

A

# DISCOURSE

PRONOUNCED JULY 30, 1844,

BEFORE THE

## PHILOMATHESIAN SOCIETY

IN

### MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE.

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BY WILLIAM B. SPRAGUE, D. D.,

OF ALBANY.  
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## DISCOURSE.\*

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IN casting about for a topic with which to occupy this hour, no better principle of selection has occurred to me, than is suggested by the familiar saying of the wise man—“To every thing there is a season.” There are seasons in which it may be fitting to discourse for amusement, and upon topics adapted to secure that end. There are seasons in which one may indulge visions of fancy, and soar away, if he can, on the wings of an eagle. There are seasons for breaking a lance with an intellectual combatant, on questions which perhaps can never be decided—seasons for those who have the taste and the talent, to go down into the deep places of metaphysics, or if you please, to linger in the cloudy regions of mysticism. But it is not upon any one of

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\* Since this Discourse was delivered at Middlebury, it has been delivered, with some slight modification, before the Philermenian and United Brothers' Societies of Brown University.

these seasons that you and I have fallen in our meeting this evening. You, young gentlemen of the society whom I have the honour to address, occupy a position toward which the heart of the patriot, the philanthropist, the christian, turns with an instinctive and almost oppressive solicitude. In you, and others like you, is bound up the germ of that influence which will shortly diffuse itself as a universal element through society. While you are waiting a little before you step into those places of trust for which your education prepares you, and which death, by the removal of those who now occupy them, will soon have prepared for you, I feel that the task of addressing you involves no common responsibility. I should be treacherous, not only to your own interests, but to the claims of society and of God, if I were to waste this hour in dreamy and profitless speculations. I would, at least, speak to you words of truth and soberness; and if I shall succeed in saying any thing that shall prepare you the better to meet any danger to which you are exposed, or any duty that you may have to perform, I shall congratulate myself that I have not spoken to

you in vain. The few hints which I purpose to address to you, will have respect to THE RELATIONS OF THE PRESENT TO THE PAST.

Most men have but little knowledge and little thought concerning the process by which their own characters are formed. If they give the subject *any* reflection, they think only of those palpable influences which, like the surrounding atmosphere, are pressing immediately upon them. And the same remark is applicable, at least in a degree, to the estimate which they form of the characters of each other. The biographer feels ready to lay aside his pen, when he has told what his subject was, and what he did, without attempting to search for any formative agency beyond the circle of his domestic relations. The chronicler of events on a larger scale—the historian of some great enterprize or some illustrious era, has not unfrequently played the same superficial part toward his readers: he has shown them the stream without carrying them back to its source;—has given them a string of facts—as if taken from a diary—without developing any great principle either of harmony or of solution. The reflecting and

inquisitive will never be satisfied with this; nor should they be. They ask of the historian, not merely a register of the events of the period of which he professes to treat, but the reasons of these events as connected with some previous state of things. What sort of a history of the downfall of the Roman Empire would that be, which should consist merely in a detail of the incursions, and ravages, and victories, by which that event was brought about? Who would be satisfied with a history of the Reformation, which should overlook its connection with the events of preceding centuries? Who would call that a history of the French Revolution, that should begin with '93; or that a history of the American Revolution that should reach back no farther than '75? The truth is that each successive age is the product of ages that have gone before; and if this connection be disregarded, the great ends of history are never reached. It was but the other day, my friends, that you and I began to exist; nevertheless, our characters, yet but imperfectly formed, are the result of influences which have been operating for ages. This noble institution in

which your education is going forward, has commenced its career within the last half century; but the causes which produced it were in operation long before even a thought of it had existed. The fabric of our national independence—we may easily enough find out whose counsels designed it, and whose hands reared it, and whose blood cemented it; but it will not be so easy to trace that stream of influence, which was hidden in the past, and moving onward to this mighty result, while America was yet the home of the savage. Oh, it is not the present but the past—the great and mighty past, that makes us what we are.

But if we would suitably realize our obligations to the past, we must analyze more closely the influence by which it operates to form our character and destiny. This influence we shall find is twofold—consisting partly of those monuments of the intellect of other days, that are visible and palpable, and partly of those institutions, usages, modes of thought, which have come down to us as a traditional legacy.

Plant yourself in almost any department of the wide empire of thought, and a host of teachers will issue forth from the past, to whom you will do well to give heed. Brighter geniuses have never shed their lustre upon the world, than some whose efforts have descended to us through the long line of twenty centuries. In several departments, the most splendid models are to be referred to a period so remote, that it is not easy to define it; and even in those departments in which later generations have worked out the greater discoveries, we shall often find that the minds of the ancients were awake, and were assailing with great energy the barrier between the known and the unknown; and that these efforts, though they might have seemed at the time abortive, were nevertheless essential to the attainment of the end. It is curious to notice the various steps in the process of discovery and improvement—to trace the stream from its source in some vague conjecture in the brain of an ancient philosopher, till it finally empties into the broad sea of well ascertained truth. The world, no doubt, often mistakes in measuring out its gratitude to its intellectual



benefactors. The fortunate spirit who strikes upon some noble discovery, has his name gloriously enshrined, and perhaps the world in all future generations will do it homage; but the great minds which, during successive centuries, have been accumulating the materials from which the discovery is made, are lost in the brighter light of the more successful, but possibly not more gifted or deserving labourer. We talk proudly of the discoveries of one or two of our countrymen in respect to the application of steam—and far be it from me to say that they are praised beyond their deserts; but we are not to forget that they inherited the results of much laborious research, and that they worked by the condensed light of the two preceding centuries. The same is true of all great discoveries in science—those whose names are finally connected with them, have had teachers from the ages that are past;—teachers not unfrequently, who have conducted them to the very verge of discovery, and left them with little else to do, than to walk into the temple whose gates have been thrown open to them. Those teachers are for us as well as for them; and we shall be unjust to

ourselves, if, instead of tracing the progress of thought from generation to generation, and marking the contributions which each has made, either to particular branches of science or to the common cause of human knowledge, we indolently repose in the results of previous labours, as they happen to be developed in the accidental discoveries of a single mind, or in the general illumination of the age to which we belong.

Who shall compute the number of illustrious minds in connection with almost every department of learning, as they shine out on the records of the past? Enter the temple of literature, of science, of philosophy, and crowds of the mighty dead are speaking to you through the monuments they have left behind them. Would you linger in the regions of poetry, and court the inspiration of the muses? A thousand spirits, accustomed to soar on golden pinions, come forth from the past, and bid you welcome to the bright treasures which it has been the work of their lives to produce. Homer and Hesiod, Virgil and Horace, Dante and Tasso, Racine and Corneille, Milton and Shakspeare, Herder and

Schiller, stand forth the glorious representatives of a glorious host that no man can number. Would you enter the field of historic research? Here again, Thucydides, and Sallust, and Machiavelli, and Vertot, and Robertson, and Müller, and multitudes of kindred minds, are offering themselves to you as guides at every corner. Would you range through the dominions of science and philosophy? You walk in the light of Archimedes, and Euclid, and Aristotle, of Newton, and Leibnitz, and Bacon, and Locke, each representing a constellation, and the several constellations forming a vast galaxy. And you may subdivide these several branches of knowledge as often as you will, and still there is scarcely any department, however limited, in which helps—noble helps from the past—are not within your reach.

