems to me to be as honorable, useful, and pleasant a way of earning a living as that of teaching history, German, English, or anything else in the curriculum. That any teacher's position or living is even remotely dependent upon contest debating is wholly regrettable. I am afraid that this condition still exists in certain institutions, but it does not exist, I trust, at Bowdoin. And since my name has been connected with the "conception" attacked, I may be pardoned for remarking here that such a condition has not obtained in any institution with which I have ever been connected. When this condition of emancipation becomes the universal rule, we can probably talk about intercollegiate debating frankly without juggling for words that seem to sound respectable even though their meaning does not accurately fit the truth of the situation.

The parallel in physical education is all right as far as it goes. I should say that the teacher of public speaking who supervises and assists in contest debating is like a teacher of any other subject—physical education, literature, dramatics, economics, music—who

supervises or assists in outside activities. There never should be in debating anyone corresponding to the special athletic coach.

Now I trust that I shall not be accused of advocating one set of *standards* in the classroom and another in contest debating. If the contest debating is what it ought to be, the same kind of debating will be done that is learned in the classroom; and if the teacher knows his business, and happens to be an honest man, that debating will be thorough, honest, sensible—free from cheap tricks, immoral devices, falsehood, and bombast. Of course the purpose of all courses in argumentation and debate is training for life and living. These courses should not be conducted for the sole purpose of turning out contest debaters, any more than courses in English composition should be conducted for the sole purpose of turning out advertisement writers or novelists. The student should find in the courses something that will help him in all his thinking and his attempts to influence the thinking of others, and whether he will use what he gets in contest debates or not is a matter of little importance. Probably not 5 per cent of the students to whom I have had the privilege of teaching argumentation and debate have ever taken part in a contest debate. It should also be remembered that the purpose of the teacher of debating, even in regular academic courses, certainly should not be primarily to teach “the truth” about tariff or neutrality, or to advocate “the right” side of the propositions debated. These are more properly the functions of the teachers of economics or political science. The purpose of the debating course is to teach students how to find and express that which may truthfully be urged on *either* side of *any* question. Facility in the three R’s of debating—research, reasoning, and rhetoric—is the proper object of instruction and practice in debate. Classroom work in debating should certainly be a training for “real life.” It should deal with fundamentals of argument and debate—fundamentals that are the same in intercollegiate debating, political campaigns, court trials, legislative hearings, and faculty meetings (which are misunderstood, misused, and abused with too great frequency in all of these situations).

What then is the purpose of contest debating? It is to give an opportunity for important public practice of the things learned in

the classroom, to demonstrate skill and ability in debating, to show if possible greater skill than one's rivals can show, to capitalize the competitive element in order to get the best possible work, to play a fine game, to try to excel in something difficult and worth while, to win a just award. If doing this intelligently, earnestly, honestly, is not "training for the wise disposition of important matters," I do not know what is. Have we made the training afforded by such contests more worth while when we call them "counterfeit presentments" rather than "games"? This seems to me not to better the situation. Anyone who is afraid of words and does not look beyond them may be terribly shocked at this phrase. Certainly the connotations of "counterfeit" leave something to be desired. Changing labels will not help us very much.

Then is there anything fundamental in the "game conception" of contest debating that is undesirable? There is not, in my opinion, except as it is gratuitously read into that conception. What are the charges? "According to the first of these conceptions debating is a game; the contests in debating exist in and for themselves and are conducted accordingly." Note the jump in logic represented by that innocent semicolon. Why should a game "exist in and for itself" and not exist as valuable training for something very much worth while? The whole passage from which Professor Davis quotes in part, in setting forth the object of debating according to this conception, reads as follows: "The object of the whole activity is of course the benefits that accrue from the activity to the participants and others of the student body. But the object of any particular team in a particular contest is to demonstrate its superiority over its opponents in debating. Does anyone think for a minute that the object of the Harvard debating team in going to Princeton to debate is not to show, if possible, its superiority in this activity, but is actually to convert the Princetonians to the economic truth expressed by the Harvard side of the question. Of course not. The object of the team is precisely that of a track team entering a meet, or a glee club going into a musical-club contest" (the *Quarterly* for July, 1915, p. 204). Does one have to believe that athletic and musical activities and competitions "exist in and for themselves"?

