Literature

"Orations and Addresses"

Of George William Curtis. Edited by Charles Eliot Norton. Vol. III. Historical and Memorial Addresses. Harper & Bros.

THE FIRST HALF of the third volume of Curtis's orations contains this ardent patriot's addresses delivered at meetings held in honor of events connected with the Rebellion and Revolution. They are virile and fervid expressions of his absorbing patriotism—a patriotism which was, however, of a most healthy nature, for, while recognizing his country's faults, he yet never despaired of her ability to eradicate them. Especially discriminating is the tact with which, in the early seventies, while passions were not yet dormant, he spoke of the Rebellion. "With all good grace to grace a gentleman," he claimed that the Southerner of the future generation will look upon the Northerner, not as a pristine foe, but as his savior from degradation, just as some English historians assert that the revolt of the American colonies checked the ever-increasing power of the Crown, and thus saved England from a lapse into a pseudo-Stuart régime. As regards ethics, Curtis believed that justice is absolute, failing to recognize that ideas of right and wrong are historical products, varying with race, climate and time. In his criticism of historical phenomena, he thus naturally applied this ethical standard. While our standard of morality is a just one to apply to current phenomena, it is surely not one by which to judge the men of a hundred years ago. In this respect, but more especially in his political philosophy, Curtis betrayed more affinity with the Gaul than with the Anglo-Saxon. In his studies on comparative constitutional law, Prof. Boutmy contrasts the extremely practical character of Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights with the general principles occupying so prominent a place in French constitutional documents. Our early statesmen, especially Jefferson, were greatly influenced by the idealistic French philosophy of the last century, as can be seen from the principles laid down in the Declaration of Independence. Throughout American history, from Jefferson on, we can trace the influence of the philosophy of natural law, and in Curtis we can behold it in a marked, and, at times, even in a dominating degree. There was in him, as it were, an effort to compromise between his intense idealism and his intimate acquaintance with practical politics. Thus he criticised the *raison d'être* of institutions more from their conformity with certain general philosophical principles than from their actual utility. An institution, not based on such principles, should not be tolerated, and should be uprooted. For, as he said, you cannot stretch a diamond, nor an eternal truth. Thus, when the War was over, and the principle of the equality of all men was established, Curtis thought that the Negro Question was solved. When, as is always the case, the weaker race was being pushed aside by the stronger, he had to admit that the question was still unsolved. The doctrine that "all men are born equal" had not done away with the hard facts of life. While we think that this tendency towards abstract theories, which do not take into account the actual relations of mundane things, mars the absolute value of Curtis's thought, it adds, on the other hand, to the moral stimulus one derives from a perusal of his speeches. It is rarely, indeed, that we cannot find in them much that is true and invigorating. The truths may have been known before, but they have never been expressed so nobly and artistically and so forcibly withal.

The longest oration in the volume is the eulogy on Charles Sumner. As Curtis says that Sumner was the only statesman for whom he had the personal adherence that men of the preceding generation had for Clay and Webster, it is not surprising that the oration is eulogistic, though not inartistically fulsome in its praise. Nor is it strange that Curtis was so attached to Sumner, for what he considered the key-note of the Massachusetts Senator's character, was his rigid and unswerving adherence to the dictates of his conscience and his utter inability to admit that a question of morality could be compromised. Curtis was such a man himself. Leaving aside the stern Puritan, we go on to the next oration, on Garfield, delivered in 1881, on the day of the President's burial. It is lofty in tone, but restrained in view of the occasion, appreciative of what was best in Garfield, and marred by no false note. The most eloquent and burning oration in the volume is the eulogy on Wendell Phillips, the great agitator for the abolition of slavery. Curtis felt fully as intensely as Phillips the crime of slavery, and, as he reviewed "the apostle of liberty's" career, he was carried away by his intense admiration to the zenith of his oratorical powers. And this oration, in many respects the finest ever delivered by him, shows most clearly the chief characteristics of Curtis's mind. He, unlike Webster, did not carry men with him by his weighty arguments, by the irresistible force of his logic, but, appealing to the principles of right and wrong, he stirred the inmost fibres of man's higher nature. His expositions were not scientific, for science shuns sentiment and anything appealing to aught but the reason. But science has never directly brought about any great political reforms; it needs the force of an agitator, of an O'Connell or a Phillips, who, blindly pushing aside the arguments of opponents, can see only the absolute justice of his side. The brightness of the sun prevents him from seeing that the stars of others are in the heavens. Such a man cannot be a great statesman, but he can bring about revolutions. What Turgot could not accomplish, Rousseau brought to pass. What Cobden and Bright made inevitable, Sir Robert Peel was forced to crystallize in law. What Webster in his old age surrendered to, Garrison, Phillips, Sumner and Curtis overturned.

One point illustrates very well to what extremes Curtis was willing to go, in order to uproot slavery. As clearly as any man, he recognized the vital distinction between liberty and law, as well as the importance of that Anglo-Saxon tenet which Prof. A. V. Dicey calls "the supremacy of the law." Yet he says that in certain cases, where laws are manifestly and vitally unjust, a true man should seek refuge in his conscience, and not render them obedience. This leads to the anarchic proposition that the conscience of the individual, and not that of the state, is the arbiter. It places the individual above the law. The abolitionists were thus reproached with teaching anarchy—a reproach deriving its chief odium from the name, and insignificant in comparison with the positive good they did. It is curious that Curtis, a man of such distinct literary ability, verging on genius, should have spoken so little about literature. Of all these orations, three alone are devoted to men-of-letters—in reality only one, on Burns; for those on Bryant and Lowell are mainly expositions of their relation to politics. That on Lowell is a defence of the poet of Elmwood against the charge of too great an admiration for English institutions at the expense of his patriotism.

This volume completes the collection of Mr. Curtis's orations, for editing which America owes a debt of gratitude to Prof. Norton. The volumes are a store-house of lofty thoughts, and form an everlasting monument to Curtis's greatness as an orator and a man. No one can arise from reading them without being enriched in knowledge and, what is more important, without being stimulated to live more nobly in emulation of the man whom no sordid cry of wealth, no seducing voice of ambition, led to disobey the dictates of his conscience.