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82. ADDRESS

BEFORE

The Literary Societies

OF

New Institute.

by

Rev. W. H. S. Wilson.

1855.



AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED

BEFORE THE TWO LITERARY SOCIETIES

OF

NEW INSTITUTE,

Iredell Co., N. C., June 6th, 1855.

BY REV. N. H. D. WILSON.

Salisbury :

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1855.

CORRESPONDENCE.

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NEW INSTITUTE, N. C., June 6th, 1855.

REV. AND DEAR SIR :

We are authorized by the Philomathean Society to tender to you their sincere thanks for the excellent address delivered by you to-day and respectfully request of you a copy for publication.

Yours, most respectfully,

G. W. WEAVER,	} Committee.
O. F. CLEGG,	
J. W. KIRK,	

Rev. N. H. D. WILSON.

—o—

PARSONAGE, NEW INSTITUTE,	}
Iredell Co., N. C., June 7th, 1855.	

YOUNG GENTLEMEN :

Your note of yesterday has been received and considered. In reply allow me to say, without endorsing the opinion of your society, expressed through you, that my address should be published, or on the other hand, affecting to believe that it possesses no merit, in compliance with your request I place a copy at your disposal.

Very respectfully yours,

N. H. D. WILSON.

G. W. WEAVER,	} Committee.
O. F. CLEGG,	
J. W. KIRK,	

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ADDRESS.

*Young Gentlemen of the
Philomathean and Ciceronian Societies :*

The large portion of my time which I foresaw and foretold you would be required in the performance of other duties, which caused me to hesitate when requested to address you, is a sufficient reason why I have not made such preparation as is desirable, and as I should have made under more favorable circumstances. I have, however, hastily thrown together some thoughts which I trust may be useful.

In choosing a theme for your reflection, I have not felt called upon to attempt a definition of education, an argument in its favor, or a discrimination between the theories relative to it. These I leave in more competent hands. These I presume, you have received from your able and faithful corps of instructors. I prefer to employ this occasion in impressing upon your minds the duty of striving to form a *correct self-estimation*.

This is a lesson, not only suitable for the young gentleman who has finished his collegiate or academic course, but likewise for the student of every literary grade below him. *It is for all.*

I need not remind you that this advice diverts you at once from the beaten track of popular example. Man, though charged with being excessively selfish, seems to make an effort to redeem himself from liability to this charge, by taxing

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his powers, draining the sources of his information, and spending his time, in weighing and measuring the history, character and interests of others. We will not attempt to traverse together this promenading ground of the multitude, not even to give a particular caution against the many flowers and fruits that bloom and grow, by illusion, under the upas that shades it; but direct our steps in a narrower and more rugged path, made healthful with the atmosphere of valuable truth.

The ancients regarded the maxim, "know thyself," with great veneration. Thales, one of the seven wise men of Greece, is said to have been the first author of it. It is one of the three precepts which Pliny affirms to have been consecrated at Delphos in golden letters. At length it acquired the authority of a divine oracle; and was supposed to have been given originally by Apollo himself. Cicero gives the following reason for this opinion: "because it hath such a weight of sense and wisdom in it as appears too great to be attributed to any man." Pope endorses this ancient opinion when he says,

" 'Tis virtue only makes our bliss below,
And all our knowledge is ourselves to know."

In fixing before the mind the point at which we should aim our present strength, acquirements and circumstances, should be carefully surveyed. What *am I now?* is the first question to be answered. After this, the mind's *capacities* should be measured as accurately as possible, and the true estimates of its powers telegraphed upon every page of development along the line of life, so that as we pass the playing wire-points we may read not only what we *are*, but what we may, by exertion, become.

In the effort we make, not only *too high*, but *too low* an estimate should be avoided. But in striving to attain this point, we should not forget that it is environed with much difficulty.

