1838

Everett's Address at Williams College

Lucian Minor
EVERETT'S ADDRESS: AT WILLIAMS COLLEGE. SHAKESPEARE. HOMER. DANTE. MILTON.
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the highest effusions of poetry. This opinion, so discouraging to those who hope highly of
man's progress, through the instrumentality of so many systems of worlds, of the
inspiration which that hope inspires,—is combated by Mr. Everett with
unanswerable power. Let not the length of the extract deter any reader:

'I deem the notion, that the first age was necessarily the best, to be a mere prejudice; and the idea that a
partially improved age and a limited degree of knowledge are in themselves and essentially more favorable to
the exercise of original genius, in any form, appears to me to be a proposition as degrading as it is unsound.

'On the contrary, I believe that truth is the great inspirer,—the knowledge of truth the aliment and the
instrument of mind; the material of thought, feeling, and fancy. I do not mean that there is no beauty in
poetical language founded on scientific error,—that it is not, in fact, consistent with poetry to speak of the
rising sun or the arch of heaven. Poetry delights in these sensible images and assimilations of ideas in
themselves distinct. From the improvement of human language, it will perhaps always be necessary to de-
scribe many things in the material, and still more in the moral and metaphysical world, under similitudes
which fall greatly beneath their reality:

'Thus in Shakespeare,

the floor of Heaven
Is thick intwined with pathways of bright gold.

In Spenser's Faery Queen,

The sacred fire, which burneth mightily
In living breasts, was kindled first above.

In Paradise Lost, the moon divides her empire
With thousand thousand stars, that then appeared
Ruling the universe.

'Now, though these images, separately weighed at the
present day, may seem beneath the dignity of the
subject to which they are applied, they are poetical
and pleasing, (with the exception possibly of lampy)
or I do know that in any state of science, however ad-
vanced, such language will cease to please.

'But the point I maintain is this, that, as knowledge
extends, the range of all imagery is enlarged, poetical
language is drawn from a wider circle, and, what is far
more important, that the conception kindles by the con-
templation of higher objects.

'Let us illustrate this point still further, in reference
to the effect on poetry of the sublime discoveries of
modern astronomy. The ancients, as we all know, formed
but humble conceptions of the material universe. The earth was the centre; the sun, moon, and
five planets were shining bodies revolving about it, to
give it light, and the stars were luminaries hung up as
lamps in a vaulted sky. This philosophy not only lies at the foundation of the imagery, under which Homer
represents the heavens, but it prevailed so long, and falls in so entirely with the impressions made upon the
eye, that it has given a character to the traditional
language of poetry even to the present day. Shakespeare,
Spenser, and Milton, as we have just seen in this respect, draw their images from the same source as
Virgil, Homer, and Hesiod.

'Now I cannot but think, that, when the sublime discoveries of modern astronomy shall have become as
thoroughly wrought into the vocabulary and the intel-
ligence of the community, as the humble and errone-
ous conceptions of the ancients, the great and creative
mind will derive from them a vastly grander range of
poetical illustration. I cannot but think, that, by the
study of this one science alone,—thought, speech, and
literature will be wonderfully exalted. It is not in
reference to poetry, a mere matter of poetical imagery.
The ideas formed of divine wisdom and power,—of the
finite space,—of stupendous magnitude and force,—of
the grandeur and harmony of the material universe,—
are among the highest materials of thought and the most
prolific elements of poetical conception. For this rea-
son, in the same proportion in which the apparent circuit
of the heavens has been enlarged and the province of
astronomy extended by the telescope, the province of
imagination and thought must be immeasurably ex-
tended also. The soul becomes great by the habitual
contemplation of great objects. At the discovery of a
new continent, upon the surface of the globe by Colum-
bus, gave a most powerful impulse to the minds of
men in every department, it is impossible that the dis-
covcry of worlds and systems of worlds, in the immen-
sity of space, should not wonderfully quicken the well
instructed genius. As the ambition, the avarice, the
adventure, the legion host of human passions rushed out
from the old world upon the new, so the fancy might wing its way, with unwo nted boldness, into the
now found universe.

