

The People in Art, Government, and Religion

George Bancroft (1800–1891)

(1835)

Born in 1800, died in 1891; Collector of the Port of Boston in 1828–41; unsuccessful candidate for Governor of Massachusetts in 1844; Secretary of the Navy in 1845–46; United States Minister to Great Britain in 1846; Minister to Berlin in 1867.

THE MATERIAL 1 world does not change in its masses or in its powers. The stars shine with no more luster than when they first sang together in the glory of their birth. The flowers that gemmed the fields and the forests before America was discovered, now bloom around us in their season. The sun that shone on Homer shines on us in unchanging luster; the bow that beamed on the patriarch still glitters in the clouds. Nature is the same. For her no new forces are generated, no new capacities are discovered. The earth turns on its axis and perfects its revolutions, and renews its seasons without increase or advancement.

But a like passive destiny does not attach to the inhabitants of the earth. For them expectations of social improvement are no delusion; the hopes of philanthropy are more than a dream. The five senses do not constitute the whole inventory of our source of knowledge. They are the organs by which thought connects itself with the external universe; but the power of thought is not merged in the exercise of its instruments. We have functions which connect us with heaven, as well as organs which set us in relation with earth. We have not merely the senses to open to us the external world, but an internal sense, which places us in connection with the world of intelligence and the decrees of God. There is a spirit in man—not in the privileged few, not in those of us only who, by the favor of providence, have been nursed in public schools; it is in man: it is the attribute of the race. The spirit, which is the guide to truth, is the gracious gift to each member of the human family.

You can not discover a tribe of men, but you also find the charities of life, and the proofs of spiritual existence. Behold the ignorant Algonquin deposit a bow and quiver by the side of the departed warrior, and recognize his faith in immortality. See the Comanche chieftain, in the heart of our continent, inflict upon himself the severest penance, and reverence his confession of the needed atonement for sin. The barbarian who roams o'er the Western prairies has like passions and like endowments with ourselves. He bears with him the instinct of Deity, the consciousness of spiritual nature, the love of beauty, the rule of morality.

If reason is a universal faculty, universal decision is the nearest criterion of truth. The common mind winnows opinions; it is the sieve which separates error from certainty. The exercise by many of the same faculty on the same subject would naturally lead to the same conclusions. But if not, the very differences of opinion that arise prove the supreme judgment of the general mind. Truth is one. It never contradicts itself. One truth can not

contradict another truth. Hence truth is the bond of union. But error not only contradicts truth but may contradict itself; so that there may be many errors and each at variance with the rest. Truth is therefore of necessity an element of harmony; error as necessarily an element of discord. Thus there can be no continuing universal judgment but a right one. Men can not agree in an absurdity; neither can they agree in a falsehood.

The little story of Paul and Virginia is a universal favorite. When it was first written the author read it aloud to a circle in Paris, composed of the wife of the prime minister and the choicest critics of France. They condemned it as dull and insipid. The author appealed to the public, and the children of all Europe reversed the decree of the Parisians. The judgment of children—that is, the judgment of the common mind under its most innocent and least imposing form—was more trustworthy than the criticism of the select refinement of the most polished city in the world. 5

Demosthenes of old formed himself to the perfection of eloquence by means of addresses to the crowd. The great comic poet of Greece, emphatically the poet of the vulgar mob, is distinguished above all others for the incomparable graces of his diction; and it is related of one of the most skilful writers in the Italian that when inquired of where he had learned the purity and nationality of his style, he replied, from listening to country people as they brought their produce to market. 6

In like manner the best government rests on the people and not on the few, on persons and not on property, on the free development of public opinion and not on authority; because the munificent Author of our being has conferred the gifts of mind upon every member of the human race without distinction of outward circumstances. Whatever of other possessions may be engrossed, the mind asserts its own independence. Lands, estates, the produce of mines, the prolific abundance of the seas, may be usurped by a privileged class. Avarice, assuming the form of ambitious power, may grasp realm after realm, subdue continents, compass the earth in its schemes of aggrandizement, and sigh after worlds, but mind eludes the power of appropriation; it exists only in its own individuality; it is a property which can not be confiscated and can not be torn away. It laughs at chance; it bursts from imprisonment; it defies monopoly. A government of equal rights must, therefore, rest upon mind, not wealth, not brute force; some of the moral intelligence of the community should rule the State. Prescription can no more assume to be a valid plea for political injustice; society studies to eradicate established abuses and to bring social institutions and laws into harmony with moral right; not dismayed by the natural and necessary imperfections of all human effort, and not giving way to despair because every hope does not at once ripen into fruit. 7

The public happiness is the true object of legislation and can be secured only by the masses of mankind, themselves awakened to a knowledge and care of their own interests. Our free institutions have reversed the false and ignoble distinctions between men, and, refusing to gratify the pride of caste, have acknowledged the common mind to be the true material for a commonwealth. Everything has hitherto been done for the happy few. It is not possible to endow an aristocracy with greater benefits than they have already enjoyed; there is no room to hope that individuals will be more highly gifted or more fully developed than the greatest sages of past times. The world can advance only through the culture of the moral and intellectual powers of the people. To accomplish this end by means of the people themselves is the highest purpose of government. If it be the 8

duty of the individual to strive after a perfection like the perfection of God, how much more ought a nation to be the image of duty. The common mind is the true Parian marble fit to be wrought into the likeness to a God. The duty of America is to secure the culture and the happiness of the masses by their reliance on themselves.