The worst charges, however, are brought as prophecies of the awful conditions that will result from the conception of debating as a game. "One thing is certain, that, frankly accepted as a game, debating becomes a monstrous affair. A game is indulged in for fun; practices clearly improper in dealing with serious affairs, actual conditions, become permissible and even important in the realm of sport—they are 'part of the game.' We none of us can deny that the tricks and deceptions incident to tennis, baseball, and football are part and parcel of those noble games. Where shall the strategy of the debater begin or end if debating is primarily a game?" Specious arguments, artfully misleading wordings, postponements, etc., it seems "can hardly be ruled out. No one can sensibly find fault—it is all in fun." This strikes me as a shockingly immoral theory of fun—a theory not tolerated anywhere among gentlemen engaged in the noble games above referred to. Such a system of moral discipline might have found its origin in the "Willie" rhymes, which, as you remember, set forth "Willie's" exploits in arson, mayhem, and murder, and close each incident with the absolving refrain:

"Willie's always up to tricks.
Ain't he cute? He's only six!"

It is hard to take seriously the fear that any conception of debating will tend to excuse "brilliancy and industry employed in advocating falsehood," or cause any debating team to disregard entirely the "search-for-truth" aspect of its work. Why are not decency, honesty, skill, fairness, good sportsmanship, the same in all activities? Why in the name of all the sports at once do we need a different set of ethics for each "activity"? It seems to me that the man who is a gentleman at quarter-back, first base, and when "playing net" will be a gentleman when in the presence of the honorable judges and the worthy opponents, and that students who have brains and morals enough to be above slugging, spiking, and misscalling serves, will be above parallel practices on the platform. It ought to be as easy for one to listen with "indulgence and equanimity" to references to "colleagues," "preceding speakers," and "our opponents," as to "forty-love," "bunts," "sacrifices," and "four-eleven-forty-four."

Does anyone believe that "real life," as exhibited by our legislatures, is so pure and perfect that we must *pretend* to be taking part in it in our student debates. I submit that there is a vastly greater proportion of specious argument, cheap tricks, devices, and mere cleverness (of a contemptible and unintelligent sort) in our legislatures than in our intercollegiate debates, particularly where they are conducted by those who look on contest debating as a hard, keen, intellectual sport. When we refuse to accept this conception of contest debating and attempt to set up a different one which we shall call a "counterfeit presentment" which is (the contest itself, mind you) "primarily an effort to get at the truth," "an artificial but a genuine means of arriving at the just determination of important matters," we are simply digging our heads into the sand. This activity is indeed "an improvable, not a finished, product"; but the starting-point of improvement must be an honest, frank recognition of what contest debating really is, without magnifying its weaknesses or its good points, and above all without any make-believe that in it important matters are *actually being determined* (the youngest Freshman present would *know* this could not be true) and without any pretense that the contestants are entering the competition for the purpose of *converting their hearers* to the truth as they see it.

Finally, a sense of humor will help us in all this stress and storm. I suspect that Professor Davis grinned a bit as he typed these broadsides, and I'll admit that editorial dignity relaxed somewhat as they were received and as these thunderbolts were being forged in answer.

But *nota bene*: Professor Davis and the editor are here engaging neither in a game nor in counterfeit presentment. To us it is given to chorus "This is the (real) life."

J. M. O'NEILL

THE "PUBLIC SPEAKING REVIEW"

WHEN the work of compiling the index to the *Public Speaking Review* was completed, it was discovered that twenty-five printed pages would be required to publish it. The orders for this index which resulted from our advertisement in the January

Quarterly were so few that publication at the price there quoted was impossible. The index has not yet been printed. If, however, thirty-five copies at one dollar each are ordered *now* of Business Manager Woodward, the printing will be done and orders filled at this price. Otherwise the money received will be returned. Copies of the various numbers may be had still at prices quoted in the January *Quarterly*. If you want this index, or if you want to help to make the 884 pages of our first professional periodical usable for students and teachers in the future, send word *now* that you will take one or more copies (your library will surely want one) at one dollar each.

A SENSIBLE SYSTEM

IN ITS February, 1916, issue the *Iowa Alumnus*, in speaking of a state high-school declamatory league, says: "A new system of judging has been adopted by the state league, by which one man does the judging, and afterward states to the audience his reason for voting as he did, at the same time giving constructive criticism on the contestants." Professor Mery of the State University of Iowa has been appointed to this important expert judgeship for the third time. Isolated cases of this excellent practice have been heard of before, especially in Illinois, but this is the first case we have learned of in which a league has adopted such a system. This is welcome news. The benefit that can accrue to the public-speaking work of the schools of the state from such a system is very great. Here is an opportunity for raising standards, for giving advice and help, for pointing out authoritatively the difference between ranting and intelligent speaking, between mechanical exhibition of powers of voice, gesture, and memory, and thoughtful interpretation of an author to an audience. This ought to increase, not only the value of the contests to the contestants, but also the interest of the public in these affairs. Many people in a general audience could profit by attendance at contests so conducted. More important still, this gives an opportunity for rewarding the good and penalizing the bad, regardless of the opinions of those whose opinions are worthless—and this with little expense and trouble. It is to be hoped that this system will grow rapidly in popularity.