Beyond the solar walk or milky way.

'In Paradise Lost, there is a struggle between the old
and new philosophy. The telescope was known, but
had not yet revolutionized the science of astronomy.
Even Lord Bacon did not adopt the Copernican sys-
tem, and Galileo's wonderful instrument undermined
and discredited any system; beyond a more distinct conception of the
magnitudes of the bodies, which compose the
solar system. But it is pleasing to remark, with what
promptness Milton seized upon an new source of poeti-
cal illustration. In his very first description of the
arch-fiend, we are told of his

...his ponderous shield,
Ethereal temper, massy, large, and round,
Behind him cast; the broad circuit
Hung on his shoulders, like the moon, whose orb,
Through optic glass, the Tuscan artist views,
At evening from the top of Pisa:
Or in Valhalla, to descry new lands,
Rivers, or mountains, in her spotty globe.

'Grand and sublime as is this imagery, it is borrowed
from the lowest order of the wonder unfledged by the
telescope. I cannot but think, if the whole circle of
modern astronomy had been disclosed to the mind of
Milton, that it would have filled his soul with still
tinglier visions. Could he have learned, from the
work of his great discoverer, the organic law which regu-
lates the entire motions of the heavens;—could he
have witnessed the predicted return of a comet, and
been taught that of these mysterious bodies, seven mil-
eons are supposed to run their wild career within the
orbit of the planet Uranus; and that, by estimation,
hence, millions of stars, each probably the centre
of a system as vast as our own,—multitudes of them
combined into mighty systems of suns wondrously
instructed genius. As the ambition, the avarice, the
middle darkness of the Ptolemaic system, he would
have soared with the

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...
it, and with all experience. A preoccupation of it lies deep in the soul of man, spark as it is of the divine nature. The craving after excellence, the thirst for truth and beauty, has never been,—never can be,—fully slaked at the fountains, which have flowed beneath the heel of the enchantor's wand. Man listens to the heavenly strains and strains out still loftier melodies. It has nourished and strengthened instead of satiating his taste. Fed by the divine aliment he can enjoy more, he can conceive more, he can himself perform more.

In the subjoined extracts, are some enlightened criticisms upon the four greatest poets of the world. We place the name of each poet as a head to the observations upon him.

SHAKESPEARE.

With a reverence as deep as honesty or manliness permits for the master geniuses of our race,—a reverence nourished by the fond and never-intermitted study of their works,—I may say that I catch, from this very study of their writings and characters, a conception, that as high as they rose, they might have risen higher. I can sometimes behold the oil of the world upon their snow-white robes, and the rust of human passion upon the glittering edge of their wit. It was long ago said by the great Roman critic, that the good Homer sometimes nods;—the white robes of the muse Shakespeare, the most brilliant example unquestionably of a triumph over the defects of education,—mental and moral,—too often exhibits traces of both. As he floats on eagle's wings above what he nobly calls "the brightest heaven of invention," he is sometimes borne, by an unaccountable taste, into a misty region, where the understanding endeavors in vain to follow him; and sometimes, as he sinks with the swallow's ease and swiftness along the ground, too confident of his power to soar when he will up to the rosy gates of the morning,—he stoops, and stoops, and stoops, till the tips of his graceful pinions are sadly daggled in the mire.

HOMER.

