

The Duty of the American Scholar to the Literature of his Country.

AN

ADDRESS,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

GOETHEAN & DIAGNOTHIAN SOCIETIES,

OF

MARSHALL COLLEGE,

AT THEIR ANNUAL CELEBRATION,

SEPTEMBER 28, 1841.

BY JOHN FROST.

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Marshall College, September 28, 1811.

ESTEEMED SIR,

We have been instructed by the Societies we represent, to tender you their thanks for the highly pertinent and instructive address you delivered before them this afternoon, and also to solicit a copy for publication.

Yours respectfully,

F. B. SHUFORD,
GEORGE L. STALEY,
JOHN H. VANDYKE,

Committee of the Goethean Literary Society.

O. C. HARTLEY,
J. W. KILLINGER,
C. B. MACLAY,

Committee of the Diognothian Literary Society.

JOHN FROST, A. M.

Mercersburg, September 28, 1811.

GENTLEMEN,

The copy of the Address delivered before your Societies, this afternoon, although not written with a view to publication, is cheerfully placed at the disposal of the Committees.

Very respectfully,

Your servant,

JOHN FROST.

MESSRS. F. B. SHUFORD,
GEORGE L. STALEY,
JOHN H. VANDYKE,

Committee of the Goethean Society.

MESSRS. O. C. HARTLEY,
J. W. KILLINGER,
C. B. MACLAY,

Committee of the Diognothian Society.

ADDRESS.

It is a pleasant thing for scholars to meet together upon a literary festival. The great luminary of the heavens, as he passes, in his daily course, over this busy world, surveying alternate scenes of toil and mirth, of bloody strife and Arcadian serenity, sees no exhibition of more cordial good feeling than that where the friends of literature have gathered together to exchange greetings and good wishes, and to strengthen each others' hands in the noble cause of human improvement. No calculations of sordid gain, no contest for political power, no base intrigues for office or place are permitted to disturb the harmony of that scene; but the hand of the scholar from the north grasps the hand of the scholar from the south, and heart speaks to heart, acknowledging the blessed truth that the republic of letters is one and indivisible, and that all its true citizens are friends and brothers.

To be the chosen orator upon any such occasion is an honourable distinction, more especially when the lot has fallen upon one who feels that he has very slight, if any claims, to such a distinction, receiving it moreover, from societies whose very names indicate that they are consecrated to pure literature. While, therefore, my brethren of the Goethean and Diagnothian societies, I am

fully conscious of the honour which you have conferred upon me, I am also conscious that in attempting to contribute my contingent towards the celebration of the present happy festival, I can do no more than express my earnest wishes for the success of the cause in which we are all embarked, and give utterance to a few observations on the nature of our obligations to that great cause, and the means by which its success may be promoted.

I have chosen, therefore, as the subject of this address, THE DUTY OF THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR TO THE LITERATURE OF HIS COUNTRY.

To one who regards the subject with a careless eye, who merely casts a cursory glance over the surface of things, it might appear that LITERATURE, properly so called, exerts but very small influence in the affairs of mankind. "Your bookish man," says the unthinking repeater of common place remarks, "Your bookish man lives apart from the world, and dreams away a useless existence, merely throwing out a few idle verses or a speculative book, while the active minds of the country are directing its destinies by positive exertion. The literature which he furnishes is inoperative, dead, useless. It may amuse a vacant hour, but it cannot influence the character and destiny of a nation." Such have been the remarks made by what are called your practical men, respecting every great author that ever lived. But nevertheless, literature has its uses; and if in examining the testimony of past ages on this point,

we, in some instances, find that it is inoperative in any given age or nation, we shall also be able to discover that, in that instance, it was not truly national, that it did not sympathize with the popular feeling and spirit, did not enter into the bosoms and business of men, was not the true type of the national mind; while, in general, whatever is truly great and noble in national character, is found to have a direct relation with and dependence upon the national literature.