Nor is it otherwise in respect to the arts. In most of them there are glorious specimens remaining, to indicate the spirit of the ages which they represent. If you get far back into antiquity, you will indeed search in vain even the records of tradition, for the names of the individuals whose productions you admire;

and in some instances you cannot so much as identify the age to which they belong; but, on one point, they tell their own story — they testify that they were designed and formed by the power of genius. In general these monuments are found scattered only here and there over the wide field of ancient civilization, especially on the sites of those cities which successively, in a great measure, governed the world. But, within the last century, you are aware that a portion of two Roman cities that were buried in the earth nearly two thousand years ago, have been brought up from their graves, and made to stand before the world the unimpeachable witnesses of antiquity. Here you see the productions of ancient art, and nothing else: the pavements of the streets, the furniture of the dwellings, the pictures on the walls — every thing that meets your eye, tells of the genius, the taste, the habits of the Roman people. But though these disinterred cities furnish, in some respects, the richest field of ancient relics of which we have any knowledge, and though they shed light on various usages of society, that we shall seek in vain from any other source, yet they do not,

by any means, include the noblest monuments even of Roman art, that have come down to us. Who does not know that in most of the *artes liberales* there are ancient specimens remaining, to which the world, by common consent, awards the honour of being the most perfect models? If you will see architecture in its most stupendous and imposing forms, you must go to Egypt, and view her pyramids, piercing the clouds in awful grandeur, and proof against every thing but the shocks of the last day: if in its most graceful and elegant forms, you must go to Greece, and see her temples of Minerva and Theseus, — to Rome, and look at her Colliseum and Pantheon, and innumerable other magnificent edifices — most of them indeed, laid low by the hand of barbarism or of time, but yet glorious even in their ruins. So too, if you will find the noblest specimens of sculpture — marble breathing and glowing through the power of the chisel — you must not stop short of the splendid Laocoon, the Apollo Belvidere, the Venus de Medici, the Hercules Farnese, the Dying Gladiator, the statue of Pallas — all dating back to an obscure antiquity. Need I say that the finest

productions of the pencil also, belong to a past age, and are associated with the names of Michael Angelo, Correggio, Raphael, Titian, and Vandyke; to say nothing of the illustrious Grecian masters, who contributed not a little to illuminate the period in which they lived: these were all princes in the art; and their empire, for aught that appears, may reach down to the end of time. There are some arts, particularly printing, carried to a higher perfection now, both in respect to facility and beauty of execution, than in any preceding age; and yet we occasionally meet with an old book, bearing the imprint of 1600, which, in respect to all that renders it legible and durable, would carry off the prize from the best wrought productions of our modern press.

But there is no other department in regard to which we are so much debtors to the past, as that of religion. Far back we see what could be effected by the strugglings of the greatest minds on this subject, independently of revelation. What else do Plato, and Socrates, and Cicero teach us by their confused and often contradictory speculations concerning

the *summum bonum* and a future existence, than that man needs a higher guide on these subjects than the highest human reason; and that therefore it is worthy of the Infinite to meet this great moral exigency of his creature by a miraculous interposition? This exigency He *has* met in the richest — infinitely the richest treasure of the past — the Bible. Here is the record of a succession of divine revelations, extending through a period of more than four thousand years: here is history the most ancient, prophecies the most unquestionable, eloquence the most glowing, poetry the most sublime, morality the most perfect, discoveries of the divine character and will, and of man's duty and destiny, glorious beyond any thing that ever came within the range of human thought. Here is the light of the world, — the remedy for our moral diseases, — the great peace-maker between earth and Heaven. We look upon this book with reverence and gratitude as God's best gift to man; and we have no hopes of the final regeneration of the world that do not connect themselves with it. Nor is the Bible the only sacred legacy that the past has bequeathed to us. There are the

writings of the great and good who immediately succeeded the purest age of Christianity. There are the writings of the Reformers, who saw with wonderful clearness, especially considering that they were born and trained in the dark. There are the writings of the old Protestant divines of the seventeenth century, both in Great Britain and on the continent, many of which are so full of spirit and power, that they would seem almost to have monopolized the vigor of their age. Nor has any generation since that period, been lacking in contributions to the cause of theological learning. All that uninspired men have done to purpose, has been to vindicate the authority, to illustrate the truths, and enforce the precepts of the Bible ; but the amount of service which they have rendered in these different ways, it is not easy adequately to estimate.

But our obligation to the past appears not merely from the fact that it has produced so much that is valuable, but that so many of its productions have been preserved and transmitted to us. Much, indeed, has been irrecoverably lost: and could we expect it to be otherwise, when we remember that the world



has always been the theatre of national revolutions and convulsions, and that many things must necessarily fall a prey to all consuming time? Where are now the earliest libraries of which history has given us any account—the libraries of Pisistratus, and Euclid, and Euripides, and Aristotle? Where is that most magnificent library of antiquity, founded by the Ptolemies at Alexandria, which, according to Aulus Gellius, contained no less than seven hundred thousand volumes? Where is the library of Pollio and of Augustus—where the libraries on the Roman Capitol, in the temple of Peace, and in the palace of Tiberius, into which were gathered most of the literary treasures of antiquity? Barbarism has given them to the winds or the flames, centuries and centuries ago. And of the ancient works of art too, much the greater portion have passed away, leaving no trace of their existence. Nevertheless we have reason to believe that the most important contributions which the past has made, especially to the stock of science and learning, still remain; and that that good Providence which ordained their existence, also ordained their perpetuity.

There are extant some of the writings of nearly all the most illustrious of the ancients, whose names have been transmitted to us; and this seems the more worthy of notice, as in those early days there was no way of multiplying copies except by the pen. Every one knows what service the monks rendered to the cause of learning during the middle ages, not only by preserving in their cloisters these relics of antiquity, amidst the reign of an almost unqualified barbarism, but also by devoting their lives to the labour of transcribing, and thus increasing the number of copies many fold. At the revival of letters in Italy, in which the family of the Medici bore so distinguished a part, there were learned men sent, through the munificence of certain branches of that family, into various parts of the East, to gather up, so far as they could, all the ancient manuscripts that were then extant; and they returned richly laden with these treasures of the past, which were henceforth placed in a situation to shed more light upon the world. It was, however, chiefly the discovery of the art of printing that has embalmed the works of the ancients; or rather

that has given a sort of Omnipresence to that which had proved itself immortal before. By this means, knowledge of every kind has acquired wings; and the mighty spirits of the past, instead of dwelling here and there in the library of a prince, may become the inmates of every dwelling.