It is by no means easy to pass between this Scylla and Charybdis while the adverse winds blow upon us. Thales asserted it to be, in his opinion, the "hardest thing in the world for a man to know himself." *Plutarch* is said to have remarked, "If it were a thing obvious and easy for every man to know himself, possibly that saying, 'know thyself,' had not passed for a divine oracle." A yet higher authority propounds the significant question in reference to the "heart of man," "who can know it?"

Even a superficial glance at the subject will satisfy us that we undertake no easy work when we assume to weigh *self* in the balances. There are reasons why the student, as well as other men, is in danger of falling *below* the proper estimate of himself. He has been remarkably fortunate if he has not, even in a few short years of scholastic training, found barriers in the way of his advancement in literature which he could not break down without the help of others. These failures tend to mantle the mind with discouragement. The few intervening years between the attempted self-analysis and the time when he was confessedly without claims to mental strength and acquirements, fetter the judgment and argue against his elevation. The want of acquaintance with the *wide* range of subjects inviting intellectual effort and affording intellectual pleasure, depresses the mind; and this is increased when those who are stronger than we, who commenced their career with us, gain the mountain top before we reach it, and feast the eye on a more extended and delightful vision. And if the young man has struggled up through the vale of poverty, destitute of the social polish and other advantages incident to cultivated society and worldly competency, the perpetually recurring insinuation that "this is the carpenter's son"—"his opportunity has not been good"—"his means are limited"—"but he deserves great credit *even* for what he is"—clips the wings of

the ascending eagle and throws his loftiest circlings further beneath the sun. We should therefore guard against these weights that bear us down in our decision of what we now are, or what we are capable of becoming. When these clogs hang around us, and augment the difficulty of our work, let us remember that,

“The wise and prudent conquer difficulties
By daring to attempt them. Sloth and folly
Shiver and shrink at sight of toil and danger,
And *make* the impossibility they fear.”

On the other hand, there is great danger of fixing our decision, in one sense at least, too high. The pride of man's heart lifts up his judgment when he brings it to play upon himself. The flattery of affected friends may blind a more than ordinarily clear mental eye. A few successful struggles with difficulties may give a dangerous boldness. Comparison with those who are not privileged to dwell in “classic halls,” and even with less industrious or less intellectual fellow-students, may cause us to add value to our real worth. It is not uncommon to find in ourselves a kinship to the reported sage of Boston. His creed is said to have been the following: Massachusetts is one of the original thirteen States of the Union, with educational and other facilities in advance of her sister States, and therefore ought to have a controlling influence in the council of the nation. *Boston* is the principal city of Massachusetts, possessing a large population, great wealth and intelligence, and therefore should control the State. *I* am the oldest citizen of Boston, with much experience and mature judgment, and therefore Boston should be controlled by *me*. The old man's *relatives* are still living in *Boston*, and some of them are scattered over every State, county, town and neighborhood. Let us strive honestly and earnestly to repudiate this relationship.

The effort to reach a correct conclusion relative to ourselves should direct itself, first, to our *positive* character. Man is often called upon to act *alone*, and his response must have *sole* reference to his own ability. When this is the case, it is much more valuable for us to know the exact strength we possess, than to mark the proportion between it and that which carried off the gates of Gaza. When we look to personal privilege, personal responsibility, personal achievement, the question for us is, What can *I enjoy*? What can *I bear*? What can *I accomplish*?

Our estimate should also take into the account a *just comparison with others*. The moon blushes in darkness at the approach of the sun, while she smiles with queenly beauty and majesty upon the lesser faces of a thousand stars. So the young Ciceronian pours forth his eloquence, and the Philomathean talks of his love of learning, and an audience listens, admires and applauds, but the presence of the old masters of Greece and Rome would deprive us of our feast. The shining epaulettes of a "general review" (so important in the history of our country that it assembles multitudes of young and old, male and *female*, white and black,) should point their honored, influential and authoritative wearer into private ranks at the appearance of Winfield Scott, and cause the retiring commandant respectfully to decline "talking of war in the presence of Hannibal." It were a well merited honor to be chosen President of your Literary Society, but you are not therefore to infer your competency to preside over the assembled representatives of a State or Nation. By keeping our relation to others in view, we are furnished with a sliding scale by which we are at one time *first*, and at another *last*, of those with whom we are compared; and this is of great importance to *us* and to *them* in our intercourse with men.

