

ADDRESS

TO THE

SENIOR CLASS

AND BEFORE THE

AUDIENCE ASSEMBLED

AT THE

ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

On the 28th of June, 1827.

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ADDRESS.

I might employ the few minutes usually allowed us at this closing period of our business on this day, and of our connection as instructors and scholars, in presenting general remarks and counsels, with reference to the more practical nature of the life on which you are about to enter. Nothing is more certain however, than that the wisdom deduced from past experience, where experience has to any amount been already gained, is more valuable on account of its evidence and its influence, than any other which we can hope to communicate or receive. Let me invite you then for a little, to take a retrospect of the past, to see the course we have pursued, the advantages attained, the losses incurred, and the methods of retrieving them. While we are thus occupied, not only ourselves but others, whose cheering and benevolent presence we would not forget, will have some opportunity of appreciating the value of such an education as it is the purpose of this and other similar institutions to impart.

As the great objects of education here are to treasure up knowledge in the mind, to expand and invigorate the faculties, to discipline it to a pertinent, skilful, and efficient use of them, and above all to attach it if possible, inseparably to virtue, the occupations of the young are modelled to the accomplishment of these purposes. Our time is distributed into hours of business, and hours of exercise and amusement. In a society whose members are collected as in this place, into one compact body, it were vain to hope for success in the prosecution of its objects, if all did not move in concert. The pastimes of some must not clash with the business of others. It were as hopeful to compose a machine, and maintain its motions, with unfitted wheels. As a community, we commence the business of the day with the rising of the sun. This is rendered easy by a provision for retiring early to rest, at once promoting health, virtue, and the proper strength both of the mind and body, by the habitual observance of seasonable hours. The first act to which we are called, is a recognition of God and his providence, "in whom we live and move, and have our being." It is the last also with which we conclude the business of the day. Worship is the dictate of the understanding and the heart. Happily, while we are cultivating the rational faculties to their utmost extent, they concur with the religion of our country, and of revelation, thus producing a coalition

of the greatest moral perfection, with our obligations as citizens, and with the only assurances which heaven has given to men of a happy immortality.

The first of obligations thus fulfilled, the daily and primary object of enlarging the mind is recommended by an immediate engagement in its exercises. This, as the great end of a collegiate life, is prosecuted through the day, but is seasonably intermitted by three distinct intervals for relaxation, food, and the varied pleasures of healthful and renovating exercise.

The plan of business, or the whole system of mental culture, and the mode of initiation in literature and the sciences here practised, are determined it is believed, to be the most eligible that can be framed, by the aid of all the accessible light and experience of past and present times, adapted to the instrumentality and present circumstances of this institution, to the state of our country, and to its other literary institutions. The ancient languages and classics of Greece and Rome, which the world has to the present day, continued to sanction as constituting the best basis of refined taste and correct knowledge in our own language, and in all the modern languages of Europe, are assiduously cultivated by the instructors provided for them. By this, opportunity is afforded to the student, to store in his mind the elements of the whole nomenclature of modern science, in all its precision, expressiveness, and beauty. It is impressively remarked by the celebrated Lavoisier, "While I proposed to myself nothing more than to improve the language of Chemistry, my work transformed itself by degrees, without my being able to prevent it, into a treatise upon the Elements of Chemistry." It is one of the maxims on Condillac, as quoted by the same writer, that "Algebra, which is adapted to its purpose in every species of expression, in the most simple, exact, and the best manner possible, is at the same time a language, and an analytical method. The art of reasoning is nothing more than a language well arranged." These observations respecting the nomenclature of Chemistry and Algebra, are no less pertinent to all the other sciences and to the liberal professions, in their present perfection and magnificence. How their correctness is to be appreciated, could time be taken, it would be supernumerary to explain, to such as have advanced into the sciences, furnished with the brilliant torch of the ancient languages to illuminate their path. To others, I fear any attempt would be vain to convey a competent idea of their efficiency and necessity. It is an argument which must be estimated by experience, that its force may be felt and its import understood.