Passing by the history of the preservation of the monuments of art, so far as they have been preserved, let me direct your attention for a moment to the transmission to us, in their purity, of the original records of our religion. I say, *in their purity*—not that I suppose there has been any miraculous interposition to prevent any corruption, even the slightest, of the original text;—for every scholar knows that there *is*, to some extent, a diversity of readings in different copies; but every scholar knows also that this diversity relates to unessential things, and does not affect a single important fact or doctrine revealed in the Scriptures. It was the purpose of Him who gave this revelation to the world, that it should reach through all time, as well as to the ends of the earth; and this purpose of course secures the event. Accordingly we

find that this most ancient, and for many ages cumulative, record, has been preserved from its first beginning by the hand of Moses, to the present hour. So completely has it been identified with the whole economy, both of the Jewish and Christian dispensations, that its preservation has been a matter of course ; and so constantly has it been appealed to by the Jewish and the Christian church, and by different sects in each, in their various controversies, that it has been utterly impossible that it should undergo any material corruption. The same wisdom and goodness that gave this book to the world, provided in the arrangements of Providence, for its transmission in substantial purity through all time.

What say you now, my friends, of our obligations to the past, in consideration merely of those great works which the past has produced and preserved for us ? Do you not regard it a privilege to be brought in contact with the illustrious minds of your own day ? Are there not men now living, for the privilege of conversing with whom, you would scarcely think a voyage across the ocean an extravagant price ? But perhaps you have not considered

that the past has put it within your power to hold communion with as great or even greater minds than these, without crossing the threshold of your own dwelling. Are the walls of your study lined with a rich and well chosen library? Then are you living in glorious company. You have around you Demosthenes and Xenophon, Tully and Livy, Newton and Bacon, Butler and Lardner, Edwards and Hall, and you may converse with any or all of them at your pleasure. True indeed you see not the philosopher or the orator in his robes, and there is no voice to break upon your outward ear; but all that was visible and audible of the man belonged to his inferior nature: that which pertains to immortality and allies to divinity—the working of the thoughts—the movement of the soul, lies yonder within the covers of a book. And there you may approach him without being embarrassed by his sensible presence. You may listen to the thunder of his eloquence; you may catch the fire of his spirit; you may hear him in the Lyceum or the Senate House—in short you may, to all practical purposes, hold communion with him as truly as if the whole man, even to the flesh

and blood, actually stood before you. And it is not a single great spirit, but multitudes scattered through more than a hundred lustums, with whom you may always have the privilege of intercourse. Imagine for a moment that no such privilege had been yours — imagine that all the works of literature, and science, and philosophy, and theology, and art, which have come down to us, were blotted out, and that our knowledge of the past depended entirely on uncertain tradition — where, I ask, would be our apparatus for intellectual culture? There are some men who profess to think lightly of books; but where is he who would be willing to dispense with this medium of acquiring knowledge? What would be the character of the next generation, — what the prospects of all coming posterity, if the past, speaking as she now does, through the great works that she has produced and preserved, should henceforth become dumb forever?

*La biblioteca e' l nutrimento dell' anima.*

But there is an influence exerted upon us not less real or powerful, but more difficult to analyze, from the unrecorded thoughts and

feelings of the past. How much is there connected with civil government, with the usages and habits, nay, the very organization, of society, which comes not directly within the cognizance of the senses! When we speak of a national revolution, or of a system of civil polity, or of the dominion of public sentiment, we speak of that which belongs primarily to the intellectual and moral, however its effects may extend to the material. There is something here that you do not find in books, or towers, or any of the productions of science or art: you cannot lay your hand upon it, and yet you feel that it works with mighty energy. Now this invisible, intangible thing—this that constitutes the indwelling power of human society—this incessant working of the mind in the great realities of life, has, from the beginning, been rolling down the tract of time with an ever accumulating force. One type of society or one form of government in one age, has given place to another in the next; but the influence which effects the revolution has by no means expended itself when the revolution has taken

place: it works for itself some new channel, and keeps flowing down with complicated and mysterious effect from generation to generation. And let it be remembered that that which is visible and palpable, and that which is invisible and impalpable, reciprocally operate upon each other. The institutions of an age do much to give complexion to its intellectual productions; while those productions in turn may essentially mould the institutions of a series of ages. The writings of the Reformers, for instance, never could have been what they were at any other period: the mighty movements of society in which those illustrious men had themselves a primary share, gave that high intellectual and moral impulse to which we are to attribute chiefly the wonderful superiority of their works. But who needs be told, on the other hand, that those immortal works have ever since operated with prodigious effect throughout Protestant Christendom? You see then that the influence that bears upon us from the past, has not only been constantly accumulating with the progress of events, but consists of the com-



bined influence of the institutions of preceding ages, and the embodied efforts of the world's greatest minds.

It may not improbably occur to you that my estimate of our obligations to the past is too high, inasmuch as it has been, to a great extent, a scene of folly and crime; and if there have been some great minds to shed light upon our path, and some bright examples to allure to the right, much the greater number have perverted their faculties to entail evil on posterity. It is true that the good influence has been exerted by a comparatively small number: a few bright lights have appeared in an age; and in some ages, if there were *any* such, no record of them remains to us. But that they have multiplied with the progress of centuries, no one acquainted with the world's history can doubt; and each one has made some impression on the character and destiny of his race. And as for those spirits that have been working for evil, — working to retard the progress of society, or shed mildew around the best hopes of man — we certainly cannot remember them either with gratitude or approbation; but there is a sense in which

their evil doings may minister — are designed to minister — to our improvement. Constituted as we are with tendencies to the wrong, and with a susceptibility of being influenced as well by the fear of evil as the hope of good, who will not say that there is benevolence towards us, in suffering history to be strewn with so many characters, that point with a finger of warning to the issues of a wayward course? Pharaoh, and Judas, and Nero, and Julian, and Napoleon — wherefore is it that Providence has lifted you to such a conspicuous elevation in the past? Not surely that the world, by gazing at you, may catch that thirst for blood, or that spirit of impiety or infidelity, which constitutes your inglorious distinction — not that you may have opportunity of accomplishing by your example after you are dead, malignant purposes toward your fellow men, which your lives were too short to fulfil — No; but that you may stand as monuments of God's displeasure against a career of crime — that the nations, when they look at you, beaten down and scathed by the retributive justice of Heaven, may learn to search for the path of right, as for hid trea-

asures. I say then, while our gratitude is due to the great and good spirits of other ages, who, in living for the benefit of their respective generations, have lived to bless all the generations that have succeeded them, we are not to withhold our thanks to a gracious Providence for permitting us to be instructed and warned out of the record of the evils of the past. Incomprehensible are the designs of the Infinite, overruling as he does the wrath of man to his praise. He forms a human being, and endows him with noble powers, by which he may work himself into an angel or a fiend. Those powers he prostitutes to purposes of evil; and while he is madly trampling on human rights, and steeping the earth in human blood, he is just serving the purpose of a rod in the hand of the mighty Ruler of the world, to chastise his rebellious subjects. And after he has entered upon the scenes of the retributive and the invisible, still God keeps him on the earth in the record that remains of him, to preach to all generations concerning the madness of the transgressor's heart, and the terrors of his doom.

