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Valedictory Oration

Class of '65

Wilkesboro Mills

June 23rd

The Principle of Assimilation.
As we listen to the sound of music in
the evening air or turn our eyes upon the
fresh beauties of a spring morning, we but
seldom reflect that there is another influ-
ence being exerted upon us, far more im-
portant than the mere gratification of eye
or ear.

At such times almost every man
becomes a poet and feels deep, down in his
soul a vague longing after the beautiful and
good after something fairer than the home-
ly shapes of everyday and better than his
spirit's selfish propensities. This feeling is
but transient - the sun soon banishes the
dew drops, the bustle of daily business soon
drowns the sound of that evening song and
again we are true children of earth.

Yet let life undergo a change, let the city
office be exchanged for the rural parsonage
and the pouring of endless parchments
for quiet walks by the winding river side and
he who without any decided genius would
once have made a tolerable counsellor will
now become a tolerable poet. The repetition
of the impression gives it permanence and
the mind assimilates itself to its surround-
ings. Every flower which we pluck admiring-
ly exerts its power upon us its influence and when
a home is full of flowers, poetry, painting &

music, their sweet though silent teachings will not be lost upon the inmates of that home. The painter's child passed his boyhood in his father's studio and the little son of the village chapel master, heard the cottage pianist among the first sounds which greeted his baby ears, but it was not until the one had painted his *Tragnofiguration* and the other composed his *Requiem*, that in this instinctive perfection of eye and ear were displayed the results of that childish life amid beauty and harmony.

Nor need we rest here with the individual, but let us extend these surroundings until the beautiful in art becomes the beautiful in nature and the individual is expanded to the nation.

The shepherds who kept their flocks upon the solitary moorland accustomed to the darkness of the tempest or the glitter of the stars upon the snowfield and they who in the time of persecution were wont to hear the thunder of the torrent down the gorges of the Highlands, were like the wilderness in which they dwelt - a stern, solemn and sublime people.

Far different from the wild fervor of the psalm, rising from the midst of nature's rudest fastnesses, sounds the brisk measure

3.
of the dance and quily does the peasant
relaxing from his vineyard's toil, wake
with his simple village airs the evening
stintness of some hamlet beneath the
sunny skies of Provence or beside the
winding current of the Loire.

The traveller from the mists of London
as his ship cuts the blue waters of the Tus-
can sea or winds among the green Cyclo-
des spread out like emeralds upon the
ocean, no longer wonders that this was
the land of song. Can we not distinguish in
the characteristics of classic poetry the ge-
nial influence of the Ionian clime?
The same sun which called forth the
rich clusters of the vine of Chios, gave to
the songs of Anacreon their warmth
and life. The rural scenery of the Sicilian
country life gave to the Pastoral its delicious
freshness and none but the pure beauty
of the eastern night and naught save the
warmth of perpetual summer could
have called forth those glowing passions
which made Sappho's story immortal
and dictated to Bion his hymn to the
evening star. The soft garden-like charms
of the Attic landscape drew forth the
sweet sorrow of Tragedy and gave to
Aristophanes the sublime chorus of his
Clouds. But while the mind of Greece

was thus blossoming in its beauty, there
 was in a distant land, a far different
 race. Let us pass to the shores of the Baltic,
 from the land where the orange blooms
 to where the winter winds whistle through
 the pine forests of Sweden or whirl the
 surf round the promontories of Gut-
 land. Let us listen to the sound of the
 northern harp as with discordant burst
 the bards chant the battle hymn of
 Rollo. Those harps of our ancestors were
 not tuned to the solemn sounding mur-
 murs of the Mediterranean but to imi-
 tate the dash of the breakers on the bold
 shore or the shriek of the wind through
 the strained cordage, for they were men
 of the sea - bold spirits who lived in
 the battle and tempest. Had Homer
 seen the light amid the woods of
 Scandinavia, we might have had
 a song of the clashing of swords or a
 legend of Thor or Woden, but never the
 stirring simplicity of the Iliad, while
 the bards of our Saxon forefathers had
 they been transplanted for a few gene-
 rations to the cloudless skies of Asia,
 would have handed down the strains
 of an Alcaeus or Pindar.
 Such then is the soul's assimilation to
 external influences from the physical