The low estimate which most people attach to the positive influence of literature arises from an inadequate knowledge of its true nature and importance. It covers a much larger extent of ground than is usually assigned to it, and acts upon many occasions where its presence is not perceived. "Literature," if I may be permitted to adopt the definition of a German critic, "literature comprehends all those arts and sciences, and all those mental exertions which have human life and man himself for their object; but which, manifesting themselves in no external effect, energize only in thought and speech, and without requiring any corporeal matter on which to operate, display intellect as embodied in written language. Under this are included first, the art of poetry, and the kindred art of narration or history; next, all those higher exertions of pure reason and intellect which have human life and man himself for their object, and which have influence upon both; and last of all, eloquence and wit, whenever these do not escape in the fleeting vehicle of oral communication, but remain dis-

played in the more substantial and lasting form of written productions.”*

If this be a correct definition of literature, as it undoubtedly is, how immense is its influence on the minds and actions of men! Take for example the department of poetry. Without going back to the days of Pindar and Tyrtæus, let us look at a single incident which occurred in the latter years of the last century. Driven to desperation by ages of continued despotism, a nation had risen up in its strength and hurled its oppressors into the dust. All Europe was in arms to punish the presumptuous act, the nation itself was embodied *en masse*, and marched to the border to preserve the integrity of its soil, and to assert the rights of outraged humanity. But as the decisive moment approached in which the opposing masses should meet, and by the moral effect of the first conflict, give a tone and tendency to all which should follow, the enthusiasm of the friends of liberty began to abate—fear and distrust were in the ranks, and murmurs of discontent reached the ears of the commanding general. On the eve of the battle he applies to one of those useless characters, an author, a mere bookish man, to write him a song which shall cheer up the soldiers in the coming battle.

That author knew the true office of poetry. He embodied the spirit and soul of that nation in a few thrilling verses, and on the ensuing day, there was heard re-

* Schlegel, Hist. Lit.

sounding for the first time along the French lines, the inspiring notes, and the more inspiring words of the Marseilles Hymn. The enthusiasm which it kindled was unparalleled in the history of war. The men fought like lions, and the victory of that day was but the first of a thousand, won under the same banners to the sound of the same music.

This is but one, among innumerable instances of the powerful influence of poetry, in determining the character and destiny of nations. The historian of wars pays no attention to the fact; but to the historian of literature it is perfectly well known that the heroic songs of every nation have an intimate connection with its heroic deeds; so intimate, that a shrewed observer of men and things did not hesitate to declare, that if he could have the privilege of writing the ballads of a nation, he cared not who should frame its laws—so intimate, that Edward the First, deemed it necessary to exterminate the Welsh bards before he could hope to conquer the Welsh nation*—so intimate, that Richelieu deemed it necessary to establish a censorship of French poetry, before he could count with certainty on enslaving the French mind—so intimate, that the history of the whole seven hundred years of Spanish resistance to Moorish valour, on its own soil, may be read in the romantic poetry of that heroic people—so intimate, in short, that the patriotism and public spirit of every nation may be found embodied in its poetry.

* This tradition is discredited by Keightley and others.

The effect of poetry on the minds of men is by no means to be limited to that which it produces by stimulating them to deeds of valour. The agreeable form in which it communicates every kind of sentiment to the mind, is the occasion of leaving a strong and lively impression on the memory. Lines or couplets conveying particular truths or fallacies, thus pass into popular maxims, which thousands repeat with reverence, who are scarcely aware of their precise origin. Other detached fragments of poetry are treasured up in the memory, on account of the beautiful images which they present to the imagination, or the sweet melody of the verse; and they thus become instrumental in refining and polishing the popular taste, and diffusing a nice perception of the beautiful and the true. In order to understand how extensive is the influence which poetry exerts in this manner, one has only to consider what would be the effect of instantly blotting out from the popular mind every quotation, which is now in daily use, from the writings of Shakspeare, Pope, Dryden, Young, Cowper, Byron and Moore, as well as the popular songs of Burns, Dibdin, Cunningham, Haynes Bayley, and a few hundred more poets whom it would be rather tedious to enumerate; but whose verses are nevertheless, familiar in our mouths as household words. What a chasm would thus be created, not only in the substance and spirit of enlightened conversation, but in the productions of popular eloquence at the bar, in the pulpit and the halls of legislation, and what is still more

essential, in the cherished recollections of thousands upon thousands, who never speak in public, or write for the press; but who, nevertheless, enjoy the beauties of poetry as they do the vital air, or the tones of household affection, without being conscious of their indebtedness to the giver of such every day blessings.