We should likewise carry this effort to *all subjects* of thought and action. This lesson we are all liable to forget, and especially the student who has been for years pursuing successfully his studies. He has learned much of his books; but when he therefore claims superior attainments upon all subjects, he must fail to support his pretensions. The man who is prepared to rise and fall like the ocean wave, standing high as he passes one subject of thought or action, and gracefully descending out of sight as he touches one that he does not understand, gives proof of a profitable self-knowledge. This is particularly necessary in our free country, where the citizen can condemn with impunity the action of a President without being able to spell his name; a client who never read a chapter in Blackstone can censure his lawyer for want of legal attainments; the patient, (especially if convalescent) treat with contempt the doctor's skill and drugs; the merchant and banker deliver agricultural lectures; the plow boy discourse on commerce in general, and exchanges and tariffs in particular; the scholar whose diploma testifies that he "went through" Webster's Spelling Book, cyphered to the single rule of three in Pike, and "turned out the school master" at Christmas, pronounces a College President and Professors incompetent to teach Mathematics and the languages; and the man who never reads his Bible passes upon the theology of a sermon from the lips or pen of a hoary-headed divine. This political, civil, social liberty, which I would not abridge, should nevertheless always be held under the restraints of common sense, asking and answering the question, What do I know about the particular *subject* upon which I am assuming to judge? I make not the most remote reflection upon any man for his want of knowledge, provided he is not wilfully ignorant, but I do urge upon every student belonging to the societies here, the importance and duty of shunning such foolishness as I have alluded

to, by connecting their just self-estimation with every subject upon which they think, speak, write or act.

You will perhaps find a place for this lesson as soon as you return to the old homestead. Your father and mother, whose industry and economy have afforded you facilities for education which they never enjoyed, anxiously await your coming. It is not unmanly to meet them with heart and tears of joy, melting you down even to unnecessary deference to their position, opinions and wishes. But to carry with you the ridiculous fallacy upon your demeanor that the knowledge you have gained here makes you wiser on *every* subject than they are, will be to send back a blush of shame for the face of your instructors, damage the cause of education, detract from the strength and fullness of parental respect and love, and betoken for you an uncertain if not disastrous future. I have not kept my eyes closed upon the face of society. I have seen what I caution you against. For a son to treat with contempt the advice and opinions of a father, because he is not acquainted with Mathematics, Greek and Latin, or even the English Grammar, Geography, &c., is so low a descent from the true position of a student that we decline any further notice of the folly or of him who would be guilty of it.

Every *period* of our existence should be embraced in our calculation. It is not enough that it draw its figures upon our childhood or academic course, but the man of middle age, the old man, and higher still, the *immortal man*, should be brought in review before us. It is not my work of to-day to preach you a sermon: this has been earnestly and ably done by others at earlier periods of the exercises, but I must be allowed the privilege of recording upon your youthful minds this truth, *that estimate is fearfully defective which does not link itself to a future state of existence.* .

A passing hint at some of the means by which this self-knowledge is obtained, may not be out of place.

