

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

VICTOR HUGO'S  
ORATION ON VOLTAIRE.

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VICTOR HUGO'S  
**Oration on Voltaire.**

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*Delivered at Paris, May 30, 1878, the hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death.*

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TRANSLATED BY JAMES PARTON.

A HUNDRED years ago to-day a man died. He died immortal. He departed laden with years, laden with works, laden with the most illustrious and the most fearful of responsibilities, the responsibility of the human conscience informed and rectified. He went cursed and blessed—cursed by the past, blessed by the future; and these, gentlemen, are the two superb forms of glory. On his death-bed he had, on the one hand, the acclaim of contemporaries and of posterity; on the other, that triumph of hooting and of hate which the implacable past bestows upon those who have combated it. He was more than a man; he was an age. He had exercised a function and fulfilled a mission. He had been evidently chosen for the work which he had done, by the supreme will, which manifests itself as visibly in the laws of destiny as in the laws of nature.

The eighty-four years which this man lived occupy the interval that separates the monarchy at its apogee

from the revolution in its dawn. When he was born Louis XIV. still reigned; when he died Louis XVI. reigned already; so that his cradle could see the last rays of the great throne and his coffin the first gleams from the great abyss.

Before going further, let us come to an understanding, gentlemen, upon the word abyss. There are good abysses: such are the abysses in which evil is engulfed.

Gentlemen, since I have interrupted myself, allow me to complete my thought. No word imprudent or unsound will be pronounced here. We are here to perform an act of civilisation. We are here to make affirmation of progress, to pay respect to philosophers for the benefits of philosophy, to bring to the eighteenth century the testimony of the nineteenth, to honor magnanimous combatants and good servants, to felicitate the noble effort of peoples, industry, science, the valiant march in advance, the toil to cement human concord; in one word, to glorify peace, that sublime, universal desire. Peace is the virtue of civilisation; war is its crime. We are here, at this grand moment, in this solemn hour, to bow religiously before the moral law, and to say to the world, which hears France, this: There is only one power, conscience in the service of justice; and there is only one glory, genius in the service of truth. That said, I continue.

Before the revolution, gentlemen, the social structure was this:

At the base, the people;

Above the people, religion represented by the clergy;

By the side of religion, justice represented by the magistracy.

And, at that period of human society, what was the people? It was ignorance. What was religion?

It was intolerance. And what was justice? It was injustice. Am I going too far in my words? Judge.

I will confine myself to the citation of two facts, but decisive.

At Toulouse, October 13, 1761, there was found, in a lower story of a house, a young man hanged. The crowd gathered, the clergy fulminated, the magistracy investigated. It was a suicide; they made of it an assassination. In what interest? In the interest of religion. And who was accused? The father. He was a Huguenot, and he wished to hinder his son from becoming a Catholic. There was here a moral monstrosity and a material impossibility. No matter! This father had killed his son; this old man had hanged this young man. Justice set to work, and this was the result. On the month of March, 1762, a man with white hair, Jean Calas, was conducted to a public place, stripped naked, stretched upon a wheel, the limbs bound upon it, the head hanging. Three men are there upon a scaffold—a magistrate, named David, charged to superintend the punishment, a priest to hold the crucifix, and the executioner, with a bar of iron in his hand. The patient, stupefied with terror, regards not the priest, and looks at the executioner. The executioner lifts the bar of iron, and breaks one of his arms. The victim groans and swoons. The magistrate comes forward. They make the condemned inhale salts. He returns to life. Then another stroke of the bar. Another groan. Calas loses consciousness. They revive him, and the executioner begins again; and, as each limb before being broken in two places receives two blows, that makes eight punishments. After the eighth swooning the priest offers him the crucifix to kiss. Calas turns away his head, and the executioner gives him the *coup de grâce*—that is to say, crushes in his chest

with the thick end of the bar of iron. So died Jean Calas.

That lasted two hours. After his death, the evidence of the suicide came to light. But an assassination had been committed. By whom? By the judges.