In these models of language, the laws of universal grammar, and the methods of construction are distinctly marked, and prominently exhibited. As by a skillful architect, the various pieces of an edifice are mutually fitted and characterized, that when they are to be combined, their places may be respectively known, so in these ancient languages, perfected by the most improved nations of antiquity, we see the various parts of speech distinguished with a happy ingenuity; and diversified by terminations aptly shaped, as though mortised and dove-tailed to one another. In the cultivation of these languages, the faculties are all habitually invigorated by a due degree of action. To the memory and judgment are imparted both quickness and force, by the prompt and considerate application of the rules of construction. The beauties and arts of graceful, and forcible composition are by daily exercise insensibly formed; the knowledge of words, and the command of flowing or emphatick enunciation by the organs thus continually rendered apt and flexible by exercise, are habitually improved, and at length denote a peculiar result of advantages not enjoyed by the generality of men.

But in the attainment of these distinguished languages of antiquity, it is the great and eminent object of our instruction, to use them as the key for unlocking and setting in full view before the young the treasures of knowledge, taste and genius, in the enlargement they had attained in these most interesting nations. If the student here acquire not these riches of Greek and Roman literature, it is assuredly not that the lecture of the instructor, must be deemed accountable for a consequence much to be regretted.

By a recent measure of the Board of Trustees, advantages of a character both literary and practical, have been secured to the education of the college. I allude to the provision for a competent attainment of such modern languages as are of the highest interest and value. The French must be important, as furnishing the most diffusive communication with the whole of Christendom. It is the language also of one of the most scientific, polished, and enlightened nations of the world. The Spanish is of peculiar interest to us, on account of the vicinage, and even the intimate relation, in some instances actually subsisting between us and those who speak it; and because with little abatement, the whole of this new continent, now independent of the old, is divided between them and our own people. This acquisition to our literature is further to be prized, as a greater augmentation to the learning of the student than could have been compassed by any other mode of

appropriating the time and study necessary to their attainment. A knowledge of the ancient languages once acquired, becomes an instrument for gaining a prompt and easy access to most of the modern languages of Europe. Not to apply it to such a purpose, is to incur a forfeiture of privileges most cheaply secured. It is to disregard the laws of the wisest and most efficient economy in literature.

Having made these few remarks on language, as the proper foundation of a scientific superstructure, it is important to take notice of an erroneous opinion, received even as a maxim by many who are not conversant with the sciences, that they are systems merely theoretical, and thus contradistinguished from all that will hold good in practical life.—This is a prejudice fallacious in itself, and pernicious in its consequences. Of this yourselves are well aware, from the manner in which the sciences have been prosecuted, and advanced to their present perfection, since the laws of investigation established by Bacon, illustrated by the successes of Newton, and practised by their successors to the present day. Once it was true, that the knowledge of the schools consisted of little else than futile conceits and inflated speculations, conceived and matured in the brains of its professors. Happily at present, every science is strictly nothing more nor less, than a systematick arrangement of such practical truths, as are derived from experience only, and incontestably established by it. For this reason the philosophy now received, the elementary principles of which are taught in a collegiate education, is eminently and with essential propriety styled the experimental philosophy, to distinguish it from the hypothetical and visionary theories of former times. The difference at present between theory and practice is totally misunderstood, if it be supposed to imply a possible fallibility in scientifick rules. The laws of nature do not change, and every law has been determined, not by conjecture, but by innumerable trials actually repeated, carefully examined, with every opportunity for fixing the truth with precision, and by the most shrewd and powerful minds, through many successive generations. Any one may mistake in the application of these rules of action or calculation, for want of presence of mind, or of advertency to all that they prescribe, and this may especially happen, when he first commences them in practice. But it is a fatal error, and the occasion of incalculable loss, to reject or hold them in contempt, because they are thus unfaithfully or unfortunately exhibited by those who have had some opportunity of knowing them, but through defect of skill in their application, have omitted or violated some of the con-

ditions which themselves require as indispensable to success. How many thousands would have been saved from vain and abortive plans, had those who have taxed themselves, and been as often disappointed in quest of the perpetual motion, and other illusive schemes in the arts, consented in the first instance, to consult the well known laws of nature, as determined by long experience, and treasured in the sciences. If any man professing to act by their direction, fail in the attainment of his object, it may be for want of recollection, or of manual skill, which science pretends not to communicate, or because he is still ignorant of that which he professes to know; but to impute the disappointment to science itself, is to impute it to the laws of nature, which it is the very object of science to display.