An English writer, speaking of the poet Gray, remarks, that his writings were so popular in his own country, that if the printed and written copies of the whole should be lost, it would be an easy matter to replace them perfectly from the recollections of the people. I question not the truth of the observation, and I believe it might be extended to certain other poets, who, like Gray, have paid more attention to the quality than the quantity of their effusions, and who, to use his own most happy expression, have ever been careful to scatter among their countrymen, "thoughts that breathe and words that burn." The influence of remembered poetry alone, would form a prolific subject for volumes of disquisition.

Let us take another department of literature—history; and consider its influence on the national mind and spirit. It is the office of history to record the deeds of past generations of men for the instruction and encouragement of the present and the future generations. The record is preserved and read; and its most essential parts dwell in the popular mind, and thus form the basis of all that is ennobling and inspiring in the national character. It forms the theme of the poet

when he would touch the sympathies of patriotism,—of the orator when he would counsel his countrymen to toils and sacrifices for his country's weal,—of the statesman when he urges the enactment of wise and wholesome laws,—of the general when he harangues his soldiers, and stirs them up to deeds of valour.

Where would be the spirit of a nation without an honourable sense of national pride; and upon what is this sentiment based but upon the recorded actions of its illustrious founders and defenders? Where are we to look for the most thrilling and powerful appeals in the speeches of Demosthenes, but in those passages where he refers to the historical recollections of his countrymen—to the fields of Marathon and Plataea? Why was it that the Romans, ever attentive to the preservation of an indomitable national spirit, were so fond of referring their origin as a nation to the gods, and especially to Mars, the God of war? It was because they knew that historical recollections form the broad basis of national character. It was because they knew, at every period of their brilliant career of universal conquest, that what Rome *should be*, depended on the people's recollection of what Rome *had been*.

Why is it that an Englishman so devoutly believes himself to be a match for ten Frenchmen, but because he can refer to the fields of Agincourt, of Cressy and of Poitiers, and to the bloodstained laurels of Trafalgar and the Nile? Why is it that a Frenchman, ever courteous in his personal intercourse with others, blazes

into fiery indignation at the slightest imputation upon the national honour, but because he feels that he shares that honour with Henry the Fourth, with Coligny, with Napoleon? Last, not least, why is it that the humblest citizen of our own beloved country, in ever so remote a quarter of the world, in the presence of the haughtiest nobility of more ancient nations, feels a glow of honourable pride when he lays his hand upon his bosom and says, I am the countryman of Washington? It is because the history of a glorious and heroic age is the most precious inheritance of a free nation.

Such are the influences of history. It were an easy task to trace out similar influences exerted in every department of literature, less extensive perhaps, and less conspicuous, but not less certain and powerful. Take, for example, prose fiction. The legitimate purpose of fiction is to convey important truths to the mind by the aid of imagination. The agreeable form of narrative which it assumes, renders it the most fascinating of intellectual recreations. It has charms for every class of readers, and consequently, it finds its way into all the retreats of leisure. The man of business and the student, the grave and the gay, the youth and the veteran, all seek the agreeable relaxation of a novel or a story. The wide diffusion of this class of writings throughout the civilized world, renders them an important means of disseminating truth, and too often of spreading the most pernicious sophistry. In the shape of novels and tales one may now find, not only the man-

ners and characters of past ages described, the personages of history exhibited in their most careless moments, the adventures of virtuous and vicious heroes of romance narrated to the life, and the scenery of every quarter of the world delineated in all its beauty and splendour, but may also discover, interwoven with the texture of the narrative, all sorts of doctrines, false as well as true, in philosophy, ethics, religion, and political economy. In a novel, one is introduced into all kinds of society, good and bad, and converses familiarly with the most dissolute and detestable, as well as the most virtuous and honourable characters. At one time the reader is invited to witness the struggles of honest merit in the weary path to eminence; and, at another, to follow consummate villany through the windings of intrigue, and the haunts of dissipation. The writer of fiction takes the willing reader by the hand and conducts him whithersoever he may choose, whispering in his ear the sublimest truths, or the most seductive and pernicious sophistries; and this too when the mind is disengaged, and seeking pleasant relaxation. From causes which I have now no time to discuss, this form of literature has become so popular that it occupies almost the whole field, and threatens to swallow up all others. Widely diffused as it is, and universally read, shall we be told that it does not exert a most potent influence on the characters and dispositions of men? Is it to be presumed that all the music of the spheres and of the infernal regions, which it calls up to the imagination, passes by