It is not by vast armies, by immense natural resources, by accumulations of treasure, that the greatest results in modern civilization have been accomplished. The traces of the career of conquest pass away, hardly leaving a scar on the national intelligence. Famous battle-grounds of victory are most of them comparatively indifferent to the human race—barren fields of blood, the scourges of their times, but affecting the social condition as little as the raging of a pestilence. Not one benevolent institution, not one ameliorating principle in the Roman State was a voluntary concession of the aristocracy; each useful element was borrowed from the democracies of Greece or was a reluctant concession to the demands of the people. The same is true in modern political life. It is the confession of an enemy to democracy that “all the great and noble institutions of the world have come from popular efforts.”⁹

It is the uniform tendency of the popular element to elevate and bless humanity. The exact measure of the progress of civilization is the degree in which the intelligence of the common mind has prevailed over wealth and brute force: in other words, the measure of the progress of civilization is the progress of the people. Every great object connected with the benevolent exertions of the day has reference to the culture of those powers which are alone the common inheritance. For this the envoys of a religion cross seas and visit remotest isles; for this the Press in its freedom teems with the productions of maturest thought; for this philanthropists plan new schemes of education; for this halls in every city and village are open to the public instructor.¹⁰

It is alone by infusing great principles into the common mind that revolutions in human society are brought about. They never have been, they never can be effected by superior individual excellence. The age of the Antonines is the age of the greatest glory of the Roman Empire. Men distinguished by every accomplishment of culture and science for a century in succession possessed undisputed sway over more than one hundred millions of men, until, at last, in the person of Marcus Aurelius, philosophy herself seemed to mount the throne. And did she stay the downward tendencies of the Roman Empire? Did she infuse new elements of life into the decaying constitution? Did she commence one great beneficent reform? Not one permanent amelioration was effected. Philosophy was clothed with absolute power; and yet absolute power accomplished nothing for humanity. It could accomplish nothing. Had it been possible, Aurelius would have wrought a change. Society can be regenerated, the human race can be advanced, only by moral principles diffused through the multitude.¹¹

And now let us take an opposite instance; let us see if amelioration follows when, in despite of tyranny, truth finds access to the common people. Christianity itself shall furnish me the example.¹²

So completely was this greatest of all reforms carried forward in the vale of life, that the great moral revolution, the great step of God's providence in the education of the human race, was not observed by the Roman historians. Once, indeed, at this early period, the Christians are mentioned; for, in the reign of Nero, their purity being hateful to the corrupt, Nero abandoned them to persecution. In the darkness of midnight they were¹³

covered with pitch and set on fire to light the streets of Rome, and this singularity has been recorded. But their system of morals and religion, tho it was the new birth of the world, escaped all notice.

Paul, who was a Roman citizen, was beheaded just outside the walls of the eternal city; and Peter, who was a plebeian and could not claim the distinction of the ax and block, was executed on the cross, with his head downward to increase the pain of the indignity. Do you think the Roman emperor took notice of the names of these men when he signed their death-warrants? And yet, as they poured truth into the common mind, what series of kings, what lines of emperors, can compare with them in their influence on the destinies of mankind. 14

The irresistible tendency of the human race is therefore to advancement, for absolute power has never succeeded and can never succeed in suppressing a single truth. An idea once revealed may find its admission into every living breast and live there. Like God, it becomes immortal and omnipresent. The movement of the species is upward, irresistibly upward. The individual is often lost; providence never disowns the race. No principle once promulgated has ever been forgotten. No “timely tramp” of a despot’s foot ever trod out one idea. The world can not retrograde; the dark ages can not return. Dynasties perish, seeds are buried, nations have been victims to error, martyrs for right; humanity has always been on the advance, gaining maturity, universality, and power. 15

No truth can perish, no truth can pass away; the flame is undying, tho generations disappear. Wherever moral truth has struck into being, humanity claims and guards the greatest bequest. Each generation gathers together imperishable children of the past, and increases them by new sons of light alike radiant with immortality. 16

Note 1. Delivered before the Adelphi Society of Williams College, in August, 1835.
Abridged. [[back](#)]