

THE ACADEMIC TEMPER

COMMENCEMENT ORATION BY DR. BLISS PERRY, DELIVERED JUNE 21

In a book entitled "The Philology of the English Tongue," published by an Oxford professor some thirty-five years ago, there was a witty passage about social adjectives. Confident personal judgment is rare, said Professor Earle; social intercourse requires modesty; and there is consequently a shyness about the utterance of original adjectives. Hence it has come about, that there is in each period or generation, one or more chartered social adjectives which may be used freely and safely. Their meaning is more or less vague, and it is this quality that fits them for their office. The words "merry" in ballad poetry, "fair and pretty" in Elizabethan drama, "quaint", "elegant", "nice", in later periods of our literature, have performed this useful social function.

No reader of American newspapers will dispute the justice of these observations by the Oxford scholar. Certain adjectives or epithets appear from time to time in our social and political life, to save us the trouble of individual thinking. Like the Man with the Hoe, or the man with other more or less honorable implements, they become convenient symbols, the current coin of the street, the train, the hotel,

the pulpit. A word is caught up from a presidential message, from a popular humorist, or from a scientist's playful after-dinner speech, and from one end of the country to the other it is pounded back and forth like a tennis ball, until its color and shape and resiliency are gone. Fine words become cheapened; and, conversely, the terms of the card-table are exalted into the program of a party, the motto of a campaign. The choice of adjectives, and the skill to attach them to the person of your opponent, is often half the battle of the debater and the journalist. For example, what an unanswerable retort is the epithet "pessimistic"! We know beforehand that our cheerful American jury is sure to laugh the placarded "pessimist" out of court.

I wish to speak of one of these overworked adjectives. Of ancient lineage and honorable history, it is tending just now in popular usage to become a term of disparagement. Although not quite so black as the word "pessimistic," it carries a connotation of vague suspicion, if not of positive reprobation. It is the term "academic."

I have ventured to collect a few ex-

amples of contemporary usage. In William James's recent sketch of that breezy, racy individualist, Thomas Davidson, occurs this passage:

"I well remember," says Professor James, "one dark night in the Adirondacks, after a good dinner at a neighbor's, the eloquence with which, as we trudged down-hill to his own quarters with a lantern, he denounced me for the musty and mouldy and generally ignoble academicism of my character. Never before or since, I fancy, has the air of the Adirondack wilderness vibrated more repugnantly to a vocable than it did that night to the word 'Academicism.'"

The eloquent Governor of Massachusetts, addressing an audience of Spanish War Veterans on Memorial Day, asserted: "The ideals may have flown from the yew-shaded academy of a pessimistic philosophy, but, thank God, they live yet along the firing line." You will note that with that double-barrelled sentence His Excellency brought down both the pessimists and the academicians.

From the *Outlook*—a journal whose adjectives are selected with recognized adroitness—I quote this sentence about a political reformer: "His idealism was not academic, theoretical, impracticable; it was practical, effective, genuine."

The so-called Frick Report, presented to the Directors of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, declared that "The question as to the ethics of extending the hope to one policyholder that his prosperity will be increased through the misfortune of another policyholder, is purely academic, and need not be discussed here."

In a book on "The Color Line," just published by a Southern writer, occur these sentences: "The testimony of the North and of Europe [upon the race question] is hardly more relevant than would be that of the Martians. For in neither has the

race question yet presented itself as a serious, practical matter. . . . Hence their treatment of the subject is merely academic and sentimental. They have generous ethical ideas, respectable but well-worn and over-worked maxims, high humanitarian principles, and these they ride horse-back."

The word is similarly used in a vigorous pronouncement upon the Philippine question by a well-known publicist: "The Filipinos will never, in our lifetime, be fitted for self-government, and nobody—except a few academic persons—thinks of giving it to them."

To all these writers "academic" is a term of reproach. In their vocabulary it obviously means "theoretical," with an added flavor of the idealistic, the Quixotic.

