TIMOTHY DWIGHT

Timothy Dwight (1752-1817)

David F. Musto, MD

April 29, 2003

WE ARE GATHERED to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Timothy Dwight, one of Yale's most influential graduates and perhaps its most charismatic president. A conscious model of rectitude and orthodoxy, he left deep impressions on the students of Yale as well as on the faithful of New England. Dwight was active in many social reforms. For example, he was a charter member of "The Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, and the relief of Persons unlawfully holden in Bondage". He took this anti-slavery stand in 1792, three years before he was chosen president of the College. While president of Yale Dwight strongly supported a controversial school in New Haven that taught African-American women to read and repeatedly stressed that simply freeing slaves was not enough to make up for the harm slavery had done to them.

Students of Dwight were deeply affected by his vision for Yale. The powerful social reformer Lyman Beecher had been inspired by him to enter the ministry and carried forth with something of Dwight's style and imposing figure. Dwight persuaded Benjamin Silliman, a recent graduate who was about to go to Georgia, to become the Professor of Chemistry. Dwight's choice became a scientific star of the 19th century. Incidentally, one of the arguments Dwight used to keep Silliman in Connecticut was that in Georgia slavery was legal.

Dwight was born in Northampton, Massachusetts on 14 May 1752, the first child of Mary, Jonathan Edward's daughter. Her husband, Major Timothy Dwight, was prominent in local politics. He carried a reputation for strict morality and great physical strength. His father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards, one of the leading theological minds America has produced, held the pulpit in Northampton until 1750 when he was dismissed over a theological dispute. A few years later Princeton, learning of Edwards's frustrations, elected him president of that college.

Timothy Dwight appears to have been an atypical child, more interested in nature and the bible than playing games. His mother instilled in him a deep fear of offending God. The depth of his fear revealed itself when he, along with other boys, took pears from a neighbor's trees. Timothy took them home as a gift to his mother who explained that he had broken the 8th commandment and should return them. In agitation, he did so. When the neighbor said he could keep the pears he refused them, nor would he eat any pears the lady then sent to the Dwights for fear they were the same stolen fruit. This reminds one of St. Augustine who regretted that as a child he had stolen apples. But he did not regret it until later in life - certainly a point in Timothy's favor. The pear event would seem to portray a very faithful child, but Calvinist religious tenets held that children

were depraved, even little Timothy. Everyone in Dwight's family held this view. Much later in life Timothy Dwight himself wrote about children:

They are rebellious, disobedient, unkind, wrathful and revengeful. All of them are proud, ambitious, vain and universally selfish. All of them, particularly, are destitute of piety to God ....I have been employed in the education of children and youth more than thirty years, and have watched their conduct with not small attention and anxiety. Yet among the thousands of children, committed to my care, I cannot say with truth, that I have seen one, whose native character I had any reason to believe to be virtuous; or whom I could conscientiously pronounce to be free from the evil attributes, mentioned above.

Under his mother's tutelage little Timothy thrived in spite of depravity. She fed him knowledge which he eagerly ate up. By the age of four he could read quite easily. Her influence and example can be gauged by Dwight's statement at age 55: "All that I am and all that I shall be, I owe to my mother." Around six Timothy entered a local grammar school where he was determined to study Latin and succeeded although his father initially forbade it as premature. Timothy was estimated to have been ready - academically - for Yale at the age of eight. Yet he had to wait until he was thirteen, the same age at which his illustrious grandfather matriculated. In addition to the entrance examination, students applying to Yale had to present "suitable testimony of a blameless Life and Conversation". Considering all the stories of campus rebellions and mischief, one wonders how so many blameless young men could cause so much trouble once they were admitted.

While at Yale Dwight enforced on his body very tough regimens, regimens deduced from some higher principle. For example, as a post-graduate teacher he was bothered by a sense of mental dullness after dinner. Assuming the dullness arose from eating food, he decided to eat only 12 mouthfuls at dinner. Rather scientifically, he tried this experiment for a full six months, but without satisfaction. He then decided to cut out meat and subsisted mostly on potatoes for six months. As the result of such strenuous efforts to control his body he fell weak and ill. A local physician prescribed Elixir of Vitriol, a concoction of sulfuric acid — which the imbiber had to take through a straw to avoid touching it with his teeth because the vitriol dissolved teeth. For some reason this did not cure him and he developed severe abdominal pains and lassitude. Now his life was believed to be in great danger. His father, summoned from Northampton, took him home. The local physician there had a different approach from that of the New Haven therapist. No more oil of vitriol. The Northampton doctor recommended the free use of Madeira wine. For three months he drank a bottle a day, then tapered to a pint a day for three more months. He was also prescribed walking. So he walked — perhaps a little unsteadily — six miles every day and rode his horse for eight miles. Gradually he regained his health.