These remarks are all applicable to the whole and to every part of those sciences which are traversed in a course of collegiate education. Not a conclusion is there, at which they arrive, nor a process for its attainment, but has been thus placed beyond the power of scepticism by the test of experience, in a thousand instances.

The basis then of a liberal education is correctly laid in a knowledge of language as the essential instrument of thought and reasoning, without which the researches and communications of science could be prosecuted within but very contracted limits.* This is done upon the best models which the world has furnished for such a purpose. To us these models are eminently valuable, and peculiarly fitted, because our own language, not only in its scientific parts, but in all its comprehension, is most largely indebted for its copiousness and transparency, to the same Greek and Roman springs. The completion of an education consists of Mathematics, first pure in their various branches; then mixed, in Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and Astronomy, succeeded or accompanied by Rhetoric, a rational Logic founded in the true Philosophy of the mind, Political Economy, and Ethics. With these are intermingled, through every part of the course the practice of composition, elocution, and the habit of explanation on every subject in the ordinary recitation to which the student is habitually called.

This, it may be said, is a fair fabrick, comely to the eye, and carrying to the mind a conviction of its solid advantages, could its promises be realized. But is it not true that a small number only of those who engage in it, actually show in result, the rich and exuberant fruits which it foretokens. To this it

* See Stewart on the Philosophy of the mind.

is replied, that those who would model a plan for the liberal education of youth, are not at liberty, even were they inclined to select its subjects with an unlimited discretion. If to gratify popular opinions and wishes, in the peculiar shape they might assume, we were to attempt an exclusion of the mathematical sciences, or even any large portion of them from a collegiate education, to some it might appear a consummation devoutly to be wished. But while we were rejecting such subjects as Algebra, Geometry, and therefore of necessity the mensuration of heights and distances, surveying, navigation, natural philosophy and astronomy, as abstract subjects, and little connected with practical life, can we easily conceive the estimation that would be fixed upon our pretensions to the name and rank we assume of institutions on which other men bestow the name of Colleges and Universities for imbuing the early mind with knowledge and an efficient discipline! Should we not soon find it necessary either wholly to relinquish our claims to a liberal education, or else to throw away the plumes and titles with which we had thus vainly and presumptuously decorated ourselves. To the same degrading issue must we arrive, were we, in compliance with others, to pronounce the ancient languages and classics, no longer indispensable to a course of literature and science. It is perhaps little known to some, while to others it may appear strange, that such an experiment actually made, is already upon the records of our University, and that it was continued with no small perseverance, to accommodate that portion of public opinion which decried the utility of these languages. And what was the result of this? No sooner did candidates begin to offer themselves for the highest honours of the institution, as having substituted the requisite portion of modern language for the ancient, than intelligent and enlightened members of the Board, making no pretensions to collegiate learning, and having no undue prepossessions in behalf of the prescriptive learning of the schools, after witnessing the collateral examinations of such as were versed in the ancient languages, and of others who had not enjoyed these opportunities, exclaimed under the severe disparagement of the comparison, against the continuance of a practice, of whose effects no previous exposition could have convinced them,