A slightly different shading is given to the word in the protest issued by the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology against the proposed merger with Harvard. The Technology professors declared: "The lack of academic leisure and of monumental college surroundings, and the absence of a great part of the social and academic life of the typical American college—such losses are a necessary price which we and our students pay for the spirit of professional study, of businesslike regularity, and of scientific accuracy. In the training of engineers we believe that these qualities are worth vastly more than the desirable things which we sacrifice in order to obtain them."

In that passage, the word "academic" hints not only at the still air of delightful studies, but the exhausted air of those studies when pursued in a spirit of inefficiency. Engineers are better off without it.

Mr. W. C. Brownell's admirable volume on "French Art" has a chapter devoted to "Academic Sculpture." "Its cardinal defect," he says, "is overcarefulness for style. . . ."

Modern French academic sculpture feels the weight of De Musset's handicap—it is born too late into a world too old. Culture, the Institute, oppress individuality. . . . Its lack of original force, . . . its inevitable sensitiveness to the criticism that is based upon convention, make the weak side of the French academic sculpture of the present day, fine and triumphant as it is." And Mr. Brownell adds that the national thought and feeling are not a little conventional, and have the academic rather than a spontaneous inspiration.

And finally, to come back for one more moment to the roving Scotch philosopher, Professor James takes leave of Davidson with these words: "The memory of Davidson will always strengthen my faith in personal freedom and its spontaneities, and make me less unqualifiedly respectful than ever of 'civilization' with its herding and branding, licensing and degree-giving, authorizing and appointing, and in general regulating and administering by system the lives of human beings."

We meet today for an academic festival. It is one of those hours of "herding and branding, licensing and degree-giving, authorizing and appointing," in which our civilization takes delight. The fraternity of college-bred men and women welcomes these new initiates, who have justified their right to membership by completing a definite, recognized, authorized course of study. By our very presence here we attest our interest and our faith in academic institutions, academic training. And yet, as I have ventured to point out by such abundant quotation, the word "academic" is used all around us and every day as synonymous with the "pedantic," the "conventional," the "theoretical," the "unreal."

How did it get these meanings? Language may be an imperfect instrument of thought but for all prac-

tical purposes it is a tolerably accurate one. These connotations of the term academic must certainly have originated in some association with academic institutions or character or tendencies.

As a matter of fact, few words have come down to us more richly marked by the memories of two thousand years of use. To the scholar, the word Academy means first of all the little plot of ground near Athens where Plato taught. Its owner had been a certain Academus, a reputed hero of the Trojan war. Platonism appropriated the owner's name, as calmly as it had taken possession of his garden. Henceforward "the Academy" means not a man nor his garden-ground, but a philosophical system. Systems imply disciples, and thus "academy" gradually comes to mean an association or society for the cultivation of some philosophy or art or science. Those who love the history of culture remember how at the Revival of Learning these voluntary societies for the study of art and letters sprang up everywhere in Southern Europe. They rivaled the Universities in influence. During the 16th century they were numbered by the hundred in Italy alone. Before the middle of the 17th century Cardinal Richelieu established the famous French Academy, with its 40 "immortals," and its primitive fervor for an authoritative grammar, rhetoric, and dictionary. Cardinal Mazarin, not to be outdone, founds the French Academy of the Fine Arts—the "Beaux Arts"—which with the other French Academies forms what is known as "the Institute." In 1768 is founded the British Royal Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, composed, as its contemporary historian boasted, "of the ablest and most respectable artists resident in Great Britain." Alas, what danger is to lurk in that fair-sounding word "respectable"! In the first Discourse of

its first President, Sir Joshua Reynolds, there is stated, with his characteristic simplicity and good sense, the essence of academicism:—

"I would chiefly recommend," he says, "that an implicit obedience to the Rules of Art, as established by the practice of the great masters, should be exacted from the young students. That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides; as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism."

In Sir Joshua's fifteenth and last "Discourse," when, broken by age, he bade farewell to the Academy in 1790, he remarks: "I have taken every opportunity of recommending a rational method of study, as of the last importance. The great, I may say the sole use of an Academy is, to put, and for some time to keep, students in that course; that too much indulgence may not be given to peculiarity, and that a young man may not be taught to believe that what is generally good for others is not good for him."

