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1850.

Classical Oration

What is the true progress of the age?

By
William C. Wilson
New London
Chester Co

Pa

July 11th 1850

"This is an age of progress" is an expression rendered familiar by everyday's repetition. We hear it from all classes & conditions of men. All unite to shout the praises of this the glorious Nineteenth Century. But should we skeptically ask, "what is the Progress of the age & where are its evidences?" men at once point us to the rapid increase of wealth & refinement - to the wonderful developments of science - to the triumphs of art over the difficulties of nature, to Telegraphs & Locomotives, that bear intelligence on the wings of lightning & bring Maine & Texas together - to steam-presses & Steam ships, that spread knowledge & make the old & the new world neighbors, & significantly say "these". But is this all? This of itself is no evidence of real progress. It may be but the development of man's selfish nature: it is consistent with & may be made conducive to the greatest moral degradation. Rome in her greatest magnificence, amid all the glories of her Augustan age, was but the Marble palace of corruption, the splendid Mausoleum of departed liberty, and the flowing strains of her Mantuan Bard were but the "Swan Song" of her dying greatness. But man possesses

a higher & a holier nature - that which truly makes him what he is & a man. He is capable of a nobler progress - a progress towards a loftier manhood. This is the great end of his existence, to which all other progress is but the means. His intellectual should always be subservient to his moral improvement, otherwise it becomes but the sad evidence of his depravity.

When God first "breathed into man the breath of life & he became a living soul" he stamped upon that soul the impress of divinity & placed him in communion with himself "but little lower than the angels." By the fall man's communion with the Deity was lost, the Godlike impress on his heart defaced. Ever since then, though wandering in darkness & error, his aspirations have ever been heavenward. His whole history has been but one continued struggle to regain his first estate - to revive the long lost image in his heart. It is this upward tendency that constitutes the grand unity, the Philosophy of History & makes it intelligible. Through all past ages the tide of progress has flowed onward. Though war & pestilence, rebellion & revolutions, the rise & fall of empires have disturbed the

surface of human affairs, yet beneath & through all the current, slow, silent & deep, has ever rolled on its resistless course; and thus it will continue to roll on as succeeding ages circle away; and as man approaches nearer & nearer to his original perfection, the defaced impression on his soul will revive feature after feature, till it again becomes as it originally was. The Bright reflection of the Godhead.

Where are the signs of this Divine Progress in this land & in this age? We can see them - we can feel them around & within us continually. It is manifested in the widening sympathies, the expanding thoughts & feelings of men. We are beginning to see & feel more fully the true dignity & high destiny of Manhood, to act & think more like men, to love & respect a man more, not because of his class or his sect, the color of his skin or the spot of his birth, but because he is a man & a brother. The contemptuous epithets of "Radicalism" & "Heterodoxy" have no longer the potent influence they once had, to check freedom of thought & frighten the rising energies of the soul back into the contracted shell of what Bigotry chooses to call Orthodoxy. Men are beginning to respect less the abstract, freezing doctrines of sectarian dogmas

& to love more the living truths of the Gospel;
To seek more for the spirit of Christ - the
spirit of boundless love. Society is beg-
inning to look upon the Lash & the Gallows as
~~but~~ the bloody relics of a barbarous age, as only
the means to restrain brutes, not men.
It begins at last to feel that Punishment
is not the only prerogative of the Government
of a Christian people.

"That man is holier than a creed. ^(good)
That all restrain upon him must consult his
Hope's sunshine linger on his prison wall,
And love look in upon his solitude."

These & other signs of progress, though in-
comprehensible to the narrow-minded bigot
& fraught with terror to the timid Conservative
are cheering to the heart of the true Philanthro-
pist. But the end is not yet. Other struggles
are yet to be met & other triumphs gained
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to brighten over the distant Hilltops, the mists
& shadows of the night still envelope the
plains below. Though from the lofty moun-
tain-top of Faith we catch bright glimpses
of the Promised-land our wanderings in the
desert are not yet ended. In this civilized
land the generous Sailor's back still reeks
under the gory lash. In this free land the
slave still clanks his chain. And this

Christian land the Hangman still plies his infernal trade & the wholesale Butcher of his race is still absurdly called a Hero. But these heavy abuses, though sanctioned by the prejudices of men, sustained by influence & supported by Power, cannot always stand before the progress of Truth. They may, it is true, continue to disgrace humanity for ages yet; but the progress of the past inspires us with hope for the future; the watchword of the age is "Reform", and the time will come when the chains that bind the limbs, as well as the narrow prejudices that shackle the souls of men, will be cast off. Heartless Demagogues may attempt to justify popular crimes & pander to the basest passions of men - even the ministers at God's sacred altar, forgetting the Holiness of their calling, may turn aside to support the Kingdom of Darkness & neglecting the mild spirit of Jesus, may pervert God's holy word to sanctify Institutions, the most abominable & practices at which every feeling of Humanity revolts, but it will be in vain;

"Still lives for earth which fiends so long have trod,
The great hope resting on the truth of God -
Evil shall cease & violence pass away."

And the tired world breathe free through a long Sabbath ^(day)
He who contributes to the intellectual improvement & increases the material comforts of men, may be a benefactor of the world; but he who advances the cause of Humanity, who widens the circle of human sympathies, who enlarges the feelings & ennobles the mind of men, is the divinest blessing of Heaven to his race. Franklin & Fulton may be bright names in our country's history; but future generations whom their earnest labors will have contributed to bless, will repeat with grateful reverence the names of Burrill & Chambling. {look on the other page}

(last page)

The mission of the true Reformer, though Divine,
has ever been a hard & painful one. His
manly opposition to old prejudices & long-
established abuses may reject him the hatred &
scorn of their supporters. Contemptions Pride
may sneer at him, hellish Bigotry may
dog his footsteps, with the clamorous cry of
"enthusiast" & "Infidel" & foul Persecution
hunt him to the grave; yet

"Despite of sneers like these, oh faithful few:
Who dare to hold God's word & witness true,
Still keep the path which duty bids you tread
Though worldly wisdom shake its cautious head.
No truth from Heaven descends upon our sphere
Without the greeting of the skeptic's sneer.
Denied & mocked at till its blessings fall
Like dew & sunshine over all.
Then o'er earth's warfield till its strife shall cease,
Like Promen's harpers, sing your songs of peace"

J. C. Wilson

Commencement Oration of William Wilson, Class of 1850
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

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