What has been now said of the indispensable necessity of all those parts of learning which constitute a system of collegiate study, is no less applicable, to the quantity of every part, and therefore of the whole. We know that it is a complaint sometimes heard; nay by some much stress has been laid upon it, that a larger compass of literary and scientific attainment is

required at the University than is reasonable or necessary; and that it acts oppressively upon those who would have their sons educated here, or upon the student himself, or it may be on both. But that the expense of an education to a youth while in College is increased, by enlarging the quantity of study, is evidently impossible, so long as the time of his continuance which is four years, is unchanged, except that a few more books may become necessary, which upon a more limited plan might not be required. Yet even this consequence needs by no means to follow, since if systems of the best character are selected, as they ought to be, the number of volumes must be the same, while the whole course is reduced by a diminution of the quantity only studied in each. Should it be urged that the whole period of an education is extended by calling for larger preparations in the academies, we ask only for an attentive comparison of the qualifications demanded of the candidate for admission into any class in this institution, and into a corresponding class in any respectable college of our country. If by any means it should be ascertained that at some one or two institutions, students are admitted to membership upon terms far less in reality than such as make an ostentatious appearance in their publications, could it be the dispassionate wish of any one, that education in our University, should be frittered away and reduced by such unfaithful practice and hollow pretensions, to the lowest standard elsewhere discoverable in the United States. North-Carolina makes no great pretensions to figure and exhibition among her sisters of the Union, but God forbid that for the sake of display, she should forfeit some solid realities of character, which yet remain to her, and to which she may safely institute a true claim in comparison with many, by whom they are denied, through lack of information, or it may be of an ingenuous sentiment which it is still less creditable not to possess. But must it not above all be conceded, nay should it not be steadfastly asserted and maintained, that wherever education is professedly communicated, it should be done not in pretension and appearance only, but as far as possible to every youth in its proper solidity and worth. When we purchase an article in the market, it is our first wish not that it be for a moment admirable, by mere outside tinsel and display, but that it truly possess the substantial properties long to endure in producing in perfection its proper effects. Is it in the attainment of a liberal education only that we shall renounce this principle, on all other subjects so universally appreciated and received. When we are told of a place of education, where a student is required to learn more than either himself or his parents wish him to be taught, and where his moral habits, and

his regularity of deportment in fulfilling the various rules of the institution, are so sustained that license is not sufficiently allowed to its members, it is time to consider whether every inducement of personal ease, and immediate popularity is not soliciting the instructors of youth to practise in their profession with a relaxation proceeding from one step to another, till it shall become indefinite, and subversive both of knowledge and virtue. It is time also to inquire, whether this reproach of which I speak, of asking excessive qualifications, if reproach it may be called, may not originate in causes, which when developed by time and more fully understood, shall become the glory of the community and the State, in whose institutions they have prevailed. Is it not worthy of us all, both the old and the young, parents and their sons, legislators, curators and citizens, to aspire to the reality of a seminary, not where it may be feared the doors are thrown open to the free ingress and continuance of loose habits and dissipation of time, but where as far as is rationally and discreetly practicable, the habits of virtue, sobriety, and diligence are sedulously cultivated as the immediate means of improvement, and the proper pledge of usefulness and distinction in future life. Were this to be made our object, and could a success in some degree proportional to its value be permanently secured, the energy and substance of character connected with this institution, which the wisdom and patriotism of our State are solicitous to foster and elevate to no ordinary perfection, would be an ample compensation for the loss of such from the catalogue of its numbers, as for greater opportunities of an indolent and dissolute life, might rupture the ties properly attracting and binding them to their own state, to seek after those privileges which seem so enviable in other institutions.

Of one thing we may be assured, that whatever experiments may be attempted in other parts of our country or of the world, of conducting the education of youth by a system of little less than universal release from all restrictions to industry and virtue, it is not in North-Carolina, that such an experiment can be sustained. And while most persons who are acquainted with the sentiments and habits of our population will concede this, it contains an evidence unequivocal of correct principles in the public mind, and of a deep and honorable solicitude for the best interests of the rising generation, and for the future prospects of our country.