If the past were filled only with monuments of good, it would seem that there could be no danger in contemplating it; except as there is always danger, owing to the wayward tendencies of our nature, that the good may be perverted to purposes of evil. But considering the mixed character of the past — that it exhibits at best a scene of varied imperfection, — and considering moreover that its influence for good or evil in forming our character is as irresistible as the light to a healthful eye, it is obvious that there are dangers connected with it, which it becomes us most scrupulously to avoid. These dangers are to be found on the right hand and on the left: either excessive reverence for the past, or the want of due regard for it, is fraught with serious evil.

There are some minds which, either from constitution or habit, regard every thing old — no matter in what department — with a degree of homage approaching idolatry. They are constantly calling out for the restoration of obsolete usages. They have an eye that brightens and flashes wonderfully in the dark. The ghost of an old institution they easily

mistake for a divinity. They sigh in secret that they had not lived before the flood; and perhaps they sometimes dream of the luxury of passing a whole life in Herculaneum or Pompeii, and of being laid at last in a subterranean sepulchre, where some old Roman and his family mouldered twenty centuries ago. Now this extravagant veneration for antiquity, however we may smile at it as a foible — a mere *amabilis insania* — is fruitful of mischief, and deserves serious reprehension. A moment's reflection will show us what some of its evil tendencies are — tendencies as it respects the character of the individual who is the subject of it, and the general improvement of the race.

It is hardly possible but that one effect of this principle, especially when found in connection with a gloomy temperament, should be to cherish a superstitious habit of mind. For, in the first place, no small part of the record of the past is the record of superstition. Religion in its purity has hitherto prevailed in the world but to a very limited extent; and where that has *not* prevailed, some form of superstition has been the substitute. What else

was the religion of the ancient Carthaginians, and Phœnicians, and Egyptians, and afterwards of the Greeks and Romans, but systems addressed in a great measure to the more abject principles of our nature—systems which, in proportion to the tenacity with which they were held, must have rendered their votaries superstitious? What else especially could have been the effect of the celebrated mysteries, which seem to have originated in Egypt, and subsequently to have been adopted by various nations of antiquity? And to come down to a later period—who is not familiar with the fact that Christianity herself has been divested for ages of her primitive robes of simplicity, and grace, and love, and been tortured into an unnatural, repulsive thing—*monstrum horrendum, ingens*—insomuch that she might almost dispute the palm, in respect to the most odious qualities, with Paganism herself? If then there be so much of this spirit pertaining to the past, is it not manifest that those who are prepared to devour antiquity, without discrimination, are in the way to become giants of superstition? Besides, the past, especially the remote past, is

dim and shadowy — its objects are seen as if by twilight; and imagination easily conjures up things that are not, and distorts things that are. There is more or less of superstition, even among Protestant Christians, at this day; but if I mistake not, you will almost always find that it is associated with an undue reverence for antiquity. You will find that the men who evince most of this spirit, cannot breathe freely unless they fancy that they are breathing the atmosphere of another age; and woe be to him, in their estimation, who asks any better reason for believing a dogma, than that some veteran in quibbling, during the glorious period of the dark ages, happened to write a paragraph in its defence.

Closely allied to the superstitious tendencies of an idolatry of the past, are the tendencies to mysticism — indeed the latter is scarcely more than a modification of the former. The mysticism of the ancients certainly forms a curious subject of inquiry, whether we consider it in respect to its nature, its origin, or the various forms under which it has existed. What mysticism was in the early ages, or what it is now, I will not venture to

say ; but this much I *may* say — that it is about equally allied to the poetical, and the philosophical, and the theological, and somewhat more nearly to the unintelligible than to either. Its votaries will have it that it is a sort of ladder between earth and Heaven, — a key to unlock the inner sanctuary of the invisible and spiritual, — a revealer of the unreal character of material substances ; whereas Truth inscribes upon it, “ The dream of dreams — the everlasting antagonist of common sense.” Whatever the mysticism of the ancients was, the mysticism of our day is marvellously like it ; and notwithstanding these strange doctrines have been recently ushered forth with all the parade of new discoveries, as if they had been brought fresh from the depository of unrevealed truth, — we find on examination that their pretended authors are either downright plagiarists from antiquity, or else they have so far succeeded in throwing themselves back into the mental attitudes of Plato, that his thoughts have spontaneously sprung up in their minds ; and in either case they have engrafted them on the Heaven-produced stock of Christianity.



I do not complain of men for not being satisfied to remain forever on the surface of things, or for endeavouring to make themselves at home in any part of the vast territory that lies within the legitimate boundaries of human knowledge. I am well aware that in the province, especially of philosophic research, there must be much patient groping in the dark — much vigorous struggling with the untrue and the uncertain, before the light of discovery begins to dawn — especially before the truth stands forth in acknowledged certainty. But in matters of religion, where God himself has condescended to become the infallible teacher, we may safely conclude that he has revealed to us truth commensurate with our faculty of comprehension; and to attempt to travel off by any of the lights which philosophy affords, into regions that lie beyond those which have been illumined by revelation, were nothing less than an impious reflection upon God's wisdom and goodness. If I have owned Jesus as a divine teacher, it is with an ill grace that I attempt to bring in Plato to share with him the chair of inspiration; as if the brightness of the sun would

become more radiant by a return of the darkness which his beams were designed to dispel. Let philosophy keep her proper place, and she shall have the veneration of all of us; but let her dress herself up in a mysterious livery; — let her attempt to force the barrier on which the finger of God hath written — “Thou shalt come no further;” let her put the wild workings of her ignorance into unintelligible language and call it oracular — in short, let her transform herself into a dreaming and ignoble mysticism — *asinus portans mysteria* — and the sooner we can banish her from the world, the better. The way of her votaries, like “the way of the wicked, is darkness, and they know not at what they stumble.”

And this leads me to say that an undistinguishing reverence for the past is the fruitful parent of error. We have approached very nearly to this thought in what we have just said of mysticism; and yet that rather brings us into the region of mists and shadows, than of positive and well defined error. But who does not know that a large portion of the world's history consists in a history of the world's errors — errors too not unfrequently

of momentous import, and connected with the highest interests of man? That must be a singularly inventive mind, that can conceive at this day of any form of error, whose prototype may not be found by a recurrence to antiquity. Our age, as every one knows, has run wild on various questions connected with theology and morals; but it is only the rekindling of the rush-lights of other days: the errorists of the present are sitting at the feet of the errorists of the past. The prediction of the near approach of the destruction of the world, is nothing better than an old dream that seems to have come round in a sort of cycle. And even the wretched delusion of Mormonism, at which we may not laugh just now, because we have to think of it in connection with the impostor's horrible death — even Mormonism is substantially nothing else than the resurrection of a thing which has before often plagued the world. I say then, the experience of the present age shows, that there is danger that exploded errors will revive, and be cherished, and gain an extensive ascendancy, under the influence of an undue regard for antiquity.