Dwight prospered at Yale and was named a Tutor - a combination of post-graduate study and teaching - two years after his graduation in 1769. He excelled as a teacher. He and fellow Tutor John Trumbull not only expanded the curriculum to include English literature, the pair also became part of a coterie of poets collectively called the "Connecticut Wits." Dwight's first lengthy poem The Conquest of Canaan glorified the rise of America. Trumbull wrote a humorous poem, The Progress of Dulness. Both authors in these and subsequent poetry aimed to erase the European accusation that America had produced no literary talent.

The battle with European sophistication stands out as a major theme in Dwight's presidency. In his poetry, other writings and even his lengthy travel diary of New England and New York, Dwight aimed to refute foreign denigration of the United States. At the same time he tried to root out the anti-religious influence that had already begun to take hold in his native land. He expressed anger and shame that Americans, especially those who served in the military services, had been attracted by the wit, irreverence, cynicism and savoir faire of the French officers who so crucially aided the American cause during the War for Independence. He castigated the aristocratic officers as distributors of dangerous and unholy attitudes. Equally, however, he condemned the aristocratic British officers who had defended the colonies in the French and Indian War a generation earlier. Without those baleful intrusions, Dwight claimed, New England would have remained a land with a pure theology.

Dwight prepared his battle for American minds by way of Greenfield, Connecticut where, in 1783, he established an academy for both boys and girls to supplement his income as the local minister. He believed that girls should be afforded the same intellectual advantages as boys in his school. In addition he strongly advocated that girls exercise -- both advanced ideas for his day. By 1795, when president Ezra Stiles died, Dwight had achieved such status in New England through his writings, preaching and personality that he was the obvious choice to succeed Stiles. In 1795, Dwight became president of a college that had a number of routine problems and, what was far worse from his point of view, a student body that rejected authority, took pride in expressing advanced European thought and declared their contempt for Christianity. Dwight was confident he could turn the tide.

How did Dwight impress others? One contemporary wrote:

His presence was singularly commanding, enforced by a manner somewhat authoritative and emphatic. This might have been offensive, had not his character and position prepared all around to tolerate, perhaps to admire it. His voice was one of the finest I ever heard from the pulpit—clear, hearty, sympathetic—and entering into the soul like the middle notes of an organ. His knowledge was extensive and various and his language eloquent, rich, and flowing...When he spoke, others were silent. In society the imposing grandeur of his personal appearance in the pulpit was softened by a general blandness of expression and a sedulous courtesy of manner, which were always conciliatory and sometimes really captivating. His smile was irresistible.

The 1790s at Yale had some similarities to Yale of the 1960s, with authority challenged, institutional religion ignored, and hierarchies rejected. President Dwight, on the other hand, spoke as an unquestioned authority and defended to his death the establishment of Congregationalism as the official religion of Connecticut. As for hierarchies, the rule at Yale in his day was that a student must remove his hat when less than 80 feet from a tutor, 130 feet from a professor and 165 feet from President Dwight. It would be an interesting encounter between Dwight and the students.

Dwight's style was to confront students directly. He spoke through his sermons at chapel where attendance was compulsory, by teaching classes, particularly the senior class, and by personal meetings with individual students. Relying on his powerful personality and capacious knowledge of science, philosophy and theology, he ridiculed the ideas of the philosophes, of Hume and other non-believers. His published sermons included footnotes for quotations from a wide array of writers. Close study of these quotations and his representation of their points of view is less impressive. Some defenders have said that faulty eyesight hampered a thorough acquaintance with his opponents books.

Dwight also attacked foreign ideologues with what he may have thought were their own weapons, irony and poetry. In 1788 he directed a second epic poem, The Triumph of Infidelity at Voltaire and other enemies of American faith and outlook. His concerns reflect themes in American culture that continue today, rejection of ideas thought Un-American and wariness of influence from foreigners with their peculiar notions.