the ears of society like the idle wind which we regard not? Can the hymnings of lofty spirits, and the seductive songs of syrens be forever ringing in our ears, without producing their legitimate effects upon the fancy and the heart? Far from it. The influence of fiction is one of the strongest to which society is subjected in the present age. It might easily be pointed out in every walk of life. It penetrates every part of society, and every where leaves its traces for good or for evil. If, in some instances, it warns and guides the inexperienced, and solaces the care worn and afflicted, in others it corrupts the unsuspecting mind, debilitates the active powers, and nearly obliterates the moral sense.

If we examine the effects of the different classes of fictitious writings in detail, we shall find the most convincing proofs of the powerful influence they exert.

The historical novel has been lauded on account of the taste which it inspires for the reading of authentic history, and the additional light which it sheds on the manners of remote ages and countries. Those of Scott, James, Cooper, Bird, Kennedy, and some others, have undoubtedly rendered important service in this way. But all writers of historical novels do not preserve the same purity of language and moral tone which characterizes the works of these distinguished authors; and all readers are not induced to attempt the serious study of history by the entertainment they receive from the historical romance.

The moral, economical and religious stories of Edgeworth, More, Sherwood, Sedgewick, and many others, have undoubtedly a most powerful tendency to impress religious and moral truths on the minds of the young, and thus to render important aid to the cause of virtuous education. But when we have thus excepted the historical and the moral novels, we leave behind the far greater portion of this class of books, liable, in a greater or less degree, to the charge of exerting a positively pernicious influence on the mind. What defence can be offered of that large class of tales which make thieves, robbers and libertines their heroes, and combine with the evil of their characters precisely those noble and generous traits, which in real life are never found to coexist in the same character with such vices? Of what possible benefit can it be to the ingenuous youth of this nation to be made intimately acquainted with all the forms of fashionable dissipation, and the follies of high life in London and Paris? this being precisely the burden of the song in a greater part of the novels reprinted from English originals in this country. Again, I would inquire if it can be esteemed a wholesome and suitable preparation for the sober business of life, for young persons to read, by way of recreation, those romantic tales which are made up somewhat in this fashion? The hero is represented as a person of very noble and exalted sentiments, but of no useful trade or profession, who falls desperately in love with a young lady of very noble

and exalted sentiments also, but no skill in household affairs. The whole happiness of said hero and heroine is made to depend on their being married forthwith, and settled down with an independent fortune. But the novelist, for purposes of his own, contrives, by means of parents, uncles and guardians, all cruel and hard-hearted wretches, to delay this consummation, so devoutly to be wished, from chapter to chapter, through some five hundred mortal pages, when, at last, it turns out to the reader's delight and astonishment, that the heroine has been made the heiress of a generous uncle just returned from India, and the hero is a peer of the realm?

Is not this a tolerably correct outline of some three-fourths of the English novels of the present day, reprinted and sold by thousands in our enlightened and republican country? Now, one may very reasonably inquire what ideas and purposes are likely to be inspired by such narrations as these? Will our youth, when perpetually told that coronets and independent fortunes are the rewards which heaven has ordained for superior virtue, be likely to keep always in mind, that the happiness which is really ordained as the natural consequence, rather than the reward of virtue, is that of a serene mind and a sure hope of immortality? Will the youth, who is constantly reading narratives in which the fortunes of the hero are made to depend on lucky accidents and unforeseen contingencies, learn from such reading that success in life generally depends on a sober

and cautious adaptation of means to ends? Do the novels which our young people generally read, teach the industry, sobriety and frugality which ought to characterize the rising generation of a rising republic? Indeed they do not. But they teach that the sudden acquisition of a great fortune is the one thing needful; and it may very well be questioned, whether, if the secret influences which operate on the human mind, could be perfectly traced out, it would not be found that a great part of that delusive thirst for the sudden acquisition of wealth, which has recently pervaded our country, has been occasioned by the false views of things imbibed from this most pernicious, but unfortunately, most popular class of books.