Still another effect of this infirmity, — if we may call it by so mild a name — is, that it cramps the faculties, and prevents the mind from attaining to its legitimate expansion. The faculties of the mind as well as the body, improve by well directed exercise ; and men work intellectually as well as corporeally, to the best advantage, by the light. There is indeed light — much light, shining on almost every subject, from the past ; but those who live so exclusively in other ages — the maniacs in respect to antiquity — are almost sure to choose the darkness rather than the light — at least they never seem satisfied unless there is a dense mist going up around them ; and the consequence is, that though some of their faculties may be intensely exercised, yet there is nothing to secure an harmonious and complete intellectual development. Especially is there an influence exerted unfavourable to the mind's independence — a quality essential to all true greatness. The mind was made to be free ; and if it is kept in bondage to any thing, it can never fulfil its allotted destiny. And the calamity is not the less, but the greater, because it voluntarily bows to the yoke ; for that

which is voluntarily taken, is most likely to be pertinaciously retained. But the mind that is under the influence of which I am speaking, is literally enslaved to the past: it regards the decisions of the past, even where it is the least competent, as infallible: it has more reverence for a voice coming up from the depths of an obscure antiquity, than it would have for a voice coming down from the throne of the Omniscient. Of course such a mind can hardly be said to think its own thoughts. Its highest efforts are made, in endeavouring to force itself into the same space that has been occupied by other minds. It is a stranger to the luxury of untrammelled investigation. It never stretches its wings but to fly backward. It deems it a sort of profanation to move, except in a beaten track. It may revel; but its revels are like those of the enchained maniac — there is no freedom here; the glorious native aspirations of the spirit are held in check, and the eternal past would seem a brighter inheritance than the eternal future.

If such be the effect produced by extreme devotion to the past on the characters of indi-

viduals, it is easy to see what must be its bearing on the general interests of mankind — the great cause of human improvement. Each individual is to be viewed, not as an insulated being, but as a member of society — as sustaining relations to his neighborhood, his country, the world; and these relations constitute a channel through which his influence is forever circulating. It follows then, that all the superstition, and mysticism, and error, and intellectual servility and dwarfishness, that result from this habit of mind, constitute a part not only of the material out of which the history of the race is formed, but also of the influence by which the destiny of the race is controlled. I will advert here only to the influence that is exerted adverse to the natural progress of society. If the mind is chained to the past, society can never advance; and though we know that it does advance — must advance, yet it is only because the right spirit is strong enough to overcome the resistance of the wrong — because the ancients living in the person of the moderns, are too weak a host to cause either the sun or the moon in the firmament of intellect to

stand still: and yet all the influence that they do exert, is in the spirit of a quarrel with the true genius of improvement. Other ages have had to encounter this hostile element as well as our own; but happily there have always been some independent minds, that the spirit of the darkest age could not trammel — some who were always upon the watch-tower, to catch the first glimpse of whatever object might appear above the horizon of human knowledge. Had Galileo, and Kepler, and Newton, been contented with what the ancients could tell them, where would have been those splendid astronomical discoveries, which have brought us in contact with the distant heavens, and scattered the mist from an immense territory in Jehovah's dominions? Had Bacon been satisfied with the legacy that had come down to his generation from Aristotle, *who* should have been hailed as the deliverer from that sea of perplexity in which the Grecian philosopher had for ages kept the world? Had Franklin been willing to repose in what he could find in the books, and called every improvement an innovation, and every innovation a sin, what assurance have we

that the true doctrine of electricity had been understood to this day? Had Watt, and Fitch, and Fulton, been among the worshippers of the past, *who* should have taught us how to traverse earth and ocean by the power of steam — *who* should have suggested the way for bringing Jerusalem and Constantinople into our neighborhood? I know indeed, that if these giant minds had not made the discoveries which have immortalized them, others doubtless would have performed the work, and gained the glory; but if the disposition to repose in the past had universally prevailed, then these discoveries had not been made — then indeed the world would never have advanced a step in the career of improvement. I repeat — this extravagant reverence for the past is an evil genius: it would bring every thing connected with society to a pause — at least, the only progress which it would admit, would be the progress of each successive generation, by precisely the same path, to the grave.

But if excessive veneration for the past be an error, an utter disregard for it is also an error; and the practical workings of the latter



are no less to be deprecated than those of the former. You may find the indications of this spirit in almost every department of human action: on every side you meet those who, practically at least, brand the wisdom of the past as folly; concerning whom it may be said, in the language of Ovid:

Est quoque cunctarum novitas carissima rerum.

Look, for instance, into the department of education — particularly that branch of it that relates to intellectual culture; and you will find that there are not wanting those who proscribe the ancient classics — who maintain not merely that they should not be read except upon the eclectic principle, but that they should not be read upon any principle whatever; notwithstanding some of them embody the brightest effusions of cultivated intellect that the world can boast. Our own country, yet in the greenness of her youth, can boast of no works of art that can be called ancient, unless indeed it be certain obscure ruins, which would seem to point back to some remote and undefined period of civilization. But, would you think it? — even *our* monuments of antiquity — the few remaining edi-

fices that our fathers built, are counted for the most part as nothing worth ; and the eye that lingers upon them, has glorious visions of new timber and fresh paint taking the place of the moss-grown piles of stone. I remember a fine old specimen of American architecture, some five and twenty years ago, in a church—if I mistake not, the oldest church then in New-England. It stood on an open common, where the cattle were welcome to roam ; and its site was not needed or desired for any other purpose. Its construction was so peculiar, that even an architect of the present day might be at a loss for terms in which to describe it : suffice it to say, it was a specimen of the style of building that had nearly had its day a century and a half ago. Instead of being torn down, I would have had it decently fenced in, and kept for posterity to look at, with a view to inspire gratitude and veneration toward the memory of their fathers ; and I would have spared it the rather, as it had been associated, for nearly half a century, with one of the brightest lights of the American pulpit.\* But

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\* Rev. Dr. Lathrop of West-Springfield.