Not a ray of pure spiritual illumination shines through the sweet visions of the father of poetry. The light of his genius, like that of the moon as he describes it in the eighth Idyll, is sincere, transparent, and heavenly fair; it streams into the deepest glades and crevices of the mountain tops of the material and social world; but for all that concerns the spiritual nature, it is cold, watery, and unquenching. The greatest test of the elevation of the poet's mind, and of the refinement of the age in which he lives, is the distinctness, power, and purity with which he conceives the spiritual world. In all else he may be the observer, the record-er, the painter; but in this dreadful sphere he must assume the province, which his name imports; he must be the maker:—creating his own spiritual world by the highest exercise of his mind, upon all the external and internal materials of thought. If ever there was a poetical vision calculated not to purify, and to excite, but to abase and to sadden, it is the vision of Ulysses to the lower regions. The ghosts of the illustrious departed are drawn before him by the reeking fumes of the recent sacrifice, and the hero stands guard with his drawn sword, to drive away the shade of his own mother from the gory trench, over which shehover, hankering after the raw blood. Does it require an essay on the laws of the human mind to shew, that the intellectual triumph of the greatest of our beings, under this ghastly and frivolous imagery, has never been born to spiritual life, nor caught a glimpse of the highest heaven of poetry?

DANTE.

In Dante, for the first time in an uninspired bard, the dawn of a spiritual day breaks upon us. Although the works of superstition rest upon him, yet the straits of the prophet were in his ears, and the light of divine truth—strong though clouded—was in his soul. As we stand with him on the threshold of the world of sorrows, and read the awful inscription over the portal, a chill from the dark valley of the shadow of death comes over the heart. The career of the poet contains no image which surpasses this dismal inscription in solemn grandeur,—nor is there anywhere a more delicious strain of tender poetic beauty, than that of the distant speer bell, which seems to return for the departing day, as it is heard by the travellers leaving his home. But Dante lived in an age, when Christianity,—if I may so speak,—was paganized. Much of his poem, substance as well as ornament, is heathen. Too much of his inspiration is drawn from the passions of life. The warmth with which he glowed is too often the kindling of scorn and indignation, burning under a sense of intolerable wrong. The holiest muse may string his lyre, but it is too often the incessant partisan that sweeps the strings. The divine comedy, as he calls his wonderful work, is much of it mere mortal satire.

MILTON.

In Paradise Lost, we feel as if we were admitted to the outer courts of the Infinite. In that all-glorious temple of genius inspired by truth, we catch the full diapason of the heavenly organ. With its first chord the soul is lifted from the earth. In the Divina Commedia, the man, the Florentine, the exiled poet, stands out from first to last breathing defiance and revenge. Milton in some of his prose works, betrays the partisan also,—but in his poetry we see him in the political intrigues in which he had lived, with upturned sightless eyes, rapt in meditation at the feet of the heavenly muse. Dante in his dark vision descends to the depths of the world of perdition, and, homeless figure, in some sort of semi-sleep, is impelled to the fearful country to repine at his fortune and war against mankind, how calm and unimpassioned he is in all that concerns his own personality! He deemed too highly of his divine gift to make it the instrument of immortalizing his hatreds. One cry alone of sorrow at his fall, one pathetic lamentation over the evil days on which he had fallen, bursts from his full heart. There is not a flash of human wrath in all his pictures of vee. Hatred nothing but evil spirits, in the childlike simplicity of his heart, his pure hands undefiled with the pitch of the political intrigues in which he had lived, he breathes forth his inexpressibly heroic strain,—the poetry not so much of earth as of heaven.

Can it be hoped that, under the influence to which we have alluded, any thing superior to Paradise Lost will ever be produced by man? It requires a courageous faith in general principles to believe. I do not call it a probable event; but can we say it is impossible? If out of the intellectual and moral elements of the commonwealth in England,—imparting as they did at times too much of their contagion to Milton's mind,—a poet like Paradise Lost could spring forth, shall we not find corresponding fruit of excellence be produced, when the world shall be universally diffused, society enlightened, elevated, and equalized; and the standard of moral and religious principle in public and private affairs, raised far above its present level? A continued separation of the intellectual world is consistent with all that we know of the laws that govern it, and with all experience. A preoccupation of it lies deep in the soul of man, spark as it is of the divine nature. The craving after excellence, the thirst for truth and beauty, has never been born to a spiritual life, nor caught a glimpse of the highest heaven of poetry?