world:— let us pass from the heroic poetry
 to the heroism itself. Aristocracy has
 often demonstrated its power. The young
 patrician, though perhaps even inferior
 to the youthful peasant in natural pow-
 ers, yet acquires an ability to command,
 an inflexible pride and a haughty though
 perhaps somewhat fantastic sense of honor,
 which make him the bulwark of a
 tottering state and enables him like
 the old senators of Rome, to insult the
 Carthaginian with Hannibal at the
 gates. Where did that tremendous oligar-
 chy derive the iron determination, which
 to this day is proverbially known by the
 epithet Roman. In the cradle the
 infant Posthumius or Fabricius had
 watched the sunbeam playing upon
 the statues of his ancestors—the dicta-
 tors, consuls, statesmen of the republic
 and been stimulated in boyhood by the
 achievements of that Posthumius who
 led the legions by lake Regillus or that
 Fabricius who to move from the path of
 honor would have been more difficult than
 to turn the sun from his course. As were
 his surroundings so grew up the man—
 brave, proud, cruel perhaps, yet not devoid
 of generosity and with an unconquerable
 resolution which bade defiance to adversity.

6.
Nor does history fail us for other, different instances. The grenadier of the Old Guard deemed himself born to pierce the grey columns of Austria, the English seaman was told of the victories of his navy over the fleets of France and just so will the American sailor, should an occasion again occur, be taught to consider himself invincible, with the cool yet fiery courage of Hull and the Constitution beazl down again upon the Red Cross of St. George. The tales of 1812 and the war with Mexico have done their work. The dwelling upon these stirring themes;—the storming of Chapultepec, the stand at Niagara, and the breast works of New Orleans, has already formed us on a somewhat martial model; and with reason did Washington advise, seventy years ago, neutrality in the disputes of Europe, when he foresaw that should the generations of the future grow up like our revolutionary sires, in the midst of martial preparation, that a permanent thirst for glory once roused, Americans would become the Romans of the 19th Century.

The present is an age of activity and contemplating its lofty standard, it knows no impossibilities, it believes itself equal to any achievement. The lives of our great men are

in the hands of our smallest school children
and they are each a sermon on the text
"Go thou and do likewise." I see the age sit-
ting in his workshop and by the forge amid
the dust and sweat of his daily toil. His
arm is brawny, for he is of the people and can
swing the pledge but the dome of intellect
just over those deep set eyes that burn with
the inspired prophets gaze while he watches the
future of promise rise slowly before him, sitting
there at his noontide rest, having borne the bur-
den and heat of the day, and having as his
last task broken the fetters of the slave that lie
beside him, he turns over with his heavy work-
man fingers the heaven given page of the
Great Gospel of Toil. That home in
which the beautiful and sublime in history
and art, are the frequent theme of the
evening circle, will send forth its youthful
members with the lofty purpose burnt in
upon their boyish natures:— as our greatest
American authoress has said of her family,
that she attributes much of their success, to the
frequent reminders of their father that they
were expected to distinguish themselves.
Hence the refining influence of poetry; not
because it narrates new facts or reveals new
principles, but because it keeps before our
minds the noble ideal, more exalted perhaps
than we shall ever meet in common life, but

none the less ennobling because usually
 unrealized. Hence as we have said, the
 value of an able biography and hence too
 a work of fiction, if it be written in a healthy
 tone, may have the best influence in arous-
 ing the dormant energies of our nature,
 since it will have in its characters ever
 present to the mind, the effect of virtuous
 companions. It becomes us then to keep before
 us the elevating in all its forms, to surround
 ourselves with pictures, flowers, music - the
 poetry of thought and the poetry of motion,
 to let the lives and thoughts of the mighty
 dead speak to us from our library shelves
 while their busts look down upon us from
 its walls, to keep an atmosphere of beauty
 and goodness about us, that by this great
 principle of assimilation, we may become
 refined, strengthened, elevated and
 when we rise from our books and pace
 soberly along our garden walks, may we
 remember that we are entering the great
 studio of nature, that God's works are ar-
 ranged in the glories which surround us,
 while the great Countenance of Divinity
 Himself looks benignantly down upon us
 from the walls of the universe.

Ladies & Gentlemen -

To you who are
 wont to see as an old sight the ceremonies

of Commencement, we would return our thanks for that interest which leads you to some extent to sympathize with each departing class. Our intercourse, so far as it has extended, has been pleasant and it is with genuine regret that we bid you farewell.

Gentlemen of the Board of Trustees:—
Although we have not been intimately associated, yet we know that the benefits of your supervision have not been less real because not strikingly brought before our notice. To you we owe much of the stability of our College. May you be yet more successful in the future than you have been in the past and each of you long hold, the most flattering trust to the private citizen, the superintendence of our institutions of learning, &c.