my worthy parishioners, (for it was in my own parish that it stood,) looked at it only as a huge pile of timber that could be appropriated profitably to another purpose ; and down came the old structure, occasioning, so far as I could perceive, no other feeling in the neighborhood, than that of joy that an unsightly object had been removed out of the way. And this, instead of marking any peculiarity of the people immediately concerned, was, if I mistake not, a fair specimen of the taste of a large part of our population. Does not the same disposition discover itself in respect to the high concerns of civil society ? Theories of government, involving much that is visionary and startling, are not only proposed but urged with the utmost confidence, in place of those which are the product of the combined wisdom of ages. The mob have discovered that they have rights peculiar to themselves, especially the right of riding rough-shod over the law ; and there has come up a new and anomalous judge, whose name may not here be spoken, whose circuit embraces an extensive territory, whose code is his own will, and whose decisions are hasty, irreversible, and

often terrific. The old theory is, that communities as well as individuals are bound to pay their debts;— but this is beginning to be discarded; and the doctrine of repudiation, convenient only to states that have no conscience, is, in more than a single instance, taking its place. There are those for whom the Bible is too old a book; who imagine that it may still do well enough for the vulgar, but that great minds must look beyond it, and that it were absurd to suppose that all our ideas of religious truth must be cast in an old stereotype mould, that was finished some two thousand years ago. There are those who are not satisfied with the institutions of Christianity as their Author left them, but would fain modify them in accommodation to the advanced spirit of the age. There are those who invent new modes of giving effect to divine truth; who endeavour to find their way to the heart through the senses and imagination rather than the intellect; who think that the quickening breath from Heaven is never to be looked for, but in a tempest of human passion. All these cases to which I have referred, are illustrations of the prevailing disre-

gard to the past ; and they have been recently of such frequent occurrence, that none of you will suspect me of having drawn for them upon imagination, or indeed scarcely received them on testimony.

In order to estimate the extent of this evil, we will just glance at the loss which it involves — the loss of a great part of the benefit which our relation to the past is adapted to secure. I say *a great part* of the benefit — for there are many advantages accruing to us from the past, independently of our own volition. There is, as we have seen, provision in providence for the transmission of thought from age to age ; and even those who are most slow to acknowledge their obligations to the men of other times, are yet indebted to them, under Heaven, for no small part of the influence by which their characters are formed. Nevertheless, there is much good hereby proffered to us, of which it is impossible that we should avail ourselves, without suitable consideration. This is to be derived both from the wisdom and experience of the past.

I have had occasion, in the preceding part of this discourse, to illustrate the value of

many of the productions of preceding ages. Leaving out of view the sacred scriptures, which is not to be compared with any other book—how many noble uninspired works are there—works of genius and taste, of science and literature, of philosophy and theology, which are just as if they were not, by reason of this obstinate unwillingness to “ask of the days that are past.” Admitting even that it were possible to find all the great thoughts of these ancient authors in works which are claimed as the productions of men of our own time—yet who does not see how much is lost—lost to curiosity—lost to intelligence—by not contemplating them in their original garb; especially by not being able to mark the different phases of different minds, when devoted to the same subject, or the progressive steps by which the truth may have been ultimately reached? To speak here of no other department than that of theology, and to go no further back than the seventeenth century—how incalculable would be the loss to that student who should reject the works of Chillingworth and Hooker, of Barrow and Stillingfleet, of Howe and Baxter, and a

host of illustrious authors with whom these were contemporary! I do not say that he might not be ignorant even of these great names, and still render good service to the world; but certain it is that he would be unjust toward himself, in refusing some of the best aids for the culture of his mind and heart: he would be ungrateful toward God, in turning away from some of the brightest lights which Omnipotence has ever kindled.

But there is perhaps still greater loss from setting at naught the *experience* of the past. Human nature is originally the same every where and in all ages: the different forms which it assumes, arise from the diversity of circumstances under which it is developed. There are certain common laws by which its operations are controlled; and these laws, subject indeed to the modifying influences just adverted to, operate with as much certainty as the laws of attraction and repulsion in the material world. On this great principle of uniformity in the divine government, was founded Solomon's declaration:—"The thing that hath been, shall be; and there is no new thing under the sun." Hence it follows that

the experience of the past is, to a great extent, a revealer of the future : it furnishes an index pointing to the safety and glory of one course, and the insecurity and misery of another. It tells the scholar that great attainments can never be disconnected from great efforts, and that genius, independently of application, will ever be found a broken reed. It tells the philanthropist that, if he will secure the legitimate objects of philanthropy, and obtain its rewards, he must see that his spirit does not act as a consuming fire upon the very interests which he is engaged to promote. It tells the patriot that virtue is the only safety of his country—that ruin to the best institutions hangs on the footsteps of national infidelity and crime. It tells the Christian that, in proportion as the simplicity of the gospel departs, Christianity becomes another thing—losing not only her beauty but her strength ; and that we may never expect to witness her complete triumph, till the last link of the chain that unites her to an ungodly world is broken. In short the experience of the past furnishes the best maxims for the regulation of our conduct in every thing ; and he who turns his



eye away from this record, preferring to be guided altogether by the suggestions of his own unaided judgment, is as wise as the man who should refuse to do his appropriate work by the light of the sun, because he preferred to do it by the erratic glimmering that dances at night among the marshes.

But that our view of the evil which we are contemplating may be more complete, let us advert, for a moment, to the source from which it springs, and the manner in which it operates.

It originates chiefly in an over-weening vanity and self-confidence. An individual only needs to be filled with this spirit, to break with the past forever. He hears a voice from within — a region from which, in his estimation, oracles proceed — bidding him abjure all connection with those who have gone before, and henceforth walk in the glorious light of the present — the present, especially as embodied in one human being, and that being himself. I have known some men who have set up for reformers — and far be it from me to withhold respect from those who are really so — whose reverence for themselves has some-

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times compelled me to laugh, when decency would have required me to be sober; who have forcibly reminded me of a certain celebrated character, who is said to have never used the personal pronoun *I*, or to have heard his own name pronounced, without taking off his hat. What else have we to expect then, than that men of such boundless vanity, will be disposed to expend all their reverence on themselves, and will never think of the past, unless it be to contemn and ridicule it? What else than that those who are not ready to yield to their conceits will be set down as mere *laudatores temporis acti* — enemies of all improvement — little better than cumberers of the ground? What else than that one new thing after another will be obtruded, till the individuals finally sink into insignificance, under the accumulated pressure of their own absurdities?

And this leads me to say that this spirit, originating in vanity, operates in a restless, feverish habit, that often mounts up into the very phrenzy of fanaticism. It is not satisfied merely with sealing up the volume of the past from the eye of the world, nor yet with stand-

ing aloof from that volume, and even heaping maledictions upon it — nay, it is not always satisfied with its own achievements or discoveries, though it may have pronounced upon them once with an air of infallible assurance ; but it sometimes casts them aside with the rubbish of other ages, and then challenges the faith of the world to something new ; and this in turn is soon rejected, perhaps to make way for some yet more startling novelty. There are individuals at this day, whose *religious* history particularly, might be divided into some half dozen chapters, each of which would seem to describe a separate creed and experience ; and no one can say how many more transformations they may undergo before death shall have left upon their character the enduring impress. Need I say that these spirits sometimes render themselves ridiculous, and sometimes even terrible, by fanaticism ? Resistance to their absurd dogmas is not unfrequently the signal for lighting the torch of persecution ; and if they are restrained by the spirit of the age from bringing forth faggots to eat up the flesh, yet nothing can restrain them from using, to malignant purpose, that “ world

of iniquity that setteth on fire the course of nature, and is set on fire of hell.”