* Homer I. VIII. 555.  
† Odyss. XI.  
‡ Dell' Inferno, Canto III.  
§ Del Purgatorio, Canto VIII.  
¶ Paradise Lost, Book III and VII, at the beginning.
a better age shall arise, there is remaining yet one subject worthy his powers—the complement of Paradise Lost. In the conception of this subject by Milton, then mature in the experience of his great poem, we have the highest human judgment that is the one remaining theme. In his uncompleted attempt to achieve it, we have the greatest cause for the doubt, whether it be not the most triumph of the human mind, in its present state of cultivation. But I am unwilling to think that this theme, incommensurable the grandest which can be contemplated by the mind of man, will never receive a poetical illustration, proportioned to its sublime reality. It seems to me impossible that the time, doubtless far distant, should not eventually arrive, when another Milton, divorcing his heart from the delights of life—purifying his bosom from its sordid and selfish passions—relieved by happier fortunes from care and sorrow—willting the wings of his spirit in solitude, by abstention and prayer, will address himself to this only remaining theme of a great christian epic.

Two or three more extracts, and we shall have done: though full pain would we copy the whole Address.

The following is germane to what we have before quoted, upon the dignity and importance of education. Can the thought fail to strike a thousand is unable to read, what adequate and neighbors; of whose adult white population a full turn cannot read?

'It is at once melancholy and fearful to reflect, how much intellect is daily perishing from inaction; or worse than perishing from the false direction given it in the meaning of life. I fear we do not yet fully realize what is meant, when we speak of the improvement of the mind. I fear it is not yet considered by legislators or parents, that there dwells, in every rational being, an intellect endowed with a portion of the faculties, which form the glory and happiness of our nature, and which, developed and exercised, are the source of all that makes man to differ essentially from such deprives of its appropriate nourishment, denied the discipline which is necessary to its healthy growth, this divine principle all but expires, and the man whom it was sent to enlighten sinks down before his natural death, to his kindred dust. Trained and instructed, strengthened by wise discipline, and guided by pure principles, it ripens into an Inteligence but a little lower than the angels. This is the work of education. The early years of life are the period when it must commonly be obtained; and, if this opportunity is lost, it is too often a loss which nothing can repair. It is usual to compare the culture of the mind to the culture of the earth. If the husbandman relax his labors, and his field be left until this year or the next, although a crop or two be lost, the evil may be remedied. The land with its produce remains. If not ploughed and planted this year, it may be the year after. But if the mind be wholly neglected during the period most proper for its cultivation, if it be suffered to remain dark and unenlightened, its vital power perishes; for all the purposes of an intellectual nature it is lost. It is as if an earthquake had swallowed up the uncultivated spot; it is as if a swollen river had washed away, not merely the standing crop, but the bank on which it was growing. When the time for education has gone by, man must, in ordinary cases, be launched upon the world a sighted being, scarcely elevated above the brutes that perish; and all that he could have been and done for society, for himself, is wholly lost.

Although this utter sacrifice of the intellectual nature is rarely made in this part of the country, I fear there exists even here, a woful waste of mental power through neglect of education. Taking our population as a whole, I fear there is not nearly time enough passed at school—that intellect employed in the business of instruction, are incompetent to the work; and that our best teachers are not sufficiently furnished with literary apparatus, particularly with school libraries. If these defects are as I have said, I believe a few years would witness a wonderful effect upon the community; that an impulse not easily conceived beforehand, would be given to individual and social character.

How powerfully must the subjoined passages thrill upon the sensibilities of a Massachusetts hearer or reader!