By an impartial and habitual cognizance of the powers, dispositions, &c., of the mind; close observation of the external influences with which our lives are interwoven; and, in short, every element, within and without, that goes to make up the man, should arrest our attention and give work to our judgment. If we fail to use this means, all others will be insufficient. In addition to this, we may profitably gather the opinion of friends. True, the world's currency which we call friendship, is not always genuine. Allowance of large *per cent* must often be made for the too favorable opinions of real friends, and the flattery of those who wish to deceive us under this name, or have not the moral courage to tell us of our faults. But there are friends, who by their well-timed reproof or commendation, expressed in language and actions, will furnish us aid in this difficult work. Even our enemies or opponents afford us help. An undesigned compliment is not unfrequently hurled at us by the arm of hatred. "Envy selects a shining mark," so that it may be our very excellence or strength of character that excites the malice of foes. Or on the other hand, they may truthfully, but in a bad spirit and with an evil design, read us a chapter whose record greatly detracts from our worth. But where we stand specially related to them, so that they, as well as we, are involved in the issue, we can gain much from those with whom we contend. A sort of natural demand on the part of every beligerent, no matter where he contends, is for a "foeman worthy of his steel." "Greek meets Greek," from the discussions in your Societies, to the American Congress or the British House of Lords; from single-handed personal contests to the long drawn line of marshalled soldiers. Napoleon Bonaparte was reminded of his strength when trembling Europe shook her mightiest Cap-

tains from posts of honor to posts of peril, and plunged them together in one last and successful struggle against the consolidation of the eastern world. The bloody contest of the Crimea, over which the patience of the world seems almost exhausted, and the stubbornness of Sebastopol against the boasts and balls of the allied Powers, only tells what was clearly written in the fact that the relative and successor of Napoleon forgot his death groans at St. Helena, and formed an alliance with that nation which could not trust its power, but invoked the chained genius of a mighty man to haunt his degradation, and the rugged arm of the barren rocks to express the last bitter life-drop from its captive. France and England, bound together by a broad surface of temporary interest, but anchored to each other by a chain of submarine cursings, proclaim Russia powerful, and Russia sends back the compliment.

In order to be *most* successful in reaching a correct conclusion of our worth, upon all these means must shine the fadeless light of God's truth. The Bible not only reveals God to man, but man to himself. It teaches him in all the relations of life. And more than this, it furnishes the only means by which we can trace our real value beyond the grave. Let its voice mingle with the voice of friends when they talk of you, and change even the anathemas of your enemies into guardian angels to "encamp round about you" in life's warfare; and let its hand hang up a thousand lamps in your hearts, whose light shall render you transparent to yourselves and reach to the outer limits of your character and influence.

Let us linger for a few moments around the obvious value of the attainment to which you are pointed. Its effect upon him who reaches any good degree towards it, is a sufficient incentive to strive after it. If it reveals defects in us, it gives

us the pleasure of supplying what we lack ; if redundancies are thereby discovered, we may cut them off and be free from their load ; if there are intellectual or moral affinities or antipathies, it is our joyous work to bring about, as far as may be, the requisite harmony of our nature, or foster the Providential bias that points to the brightest goal. The mere acquisition of truth, (if there is nothing *positively* painful in it,) affords pleasure to the mind ; much more a truth upon which hang, in pleasing equipoise, the thoughts, words and actions of life.

If we fix our conclusion too low, we at least deprive ourselves of a portion of the mental good in store for us, by doing less than we might perform, and thus circumscribing the benefits of our influence upon others. Although it is pleasant to carry with us *any* honor from an institution of learning whose grade of scholarship is high, he who, by undervaluing his ability, wears the third, or even second, when he might have worn the first, has lost the ripest cluster of literary fruit, and some part of that power by which he should have done good to others. So in all the walks of life, the mind robs itself of the full measure of delight by inscribing its own tablet with an undervaluation. In halls of learning, deliberative bodies, professional duties, agricultural pursuits, mechanical arts, the field, the forum, truthful claims manfully maintained, secure the fullest measure of success, and therefore the largest mental pleasure, and the greatest good to our race.