I think you will agree with me, my friends, upon a moment's reflection, that both these evils which I have attempted to illustrate, viz: extreme reverence and extreme disregard toward the past, are exemplified in no inconsiderable degree, in the character of the present age, and especially of our own country. What means this attempt to bring back the superstitious usages of the middle ages — to take from the Christian rites their beautiful simplicity, under the pretence of rendering them more imposing, — if there be not abroad a feeling of undue reverence for the past — a feeling that mocks at the dictates of sober judgment and simple scriptural piety? And then, on the other hand, what means this flood of revolting innovations that has come in upon us during these latter years? What means the tearing up of ancient landmarks, both in church and state — the reckless impulses by which the multitude have been swayed either to acts of religious phrenzy or political desperation — if a portion at least, of the present generation, have not fallen under

the influence of an utter disregard to the past? If I mistake not, these are the two great errors which, above any other, jeopard, at this hour, the interests of our country. Their tendencies are, in some respects, the same, and they reach the same end by a different process. Each of them especially leads to uncharitableness and fanaticism — each of them works vigorously, balefully, to prevent the accomplishment of the great end of our institutions. Happy will it be for us, if the antagonism that exists between them, shall so far neutralize the influence of each, that they shall be prevented from ultimately laying the pall over our country's glory.

If then there is so much of good and of evil connected with the past, and so much danger that the good will be refused and the evil embraced, or that both will be treated with equal disregard, it is obvious that our relation to the generations that have preceded us, devolves upon us some important duties. I will only hint at these duties and then relieve your patience.

I say then, the first duty to which our relations to the past calls us, is that we study

it — study it as a record, not only of the development of human character, but of divine Providence.

Men show what they are by their works: the very soul is transferred to the marble, the canvass, the paper; and you feel that it is the man himself standing forth in his productions. In studying the Venus de Medici and the Madonna, what else do you, than study the genius of Cleomenes and Raphael? In reading the Odyssey, and the Æneid, and the Paradise Lost, you have the mind of Homer, and Virgil, and Milton, laid open to you; and you witness the sublime workings of each, without the intervention of any thing, save the book that you hold in your hand. And so in regard to the *history* of these great minds — the history of the whole past, — we are to study it as the record of the experience or the achievements of intellectual and moral beings; remembering that, “as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.”

Allow me here to remark that, while every part of history is worthy of our considerate attention, as a record of the developments of human nature, there is a peculiar interest be-



longing to the study of individual character — especially the characters of those who have shone as the brightest stars of their respective periods. Take Cicero, for instance — perhaps the noblest name of Pagan antiquity — and read his history as illustrated by his writings. Mark the process by which his wonderful powers were developed. Listen to his eloquence, here gentle as the breath of the morning, and there impetuous as the spirit of the storm. Notice his vast comprehension, including almost every thing, not only in outline but in detail, which the human mind could reach; his searching sagacity, piercing the darkest designs of his enemies, and bringing out before all Rome the very secrets of their hearts; his generous disinterestedness, counting his own life of no value as compared with the interests of the republic: and in connection with these noble qualities, contemplate the defects by which his character was marked — the darkness in which, in the absence of revelation, his mind was enshrouded, in respect to some of the most momentous interests of man — the uncertainty at best which attended his speculations concerning the great doctrine

of a future existence. You admire the statesman, the orator, the scholar; but you pity the Pagan. You sit down lost in the splendours of genius, but satisfied that genius — the loftiest genius, cannot penetrate the veil by which death hides from us the future. And who will not say that here are lessons worthy of being earnestly pondered? Or take the character of our own Washington — and see how it expanded, in respect to all that constitutes true greatness, into colossal dimensions. See it towering above any other character of the age — I had almost said of any age. See how magnanimity threw its grace over the triumphs of the conqueror, and how dignity and humility appeared each the more lovely, because they were seen in each other's light, and how the whole was crowned by a profound reverence for the Ruler of the world, and a devout recognition of His benignant agency. And then contemplate the services which he rendered, the perils which he encountered, the laurels which he won, and remember that his name, throughout the world, is but another name for greatness and goodness; and tell me whether there is not that in

the character of Washington, that renders the study of it a profitable exercise. And I hope it will not be thought an irreverent association, if I introduce here another character, combining infinitely greater attractions, and incomparably more worthy of being studied, than any other—I mean the Chief Messenger from Heaven—the Saviour of the world. All other characters are imperfect—this reflects, in every feature, the grace and beauty of the third Heavens. Jesus dispensed blessings at every step from Bethlehem to Calvary. His way was a thorny way, and the thorns pierced him continually; but so intent was he upon the merciful errand that brought him hither, that he heeded them not. He commanded the elements for the safety or the comfort of others, and they obeyed him; but never did he put forth his miraculous energy for himself, even though he had not a place where to lay his head. Glory hung around his cross—glory still hangs, and will hang forever, around his name. If you will, you may lay out of view all other characters, and spend your life in studying this; for here is a specimen of humanity—to speak of nothing beyond it—

that throws all others, even the brightest, into darkness.

But we are also to study the past as a record of divine providence; for though the only visible agency that we contemplate is that of man, yet there is an invisible hand which uses man merely as an instrument: the mind of the Infinite — the true *anima mundi*, is working through the minds of his creatures; and while they lay their plans, either to be accomplished or frustrated, He has purposes of his own which nothing can defeat or embarrass. It was His purpose that Jesus Christ should come in the fulness of time to be the Saviour of the world; and we can now see that innumerable agencies had been employed in preparation for that event, through all preceding ages. It was His purpose that the Reformation should occur under Luther and his co-adjutors; and amidst all that darkness which had gone before, every thing, under his direction, was tending to that result. It was His purpose that this continent should be inhabited by a civilized and christianized people; and we find that He worked for the accomplishment of this end through the wrath of man; that the bitterest foes of

religious liberty — the persecutors for conscience sake, — while they dreamed of nothing but forging chains for the immortal mind, were sending forth men to scatter seed that should yield a harvest of freedom and glory. My friends, every other view of the past, compared with this, seems frigid and unimportant. Man's history, disconnected from God's providence — what is it? But when viewed as the development of part of an infinite plan, it gathers to itself an interest that transcends our highest estimate. The humble instrument retires, and the great Agent shows himself. In the very impotence and short-sightedness of the one, we trace the almighty power and unsearchable wisdom of the other.