Mr. President & Gentlemen of the Faculty:— While we recall your professional teachings with profit and while we hope to appreciate their full value, we shall dwell with yet more pleasure on that gratuitous counsel and instruction which could only spring from a warm heart and matured experience. The sound argument and luminous exposition may be practically useful, but the sympathy which felt with us, the liberality which could endure

discussion and the serious words of dignified counsel directing us ever to the elevating in nature and ^{high} ~~low~~, will live in her our warmest affection, our fullest confidence, our highest aspirations and in memory of these we bid you an affectionate farewell.

Fellow Classmates:

In parting from you we feel most deeply. For years we have been together. We have learned one another's failings and virtues. We have contended side by side in all the warmth of emulation. We have tested each other's powers and learned to respect them. In after life, often will the memory of years now closing be present with us:—"The battles, sieges, fortunes, we have passed" will come back upon us. They will rise before us in the noise of the street and the quiet of the study, smoothing the merchant's contracted brow, causing the clergyman to pause half sadly over his unfinished sermon and in memory of moments of purest happiness too sweet to last, making perhaps even the judge forget his dignity for the moment—"And the lawyers smile some afternoon, As he hums in court an old love tune."

We will remember too those hours sacred to friendship's circle, when the sparkle of wit and the raciness of humor, gave new life to the genial warmth of each heart; when

the song was sung or the tale told, when industry flung aside her unfinished task and gravity relaxing joined hands with mirth to make those evenings worthy of the gods. We recall too those hours when with a favorite companion, treading soberly along the cool walks, in the glory of the sunset, in the solemn vesper time, we learned to love yet more by these associations the noble pages of literature; when reviewing the past, and glancing over the present we drew from the embrace of sleeping centuries their ancient wisdom and feeling our hearts burn within us as we spoke of our immortality, we stood, as it were, at the ^{end} close of the dim chancel of the past and looking through hope's tinted pane, saw the future all glorious in the golden distance.

"Farewell!" A word which must be and hath ^{been,} been, Get one which makes us linger! Bye gone years are bidding us adieu; the last of youth is leaving us; we stand upon the world's frontier; the present sounds her trumpet signal; life's difficulties raise their frowning barriers before us: Forward then upon her ditch and rampart!

Commencement Oration of Wilberforce Wells, Class of 1866
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

Valedictory Oration: The Principle of Assimilation

As we listen to the sound of music in the evening air or turn our eyes upon the fresh beauties of a spring morning, we but seldom reflect that there is another influence being exerted upon us, far more important than the mere gratification of our eye or ear.

At such times almost every man becomes a poet and feels deep down in his soul a vague longing after the beautiful and good after something fairer than the homely shapes of everyday and better than his spirits selfish imaginings. This feeling is but transient – the sun soon banishes the dew drop, the bustle of the daily business soon drowns the sound of that evening song and again we are true children of earth. Yet let life undergo a change, let the city office be changed for the rural parsonage and the poring over endless parchments for quiet walks by the winding river side and he who without any decided genius would once have made a tolerable counsellor will now become a tolerable poet. The repetition of the impression gives it permanence and the mind assimilates itself to its surroundings. Every flower which we pluck admiringly exerts upon us its influence and when a home full of flowers, poetry, painting &

music, their sweet though silent teachings will not be lost upon the inmates of that home. The painter's child passed his boyhood in his father's studio and the little son of the village chapel master heard the cottage piano among the first sounds which greeted his baby ears, but it was not until the one had painted his transfiguration and the other composed his Requiem, that in this instinctive perfection of eye and ear were displayed the results of that childish life amid beauty and harmony.

Nor need we rest here with the individual, but let us extend these surroundings until the beautiful in art becomes the beautiful in nature and the individual is expanded to the nation. The shepherds who kept their flocks upon the solitary moorland accustomed to the darkness of the tempest or the glitter of the stars upon the snowfield and they who in the time of persecution were wont to hear the thunder of the torrent down the gorges of the Highlands, were like the wilderness in which they dwell – a stern, solemn and sublime people.

Far different from the wild fervor of the psalm, rising from the midst of nature's rudest [fastnesses?] sounds the brisk measure

of the dance and gaily does the peasant relaxing from his vineyards truly wake with his simple village airs the evening stillness of some hamlet beneath the sunny skies of Provence or beside the winding current of the Loire.