It is at least equally necessary that we avoid the opposite error. Let a man "think more highly of himself than he ought to think," and it becomes a corroding canker to eat out the peace of his heart. He expects that his services will be loudly demanded by a thousand tongues, and to his mortification there is a profound silence in the world, or now and then a half suppressed invitation to take some position which he regards as far below him. Vexed at the long and strange

delay, he urges his claims upon society, and they are repudiated. This at once curtails his influence for good, and pours the gall of disappointment into his own heart. Had he carefully performed an admeasurement of himself, and written out the result in letters of truth, a lower and more pleasant sphere of action would have been allotted him, from which his ascent, under the strength of developed capacity, might have been easy. Is not this in strict accordance with facts? The graduate of one of our colleges leaves his *Alma Mater* complaining that a man of *his* talent must take charge of what he calls an "old field school," or "small fry" academy. But it is perhaps a matter of pecuniary necessity, and he yields, with perpetual grumbling, to his fate. He publishes his purpose to accept the more eligible situation that will doubtless soon be tendered him. So that even what he does for the advancement of his pupils is not appreciated, because of the false estimate he has placed upon his claims, and *he* is not more willing than his *patrons* to break the academic fetters and "let the oppressed go free." Or the young man studies medicine: Not content to take a position in the community of his choice as young in experience, though from under the hand of an able medical faculty, he impatiently claims to be fully prepared to meet disease in all its fearful forms. Though enjoying high personal respect and growing confidence in his professional skill, he pronounces his limited patronage from the sick room, the result of stupid ignorance. I need not say, his lancet will rust, his pills dry, his drops evaporate, and the rats eat holes in his powder papers. His exalted estimate of self superinduces a professional failure, and thus denies him competency or fortune, as well as the almost unparalleled pleasure of restoring the sick to health and friends. Or he may turn his mind to the science of government, as many of our young men do. We will not deny

his patriotism,—he loves his country. If you choose, he honestly believes in the principles of his party. He attends “primary meetings,” and delegated conventions, to select suitable men for office. He has made one mistake. *Self* just fills up the vacant place. When he intimates to some confidential friend that though at great personal sacrifice he would accept the nomination, and makes the same reluctant disclosure to a great many others, (especially if they are delegates,) his too high estimate of his ability, &c., is scattering the frosts around him that nip the opening bud of promise, and contribute to wither the foliage of that tree, otherwise green under the dews of truth. Even the minister may so far miss the mark at which he should conscientiously and constantly aim, as to more than insinuate the dullness of his congregation in their failure to recognize his pulpit powers. He may complain that his profound learning, acute logic, glowing rhetoric, soul-born pathos, are lost upon the winds. He overrates his ability, and consequently is betrayed into this unseemly censure, and must weep, (if he have a heart to weep,) over waning usefulness and joy.

Into these and other professions and callings you expect to enter, when you take your places on the busy theatre of life. If you would avoid disappointment, mortification, dwarfish joys, limited good to others, eccentric success, (if success at all,) turn the powers of your mind, as a friendly battery, upon yourself. Look through the great telescope of truth, and measure the dimensions of your present attainments upon all subjects, and your capacity to increase them. Sweep with that mighty instrument not only the valleys and mountains of earth upon which you perform your varied pilgrimage through life, but the unmeasured disc of eternity’s sun, in whose light shall be the perpetual unfoldings of your immortality. Strive to do this, and the rivulets and brooks of life shall refresh you

amid your toil ; earth's darkest storms be borne from your hearts upon the bosom of hope's brightest bow, and kissed into calm with its smiles ; and though you may not, like Columbus, plow an unknown sea, inscribe your name upon the epitaph of the savage, and hang up a duplicate to blaze in the brightest glory of civilization ; like Fulton, write your history upon the commerce of the world ; like Franklin, fringe your fame with lightening ; or like Morse, bind the hearts of nations together by the pulsations of electricity, and daily pour the intelligence of a large portion of the globe into one common reservoir ; each one of you may write his name upon the hearts of men and the book of life, the weal of the world and amid the autographs of angels.

