

**AN ORATION DELIVERED AT
CAMBRIDGE BEFORE THE PHI
BETA
KAPPA SOCIETY IN HARVARD
UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 29, 1844**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649278015

An Oration Delivered at Cambridge Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Harvard University,
August 29, 1844 by George Putnam

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GEORGE PUTNAM

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DELIVERED AT CAMBRIDGE,

BEFORE

THE PHI BETA KAPPA SOCIETY

IN

HARVARD UNIVERSITY,

AUGUST 29, 1844.

By GEORGE PUTNAM.

BOSTON:

CHARLES C. LITTLE AND JAMES BROWN.

1844.

ORATION.

MR. PRESIDENT, AND GENTLEMEN :

WE meet here to-day as scholars, at least to remind ourselves that we once studied, and began to be scholars. With many of us, indeed, our scholarship is little more than a subject of remembrance. The cares of the world have engrossed us, and the prizes of life have taken us captive. The vows which we vowed to Minerva in our youth, we have redeemed in our age at the shrine of far other gods, whose names are unknown in the Olympian calendar. However this may be, we have still an interest in the cause of good letters. It is to be presumed that the liberal studies and literary associations of our early days have somewhat shaped our ends in life, and shed an abiding influence over the most unclassic of our pursuits. We are debtors for life to the intellectual training which we received here. To-day we come to acknowledge it. For the day, at least, we drop all other interests, and are scholars again. It is fit, then, that we consider together of matters pertaining to sound learning and intellectual culture, its relations and its conditions. And in that

part of the exercises of the occasion which has fallen to me, I could not answer it to myself should I do less than present what I regard as the highest of those relations and the most vital of those conditions; and these are of a moral nature. My subject, therefore, is *The Connection between Intellectual and Moral Culture*; between Scholarship and Character, Literature and Life.

Pardon the professional bias, if it be one, which leads to this choice. I know I am not placed here to moralize, nor do I intend to preach. Here and now let intellectual interests stand foremost in our regards. We will take counsel for these. Let intellect be recognized as king in man. Let virtue step down from the throne, and put off the crown with which God has invested her, and take the place of handmaid to her vassal. Sovereign as she is, she is the willing servant of all in her realm, and delighteth to minister.

My position is, that there are moral conditions on which the best and healthiest intellectual culture depends; that the intellect needs nourishment and guidance from those ideas and affections, which have conscience for their centre, and duty and virtue for their object, and recognized spiritual relations for a deep, substantial basis; that the moral elements of character are necessary to the truest, most desirable success in study and literature.

This position I would illustrate and maintain — not now for righteousness' sake, but for the sake of the intellect.

And to state at once the highest point of connection between moral and intellectual attainment — the love of Truth. Truth is the one legitimate object of all intellectual endeavor. To discover and apprehend truth, to clear up and adorn it, to establish, and present and commend it, — these are the processes and the ends of study and literature. To discern the things that really are and how they are, to distinguish reality from appearance and sham, to know and declare the true in outward nature, in past time, in the results of speculation, in consciousness and sentiment, — this is the business of educated mind. Logic and the mathematics are instruments for this purpose, and so is the imagination just as strictly. A poem, a play, a novel, though a work of fiction, must be true or it is a failure. Its machinery may be unknown to the actual world ; the scene may be laid in Elysian fields, or infernal shades, or fairy land ; but the law of truth must preside over the work ; it must be the vehicle of truth, or it is nought and is disallowed. The *Tempest*, the *Odyssey*, and *Paradise Lost*, derive their value from their truth ; and I say this not upon utilitarian principles, but according to the verdict which every true soul passes upon them, consciously or unconsciously. Lofty, holy truth, made beautiful and dear and winning to the responsive heart, — this is their charm, their wealth, their immortality. There is no permanent intellectual success but in truth attained and brought home to the eye, the understanding, or the heart.

And for the best success in the pursuit of any ob-

ject, there must be a *love* of the object itself. The student, the thinker, the author, who is true to his vocation, *loves* the truth which he would develop and embody. Not for bread, not for fame, primarily, he works. These things may come, and are welcome; but truth is higher and dearer than these. Great things have been done for bread and fame, but not the greatest. Plato, pacing the silent groves of the academy, and Newton sitting half a day on his bedside, undressed, and his fast unbroken, rapt in a problem of fluxions; Dante solacing the bitterness of exile with the meditations that live in the *Commedia*, and Bacon taking his death-chill in an experiment to test the preserving qualities of snow; Cuvier, a lordlier Adam than he of Eden, naming the whole animal world in his museum, and reading the very thoughts of God after him in their wondrous mechanism; Franklin and Davy wresting the secrets of nature from their inmost hiding-place; Linnæus studying the flora of the arctic circle *in loco*; and that fresh old man who startles the clefts of the Rocky Mountains with his rifle, to catch precisely the lustrous tints of beauty in the plumage of a bird; — these men, and such as they, love truth, and are consecrate, hand and heart, to her service. The truth, as she stands in God's doings, or in man's doings, or in those thoughts and affections that have neither form nor speech, but which answer from the deep places of the soul — truth, as seen in her sublimities or her beauties, in her world-poising might or her seeming trivialities — truth as she walks the earth embodied in

visible facts, or moves among the spheres in the mysterious laws that combine a universe and spell it to harmony, or as she sings in the upper heavens the inarticulate wisdom which only a profound religion in the soul can interpret — truth, in whichever of her myriad manifestations, she has laid hold of their noble affinities, and brought their being into holy captivity ; — such men have loved her greatly and fondly ; the soul of genius is always pledged to her in a single-hearted and sweet affiancement, or else it is genius baffled, blasted and discrowned.

It has been remarked by a recent critic, what indeed has been often said, that the eighteenth century was an age of insincerity and doubt, of plausibilities and spiritual paralysis. This is sweeping, but we know how to take it. It describes a large portion of the intellectual activity of that period — that portion of which *Voltaire* may be taken as the representative. This man, half a century ago, occupied the intellectual throne of Europe, with that sort of sovereignty of which, when it is legitimate, death does not despoil the possessor. But that sovereignty no longer vests in him or his line. His works are no longer held to be of the living and law-giving sort, either at home or abroad. Out of France, some of his volumes are much used as text-books, for learning a language of which, as to style, they are amongst the best specimens ; and at home large editions are still published, as, of course, the man who has so recently occupied the largest space in French literary history cannot be ignored. No educated French-

man can afford to be ignorant of what such a man has said and done, and no French library could venture to call itself a library, without its department for Voltaire. Still he is not read as living and ruling minds are read. His histories are not referred to as authorities, but have become notorious rather for their perversion, careless or fraudulent, of dates and facts. His name, we are assured, is hissed, when quoted by the Historical Professor in the lecture-rooms of Paris. His poetry, with all its artistic perfection, is no fountain of inspiration or spiritual refreshment to anybody; and the highest French critics, with all their national feeling, have ceased to glory in the *Henriade*. His dramas, which are his best things, will probably be retained on the stage for some time longer, on account of the felicity of their literary execution and dramatic adaptation. His batteries against religion, that bristled once so fierce and formidable, are dismantled, and that beyond repair. His philosophical speculations have scarcely a place of refuge left them, except in a few crumbling chateaux of the French provinces, where some octogenarian survivors of a graceless era still mutter in the ears of an unheeding world the last things they learned — the denials of infidelity and the dogmas of jacobinism.

Why is all this so? Why has it turned out thus with that great man, so brilliant in wit, of gifts so varied, an intellectual activity and productiveness so immense, and an influence so wide and triumphant? Considering the position he once held, and the power