But it is not merely in the contemplation and study of the past that our duty consists; for this may be a mere intellectual exercise, neither accompanied nor followed by suitable emotions nor suitable conduct. In order that this exercise may subserve its legitimate purpose, it must be carried forward to a practical result; and thus the past must lend its aid to improve and exalt both the present and the future. And how is this important end to be attained?

I answer, by carefully discriminating between the good and the evil, and using each for the purposes for which they were intended. It has been admirably said by Livy — *Hoc illud est præcipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te in exempli documenta in illustri posita monumento intueri: inde tibi tuæque reipublicæ; quod imitere, capias: inde, fœdum inceptu, fœdum exitu, quod vites.* The treasures of truth, and wisdom, and goodness, that have belonged to other ages, should enlighten our minds and warm our hearts. We should cherish them as our most valued legacy. We should incorporate them among the elements of our institutions. We should connect them with all our bright hopes of the future. And we have something to do even with the mistakes and errors of the past — we are to use them as beacon lights to warn us of danger and point us away from those concealed rocks, those terrific whirlpools, that are scattered thickly over the ocean that we traverse. Wo be to us, if, as the history of other times unrolls itself before us, we call evil good and good evil; for though names may change places, the things

which they represent, remain the same ; and it would be a poor consolation to us, if we had taken into our bosom a viper, that we had called it a dove.

I answer again, if we would reap the full advantage offered to us by the past, we must regard it with due veneration, but not with blind and implicit homage. We must act in the spirit of that fine sentiment of Boileau :

*La docte antiquité est toujours venerable,  
Je ne la trouve pas cependant adorable.*

We must beware of that extreme reverence for antiquity that is startled at the idea of progress in any thing ; that loathes the brightness of the sun and loves to walk by a glimmering torch-light ; that would throw us back blind-fold into the ninth century and call it the golden age. This spirit may make its appeal even to our piety ; but we must resist it notwithstanding—must resist it as we value our birthright of freedom, and as we would answer to posterity and to God. But we must guard with equal caution against that reckless spirit which triumphs in blotting out the good and the useful, only because it is old, and in bringing in the absurd and the profitless, be-

cause it may seem to be new ; — which would palm upon us, in religion, or philosophy, or politics, visionary theories — *ægrî somnia vana* — and require our assent to them with as much confidence as if they had come to us in the supernatural breathings of inspiration. The spirit of reformation in a world like ours is a noble spirit ; and every true friend of his race will say — “ Let God speed its progress till it shall have done its perfect work.” But let it degenerate into the mere love of change — the feverish desire for excitement, — and its element will be the tempest, and its track will be marked by the wrecks of the bright and the lovely. We should bear in mind that evils, and sometimes great evils, must, for a time, be tolerated — not because we would not gladly be free from them, but because they make part of an existing state of things, that is preferable to any other that can immediately be reached ; and because the effort to effect a violent cure, would not only, in all probability, prove abortive, but would put in jeopardy other and greater interests with which it would be madness to trifle. It is alike true in the political, the moral and the spiritual



world, that the tares and the wheat must often be suffered to grow together till the harvest, lest, in gathering out the one, we root up the other. Let those who incautiously project mighty works of reform, whether in church or state, open their ears to the rebukes of the past. Be it that you have some plan for re-modelling our institutions, which seems to you to promise immense good to our country and the world; and you are resolved not to rest from your labours, unless death call you away, till your bright visions of reform shall have been realized. Admit that the proposed change be as desirable as you regard it—are you certain that the attempt to accomplish it now, would not be premature, and therefore ineffectual? Are you sure that the evils of which you complain are not essentially incident to a better system, than that which you propose to substitute? Have you duly counted the cost of the experiment you are about to make? Have you taken into the account that the institutions that you would overturn or essentially modify, are hedged in by strong affections, and grateful associations, and long established prejudices;—that there is diffused through them

the spirit, not of one generation only, but, it may be, of many generations; and that the blow beneath which they should fall, would vibrate to the innermost heart of the country or the age? The institutions at which you aim, you will perhaps admit, are at least tolerable, as they are — are you quite certain, if you could succeed in sweeping them off, that instead of the bright fabric which your fancy has pictured, there might not rise in their place some unsightly thing — perhaps despotism — perhaps anarchy, that would stand at once the wonder and the curse of the world? There may be cases in which it is proper to assail old institutions vigorously, without waiting to see them tumble under their own weight; because they may effectually hedge up the path of human improvement, and we cannot afford to see the world stand still for the sake of being complimented either for our courtesy or our prudence. But in all ordinary cases we are to move, if we move at all, against established institutions, with the utmost thoughtfulness and caution; and we shall often find, by restraining our impatience a little in respect to existing abuses, which

we could wish to see remedied, but to which the remedy cannot at once be safely applied, that we shall be saved the trouble of encountering them altogether, and that Providence, in his high and mysterious movements, will soon show us the work accomplished to our hands.

I have endeavoured, in the preceding train of remark, to bring out certain great principles vitally connected with the well being of society — principles that deserve to be attentively considered, especially by every American citizen, and by none more than the young gentlemen at whose request I stand here this evening. Let me then, in the close of this discourse, urge them, in a single word, to contemplate their own obligations and responsibilities, in the light into which this subject throws them. In bringing before you your relation to the past, I have virtually shown you also your relation to the future; for what the past is to you now, the present will be to those who come after you; and as the generations that have preceded have contributed to make *you* what you are, so those that follow will become whatever they may be, partly

through your influence. Learning, Patriotism, Christianity, each bends forward, and eagerly asks concerning the future—nay, the future itself sends up from its dark bosom the inquiry, what legacy of weal or wo, of life or death, the present is making ready for it? Shall Learning, in coming ages, light her lamp only in cloisters, or shall her radiance be as wide and bright as that of the sun? What shall be the fate of these noble institutions—what the fate of our nation itself? The oppressors of other nations have looked at us with alternate jealousy and scorn, while they have exultingly predicted our overthrow. *Delenda est Carthago* has been heard from their lips and read in their acts; and they have seemed to be waiting with malignant impatience, to be summoned to the funeral of American liberty. Shall the future be obliged to recognize them as true prophets, or shall it be able to stand up and charge them with having lied concerning its destiny? Shall the mind here continue free and its course onward, or shall it yet submissively stoop to take the chain? Shall Truth, and Righteousness, and Charity, joyfully fling their bright banners to the breeze,

or retreat in dreary exile into the caves and dens of the earth? Shall the blood of our fathers, which once drenched the ground on which we tread, hereafter speak concerning the past in tones of approbation or tones of rebuke? These questions, young gentlemen, it rests, in no small degree, with you and the generation to which you belong, to answer. I trust you *will* answer them in a life devoted to the benefit of your country and the world; so that those who are hereafter to live, shall have occasion to say, with a far nobler meaning than the Latin poet ever dreamed of—*San redeunt Saturnia regna.*