

Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections

<http://archives.dickinson.edu/>

Documents Online

Title: "The Genius of Revolution," by George B. Day

Format: Commencement Oration

Date: June 26, 1851

Location: Orations-1851-D273g

Contact:

Archives & Special Collections
Waidner-Spahr Library
Dickinson College
P.O. Box 1773
Carlisle, PA 17013

717-245-1399

archives@dickinson.edu

The Genius of Revolution

The laws of the national discover a close affinity to those of the individual mind. The contemplation of the phases of the one leads to the exhibition of the other; and no one can sufficiently appreciate the mighty workings of a people's intellect, who has not by a scrutinizing glance at his own, and philosophical inquiry into that ^{of others} comprehended the causes, modes of operation and effects of the changes there undergone. There is in the history of every cultivated mind an uniform stage of progression, and a period when like the Chrysalis, it throws off the trammelling encasement that has long confined it in darkness and bursts into light & liberty. Instead of clogged action, or stupid inactivity, it assumes wings - sports at will - bids adieu to the fetters that tied it to the dictates of others, and becomes an independent existence where before it grew & received its nourishment through the channels of a foreign source. It is at this stage of development, when occurs the overthrow of old opinions and long-established prejudices. Convictions that have grown with years and identified themselves with the very being of the mind are suddenly sapped, and in their fall shake to the centre, the foundations of the mental structure. Truths that stood like "massive stones deep bedded in the earth", take "shapes as airy

bubbles floating in the wind. A state of absolute belief is exchanged for one of doubt or suspicious uncertainty. The flood of light suddenly poured upon the inward vision, reveals by its intense glare the confused blendings of all ideas into every shape and hue. This earthquake movement, we have said belongs to every master mind, to every one we mean, that is compelled to break from the chains of error or to pass the circumscribed limits of too narrow a sphere. And what wonder that if, in this excessive reaction "bounds should be passed and moderation spurned".

Confounded by the dazzling rays of the newly-risen orb, for a moment these disenfranchised spirits stand bewildered, - anon as they catch a glimpse of the new world above and about them, try their half-fledged wings, soaring aloft, above every sober influence. Despising the limited lines of their former prison-house they dash like madmen here & there in the intoxication of their newly gained liberty - reel with all the looseness of caprice - fancy the world their own & they the Key to unlock all mystery & the lever to move all else beside. But the storm subsides; the elements re-combine; - Sober reason triumphs over the wild vagaries of fancy, and the man with developed energies, enlarged Capacities and fresh found resources steps to an exalted station. The world bows to his genius and submits to his master spirit.

This is the nature of the revolution of the mind individual; and through such a tempest of change must every mind that has to burst the thralldom of circumscription: - And

nearly allied to it is the nature of the revolution of the mind national. Ignorance and despotic dictate may fetter & trample it; and as long as the envelope of old customs and ideas is complete it is content to move under its antique load. But let a ray of light dawn in or a doubt arise as to the legitimacy of that long-endured oppression—let a knowledge of inherent power be once obtained—a vision of the sublime heights which are accessible and open, and straightway it hurls with fearful violence its shackles to the ground. A new-born spirit whose latent energies seem to have been instantaneously developed stands forth. Maddened by the galling yoke under which it was for ages passive, its first instinct is revenge, and nothing but the utter destruction of those who have been its tyrants and enslavers will satisfy the thirst for blood.

It is terrible to contemplate the wild rage of this gigantic power. A stranger to the reception of justice, it knows not to give it. Long-dragged at the wheel of despotism, it overturns not the chariot, but mounts—in turn the despot—the seat of dethroned oppressors. The scourge, whose lashes, it for centuries bore is now wielded with tenfold fierceness against the suppliant hands that raised it. No compromise—no parley—no submission avails for those who have become the objects of wrathful malediction. Crowns roll in the dust. The heads that wore them turn their ghastly, gory features upon injured crowds. Nobility becomes the target for musket-balls and the centre-point for sword-thrusts. Titles are

paid for with life-blood. Rant is the sure passport to another world. In a word, the genius of Revolution is a storm spirit. It gathers together the elements of destruction - rides upon a whirlwind - revels in carnage. He who braves its power or resists its terrific advances, is lost in its consuming vortex.