'I am strongly convinced, that it behoves our ancient Commonwealth, to look anxiously to this subject, if she wishes to maintain her honorable standing in this Union of States. I am not grieved, when I behold on the map the enormous dimensions of some of the new states in the west, as contrasted with the narrow little strip which comprises the good old Bay State. They are home of our bone and flesh of our flesh; their welfare is closely interwoven with ours; in everything that can promote their solid prosperity, I bid them God speed with all my heart. I hear with discontent the astounding accounts of their fertility;—that their vast prairies are covered with millions of acres of rich verdant mould, on our soil on an average can boast of inches; and I can bear to hear it said, without envy, that their Missouri and Mississippi, the Mighty Ahab and Pharaoh of the west, are better than all the waters of our Poor old New England Israel.

'All this I can bear; but I cannot bear that our beloved native state, whose corner-stone was laid upon an intellectual and moral basis, should deprive itself, by its own neglect, of the great advantages to which it was entitled. Give the sons of Massachusetts, —small and comparatively unfertile as she is,—the means of a good education, and they will stand against the world. Give me the means of educating my children, and I will not exchange its thriest sands nor its bares peak, for the most fertile spot on earth, deprived of those blessings. I had rather occupy the bleakest peak of the mountains that towers above us, with the wild wolf and rattlesnake for my nearest neighbors, and a snug little school-house, well kept, at the bottom of the hill, than dwell in a paradise of fertility, if I must bring up my children in lazy, pampered, self-sufficient ignorance. A man may protect himself against the rattle and the venem, but if he unnecessarily leaves the mind of his offspring a prey to ignorance and the vices that too often follow in its train, he may find too late for remedy, How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is, To have a thankless child.

'A thankless child? No, I will not wrong even him. He may be anything else that’s bud, but he cannot be a thankless child. What has he to be thankful for? No. The man who unnecessarily deprives his son of education, and thus knowingly trains him up in the way he should not go, may have a perverse, an irreclaimable, a prodigal child, one who will bring down, sly, drag down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave, but a thankless child he cannot have.'

