

"LAST LESSON FOR REVIEW"

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music - Lionel Nowak

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Bennington College, 1958

Semichorus I

O knowledge, O wisdom, we have thee now.
And life comes next.
Four years ago we knew
The answers were written in the back of the textbook,
And look, here we are at the back of the textbook.
What comes next?

Semichorus II

Let us rejoice in the sheepskin while we may.
Tomorrow is another day,
But today we have in our hands this testimony
That we are as able as any to marry, make money,
And generally live it up:
The significant sheepskin remarks -- baa -- B.A.

Chorus

Learning was fine, lovely and splendid;
Though now it appears to have ended
Somewhat suddenly. After all that preparation for life
You might fetch up as somebody's wife --
Is that what they meant by life?

Solo Voice

But while you prepared for life
You were living; and much that your elders supposed
Was the process of education finally taking effect
Was only the passage of time, from one birthday to the next.
Even the remote academic grotto
Lives by the American motto: --
 Earn while you learn
 Pay as you go
 Save while you spend
 Begin where you end.

Chorus

But where is the wisdom, the final clue
About the Good the Beautiful the True,
 The famous conclusion
 To be drawn from our confusion?

Solo Voice

Now that you spinsters are bachelors, I am to remind you of two or three practical maxims which may be of use to you in the conduct of life.

First. A parameter is an arbitrary constant characterizing by each of its particular values some particular member of a system of expressions, curves, surfaces, functions, and so forth.

Semichorus I

I didn't major in that.

Semichorus II

I'm afraid I don't have the background.

Chorus

After four years, have we neither background nor foreground?

Solo Voice

Second. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all.

Chorus

Now that is literature, it is
A perfectly plain ambiguity
That means exactly what it says,
As well as the opposite.

Solo Voice

Third, and last, I invite you to compare the following two expressions.
a. If two systems are in relative motion with a uniform linear velocity, it is impossible for observers in either system by observation and measurement of phenomena in the other to learn anything more about the motion than the fact that there is this relative motion.
b. Nothing burns in hell but the self.

interlude of music

Chorus

Sir, we understand that we do not understand,
And that something is there to be understood,
Obscure and clear at once, and that between
These contradictions and conciliations runs
The road of the always unperfect understanding,
The holding and letting-go, both the epiphany
That shines by night, and the darkness that blackens noon.

We thank you for your sayings, and read them thus:

Semichorus I

First. The wonder of intelligence is the awareness of limits.

Semichorus II

Second. Life is in time, and some decisions cannot wait upon knowledge.

Chorus

Third, and last, the wisdom of charity is the breaking of limits.

Solo Voice.

I am pleased with your answers, and because you have answered as you have,
I know you will not take my being pleased as a matter of any great moment.
Speaking now for your teachers, I say goodbye and wish you well,
Thinking and hoping that in the world's vast confusion you will be well.

And now it is almost time for lunch.

the end