The traveller from the mists of London as his ship cuts the blue waters of the Tuscan sea or winds among the green Cyclades spread out like emeralds upon the ocean, no longer wonders that this was the land of song. Can we not distinguish in the characteristics of classic poetry the genial influence of the Ionian clime! The same sun which called for the rich clusters of the vine of [one word illegible – Chos?], gave to the songs of the Anacreon their warmth and life. The spiral scenery of the Sicilian country life gave to the Pastoral its delicious freshness and none but

the pure beauty of the eastern night and naught save the warmth of perpetual summer could have called forth those glowing passions which made Sappho's story immortal and dictated to [Byron?] his hymn to the evening star. The soft garden-like charms of the Attic landscape drew forth the sweet sorrow of Tragedy and gave to Aristophanes the sublime chorus of his Clouds. But while the mind of Greece

was thus blossoming in its beauty, there was in a distant land a far different rage. Let us pass to the shores of the Baltic, from the land where the orange blooms to where the winter winds whistle through the pine forests of Sweden or whirl the surf round the promontories of Jutland. Let us listen to the sound of the northern harps as with discordant burst the bards chant the battle hymn of Rollo. Those harps of our ancestors were not tuned to the solemn sounding murmurs of the Mediterranean but to imitate the dash of the breakers on the bold shore or the shriek of the wind through the strained cordage, for they were men of the sea – bold spirits who lived in the battle and tempest. Had Homer seen the light amid the woods of Scandinavia, we might have had a song for the clashing of swords or a legend of Thor or Woden, but never the stirring simplicity of the Iliad, while the bards of our Saxon forefathers had they been transplanted for a few generations to the cloudless skies of Asia, would have handed down the strains of an Alcaeus or Pindar.

Such then is the soul's assimilation to external influences from the physical

world: -- let us pass from the heroic poetry to the heroism itself. Aristocracy has often demonstrated its power. The young patrician, though perhaps even inferior to the youthful peasant in natural powers, yet acquires an ability to command, an inflexible pride and a haughty though perhaps somewhat fantastic sense of honor, which make him the bulwark of a tottering state and enables him like the old senators of Rome to insult to Carthagenean with Hannibal at the gates. Where did that tremendous oligarchy derive the iron determination, which to this day is proverbially known by the epithet Roman. In the cradle the infant Posthumius or Fabricius had watched the sunbeam playing upon the statues of his ancestors – the dictators, consuls, statesmen of the republic and been stimulated in boyhood by the achievements of that Posthumius who led the legions by lake Regillus or that Fabricius whom to move from the path of honor would have been more difficult than to turn the sun from his course. As were his surroundings so grew up the man, brave, proud, cruel perhaps, yet not devoid of generosity and with an unconquerable resolution which bade defiance to adversity.

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grow up like our revolutionary sires, in the midst of martial preparation, that a permanent thirst for glory once roused, Americans would become the Romans of the 19th Century.

The present is an age of activity and contemplating its lofty standard, it knows no impossibilities, it believes itself equal to any achievement. The lives of our great men are

in the hands of our smallest school children and they are each a sermon on the text "Go thou and do likewise." I see the age sitting in his workshop and by the forge amid the dust and sweat of his daily toil. His arm is brawny, for he is of the people and can swing the sledge but the dome of intellect juts over those deep set eyes that burn with the inspired prophets gaze while he watches the future of promise rise slowly before him and sitting there at his noontide rest, having borne the burden and heat of the day and having as his last task broken the fetters of the slave that lie beside him, he turns over with his heavy workman fingers the heaven given page of the Great Gospel of Toil. That home in which the beautiful and sublime in history and act, are the frequent theme of the evening circle, will send forth its youthful members with the lofty purpose burnt in upon their boyish natures: -- as our greatest American authoress has said of her family, that she attributes much of their success, to the frequent reminders of their father that they were expected to distinguish themselves. Hence the refining influence of poetry, not because it narrates new acts or reveals new principles, but because it keeps before our minds the noble ideal, more exalted perhaps than we shall ever meet in common life, but

none the less ennobling because usually unrealized. Hence as we have said, the value of an able biography and hence to a work of fiction, if it be written in a healthy tone, may have the best influence in arousing the dormant energies of our nature, since it will have in its characters ever present to the mind, the effect of virtuous companions. It becomes us then to keep before us the elevating in all its forms, to surround ourselves with pictures, flowers, music – the poetry of thought and the poetry of motion, to let the lives and thoughts of the mighty dead speak to us from our library shelves while their busts look down upon us from its walls, to keep an atmosphere of beauty and goodness about us, that by this great principle of assimilation, we may become refined, strengthened, elevated and when we rise from our books and pace soberly along our garden walks, may we remember that we are entering the great studio of nature, that God's works are arranged in the glories which surround us, while the great countenance of Divinity Himself looks benignantly down upon us from the walls of the universe.

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