

**THE RELATION OF THE POET TO HIS
AGE: A DISCOURSE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE PHI BETA KAPPA
SOCIETY OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY,
ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 1843**

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The Relation of the Poet to His Age: A Discourse Delivered Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University, on Thursday, August 24, 1843 by George S. Hillard

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UNIV. OF
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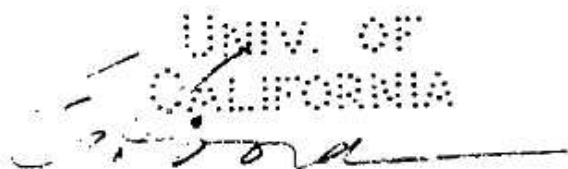
1843.

TO THE
DRY
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DISCOURSE.

Most persons have probably amused themselves with unprofitable speculations upon the relative rank to be assigned to eminence in the several departments of intellectual action, a question, upon which we can never arrive at any definite conclusion, from the want of a common measure of comparison. Sir William Temple esteemed a great poet, the "bright, consummate flower" of humanity, and observes that "of all the members of mankind that live within the compass of a thousand years, for one man that is born capable of making a great poet, there may be a thousand born, capable of making as great generals and ministers of state as any in story." On the other hand, Sir Walter Scott thought the highest success in literature cheap, in comparison with the deeds of a man like the Duke of Wellington. But, whatever dif-

ference of opinion there may be on these points, all will admit that, among writers and thinkers, the largest field of influence is enjoyed by those who address the moral nature through the medium of the imaginative faculties. Mankind here meet upon a common ground ; and in the pages of the poet and the novelist find refreshment and relaxation, whatever may be their habitual pursuits or the daily business of their minds. The influence of writers of this class begins with the first pulse of intellectual life and ends only with its last throb. They twine themselves around every fibre of the growing mind. They mould and color every man's life. They supply motive and impulse ; give stability to unfixd purposes and direction to irregular aims. They make virtue more lovely or vice more seductive. They weaken or enforce the lessons of moral truth and the sanctions of religion. Whatever elevates or debases man, whatever lifts him to heaven or nails him to earth, whatever embellishes or deforms life, whatever makes it stately, heroic and glorious, or mean, loathsome and brutish, the passions that rage like blasts from hell, the affections that breathe like airs from heaven — all find in them, appropriate food, and draw from them their elements of growth.

To writers of this class we may give the general name of poets, if to poetry be allowed a definition somewhat arbitrary, excluding the form of verse and sufficiently comprehensive to include such works as the Arabian Nights, Ivanhoe and the Sketch-Book. In view of the important influence exerted by these writers upon the public mind, I ask your attention to some observations upon the relation of the poet to his age, the various elements that modify that relation, and the changes wrought in poetry by the progress of society. I need offer no apology for selecting a subject remote from those material and political interests which make up so much of our life. We meet here as scholars. We have left our various posts of duty and occupation to breathe again the untroubled air of contemplation, and to seek the peace that comes from "backward-looking thoughts."

The office of poetry is to idealize human life; to connect the objects of thought with those associations which embellish, dignify and exalt, and to keep out of sight, those which debase and deform; to extract from the common world, which lies at our feet, the elements of the romantic, the impassioned and the imaginative; to arrest and con-

dense the delicate spirit of beauty which hovers over the earth, like an atmosphere, and to give shape, color and movement to its airy essence. Life presents itself to our view in a twofold aspect. It has its poetical and prosaic side; its face and its reverse; and different minds, by a natural affinity, are attracted to one or the other of these aspects; and indeed the same mind often passes from one to the other, as it is swayed by different moods. Hence we have tragedy and farce; the historical picture and the caricature; the poem and the parody; hence the gods of Homer and the gods of Lucian, the romance of chivalry and Don Quixote. A thousand poetical associations invest the ocean, the sailor and the ship; all of which vanish, like a ghost at cock-crow, at the thought of tar, sea-sickness and libels for wages. There are many charming pictures of woodland life in English poetry, as in the early ballads, and best of all, in "As You Like It;" and in reading these, we grant the poet his own terms. We are willing to observe from his point of view, and to overlook the plain facts of the case. We forget the miserable discomforts inseparable from such a life, which must have made it intolerable to natures so delicately organized as those who are

represented as leading it, and think only of the sunshine and the foliage, the fresh turf and the bounding deer. Pastoral life too, has always been a favorite theme with poets, and yet in point of fact, few employments are less poetical than the tending of sheep, and if the uniform testimony of observers is to be relied upon, there are few persons, whose manners and speech are further removed from an ideal standard, than shepherds. Here also we take, without questioning, the poet's statement. We waive all inquiry as impertinent. We accept the imaginative aspect as the true one, and surrender ourselves to the mellow tones of the pastoral reed, whether breathed from the lips of Theocritus, Virgil, or Allan Ramsay.

But though the office of poetry be at all times and everywhere, essentially the same, it will vary in its expression or manifestation, according to the instruments and materials with which the poet works, the scenes in which he is placed, and the social life of which he forms a part. He is emphatically the child of his age. However original his genius may be; however sternly he may refuse to bend his knee to the idols of his time, his mind will unconsciously be moulded and colored by the influences that surround him, even by those which