An example of Dwight's effort to save Yale from alien thought can be found in the departure of the Mathematics professor Josiah Meigs in 1801. Meigs admired the French Revolution and thereby disturbed the harmony within President Dwight's faculty. Shortly after Meigs left, Dwight approached young Benjamin Silliman regarding the chair of chemistry. Dwight knew what to expect from Silliman on the crucial issue, his orthodoxy. Silliman had graduated three years earlier under Dwight's tutelage. He was properly religious, the only flaw being that he was not a science student, he was a law student. Dwight explained to him that no available American had sufficient knowledge to be appointed professor, and "a foreigner, with his peculiar habits and prejudices, would not feel and act in unison with us ...however able he might be in point of science..." Silliman accepted, but prudently took time to be admitted to the Connecticut bar.

Consider Dwight's action here. The correct religious attitude—the context of events—took precedence over simple factual knowledge. This is an illustration of the meaning—well into the 19th century—of Yale's motto, Lux et Veritas, not just Veritas which was Harvard's motto. To be properly understood, to grasp the meaning of truth, Yale believed, mere facts had to be enlightened by the sunbeams of religious orthodoxy.

Stepping away from the controversies, imagine what it was like to be a student at Yale in the last years of the 18th century. You might think the few college buildings were removed from the hustle of the city and constituted, if not an ivory, at least a brick tower. However, the college square—now known as Old Campus, was only partly in Yale's hands. An observer lamented that in addition to the Old brick Row, there was:

" a grotesque group, generally of the most undesirable establishments, among which was a barn, a barber's shop, several coarse taverns or boarding houses, a poor-house and house of correction, and the public jail with its prison yard; the jail being used alike for criminals, for maniacs and debtors. Being very near the college, the moans of innocent prisoners, the curses of felons, and the shrill screams and wild laughter of the insane were sometimes mingled with the sacred songs of praise and with the voice of prayer, rising from the academic edifices."

It would be many years before Yale finally owned all of the college square facing the Green.

What was it like to be a student? The bell rang at 5:30 am in winter. To get water to wash required a walk out of the dormitory, whether snowing or below freezing. At six required religious services began in an unheated chapel followed by recitation of material prepared the night before. Breakfast at 8 am consisted of toast, coffee and occasionally a dish of oysters. At nine the students returned to their rooms and prepared for the 11 o'clock recitation. Seniors might have a lecture at noon, but the remainder could have lunch and had free time until four. Then followed another hour of recitation. Tutors checked students rooms during study periods. Evening prayers were conducted

by President Dwight at 6 pm and then supper. By now it was near 8 pm, one hour before curfew, and time to prepare for recitation at seven the next morning. One freshman reported home:

Our lessons are sufficient to employ the greatest part of the class from 6 o'clock in the morning till 9 at night; excepting the time taken up by prayers, meals, and recitations, and perhaps two hours during the day for recreation.

Obviously, the faculty minimized free time.

To operate the buttery, a place for buying odds and ends, food and books the president usually chose a recent graduate. Lyman Beecher once held the post of butler. The reward for the butler was 25% of the sales of merchandise. Beecher was spectacularly successful. At the end of his term, which included selling a hogshead of porter imported from New York, he had enough money to pay back the $300 he used to purchase the Buttery stock from the previous butler, paid off $100 of his private debt, bought a new suit of clothes, paid Commencement expenses and had $100 left over.

While handling the everyday problems of running a college, Dwight planned for a university, a proposal Ezra Stiles had set forth as early as 1777. Stiles and Dwight anticipated three graduate programs, a divinity school, a law school and a medical school. Dwight appointed a professor of law and a professor of divinity, but made no further progress in these areas. He did, however, create the medical school, although not without some delay occasioned by doubts about the key appointment. Once again, the doubts had nothing to do with Nathan Smith's competence as a physician and surgeon, they centered on his religious beliefs - or rather the lack of them. Having had a confrontation at his previous school, Dartmouth, over body-snatching, Smith was in a delicate position. Fortunately a conversion experience solved everything. He assured president Dwight that:

"My earnest prayer now is to live to undo all the evil I have done by expressing my doubts as to the truth of Divine Revelation, and to render to Society all the good my talents and powers will permit me to do."

And thus Smith was appointed Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine, Surgery, and Obstetrics, a rather extensive range of medical expertise. A colleague commented that Smith did not have a chair at Yale, he had a sofa. The Medical Institution of Yale College, as the school was first named, stood on Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall's present site. It opened in the fall of 1813.