Another fact. After the old man, the young man. Three years later, in 1765, at Abbeville, the day after a night of storm and high wind, there was found upon the pavement of a bridge an old crucifix of worm-eaten wood, which for three centuries had been fastened to the parapet. Who had thrown down this crucifix? Who committed this sacrilege? It is not known. Perhaps a passer-by. Perhaps the wind. Who is the guilty one? The Bishop of Amiens launches a *monitoire*. Note what a *monitoire* was: it was an order to all the faithful, on pain of hell, to declare what they knew, or believed they knew, of some fact or other—a murderous injunction, when addressed by fanaticism to ignorance. The *monitoire* of the Bishop of Amiens does its work; the town gossip takes upon itself the work of denunciation. Justice discovers, or believes it discovers, that on the night when the crucifix was thrown down two men, two officers, one named La Barre, the other d'Etallonde, passed over the bridge of Abbeville, that they were drunk, and that they sang a guard-room song. The tribunal was the Seneschalcy of Abbeville. The Seneschalcy of Abbeville was like the court of the Capitouls of Toulouse. It was not less just. Two orders for arrest were issued. D'Etallonde escaped, La Barre was taken. Him they delivered to judicial examination. He denied having crossed the bridge; he confessed to having sung the song. The Seneschalcy of Abbeville condemned him; he appealed to the Parliament of Paris. He was conducted to Paris; the sentence was found

good and confirmed. He was conducted back to Abbeville in chains. I abridge. The monstrous hour arrives. They begin by subjecting the Chevalier de La Barre to the torture, ordinary and extraordinary, to make him reveal his accomplices. Accomplices in what? In having crossed a bridge and sung a song. During the torture one of his knees was broken; his confessor, on hearing the bones crack, fainted away. The next day, June 5, 1766, La Barre was drawn to the great square of Abbeville, where flamed a penitential fire; the sentence was read to La Barre; then they cut off one of his hands; then they tore out his tongue with iron pincers; then, in mercy, his head was cut off and thrown into the fire. So died the Chevalier de La Barre. He was nineteen years of age.

Then, O Voltaire! thou didst utter a cry of horror, and it will be thine eternal glory!

Then didst thou enter upon the appalling trial of the past; thou didst plead against tyrants and monsters the cause of the human race, and thou didst gain it. Great man, blessed be thou for ever!

Gentlemen, the frightful things which I have recalled took place in the midst of a polite society; its life was gay and light; people went and came; they looked neither above nor below themselves; their indifference had become carelessness; graceful poets, Saint-Aulaire, Boufflers, Gentil-Bernard, composed pretty verses; the court was all festival; Versailles was brilliant; Paris ignored what was passing; and then it was that through religious ferocity the judges made an old man die upon the wheel, and the priests tore out a child's tongue for a song.

In the presence of this society, frivolous and dismal, Voltaire alone, having before his eyes those united forces, the court, the nobility, the capitalist; that

unconscious power, the blind multitude; that terrible magistracy, so severe to subjects, so docile to the master, crushing and flattering, kneeling upon the people before the king; that clergy, vile compound of hypocrisy and fanaticism; Voltaire alone, I repeat it, declared war against that coalition of all the social iniquities, against that enormous and terrible world, and he accepted battle with it. And what was his weapon? That which has the lightness of the wind and the power of the thunder-bolt—a pen.

With that weapon he fought: with that weapon he conquered.

Gentlemen, let us salute that memory.

Voltaire conquered. Voltaire waged the splendid kind of warfare, the war of one alone against all—that is to say, the grand warfare; the war of thought against matter; the war of reason against prejudice, the war of the just against the unjust; the war for the oppressed against the oppressor; the war of goodness; the war of kindness. He had the tenderness of a woman and the wrath of a hero. He was a great mind, and an immense heart.

He conquered the old code and the old dogma. He conquered the feudal lord, the Gothic judge, the Roman priest. He raised the populace to the dignity of people. He taught, pacified and civilised. He fought for Sirven and Montbailly, as for Calas and La Barre. He accepted all the menaces, all the persecutions, calumny and exile. He was indefatigable and immovable. He conquered violence by a smile, despotism by sarcasm, infallibility by irony, obstinacy by perseverance, ignorance by truth.

I have just pronounced the word *smile*. I pause at it. Smile! It is Voltaire.

Let us say it, gentlemen, pacification (*apaisement*) is the great work of philosophy. In Voltaire the equilibrium always re-establishes itself at last. What-



ever may be his just wrath, it passes, and the irritated Voltaire always gives place to the Voltaire calmed. Then in that profound eye the SMILE appears.

That smile is wisdom. That smile, I repeat, is Voltaire. That smile sometimes becomes laughter, but the philosophic sadness tempers it. Towards the strong it is mockery ; towards the weak it is a caress. It disquiets the oppressor, and reassures the oppressed. Against the great, it is raillery ; for the little, it is pity. Ah, let us be moved by that smile ! It had in it the rays of the dawn. It illuminated the true, the just, the good, and what there is of worthy in the useful. It lighted up the interior of superstitions. Those ugly things it is salutary to see : he has shown them. Luminous, that smile was fruitful also. The new society, the desire for equality and concession, and that beginning of fraternity which called itself tolerance, reciprocal good-will, the just accord of men and rights, reason recognised as the supreme law, the annihilation of prejudices and fixed opinions, the serenity of souls, the spirit of indulgence and of pardon, harmony, peace—behold what has come from that great smile !