"That too much indulgence may not be given to peculiarity!" That is only an eighteenth century phrasing of the central thought of Matthew Arnold's essay on the "Literary Influence of Academies," written nearly a hundred years after Sir Joshua Reynolds' "Discourses." Arnold envied the French for their Academy, their sovereign organ of literary opinion, their Supreme Court of Letters. But he feared, as you will remember, that the genius of England was too individualistic to submit to such a tribunal. Here in America we have had similar fears, not unaccompanied by longings for some literary authority less fallible than the newspapers. But to most Americans the word Academy, after all, recalls not so much a supreme tribunal of literature or a learned society or a school of art, as

it does some white-painted building on a New England hillside, some brick monstrosity upon the wide prairie, where they were taught in boyhood and girlhood the rule of three and the fear of God. West Point and Annapolis and other schools of professional instruction have adopted the old Platonic name, just as the peaceful Platonists borrowed the name of the warlike *Academus*. Yet practically, for most of us, the words academy and academic imply a formal system of education, both secondary and collegiate, whose completion is signaled by some form of the bachelor's degree. Now there must be regularity in such a system, or it would break down. Regularity is essential. What Sir Joshua called "peculiarity"—or individuality as we should term it—must for the time being yield precedence. And precisely here lies, as we shall see, the difficulty, the temptation, the sin of academicism.

If you examine a book which has been crowned by the French Academy, a building designed by some young graduate of an accredited school of architecture, a doctor's dissertation produced as the evidence of professional competence in scholarship, you will be likely to find in them all certain common excellencies of intelligence, industry, conformity. But you will also be likely to find formality, a conventional way of handling material. You will perceive that learning—the indispensable knowledge of what has been done—too frequently appears as pedantry, and that the springs of personality have either run dry or have not yet begun to flow.

No matter how loyal one may be to academic standards, such discoveries, one must confess, are ominous. And if, in one of these moods of doubt concerning the universal validity of conventional training, you open your newspaper or magazine only to find the word academic written every-

where with derogatory emphasis, you may be inclined to question sharply the value of the orthodox educational system, whether in art or literature or in education itself. You discover that there is much to be said for the rebels, as well as for the regular practitioners. The "most respectable artists in Great Britain" may be painting very stupid pictures, while an apparently lawless Turner and Monet, like an unrecognized Millet or Rodin, may be opening the blind eyes of a whole generation of men. Your poet laureate may be an Alfred Austin. The true teacher of philosophy may be sitting upon a stump in the Adirondacks, talking gloriously to two or three; while the holder of the philosophical chair in the great university may be simply holding the chair and walking in academic processions. You discover, in short, that regularity is a means, not an end; that it is immensely useful and desirable if it assists the long process of bringing individuality to complete expression, but that as a substitute for personality it breaks down.

Let us take some examples of the serviceableness and also of the limitations of the academic spirit. There is less revolt against it in architecture, apparently, than in any other of the fine arts. The architect is bound to concern himself primarily with certain practical problems, and his teachers must inform him precisely how these problems have for centuries been solved. If the graduate of the Beaux Arts, guided by all this experience of the past, is able to give his building a strength, proportion, and lighting suited to its specific purpose, he deserves his fee. Very likely the structural genius of the Renaissance, which he has so painstakingly studied, has overmastered his own individuality. Perhaps for that very reason his work is hackneyed and perfunctory. Pre-occupied with past solutions of the constant problems of his profession,

he may not have reached a fresh vision of the new problems which new conditions demand. Nevertheless he may be a sound and competent architect, academized though he be.

But in painting and sculpture and still more noticeably in music, we unconsciously ask for something more individual, more highly personalized, than this correct, this essential knowledge of what has already been done by the masters. We demand that the artist shall have something of his own to say, some new and exquisite revelation of the old wonders of the earth.