The review which has been taken, sets before us the methods and opportunities of such a public education, as is now deemed the wisest and best for our country and its peculiar circumstances. It exhibits a system upon which our institu-

tions most illustrious for wisdom and success in forming the character to intelligence, vigour, and essential virtue, both individual and public, have been modelled. To imagine improvements upon it were easy, but to amend it in practice, has exhausted the genius, the zeal, and the resources of all such in the past and present generations of our enterprising country, as have exerted their faculties upon the subject. Let me not be understood to say, that either the methods or the quantity of attainable advantages of education, in the most experienced and best furnished colleges of our country, are at the utmost perfection for which we may hope. But if we would seriously and wisely engage in their practical advancements, we must, as we may well suppose, bring to the subject much sober reflection, enlightened by practical opportunity, to combine our conceptions and wishes with that which will agree with human nature, and with experience already ascertained. There is perhaps no science or art, which at the present period of the world, contains not upon its records, were they faithfully and thoroughly explored, expedients and methods, promising efficient advantages, which upon experiment already made, have not proved that it would be fruitless to try them anew. Without the requisite means of illumination, they would prove but enterprizes in the moral world, of as little promise, as those which have had for their object the perpetual motion, or the philosopher's stone, or the quadrature of the circle, all alike at variance with the possibilities of nature. Every system of education, perfect as it may be in itself, and in the fidelity and ability of its execution, must after all, depend for its efficacy upon the individual himself who would reap its benefits. On his part there must be a concurrence of disposition, taste, avidity, and effort, as essential parts of the whole cause, without which it were futile to hope for the effect.

—These advantages you, my young friends, have actually enjoyed, so far as has depended upon the faithful assiduity and talent, selected and appointed for their communication. To say this, I would hope may appear to all allowable, especially when it is to you, who were it wanting in verity, would be able to attest the deficiency of claim with which it might be chargeable. To one abatement however it is subject, that he who addresses you must and ought to be excluded, that he may give this expression of his opinions and feelings respecting those with whom he sincerely esteems it his privilege and happiness to be associated.

Should it be your sentiment that no earthly treasures are to be compared with those of scientific and virtuous attainment,

prosecuted by the general course of studies which you have now completed, with such improvements as the present state of the world furnishes, you would but concur with all that countless throng throughout the christian world, by whom for many successive generations, the sciences and arts have been advanced to a perfection, which no single mind could practically estimate, though its opportunities were prolonged through many of the periods ordinarily allotted to human life. But let me remind you once more, of that which you have already often heard, that every collegiate attainment in these sciences or which you have been employed, can be correctly considered, as only qualifying you for advancing into the science to which it belongs. It is only an insatiable thirst after knowledge, the truths it reveals, the various interests and powers it confers, and the refined and elevated enjoyments it multiplies, before which its difficulties will successively disappear, till the volume of nature and providence shall universally exhibit a rich profusion both for utility and delight.

Before closing my observations, I would willingly impress upon your minds, as infinitely the most important of all that I can say, that it is the characteristic of the Gospel, ever to consider the righteousness which it teaches, amongst all the interests and occupations and events of our existence that which is indispensable and never to be relinquished. The objects of this world may be surrendered, its plans may be varied, and in our choice of them we may be much at our discretion. But with the principles and practice of virtue as it has been taught us from Heaven, we can never be at liberty to dispense. The whole life of Christ, and his sufferings at its close, have this inscribed upon every act and every circumstance. Philosophy and the maxims of the world, may think it trivial to swerve in some degree from the unchanging laws of a perfect virtue, to accommodate emergencies, escape dangers, or compass some great interest, which but for them might be attained. But it is the injunction of christian rectitude, if thy hand offend thee cut it off, if thine eye offend thee pluck it out; such is the peculiarity of the religion of the gospel. It has been exemplified to us in the lives of christians, and in the martyrdom of a cloud of witnesses. Let us all aspire, though our natures are weak and sinful, conclusively to adopt this great maxim into the whole system of our conduct, and grasp it with a tenaciousness not to be broken.— With this law written upon our hearts by the spirit of the Almighty, as with a pen of iron and the point of a diamond, we shall be useful, and honorable, and prosperous in this life, and death shall be but the portal of our transition into glory, and honor, and a happy immortality.