

**IMPORT AND VALUE OF THE POPULAR
LECTURING OF THE DAY: A DISCOURSE
PRONOUNCED BEFORE THE LITERARY
SOCIETIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
VERMONT; AUGUST 3, 1842**

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Import and Value of the Popular Lecturing of the Day: A Discourse Pronounced Before the Literary Societies of the University of Vermont; August 3, 1842 by Calvin Pease

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BY CALVIN PEASE.

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DISCOURSE.

I must acknowledge, that on a certain point, I have been hitherto resting in a mistake. And the prospect of appearing before you, as I do to-day, has most deeply convinced me of it. I had believed, that the expression of peculiar emotion, in which a speaker is wont to indulge, on occasions like this, was but a preliminary flourish; a kind of prelude,—if I may use the figure,—serving both to conciliate the “the attention and good-will” of the audience, and to lubricate the finger-joints of the performer. But, I stand corrected. A host of old remembrances throng in upon me, exciting an unknown conflict of emotions—of humility, and gratitude, and pride, and brotherly sympathy. For, it was but yesterday that I was on this stage as one of you. I cannot help regarding myself so still. And so I would be regarded. I am grateful and proud that I have not been forgotten,—that I have been invited to come up here and celebrate with you this literary festival. I love to be remembered by any body; especially by you, who are here conversing with what I was wont reverently to converse; in mysterious communion with those same spirits which breathed into me hope and courage. And I love to indulge the fancy, which, indeed, I cannot hinder, that I

am again, as I used to be, *in* the world, but not *of* the world—looking out upon its strife and its manifold phenomena, sometimes with longing, sometimes with dread—always with wonder.

It is to one of the newest and strangest of these phenomena, which you have doubtless looked out upon, not without interest, that I wish now to call your attention. It is that foaming vortex of 'lecturing' *de rebus omnibus et quibusdam aliis*, in which the whole land is whirling—when, and in what, to rest is a problem to which different solutions are given, according to the varying interpretations of the phenomenon itself.

These interpretations, indeed, vary between the widest extremes. On the one side, is heard the exulting shout of those who whirl unresistingly in the vortex: "Does not wisdom cry and understanding put forth her voice;"* behold the 'progress of the species' and the 'march of mind'! and on the other side, the contemptuous murmur of those who will be overwhelmed, rather than gyrate, against their will, they know not whither: 'What meaneth this bleating of the sheep in mine ears?'†

I shall endeavor to contribute something towards the solution of this problem. I know, indeed, that the phenomena which present themselves in the current of human affairs, are regarded, for the most part, as the bubbles which appear on the surface of a stream—evanescent and unimportant: the stream rolls on, and, with all our revolutions and reforms, bears us steadily along with it, towards the infinite sea. But, bubbles as they are, they furnish to each successive generation the argument of its

* Prov. viii : 1.

† 1 Sam. xv : 14.

peculiar hopes and fears; its sources of prophecy; the determinants and almost the conditions of its endeavors. Like the witches in 'Macbeth,' they 'stop our way with prophetic greeting;'^{*} and with 'hurly-burly' and 'bubbling caldron,' work out dark answers for eager questioners—but not, we hope, too dark for interpretation.

The witches' caldron is but too apt an emblem of the whirling, tossing hubbub of which I am to speak. But, I shall not attempt an account of all its magical ingredients. The political element—the whole matter of 'Social Compact,' 'Rights of Man,' and 'Rights of Woman,' I shall leave untouched, and inquire, only, concerning our literary condition and prospects.

The responses to such inquiry, I am persuaded, will be found clear and full; all that can be wanting is the Seer,

"————— to look into the seeds of Time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not."^{*}

To us, who are no prophets, it is sadly true, the curtain of mystery hangs around much that is before our eyes, and in our hands. The most we can claim for ourselves is, the assured belief that therein lies

"————— that truth we live to learn;"[†]

and the utmost of our hope, to be entitled to say, like Schiller on his death-bed, 'Many things are becoming clearer.'

I have specified as the theme of discourse, the manifold forms of lecturing on manifold subjects, which is

^{*} Act I, Scene III. † Ibid.