In literature, too, how much is there to be said for the rebel! No literature is richer than our own in men who have been innovators rather than conformists, who have spoken with the authority which springs from a full consciousness of power, and which differs so widely from the academic authority that comes from acquaintance with the traditions of the scribes. Wordsworth, at his best, is no less admirable a craftsman than Pope,—and a better poet into the bargain. Tennyson was no worse a poet for knowing what the Greeks said and what Dante said before him; but he would have been a less academic poet if, like Browning, he could have remembered the Greeks and Dante only when he chose. Cardinal Newman represents the academic temper in many of its most valuable and attractive manifestations; such as its delicacy, caution, suppleness, unerring taste, reverence for the past. Yet in honoring Newman we are not likely to forget his Scotch contemporary, who spoke so disrespectfully of Newman, who persistently disregarded delicacy, caution, or good taste, and cursed himself into a secure immortality through his righteous hatred of all unrighteousness. Carlyle's virtues were assuredly not academic virtues,—which is perhaps why his followers are

mainly themselves of the academic sort.

How impressive, again, is the continuity of classical scholarship! How fascinating it is to know just what the schoolboy St. Augustine in the fourth century thought of his Latin grammar, his Virgil and Cicero, and what the schoolboy Thackeray thought of those same studies in the nineteenth century,—and to remember that most of the writers worth reading, from the fourth century to the nineteenth, had to study their Virgil and Cicero too! But occasionally a man with small Latin and less Greek has also managed to write tolerably well. Shakespeare was only one of many such. Academic traditions make a safe highroad through the world of letters, but that world is also big enough for the cross-country men and for the strong-winged tribe of "scorners of the ground."

Turn from literature to politics. The tide has been running strongly of late against the so-called academic statesman. Charles Sumner, for example, who represents this type so perfectly in his learning, his fondness for abstractions, his noble idealism, his inflexible uprightness,—has fewer thorough-going admirers today than he has had for half a century. Most political thinkers in the North are now in practical agreement with the sentiment of the South in feeling that Sumner's reconstruction views were those of a theorist who could not or would not regard all the facts in the case. The consequence is that Sumner's superb service in the cause of human freedom has had to pay the terrible tax which our generation levies upon all idealism which is unsupported by evidence. Even Mr. John Morley, who like his great chief Gladstone has often been accused of academicism himself, has written in his "Life of Burke" a striking passage about the "incapacity and blindness of men who undertake the conduct of

a tremendous crisis upon mere literary methods, . . . with the student's ignorance of the eager passion and rapid imagination of multitudes of men."

We have recently lost from our own public life a statesman who had, not the student's ignorance, but the student's knowledge of this passion and imagination of the multitudes. Carl Schurz was exiled from Germany because of his participation in a revolution that was led by scholars; he did good service in our own civil war; he rendered a still more valuable service to the United States as a publicist and administrator. He was a man of courage and conscience. He fought for a clean civil service, for honest money and for honest men. Yet whenever his fidelity to political principle brought him into conflict with party organizations, how swiftly did each party in turn brand him a "doctrinaire," a "common scold," an *Evening Post* type of man! And in truth there was in his uncompromising idealism, his loyalty to logic, a fine touch of the schoolmaster. He remained unspoiled by a world which he helped to make better.

Much of the popular prejudice against men like Carl Schurz arises from pure ignorance. The men of thought are at least as tangible a factor in human affairs as the men of action whom it is the fashion just now to praise. To ignore the theorist, the philosopher, the mystic is to be aware of the body of our vast human organism and to be unaware of its mind and soul. To be called academic by such cavilers is more of a compliment than a curse. Of all illegitimate uses of that word the worst, surely, is its sneering application to the advocates of lofty and generous national action. If you plead that the individual should act toward his neighbor not only with justice but with generosity, you will be applauded. Make the same plea for your country in its international

relations, and you will suddenly discover that you are "academic." Yet some of the arguments brought forward in Congress within a month in favor of increasing our national armaments bear the pleasantly familiar stamp of the undergraduate debating society. The venerable maxim "In time of peace prepare for war"—a maxim which was mouldy when Cain first reached for his club—has been solemnly declaimed once more. These ultra-academic debaters still assert that "Trade follows the flag," although it is hard to find a single sewing machine or barrel of flour that ever did follow the flag in defiance of the natural laws of trade. The ingenuity of a Massachusetts congressman has even produced the dictum, "Our navy is our one advertising medium in the Orient"; but surely this flower of speech betrays a more than academic innocence both of the Orient and of advertising. Unfortunately these hackneyed precepts betray a lamentable indifference to the forces that are now so widely and so successfully at work for the adjustment of international differences by arbitration. A cloistered virtue is questionable enough; but an insulated national pride and vain-glory, careless of the factors that are making for the true progress of civilization, is infinitely worse. The twentieth century will soon grow impatient of the economic and militaristic mediaevalism that continues to regard the foreigner as either an enemy or a fool.

