

# ADDRESSES TO AMERICAN SCHOLARS

BY JOSEPH SLATER

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ON CHRISTMAS DAY, 1837, Thomas Carlyle recommended a new book to his friend John Sterling. "A thing of very great merit and notability," he wrote, "by your friend Emerson, the American."

It is in the form of an "Oration" to some General Assembly of the Transatlantic brethren of Letters, calling itself "Phi Beta Kappa Society,"—have *you* Greek enough to interpret that? I have not. But . . . this "Oration" to the Phi Beta Kappa is a right thing, such a tone in it as never came across the water before: as I have not heard in the world of late years.

Since 1837 readers on both sides of the water have agreed that Emerson's oration, which came to be known as *The American Scholar*, is a right thing indeed. American readers, who have less Greek than Carlyle, can easily interpret the name of the society. But few, perhaps, even among the brethren themselves, know that Emerson's address is merely the best-known and the best in one of the oldest and most distinguished of American oratorical traditions.

Phi Beta Kappa, founded at the College of William and Mary in 1776 as a secret society for undergraduates, began to emerge at Harvard in 1782 as an organization of intellectual purpose and public function. On September 5 of that year, the first anniversary of its establishment at Harvard, the society held an open meeting in the chapel with an oration by Elijah Paine which was heard by most of the students and, as the president reported, by "some of the first characters in the State." Two years later the anniversary oration was spoken by Henry Ware, in 1788 by John Quincy Adams, in 1789 by William Emerson. Soon the anniversary celebration became a part of the Harvard commencement activities, and the first characters in the State not only listened to Phi Beta Kappa orations but delivered them. In 1796 the speaker was the lawyer Timothy Bigelow; in 1815 it was William Tudor, editor of the new *North American Review*; in 1824 Edward Everett spoke to an audience which included General Lafayette. During the next twenty years the Harvard chapter was addressed by N. L. Frothingham, Joseph Story, Convers Francis,

Orville Dewey, Jared Sparks, Everett again, Francis Wayland, Emerson, and F. H. Hedge. At Columbia from 1900 to 1910 the speakers included Bliss Perry, Walter Hines Page, Brander Matthews, Charles Francis Adams, Abbot Lawrence Lowell, and William Allen White. At Yale in 1908 there were two speakers: William Graham Sumner and Woodrow Wilson. In 1907 the Harvard chapter heard Lord Bryce, in 1908 H. H. Furness, in 1909 Woodrow Wilson, in 1910 Charles Evans Hughes, in 1911 Josiah Royce, and in 1912 J. J. Jusserand. Among the poets who have written for Phi Beta Kappa occasions are Bryant, Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, Cranch, Harte, Taylor, Stedman, Sill, Boker, Gilder, Santayana, Ficke, Woodberry, Bynner, MacKaye, Noyes, Lindsay, Frost, and Auden. From the beginning the various chapters published, when they could, the most important addresses. Often, of course, Phi Beta Kappa orations and poems found later immortality in collected works, but most of them are now to be read only in fragile pamphlets printed in Cambridge, New Haven, Hanover, and Providence.

The Rutgers Phi Beta Kappa Collection was started in 1900 by Librarian George A. Osborn, with the assistance of the Rev. Oscar M. Voorhees of New Brunswick, historian of Phi Beta Kappa. It includes 150 orations and 19 poems in print and manuscript, from Timothy Bigelow's *Oration* of 1796 to Douglas Bush's *On Being Oneself* of 1951, and it is supplemented by a card file which gives the location elsewhere in the library of the more easily available items. The collection does not include, for example, *The American Scholar* or Holmes's *Mechanism in Thought and Morals*, but it has a rare *Discourse Delivered at Schenectady, July 22, 1823* by DeWitt Clinton. Only fourteen of the published items in the collection appear in the two volumes of C. S. Northup's *Representative Phi Beta Kappa Orations*; three, addresses by J. M. Cattell, R. W. Prentiss, and Frederick Tupper, are not listed in Northup's *Bibliography of the Phi Beta Kappa Society* (1928). Thus in breadth and depth the collection provides a valuable index to the cultural history of America, to ideas which the intellectual leaders of the country solemnly and almost ritually handed on to young men whom they thought to be their peers and successors.