In the next and last quotation, an evil is pointed out—the regard for cheapness more than for qualification in teachers—which is widely prevalent in Virginia. So numerous are those parents who prefer always the cheapest teacher, without looking to his mind or morals,—that, to a very considerable extent, the sacred office of instruction is a mere sink or drain, filled with the refuse of other pursuits. The latter part of the extract exhibits, most impressively, the irreconcilable war with the best interests of man.
If the all-important duty of leading out the mental powers of the young, is entrusted to the cheapest hand, that can be hired to do the work;—to one who is barely able to pass a nominal examination, by a commission sometimes more ignorant than himself, in the modicum of learning prescribed by law; and slender as the privilege of such instruction is, if it be enjoyed by our children but for ten or twelve weeks in the year,—as is the ease, even in the Commonwealth,—it is plain to see, that they are deprived of the best part of their birth-right. I know it is said, that these few weeks, in the depth of winter, are all of his children's time, that the frugal husbandman can spare. But it be so? Can the labors of the field, or any other labor be so hotly pressed among us, that ten or twelve weeks are all the time, for which the labor of the youth of both sexes can be dispensed with for five or six hours a day? I speak with difficulty on the subject, but such I apprehend cannot be the case. I cannot but think, that a majority of the citizens of Massachusetts, in all pursuits and callings, either, without the least detriment to their interests, send their children steadily to a good school, seven months in the year, and more or less of the time the other five. Without detriment did I say? Nay, with inestimable advantage to their character, to themselves, and to the state. It would be more rational to talk about not affording seed-corn, than to talk about not affording our children as much of their time as is necessary for their education. What shall a man plant his field and allow his child's intellect to run to weeds? It would be as wise to en­ up all the wheat, and sow the husks and the chaff for next year's crop, as on a principle of thrift, to sow ignorance and its attendant helplessness and prejudices in your children's minds, and expect to reap an honorable and a happy manhood. It would be better husbandmen, to go in the summer, and clutter with a hoe in the bare gravel, where nothing was ever sown but the feathered seed of the Canadian thistle, which the west wind drops from its sweeping wings, and come back in autumn and go to find a field of yellow grain nodding in the sicle, than to allow your son to grow up without useful knowledge, and expect that he will sustain himself with respectability in life, or, (if consideration must be had of self-interest,) prop and comfort your decline. Not spare our children's time? Spare it I might ask you from what? Is anything more important? Spare it for what? Can it be better employed, than in that cultivation of the mind, which will vastly increase the value of every subsequent hour of life? And to confine them, in the morning of their days, to a round of labor for the meat that perisheth, is it not when our children ask for bread to give them a stone; when they ask for a fish to give them a serpent, which will sting our bosoms as well as theirs?—Our governments as well as individuals have, I must needs say, a duty to discharge to the cause of education. Something has been done,—by some of the state governments, much has been done, for this cause; but too much I fear remains undone. In the main, in appropriating the public funds, we tread too much in the footsteps of European precedents. I could wish our legislators might be animated with a purer ambition. In other parts of the world, the resources of the state, too often wrung from their rightful possessors, are squandered on the luxury of governments,—built up into the walls of stately palaces, or marvy fortifications,—devoured by mighty armies,—sunk by overgrown navies to the bottom of the sea,—swallowed up in the eternal wars of state policy. The treasure expended in a grand campaign of the armies of the leading states of Europe, would send a schoolmaster to every hamlet from Archangel to Lisbon. The annual expense of supporting the armies and navies of Great Britain and France, if applied to the relief and education of the poor in those countries, would change the character of the age in which we live. Perhaps it is too much to hope, that, in the present condition of the polities of Europe, this system can be departed from. It seems to be admitted, as a fundamental maxim of international law among its governments, that the whole army of the civilization must be ex­ husted in preventing them from destroying each other. With us, on the contrary, while the union of the states is preserved, (and heaven grant it may be perpetual,) no obstacle exists to the appropriation to moral and in­ tellectual objects of a great part of those resources, which are elsewhere lavished on luxury and war.

How devoutly is it not to be wished, that we could feel the beauty and dignity of such a policy, and aim at a new development of national character! From the earliest period of history, the mighty power of the as­ sociation of millions of men into a people, moved by one political will, has been applied to objects at which humanity weeps, and which, were they not written on every page of the world's experience, would be absolutely incredible. From time to time, a personal gath­ ering is witnessed; mighty numbers of the population assemble en masse. Doubtless it is some noble work which they are going to achieve. Marshalled beneath gay and joyous banners, cheered with the soul-stirring strains of music,—honored, admired,—behold how they move forward, the flower of the community,— clothed, fed, and paid at the public expense,—to some grand undertaking. They go not empty-handed;—their approach is discerned afar, by a forest of glitter­ ing steel above their heads, and the earth groans beneath their trains of engineering, of strange form and su­ perhuman power. What errand of love has called them out,—the elected host,—to go in person,—side by side, and unite the mighty mass of their physical powers in one vast effort? Let the sharp volley that rings along the lines,—let the scarcely mimic thunder which rends the sky,—let the agonizing shrieks which rise from torn and trampled thousands, return the answer. Their errand is death. They go not to create, but to destroy; to waste and to slay,—to blast the works of civilization and peace,—to wrap cities in flame, and to cover fertile fields with bloody ashes.

I cannot, will not believe that such a man can rise no higher than this;—that reason and experience,—self­ interest and humanity,—the light of nature,—the pro­ cess of knowledge, and the word of God will forever prove too feeble for this monstrous perversion of hu­ man energy. I must believe, that the day will yet dawn, when the great efforts of individual and social man will be turned to the promotion of the welfare of his brother man. If this hope is to be realized, it must be by the joint action of enlightened reason, elevated morals, and pure religion,—brought home by a liberal and efficient system of education, and the aid of heav­ en, to every fireside, and every heart.