The truth is, that a reform is necessary, before we can hope to have a sound and wholesome national literature, capable of exerting a salutary effect on the national character; and it should commence in that branch which we are now considering. It is not possible, and if it were possible, it would by no means be desirable to dispense with fiction as means of instruction. Under proper regulations, it is capable of important uses; and there seems to be implanted in the human mind a natural desire for recreation of this description, which will always render it acceptable in one form or another. To make it useful and improving, it should be carefully adapted to the institutions, habits and sentiments of the nation, and should always be directed to the instruction of the people, in those views of life and principles of

conduct, which are conducive to their highest happiness. Our historical novels should be founded on the history of our own country. Those which are intended to have a direct influence on the conduct of life, should conform to the nature of our institutions, and to the actual condition and wants of society. In short, every American novel should be written with the noble purpose of giving additional strength, dignity and symmetry to the national character. I should add in this connection, that in order to furnish inducement to first rate talent to engage in this department of literature, the supreme legislature should enact an international law of copy right, which would operate as a direct and heavy tax on the republication of the senseless and pernicious trash which is poured in upon us from abroad.

Did the time permit, it would be an easy and agreeable task to point out the influences exerted in the other leading departments of literature, such as eloquence, philosophy, criticism, and the drama; but it is requisite that I should now turn to the more interesting task of inquiring what is the duty of those who are willing to exert themselves in giving a right direction to the literature of our own country. I need not say that this is, at least, a part of the service naturally expected to be performed by every literary society. Such an inquiry, therefore, will not, I trust, be considered inappropriate on the present occasion.

In order to give a direct and positive character to its exertions in this field of labour, I should counsel any

society, to which I might presume to offer advice, to commence with the formation of a library, selected with a particular reference to the object in view, viz: the advancement of a truly national literature. From this library I would exclude all useless and pernicious works of fiction, and all other books the positive utility of which might be fairly questioned. To supply the place of this large class of publications, I would, in the first place, endeavour to render the library as complete as possible in the department of American history and biography; American antiquities, statistics, poetry and the belles lettres generally. As intimately connected with our own history, I would endeavour to store the library richly with the histories of all those countries which have contributed by discovery, colonization and emigration to the settlement of the United States; and particularly, I would obtain to as great an extent as possible, the histories of their operations in colonization. The legislative proceedings, debates, speeches and diplomatic correspondence of our own government, and the local histories and statistics of our own, and other states, are also proper objects of attention in the formation of such a library. I need not add, that the standard literature of our language should occupy a conspicuous place in its alcoves. In such a library, a literary society holds a most important instrument for promoting a sound literature, by diffusing a taste for those works which relate particularly to our country, by opening to its members and the public, the rich sources of

entertainment and instruction, which its natural, civil and statistical history affords; by placing within the reach of young and ambitious writers, the materials for precisely such works as they ought to attempt, and by diverting the attention of those within the sphere of its influence, from books which are frivolous, or positively deleterious in their character.

Next to the formation of a good library, I would counsel the active members of the society, to use direct efforts for promoting the object in view, by infusing a proper national spirit into all the debates, discussions, and correspondence of the society. It might be advisable, in order to induce concentrated action, to select some single object of interest to be promoted. We have a fine instance of the success of such a procedure in the Society of Northern Antiquaries of Copenhagen, who, by untiring exertion, have fairly vindicated for the Northmen, their long disputed claim to the discovery of America. It is not long since the claim was universally derided; and if it is now treated with marked respect by every intelligent historian; we have to thank, for this gratifying result, the enlightened zeal of a literary society, pursuing steadily and calmly for a course of years, a truly national object.

As the general result of the inquiry, conducted in this lecture, I think it may be safely assumed, that the literature of every nation exerts a powerful influence on the national character, either for good or for evil; that its proper direction produces the most salutary and last-

ing effects; and that it is the duty not only of every literary society, but of every scholar in our country, to direct his efforts towards rendering our literature sound, salutary and truly national.

In conclusion, therefore, my brethren, let us exert our best talents and capacities in the promotion of this one noble design. Let us choose the particular field and object of our enterprise deliberately, and labour in the good cause earnestly and unceasingly; and when the literature of our country shall hereafter be disenthralled from pernicious foreign influences, and shall become truly American in its whole body and spirit, to us will remain the proud reflection, that we have fought in the good fight, have shared the toils and dangers of the conquering army, and are entitled to a full share of the laurels which shall adorn the the brows of literary patriotism.