

**THE ADVANTAGES AND THE DANGERS  
OF THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR: A  
DISCOURSE DELIVERED  
ON THE DAY PRECEDING THE ANNUAL  
COMMENCEMENT OF UNION COLLEGE,  
JULY 26, 1836**

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The Advantages and the Dangers of the American Scholar: A Discourse Delivered on the Day Preceding the Annual Commencement of Union College, July 26, 1836 by Gulian C. Verplanck

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**GULIAN C. VERPLANCK**

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A  
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THE ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT  
OF  
Union College,  
JULY 26, 1836.

BY GULIAN C. VERPLANCK,  
*One of the Regents of the University of the State of New-York.*

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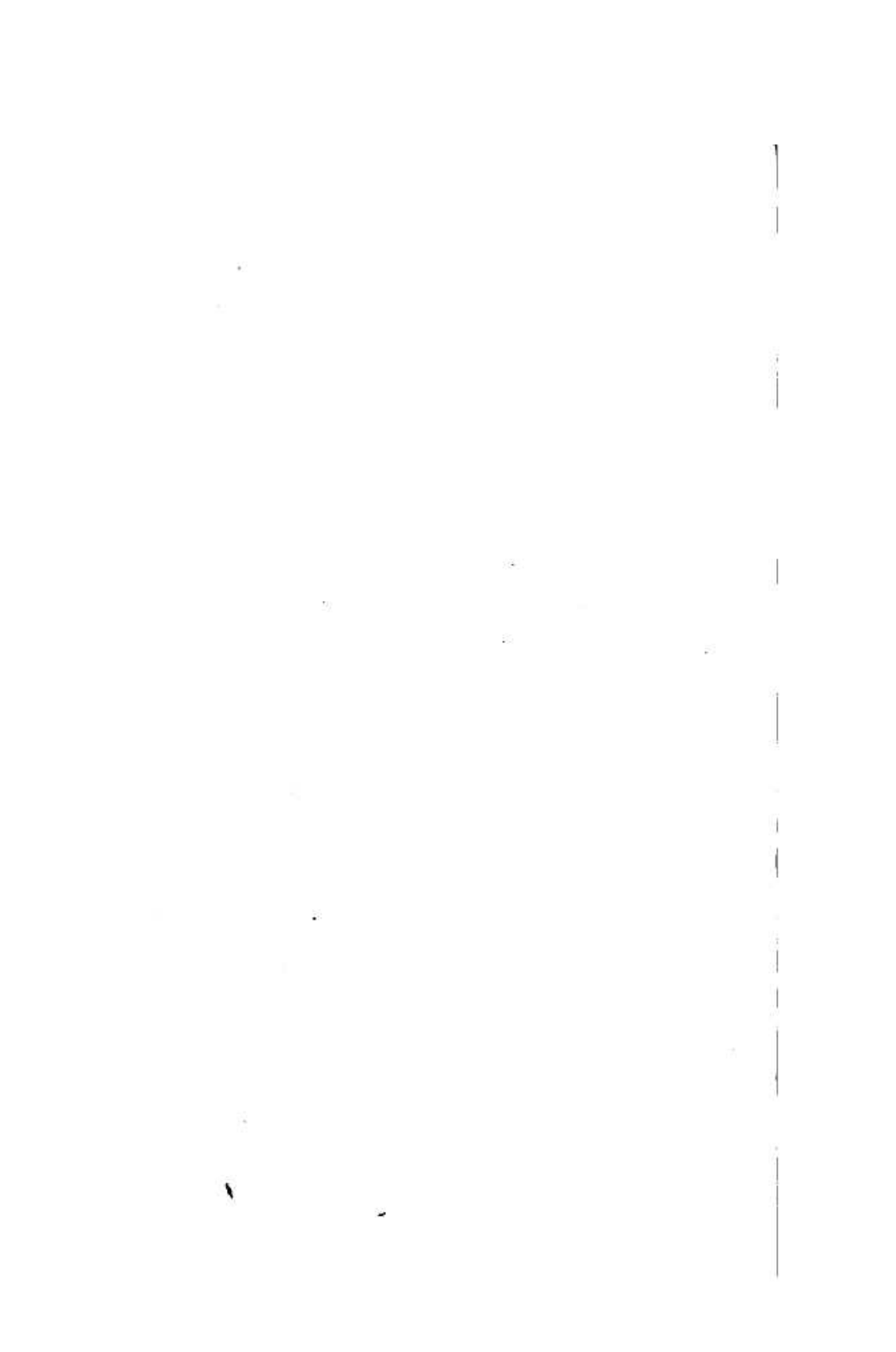
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**THE**  
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## DISCOURSE.