And when its victims have all disappeared, and naught else remains for vengeance, it turns its wrathful upon itself. Saturn like it will devour its own progeny. - will violate every thing sacred and holy. With singular inconsistency, Reason is enshrined and then worshipped by sacrifices to unbridled Passion. Virtue consists in patriotism that will doom to the silence of death every voice raised in opposition or demur to the prevailing spirit. The character of the national intellect is impressed upon its elements. Instead of the careful investigations of sage philosophers are to be seen the grasping after airy phantoms - the putting forth of fanciful speculations and the attempt to found upon them weighty structures which fall ere erected. The sound judgement and discriminating intellect must abandon the Council-hall, where sentences of death are now passed and the woe, not weal of the nation is consulted. The poetic rhapsodist mounts the rostrum in place of the skillful Statesman, and for the principles of government, descants upon the blessings of liberty and the beauties of that lawlessness he designates independence. The helm of State is grasped by the hands of fanatics; and the ill-manned ship with its course changed by every fitful clamor of the crowd moves staggeringly

on through the whirlpools and rocks every moment threatening to engulf her. The characteristics of revolutionary scenes are easily read. In national assemblies - burning eloquence & passionate appeals. In the rabble & the populace the fervid enthusiasm, which looks to a glorious consummation and anticipates final success. Impulsive daring, fire-like courage animates all breasts. The wildest spirits - tower the highest - side upon the storm and govern, if government then be, where chaos rules.

But the torrent whose flood is the result of broken barriers cannot roll forever. The tempest gathered in the calm of sultry heat must spend its violence. The ocean lashed to fury by raging winds will settle to its peaceful ripples when the blasts have ceased; and the wild conflict in the mind of a disenthralled nation must ^{terminate} cease when the exciting causes are removed, and its rage is expended. The reckless aspirants after fame and glory, fall one by one into the pits they have digged for others. The blood-thirsty are beheaded on their own scaffolds. Fanatics, enthusiasts and rhapsodists are buried under the sand foundationed structures they themselves have reared. The morn of reason dawns again on awaking freemen, and proudly lifting its head above the flagging waves, the ship of state moves majestically towards the desired moorings and anchors beyond the reach of winds & ~~storms~~ ^{storms}.

Commencement Oration of George B. Day, Class of 1851
Transcribed by Michael M. Geduldig, June 22, 2006
Edited by Don Sailer, October 2009

The Genius of Revolution

The laws of the national discover a close affinity to those of the individual mind. The contemplation of the phases of the one leads to the exhibition of the other; and no one can sufficiently appreciate the mighty workings of a people's intellect, who has not by a scrutinizing glance at his own, and philosophical inquiry into that of others comprehended the causes, modes of operation and effects of the changes there undergone. There is in the history of every cultivated mind an uniform stage of progression and a period when like the chrysalis, it throws off the trammelling encasement that has long confined it in darkness and bursts into light & liberty. Instead of clogged action, or stupid inactivity it assumes wings - sports at will - bids adieu to the fetters that tied it to the dictates of others, and becomes an independent existence where before it grew & received its nourishment through the channels of a foreign source. It is at this stage of development when occurs the overthrow of old opinions and long - established prejudices. Convictions that have grown with years and identified themselves with the very being of the mind are suddenly dropped, and in their fall shake to the centre, the foundations of the mental structure. Truths that stood like "massive stones deep bedded in the earth" take "shapes as airy

bubbles floating in the wind. A state of absolute belief is exchanged for one of doubt or suspicious uncertainty. The flood of lights suddenly poured upon the inward vision, reveals by its intense glare the confused blendings of all ideas into every shape and hue. This earthquake movement, we have said belongs to every master mind, to every one we mean, that is compelled to break from the chains of error or to pass the circumscribed limits of too narrow a sphere. And what wonder that in this excessive reaction "bounds should be passed and moderation spurned."