The school's early years went well, excepting one calamity. In 1824 one or more medical students dug up a recently buried body in the West Haven Burial Ground and hid it in the medical school basement in anticipation of dissecting it. The family quickly noted the grave's disruption and immediately suspected the Medical School. Once the constable found the body in the medical school, the townspeople were horrified. An angry crowd gathered and over two nights broke almost all the windows in the School. The medical students were barricaded inside. If it were true, as many residents believed, that a tunnel ran from the medical school over to Grove Street Cemetery, they could have slipped away. Gradually tempers cooled and one person was convicted. The Connecticut Legislature shortly thereafter enacted a law criminalizing grave robbing, but at the same time allowed medical schools to claim the bodies of those who died in jail or had been hanged, thereby reducing the problem of locating cadavers. Similar difficulties occurred at many other medical schools in this period and were eventually solved by legislation resembling that of Connecticut's. Perhaps the "anatomy riot" episode made Dwight's successor re-think the need for a medical school, a thought that recurred in the minds of several Yale presidents.

After his death, two works, each published in four hefty volumes, conveyed Dwight's influence. One was a complete system of theology in the form of 173 sermons. Published shortly after his death in 1817, it was popular in the first half of the 19th century. It illustrates Dwight's comprehensive and logical mind and contains a number of interesting sidelights on Dwight's views on the universe. For example, he believed "that Intelligent beings in great multitudes inhabit [the moon's] lucid regions." And even more curiously he added that they were "beings probably far better and happier than ourselves." Dwight anticipated present-day discoveries of planets around distant stars. He believed that the stars were created "for the same purposes, which are accomplished by our own Sun," that is, to give light, motion, life and comfort to the planets revolving around them. These distant worlds are "like the earth, the residence of intelligent beings, of incalculable numbers, and endless diversities of character" ruled "by the hand of that Almighty being, who created them."

These elevated thoughts reflected Dwight's intense attraction to the sun. During his youth Timothy Dwight developed severe eye problems so that, it was said, as President of Yale he often could not read more than fifteen minutes a day. As a result he increased his reliance on memory and improved as an extempore speaker. But how did he injure his eyes? Here is a clue. An observer reported that Dwight's eyes were once so strong he could "look for some length of time at the sun at mid-day." Why would he do this? We have already seen that he did not hesitate to put strain on his body on the basis of some deeply held dietary belief. I would suggest that Dwight's staring at the sun

was related to his steadfastly-held religious doctrines. I believe he was in prayer when he stared at the sun. To get an insight into Dwight's extreme affection for the sun, one can turn to his treatise on Theology where he leaves this extraordinary description of our star:

Of all material objects, the Sun is beyond measure the most glorious and magnificent, and the noblest creature of its creator. This great world of light is, beyond every thing else, the most perfect symbol of the exaltation, unchangeableness, perpetuity, life-giving power, benevolent influence, omnipresence, omniscience, dominion, and greatness, of God.

I believe Dwight injured his eyes by staring at the sun, communing with the most perfect representation of God visible to earth's inhabitants. He was, in a way, a sun worshiper, although he did not believe the sun was God.

Dwight's other great work was Travels in New England and New York, also published posthumously. During vacations Dwight regularly went on trips by horseback, once to Niagara and back, twice to Lake Winnipesaukee, Boston and so on. He kept detailed diaries of the trips, commenting on the character of the spreading settlements, changes that appeared over time, statistical data and reflections on nature. These volumes were reprinted as recently as 1969 and are the most enduring of Dwight's literary efforts. In the introduction to the Travels, Prof. Barbara Miller Solomon of Harvard wrote:

"No one except Dwight himself has recognized that the Travels was the first native work to describe the process of American Settlement and to consider the effects of the process upon the developing society ...Scholars have not sufficiently acknowledged the originality of Dwight's insights"

In concluding this brief sketch of a remarkable life, Timothy Dwight will have the last word. In answer to the question, "Where, among all hamlets and cities you have visited, would you prefer to live?" Timothy Dwight replied:

The inhabitants [of New Haven], taken together, are not inferior to those of any town with which I am acquainted, in intelligence, refinement, morals, or religion...Take it for all in all, I have never seen the place where I would so willingly spend my life.