Of these ideas, the most important were also the earliest stated. Timothy Bigelow, speaking at Harvard only twenty years after the founding of the society and the Declaration of Independence, was sure of his country and of his duty as a scholar:

Our country has already taught the world the true science of government, and the art to be free. She exhibits the example of a great people flourishing and happy, among whom, to the surprise of other nations, gradations in rank, and exclusive rights, are entirely unknown. Why then shall we not instruct the species in the arts of humanity, and the science of universal friendship?

A year later, at Yale, Thomas Paine, who was shortly for reasons of filial piety and Federalism to change his name to Robert Treat Paine, Jun., read a poem called *The Ruling Passion*. Although it earned its author twelve hundred dollars and critical comparison with Horace, Juvenal, Boileau, and Pope, it was not, as he knew, a good poem. But it was an earnest and patriotic one. The ruling passion of the American scholar, he said, should be patriotism, and he hailed Columbia, virtuous, isolated, and factionless:

From foreign feud, and civil discord free,  
As is COLUMBIA, may she ever be!

For a century and a half, these remained the basic themes of Phi Beta Kappa orators and poets: the uniqueness of the American experience and the obligations of the American scholar.

But such themes require varied development as times and problems change. A chronological listing of the titles in the collection would form an outline of American intellectual history. An almost random sampling recalls the chief issues that engaged the American mind: 1803—*The Ghost of Law, or, Anarchy and Despotism* by J. Warren Brackett; 1821—*The State and Prospects of American Literature* by Samuel L. Mitchill; 1845—*The Connection between Science and Religion* by Andrew P. Peabody; 1865—*The Present Position of the Seceded States* by Alpheus Crosby; 1875—*The Relations of Honor to Political Life* by T. D. Woolsey; 1898—*Our National Constitution as Related to National Growth* by George W. Pepper; 1901—*A More Socialistic State* by Walter S. Logan; 1927—*Why Study?* by John Erskine; 1930—*The Young Man and Big Business* by H. Hobart Porter; 1939—*The Future of Intellectual Freedom* by James R. Angell; 1947—*Faith in Literature* by Morris Bishop.

The dominant tone of these addresses, spoken in the summer and at the commencement of careers, is one of optimism and acceptance. Almost a century after Timothy Bigelow's words about freedom, prosperity, and classlessness, Edward Everett Hale assured a Boston University audience that the American people were sovereign masters of governments and that the shape of our society was

not a pyramid but a vase. Such satisfaction with the state of the union produced from the beginning sanguine predictions about the development of an American culture. At Harvard in 1822 W. J. Spooner delivered an address which might more accurately than Emerson's have been called our intellectual declaration of independence. There is good hope, he said, for an American literature as the flower of a new and healthy society; but "let our writers learn to think for themselves; instead of culling from English books, let them look around on the anomalous state of society in which they live,—and we shall have American works." It would not be enough, however, to flavor conventional books with descriptions of the Susquehannah; a new literature would require a fresh vision of our new society, and it could thrive only after a general elevation of taste. Edward Everett, speaking two years later from the same platform on "the circumstances favorable to the progress of literature in the United States of America," was even more optimistic. Here patronage, he said, has been replaced by the competition of democracy, a circumstance more likely to produce "intellectual exertion"; here a vast territory with one language and character will give "elevation, dignity, and generous expansion to every species of mental effort"; here, unlike Malthusian Europe, man finds a cover laid for him at Nature's table, and wealth brings leisure for the arts.

Even industry, hated and feared by most English men of letters, was greeted by Phi Beta Kappa orators as a liberating force. Job Durfee, speaking at Brown in 1843, argued that science and invention were the basis of human progress. Political theories like popular sovereignty might become empty abstractions, might be perverted into the horrors of the French Revolution, but the steady development of science through centuries of war and peace assured the final liberation of mankind. He saw in a Rhode Island bar mill a Promethean force which had freed men from subhuman drudgery. Printing, the compass, even gunpowder: these had been the agents of the law of progress; and now had come the steam engine to shrink the globe, "to toil in the field, and supplant the labor of the slave."