After all, it is scarcely necessary to search the fine arts, literature, and politics for illustrations of the academic temper. We ourselves are gathered for a college festival, and we are surrounded by the monuments, the products, of academic training. That training is upon the whole so invaluable that we may well afford to minimize its incidental blunders, its machine-like inability to know whether it has been stamping and branding

too deep and too long these delicate human fabrics that are passing through it. The regulation pattern of thought and behavior is well enough in its way. Like formal academic costume it may make for dignity; it may conceal some individual infelicities. But it is possible to exaggerate the value of the pattern. Are there not teachers who have become conventionalized, devitalized, through regarding it too closely? Are there not pupils who are contenting themselves with formalized conceptions of the world? Among both teachers and students you will everywhere note anæmic minds—victims of under-nutrition; near-sighted minds,—forgetful of proportion; flat-chested minds,—without elasticity, exuberance, without natural laughter. Our American educational machine is very wonderful and fine, but no automobile that ever was built needs to be sent more constantly to the repair shop. The new Princeton experiment of placing each student under a friendly preceptor, who strives to bring the university instruction into some personal relation to the individual mind, is being watched with the keenest interest. For it is precisely at this baffling, this all-important question of the individual that the academic machine so often proves inefficient, even if it does not actually go to pieces.

We have come a long way, indeed, from those first "groves of Academe" where Plato sauntered with his disciples, conversing, challenging, disciplining those subtle Greek intelligences with the spirit of free skeptical inquiry. But at no stage in the evolution of academicism, from the Athenian garden to the American university, has the academic spirit wholly failed to be of service to the world. I have touched upon some of its limitations, some defects of its qualities. Yet how useful, how excellent it has proved, not only in the crises of human affairs, but in the slow

and unregarded growth of all that makes for a wiser, saner civilization! The passion for inquiry, untrammelled by bread and butter considerations; for wide-ranging philosophy, untroubled by the contemporary verdicts of church and state; for the keen examination of contemporary society and business, no matter whose dividends may be impaired by the result;—who can tell what our world would have been without this spirit? The cloister shelters it in one age, the Royal Academy in another, the college classroom in our own. Some one must forever be drafted to play the part of intellectual and moral pioneer, blazing the path in which the rest of us so insubordinately follow. In every art and science there must be a more or less consistent body of doctrine, a tabulation of the results gained by slow centuries of effort. To prepare, to codify, to expound these summaries of human experience is an honorable task. No trained mind will underrate its importance. I heard the other day of a woman graduate student of literature at a leading university who was describing enthusiastically a year of graduate study under a former instructor. "I sat for a whole year," she said, "in a golden mist." A charming experience, no doubt, for her as well as for her master, the golden mist-maker, but of such is not the kingdom of scholarship. Better the dull and pedestrian virtues of patient acquisition and orderly classification of humdrum facts than the brilliant jugglery of the academic prestidigitator. But you are quite aware how little of such trickery there really is; you know the carefulness, the capacity, the effectiveness with which college investigators are today studying such questions as the laws of commerce, the rights and duties of public service corporations, the responsibilities of wealth, the nature of religion. Such investigators represent the scientific spirit at its very

noblest. What folly it is to dismiss their professional researches as impractical, when the only conceivable motive of such men is to discover and communicate the truth! As well call impractical the chemist who discovers and prepares an anti-toxin before the pestilence actually devastates the city. Academic specialists are every day compounding anti-toxins against popular delusions, against the follies of the mob and the corporate selfishness of the few. All honor to them, even if each of them is humanly fallible enough to believe that his particular brand of prophylactic is the one most needed by the world.