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THE actual state and the probable future prospects of our country, resemble those of no other land, and are without a parallel in past history. Our immense extent of fertile territory opening an inexhaustible field for successful enterprise, thus assuring to industry a certain reward for its labors, and preserving the land, for centuries to come, from the manifold evils of an overcrowded, and consequently degraded population—our magnificent system of federated republics, carrying out and applying the principles of representative democracy to an extent never hoped or imagined in the boldest theories of the old speculative republican philosophers, the Harringtons, Sydneys and Lockes of former times—the re-action of our political system upon our social and domestic concerns, bringing the influence of popular feeling and public opinion to bear upon all the affairs of life in a degree hitherto wholly unprecedented—the unconstrained



range of freedom of opinion, of speech, and of the press, and the habitual and daring exercise of that liberty upon the highest subjects—the absence of all serious inequality of fortune and rank in the condition of our citizens—our divisions into innumerable religious sects, and the consequent co-existence, never before regarded as possible, of intense religious zeal, with a great degree of toleration in feeling and perfect equality of rights—our intimate connexion with that elder world beyond the Atlantic, communicating to us, through the press and emigration, much of good and much of evil not our own, high science, refined art, and the best knowledge of old experience, as well as prejudices and luxuries, vices and crimes, such as could not have been expected to spring up in our soil for ages—all these, combined with numerous other peculiarities in the institutions and in the moral, civil and social condition of the American people, have given to our society, through all its relations, a character exclusively its own, peculiar and unexampled.

Circumstances and causes such as these, wide, general and incessantly operative, thus pervading the whole mass of the community, cannot fail, in some way or other, to reach and powerfully affect every individual. Any American citizen who will look about him with an attentive eye, and then turn his con-

temptation inward upon himself, and examine his own breast and his own life, will readily perceive how sovereignly some or other of these external causes control his fortunes, direct his destinies, and mould his habits and his conduct, swaying or guiding his tastes, his reason, his feelings, or his affections. But if these can thus reach the humblest citizen, how much more decided must be their effect upon the man of native talent and improved intellect! As his mind expands itself more largely on the surface of society, as it enters with a bolder ambition or a keener relish into the concerns of men, the pursuits of fame, of power, or of knowledge, just so in proportion must he sympathize more readily with the surrounding world, and in acting upon many, must feel more sensibly the reciprocal action of the greater mass upon himself. Hence, all that is singular and peculiar in our country, her people or her institutions, will be in some sort imaged in his mind, and will operate upon his mental constitution as silently but as certainly as his physical frame is affected by the food that sustains him, or the air that he breathes.

It is, therefore, gentlemen, that I have thought that I could not more usefully discharge the duty assigned to me by your kind partiality, or select a theme more appropriate to the annual academic celebration of a college, which already boasting among its

alumni so large a proportion of the active talent of our state, continues annually to swell that number by a numerous body of our most promising youth, than to call your attention to the consideration of the blessings and advantages resulting from the political and social condition of our republic, to the American scholar—not merely in common to him with the rest of his fellow-citizens, but to him especially and above others, as an educated and intellectual man.

These are blessings and advantages, in themselves peculiar, unrivalled, inestimable; still, like all other temporal goods, they are not unmixed with evil, not unaccompanied by dangers, always liable to abuse. Like, too, to the other gifts of the Most High, intrusted to man for the use of his fellow men, they impose upon their possessor weighty, solemn and holy duties.

It is then of these blessings and advantages of the American scholar, their accompanying dangers and their attendant duties, that I now purpose to speak to you.

The subject ought certainly to interest those whom I am called to address, for it is of themselves that I must speak. From the lips of wisdom and genius, the theme could not fail to be fruitful of the deepest and most precious instruction. For myself, and the very imperfect views I am about to