‡ Schil. Pic., A. II, S. IV.

so prominent a feature of these times. This is not, however, because there are elements in it, which are not, also, in the general literature of the day. It is, indeed, only a different mode of presenting essentially the same thing. I shall, accordingly, refer to the one or the other, as convenience shall dictate; for, my object is to determine the import and value of the phenomenon in question, which can be done only in so far as it can be traced to its sources; and these are, doubtless, essentially the same for both.

It is very manifest, I think, that phenomena of this kind point, more or less directly, to a want of the Human Spirit, for which they offer themselves as a supply. This want, although it always exists, is not always felt; and, when felt, does not always well understand itself—indefinite, and neither eager nor clamorous. In these respects it is very unlike bodily wants. When we ask for bread, we will not receive a stone, unless to fling at him who mocks us with the offer. Hunger is definite, and knows what it would have, and is not to be pacified or put to silence unsupplied. It asks for food,—and will not be put by with pictures of it—descriptions and demonstrations of its properties and uses. Unfortunately, it is far otherwise with wants the deepest and most vital—with spiritual wants. These it is easy to put asleep by imaginary supplies, and silence their clamors by that which is not bread;—and yet, only for a time—not permanently, nor forever. The immortal soul still abides, still lives, and will continue, at times, to make report of itself—raising its cry, though feeble and almost inaudible, for supplies, and will not always be mocked.

It is an important epoch for it, when it has found itself cheated by dreams and imaginations, and comes forth, with earnest and importunate demand for actual supply. For, it shall not be always unheeded. When it has become conscious of itself, and of its own wants, it seeks earnestly for knowledge and insight. It will know the truth of what it sees, and hears, and is. Light begins, little by little, to come in upon it, as if through crevices. A multitude of problems present themselves, which it must solve or get solved. Things, before unheeded, become wonders, mysteries. On every side they rise. Now, where is the Seer, the Prophet, the Teacher,—any body, that can keep to insight. For, insight it must have. It must find the truth. In that, alone, can it find rest. In these circumstances, whoever has any thing to say or do that will in any wise unravel these mysteries, or any of them, is welcome; and will be listened to and heeded eagerly and reverently. For solution and settlement, or at least the appearance of it, is now indispensable. But the latter will suffice—for a time; provided it be brief and immediate.

Indeed, with many—perhaps with the most—this want of the spirit is mostly *traditional*, and only dimly *felt*. It has been handed down from the fathers, that “for the soul to be without knowledge it is not good.”* And the Scribes and Pharisees and expounders of the Law give their sanction to the tradition; and it is *therefore* undoubtingly, believed. But, traditional sources of supply will satisfy traditional wants. The ‘form of knowledge,’ without the spirit, will keep all quiet in such a soul.

* Prov. xix: 2.

Yet, a *form*, at least, must be had, for the want is not *wholly* traditional. It is sufficiently felt to give a strong bias in favor of the tradition.

And, not only so; it is believed that this is *peculiarly* the age of knowledge—science—civilization. That which is, at all times, the interest and desire of men, becomes now their duty. Every man may, and, therefore, ought, to catch some glimpse of the light, in which all knowledge, human or inhuman, floats. Whoever, then, will promise to communicate, shall not want listeners, provided his terms be not too difficult and severe—provided he do not *so* communicate, as to shake the complacent belief, that there is something, in the age, peculiarly fitted to facilitate the acquisition of sound and sufficient knowledge. Knowledge must be poured out, without delay and without stint, that they may become *knowing* speedily, and feel themselves not altogether in the rear, in this 'age of progress.'

Besides, *handicraft* has now become scientific. That slow work of the hands, whereby the industrious poor man earned his bread, is becoming superseded. Science has invented machines to do all that, in a twinkling. So that it is not the want of the soul alone, nor the reverence for old traditions, that asks for science; but also the stomach itself and the palate. It becomes one of the organic wants. It is science or starvation. There is no alternative. If not science enough to make a machine; at any rate, enough to use one, and become one. Essentially different as is this clamor of the stomach for science, from the hungering of the soul for Truth, the former is still mistaken for the latter. This mere irritability