To apply the reproachful epithet "theoretical" to all types of university training is of course absurd. Many of the loudest critics of what they term the "college point of view" are scantily informed as to what American colleges are actually teaching. They do not know that the bridge-builder and the sanitary inspector, the corporation lawyer and the musical composer, now sit in faculty meetings on rather more than equal footing with the representatives of the classics. Indeed such is the emphasis laid by many institutions upon courses leading to practical professional work that old-fashioned educators feel that such centers of academic influence have already become not academic enough. To ridicule the complex "plant" of the modern university as the home of impractical theorists is to betray a grotesque ignorance of the actual situation.

We must not, however, balance the good and the bad qualities of academicism so long and so ingeniously as to conceal the real issue. The plain fact is, that the influence of American colleges is today impaired through a widespread popular misunderstanding of the nature of academic training. The only persons who can rectify this misunderstanding are the graduates themselves. Those of us who have

received the collegiate discipline have indeed entered into a great heritage. We have become citizens of a republic of systematized, formulated thought, which knows no distinctions of sex or race or time. But, as in all republics, this citizenship of ours needs constant scrutiny. The honorable word which best describes us and our training has in recent years become, as I have desired to point out, a term of reprobation. Whether "academic" is fairly used as a word of reproach is a somewhat complicated question; and there is evidence to be introduced on both sides. But the fact that it *is* so used is full of indubitable significance. It is a hint that we have inherited evil as well as good; fallacies and empty forms, grim idols of the lonely study, fatuous idols of the reverberant classroom, as well as the fair shapes of eternal truth and beauty. Even in a gracious hour like this we do well to examine dispassionately the web of systematized, classified, catalogued thought which has been woven around us in the colleges that are to us so dear. And we likewise do well to examine ourselves. For all these fine-spun webs of theory are to be fitted to the swiftly revolving wheels of practice. Your theory is good if it works good to actual men and women, or if in the unknown future it is calculated to work good for potential men and women. The undergraduate course in the history and sociology of the Labor Problem is excellently conceived, but the test of it is in its application to some concrete Maggie who will some day be looking doubtfully at the dampers in your kitchen range. The course in literature is very delightful, but ten years afterward to what newspaper or novel does the instinctive literary preference of the graduate really turn? The course in ethics is stimulating and clarifying, but can it hold its own against a lifetime of commerce with your neighbors, who—

"Eat and drink,
They scheme and plod,
They go to church on Sunday,
And many are afraid of God,
And more of Mrs. Grundy."

One's neighbors are so very near, and the college instruction in ethics seems, after a little, so remote!

This clear conception of the dual nature of our academic heritage should make it a little easier, surely, for us to make proper use of our heritage. The academic discipline must serve us and not master us. It is a means to a more full and noble life; it is not an end in itself. It furnishes and liberalizes the mind, but if applied too literally, too dogmatically, it breaks down, whether in politics, literature, religion, or society. Life is too big for mere theories, systems, formulas. They decorate it and help to explain it, but they do not very satisfactorily fit it. The facts of the human tragedy and comedy break away from the meshes of Aristotelian definition of tragedy and comedy. That is no reason for not studying Aristotle. He has never been studied half enough. But after you have mastered the critics and the commentators, here is

"the full
Eternal mundane spectacle,"

fascinating, unsystematic, and alive. That remains, while definitions and systems change and pass. Life is the true object of study. It will become for you the only test of the studies through which you have passed. You will live your lives out among your neighbors. I will venture to predict that the persons whom you will admire most, as you grow older, are those who know the world without ever having become worldly-minded. Let me adapt that phrase "worldly-minded" to the theme which we have been considering. To enjoy the academic discipline is a blessing for

which on this day you will not fail to return thanks. To become academic again from time to time is a tonic; it is to bathe in the streams of youth. To remain forever academically-

minded is perhaps, for a few chosen souls, a virtue. Yet it is but a cloistered virtue; it knows not the homes where the illogical and happy man and women dwell.