On the day—very near, without any doubt—when the identity of wisdom and clemency will be recognised, the day when the amnesty will be proclaimed, I affirm it, up there, in the stars, Voltaire will smile.

Gentlemen, between two servants of Humanity, who appeared eighteen hundred years apart, there is a mysterious relation.

To combat Pharisaism ; to unmask imposture ; to overthrow tyrannies, usurpations, prejudices, falsehoods, superstitions ; to demolish the temple in order to rebuild it—that is to say, to replace the false by the true ; to attack a ferocious magistracy ; to attack a sanguinary priesthood ; to take a whip and drive the money-changers from the sanctuary ; to reclaim

the heritage of the disinherited ; to protect the weak, the poor, the suffering, the overwhelmed ; to struggle for the persecuted and oppressed—that was the war of Jesus Christ ! And who waged that war ? It was Voltaire.

The completion of the evangelical work is the philosophical work ; the spirit of meekness began, the spirit of tolerance continued. Let us say it with a sentiment of profound respect : JESUS WEPT ; VOLTAIRE SMILED. Of that divine tear and of that human smile is composed the sweetness of the present civilisation.

Did Voltaire always smile ? No. He was often indignant. You remarked it in my first words.

Certainly, gentlemen, measure, reserve, proportion, are reason's supreme law. We can say that moderation is the very respiration of the philosopher. The effort of the wise man ought to be to condense into a sort of serene certainty all the approximations of which philosophy is composed. But at certain moments the passion for the true rises powerful and violent, and it is within its right in so doing, like the stormy winds which purify. Never, I insist upon it, will any wise man shake those two august supports of social labor, justice and hope ; and all will respect the judge if he is embodied justice, and all will venerate the priest if he represents hope. But if the magistracy calls itself torture, if the Church calls itself Inquisition, then Humanity looks them in the face and says to the judge : " I will none of thy law ! " and says to the priest : " I will none of thy dogma ! I will none of thy fire upon the earth and thy hell in the future ! " Then philosophy rises in wrath, and arraigns the judge before justice and the priest before God !

This is what Voltaire did. It was grand.

What Voltaire was, I have said ; what his age was, I am about to say.

Gentlemen, great men rarely come alone; large trees seem larger when they dominate a forest; there they are at home. There was a forest of minds around Voltaire; that forest was the eighteenth century. Among those minds there were summits, Montesquieu, Buffon, Beaumarchais, and among others, two, the highest after Voltaire—Rousseau and Diderot. Those thinkers taught men to reason; reasoning well leads to acting well; justness in the mind becomes justice in the heart. Those toilers for progress labored usefully. Buffon founded naturalism; Beaumarchais discovered, outside of Molière, a kind of comedy till then unknown, almost the social comedy; Montesquieu made in law some excavations so profound that he succeeded in exhuming the right. As to Rousseau, as to Diderot, let us pronounce those two names apart. Diderot, a vast intelligence, inquisitive, a tender heart, a thirst for justice, wished to give certain notions as the foundation of true ideas, and created the encyclopædia. Rousseau rendered to woman an admirable service, completing the mother by the nurse, placing near one another those two majesties of the cradle. Rousseau, a writer, eloquent and pathetic, a profound oratorical dreamer, often divined and proclaimed political truth; his ideal borders upon the real; he had the glory of being the first man in France who called himself citizen. The civic fibre vibrates in Rousseau; that which vibrates in Voltaire is the universal fibre. One can say that in the fruitful eighteenth century Rousseau represented the people; Voltaire, still more vast, represented Man. Those powerful writers disappeared, but they left us their soul, the Revolution.

Yes, the French Revolution was their soul. It was their radiant manifestation. It came from them; we find them everywhere in that blest and superb

catastrophe, which formed the conclusion of the past and the opening of the future. In that clear light, which is peculiar to revolutions, and which beyond causes permits us to perceive effects, and beyond the first plan the second, we see behind Danton Diderot, behind Robespierre Rousseau, and behind Mirabeau Voltaire. These formed those.