Confounded by the dazzling rays of the newly-risen orb, for a moment these disenthralled spirits stand bewildered, - anon as they catch a glimpse of the new world above and about them, try their half-fledged wings, soaring aloft, above every sober influence. Despising the limited lines of their former prison-house they dash like madmen here and there in the intoxication of their newly gained liberty - and with all the looseness of caprice - fancy the world their own & they take the key to unlock all-mystery & the lever to move all else beside. But the storm subsides; the elements re-combine: - sober reason triumphs over the wild vagaries of fancy, and the man with developed energies, enlarge capacities and fresh-found resources steps to an exalted station. The world bows to his genius and submits to his master spirit.

This is the nature of the revolution of the mind individual: and through such a tempest of change must every mind that has to burst the thralldom of circumscription: - And

nearly allied to it is the nature of the revolution of the [mind?] national. Ignorance and despotic dictate may fetter & trample it, and as long as the envelope of old customs and ideas is complete

it is content to move under its antique load. But let a ray of light dawn in or a doubt arise as to the legitimacy of that long-endured oppression - Let a knowledge of inherent powers once be obtained - a vision of the sublime heights which are accessible and open, and straightway it hurls with fearful violence its shackles to the ground. A new-born spirit whose latent energies seem to have been instantaneously developed stands forth. Maddened by the galling yoke under which it was for ages passive, its first instinct is revenge, and nothing but the utter destruction of those who have been its tyrants and enslavers will satisfy the thirst for blood.

It is terrible to contemplate the wild rage of this gigantic power. A stranger to the reception of justice, it knows not to give it. Long-dragged at the wheel of despotism, it overturned not the chariot, but mounts - in turn the despot - the seat of dethroned oppressors. The scourge, whose lashes, it for centuries bore is now wielded with tenfold fierceness against the supplicant hands that used it. No compromise - no parley - no submission avails for those who have become the objects of wrathful malediction. Crowns roll in the dust. The heads that wore them turn their ghastly, gory features upon infuriated crowds. Nobility becomes the target for musket-balls and the centre-point of sword-thrusts. Titles are

paid for with life-blood. Rank is the sure passport to another world. In a word, the genius of Revolution is a storm spirit. It gathers together the elements of destruction - rides upon a whirlwind - revels in carnage. He who braves its power or resists its terrific advances, is lost in its consuming vortex. And when its victims have all disappeared, and naught else remains for vengeance, it burns its wrathful upon itself. Saturn-like it will devour its own progeny. - Will violate every thing sacred and holy. With singular inconsistency, reason is enshrined and then worshipped by sacrifices to unbridled passion. Virtue consists in patriotism that will doom to the silence of death every voice raised in opposition or demur to the prevailing spirit. The character of the national intellect is impressed upon its elements. Instead of the careful investigations of sage philosophers are to be seen the grasping after airy phantoms - the putting forth of fanciful speculations and the attempt to found upon them weighty structures which fall ere erected. The sound judgement and discriminating intellect must abandon the council-hall, where sentences of death are now passed and the woe, not weal of the nation is consulted. The poetic rhapsodist mounts the rostrum in place of the skillful statesman, and for the principles of government, descants upon the blessings of liberty and the beauties of that lawlessness he designates independence. The Helm of State is grasped by the hands of fanatics; and the ill-manned ship with its course changed by every fitful clamor of the crowd moves staggeringly

on through the whirlpools and rocks every moment threatening to engulf her. The characteristics of revolutionary scenes are easily read. In national assemblies - burning eloquence & passionate appeals. In the rabble & ~~the~~ populace the fervid enthusiasm, which looked to a glorious consummation and anticipates final success. Impulsive daring, field-like courage animates all breasts. The wildest spirits lower the highest side upon the storm and govern, if government then be, where chaos rules.

But the torrent whose flood is the result of broken barriers cannot roll forever. The tempest gathered in the calm of sultry heat must spend its violence. The ocean lashed to fury by raging winds will settle to its peaceful ripples when the blasts have ceased; and the wild conflict

in the mind of a disenthralled nation must cease when the exciting causes are removed and its rage is expended. The reckless aspirants after fame and glory, fall one by one into the pits they have digged for others. The blood-thirsty are beheaded on their own scaffolds. Fanatics, enthusiasts and rhapsodists are buried under the sand-foundationed structure they themselves have [reased?]. The morn of reason dawns again on awaking freemen, and proudly lifting its head above the flagging wave, the ship of state moves majestically towards the desired moorings and anchors beyond the reach of winds and waves storms.