Phi Beta Kappa oratory was not, of course, a unanimous affirmation; in small matters and large there were many dissenting opinions. Charles Francis Adams, speaking in 1883 to the Harvard society which his grandfather, John Quincy Adams, had addressed ninety-five years before, assailed as "a college fetich" the training which

Harvard had given him for the busy, hard world of the nineteenth century. Concentration on the grammatical study of two dead languages, he said, was a waste and a betrayal of youth, productive chiefly of that "display of cheap learning which made the oration of thirty and fifty years ago a national humiliation." But a deeper radicalism had been heard in 1881 on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the society at Harvard. Wendell Phillips, in an address entitled *The Scholar in a Republic*, pleaded with his young hearers to act, to "agitate" in the great political struggles of the future: for universal suffrage and prison reform, against rum and reaction. He urged American scholars to applaud every new Irish "outrage" as a distant echo of the Boston Tea Party, and he praised the Russian Nihilists as the righteous and honorable leaders of a people crushed by tyranny, the "spiritual descendants" of Sam Adams and John Brown.

But the Phi Beta Kappa Society was not a subversive organization: the voice of conservatism, religious, economic, political, and academic, was frequently heard at its meetings. D. H. Chamberlain's *Not "a College Feitch"* was a valiant reproof to Charles Francis Adams and a lively defense of dead languages. Theophilus Parsons, speaking at Harvard in 1835 on the perennial subject of the duties of educated men in a republic, had sound advice for a time of democratic turmoil and class struggle: let us, he said, infuse throughout society ideas favorable to the rights of property; let us combat those who raise "the hue and cry against the aristocracy of wealth." And at Hobart in 1929 the Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt warned against "consolidation and centralization of government." History teaches us, he said, that "every previous great concentration of power has been followed by some form of disaster."

Fashions in oratory, like fashions in ideas, have changed greatly in one hundred and fifty years. The patches of Latin and Greek which were once fitting and elegant came to seem displays of cheap learning. The rolling periods of the trained orator were replaced by understatement and the fireside manner. Edward Everett concluded his 1824 address with this apostrophe to Lafayette:

Welcome, thrice welcome to our shores; and whithersoever throughout the limits of the continent your course shall take you, the ear that hears you shall bless you, the eye that sees you shall bear witness to you, and every tongue exclaim, with heartfelt joy, welcome, welcome La Fayette!

In 1947 at Colgate Morris Bishop gave this illustration of the plight of literature:

A friend of mine published a development of his Ph.D. thesis, a study of an aspect of Elizabethan drama, with a reputable University press. It was said to be a very good book. (I didn't read it myself.) He assured me that it sold, actually sold, four copies. He suspects his mother.

But beneath shifting taste and varying personal idioms, the Phi Beta Kappa address remained formal and serious, in manner as in theme remarkably unchanged.

Thomas Mann, who spoke at Hobart on May 29, 1939, probably knew little more than Thomas Carlyle about the Phi Beta Kappa Society; surely he had never heard of Timothy Bigelow; but his wise and eloquent words to American youth were essentially the same as those which Bigelow spoke at Harvard in another troubled time. In this new and dire crisis of the West, said Mann, we are attacked from without by an enemy whose weapons are moral cynicism, spiritual nihilism, and political absolutism; we are weakened within by the ancient contradiction between freedom and equality, between democracy and socialism. But the inner contradiction may be resolved by synthesis in democratic socialism, and, thus strengthened, we will survive. This is now the great hour of America:

The preservation and guidance of our occidental cultural heritage . . . devolve upon America during these European dark ages. . . . May America stand forth in an abandoned and ethically leaderless world as the strong and unswerving protector of the good and the godly in mankind. I salute you as a country that is conscious of its own human inadequacy but knows what is good and what is evil; that despises force and untruth; a country that perseveres in a faith which is sound and utterly necessary to life—faith in goodness, in freedom and truth, in justice and in peace.

The simple certainties of 1796 had disappeared, but it was still the mission of America to instruct and to save the species.