Gentlemen, to sum up epochs, by giving them the names of men, to make of them in some sort human personages, has only been done by three peoples, Greece, Italy, France. We say, the Age of Pericles, the Age of Augustus, the Age of Leo X., the Age of Louis XIV., the Age of Voltaire. Those appellations have a great significance. This privilege of giving names to periods, belonging exclusively to Greece, to Italy and to France, is the highest mark of civilisation. Until Voltaire they were the names of the chiefs of states. Voltaire is more than the chief of a state; he is a chief of ideas. With Voltaire a new cycle begins. We feel that henceforth the supreme governmental power is to be Thought. Civilisation obeyed force; it will obey the ideal. It is the sceptre and the sword broken, to be replaced by the ray of light; that is to say, authority transfigured into liberty. Henceforth no other sovereignty than the law for the people and the conscience for the individual. For each of us the two aspects of progress separate themselves clearly, and they are these: to exercise one's right—that is to say, to be a man; to perform one's duty—that is to say, to be a citizen.

Such is the signification of that word, the Age of Voltaire; such is the meaning of that august event, the French Revolution.

The two memorable centuries which preceded the eighteenth prepared for it; Rabelais warned royalty in "Gargantua," and Molière warned the church in

“Tartuffe.” Hatred of force and respect for right are visible in those two illustrious spirits.

Whoever says to-day, *might makes right*, performs an act of the Middle Ages, and speaks to men three hundred years behind their time.

Gentlemen, the nineteenth century glorifies the eighteenth century. The eighteenth proposed, the nineteenth decides. And my last word will be the declaration, tranquil but inflexible, of progress.

The time has come. The right has found its formula—human federation.

To-day force is called violence, and begins to be judged. War is arraigned. Civilisation, upon the complaint of the human race, orders the trial, and draws up the great criminal indictment of conquerors and captains. The witness, History, is summoned. The reality appears. The factitious brilliancy is dissipated. In many cases, the hero is a species of assassin. The peoples begin to comprehend that increasing the magnitude of a crime cannot be its diminution; that, if to kill is a crime, to kill much cannot be an extenuating circumstance; that, if to steal is a shame, to invade cannot be a glory; that *Te Deums* do not count for much in this matter; that homicide is homicide; that bloodshed is bloodshed; that it serves nothing to call one's self Cæsar or Napoleon; and that, in the eyes of the eternal God, the figure of a murderer is not changed because, instead of a gallow's cap, there is placed upon his head an emperor's crown.

Ah! let us proclaim absolute truths. Let us dishonor war. No; glorious war does not exist. No; it is not good, and it is not useful, to make corpses. No; it cannot be that life travails for death. No. Oh, mothers who surround me, it cannot be that war, the robber, should continue to take from you your children! No; it cannot be that women should bear

children in pain; that men should be born; that people should plough and sow; that the farmer should fertilise the fields, and the workmen enrich the city; that industry should produce marvels; that genius should produce prodigies; that the vast human activity should, in presence of the starry sky, multiply efforts and creations—all to result in that frightful international exposition which is called a field of battle!

The true field of battle, behold it here! It is this rendezvous of the masterpieces of human labor which Paris offers the world at this moment.\*

The true victory is the victory of Paris.

Alas! we cannot hide it from ourselves, that the present hour, worthy as it is of admiration and respect, has still some mournful aspects; there are still shadows upon the horizon; the tragedy of the peoples is not finished; war, wicked war, is still there, and it has the audacity to lift its head in the midst of this august festival of peace. Princes, for two years past, obstinately adhere to a fatal misunderstanding; their discord forms an obstacle to our concord, and they are ill-inspired to condemn us to the statement of such a contrast.

Let this contrast lead us back to Voltaire. In the presence of menacing possibilities, let us be more pacific than ever. Let us turn toward that great death, toward that great life, toward that great spirit. Let us bend before the venerated tombs. Let us take counsel of him whose life, useful to men, was extinguished a hundred years ago, but whose work is immortal. Let us take counsel of the other powerful thinkers, the auxiliaries of this glorious Voltaire, of Jean Jacques, of Diderot, of Montesquieu. Let us give the word to those great voices. Let us stop the effusion of human blood. Enough! enough! despots

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\* The Exposition of 1878 was then open in Paris.

Ah! barbarism persists. Then let civilisation be indignant. Let the eighteenth century come to the help of the nineteenth. The philosophers, our predecessors, are the apostles of the true; let us invoke those illustrious shades; let them, before monarchies meditate wars, proclaim the right of man to life, the right of conscience to liberty, the sovereignty of reason, the holiness of labor, the beneficence of peace; and since night issues from the thrones, let the light come from the tombs.



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