

SPEECH OF CONSTANT VAN CROMBRUGGHE AT PRIZEGIVING, ALOST, EASTER 1815.

Seeing the dazzling company which honours us by coming to encourage the efforts of our pupils by applauding their success, I feel inspired to give a simple exposé of the goals to which we tend, and the method which we have adopted in order to attain those goals in this school.

The point of perfection at which we have so happily arrived so rapidly proves the value of our methods and justifies the unusual degree of trust in which we are held by an enlightened populace. I beg you, ladies and gentlemen, not to expect from me an elegant and flowery discourse: I have no ambition to be known as an orator. I have nothing to offer but honesty and candour. I will attempt to gain your attention only by the importance of what I want to say.

The education of young people has at every stage in history been regarded by the greatest philosophers and the wisest legislators as the true source of happiness of families, even States and Empires. The high esteem which it enjoys nowadays among Belgians dispenses me from the necessity of establishing its advantages. It is well understood that in order to attain the perfection of which he is capable man must be cultivated. His most positive attributes will not gain any real value except through the care he takes to bring them to fruition and the good use which he learns to make of them. If I needed any proof of the unanimity of feeling which exists concerning this truth I would find it, ladies and gentlemen, in your own approval, in the part you are playing in this ceremony, in the reasons which bring you here: I would find them in the zeal of the first Magistrate of this city and of the members of his Council; it is he who brings them so often among us to encourage our young athletes.

It is, thus the role of education to form the good man and to prepare him to take his place in society; as a consequence it is its role to form the heart and the spirit of the young, to bring to perfection their reason and to embellish their imagination.

In a College, four things, it seems to me, must direct us towards this noble goal: A good choice of studies, wise rules, the power of competition and the stronger power of religion.

Ever since certain foolhardy and audacious men dared to call into question religion, morality and politics, at the same time as submitting public education to the reforming views of anti-philosophy, the literary world has been inundated with productions full of that lofty and unfeeling disdain for all which has previously existed to nourish that effervescence which called the imagination towards new ideas.

Man is doubtless capable of tending to perfection and, as a consequence, his institutions must necessarily be subject to modification. But a half-century of misfortune has taught us the real value of the philosophical reforms: thus we have made it a duty to avoid the route which has been followed these past several years, and to re-align ourselves with the beaux cycles of knowledge in order to discover there the lessons of the true masters of the education of youth. It is Rollin, that most happy genius whom nature and experience formed to direct education and to bring it to perfection. It is Fénelon, at the thought of whom one's imagination smiles and the heart is opened to the tenderest feelings. Yes, it is the good Fénelon, it is Jouvency, and yet others who have guided our councils and whose precepts have formed our laws.

Thus it is that through these true legislators of education, through these friends of youth that we have learned at what level our studies should proceed; which rules and methods should lead us to attain our goal.

Languages are like to instruments of the fine arts, and, before studying an art one must learn how to use the instruments. After the two languages of our country we give preference to the learned languages. One can learn common languages at any age, but the study of the learned languages becomes almost impossible if one has not been initiated into them in one's infancy. Besides, the learned languages lead to the growth and embellishment of the common languages.

The study of history goes hand in hand with that of languages: through languages one accumulates a treasury of words in the mind of children; through history a treasury of facts. A specific course of history is adapted to each class. The study of geography is comparable to that of history in that it places in the minds of the children empires, towns, points of unity and of division in the world, and that of chronology neatly adds eras and epochs.

From chronology one moves on to mythology, that is to the eras and wonders of fable.

From the culture of the memory we move to the enrichment of the imagination. Here it is the turn of belles-lettres, of poetry and of eloquence, seeking in Rome and in Athens - their most natural and rich soil - for the most apt precepts and the finest examples. It follows on naturally from this how much the languages of these famous cities deserve our care and application. The texture of their fine models enlarge the imagination; their precepts fortify it; their imitation perfects it.

The imagination is man's most shining attribute; nevertheless it is subject to many distractions if it is not guided by reason: it changes objects and alters them on a whim. Reason is thus the most necessary quality in man, because the art

of knowing things is more necessary than that of painting them. And the qualities of the heart are that which is most precious in man since they give him a vivid understanding of his duties and of everything which constitutes good morals.

It is therefore, in forming these last qualities that we insist in a special way in all of our classical education. Everything which follows in my speech will prove this.

2. Just as the most flourishing State could not survive if it were not governed by rules which establish the duties of its citizens - even if one is not encouraged to speak thus - the best College could not survive for long if everything within it were not subject to wise rules. Youth, being the nursery of the State, must have its duties towards that State impressed upon it. Submission is the first duty of the Citizen, so also must docility be the first virtue of the child. If one does not begin at an early age to bend the will of Youth, it will fight against all constraints, will shake of the yoke of all law and will perhaps break that which holds society together. It is important, therefore, right from early days to mould this will so that it will retain throughout life a healthy suppleness. Now is the precious moment for giving shape to this soft wax, and to make it master over nature.

The example of one's companions, being clothed in glorious distinction or mortifying humiliation, the help of rewards and even chastisement: these make the observation of our rules sweet and easy. Furthermore, we are constantly in mind of fact that the art of ignoring small misdemeanours is in certain situations the way to avert major problems. Too frequent punishments lead to discouragement. Sweetness attracts; fear repulses. Therefore it is only after having exhausted all the resources of the former that we have recourse to the latter. Public and private exhortations, friendly reproaches and the language of reason and Religion: these are our most powerful tools. This is the reason for the weekly proclamations which take place before the staff and pupils, for the careful reports sent home each month to the parents. Not for us that haughtiness which upsets instead of encouraging: those offensive tones which embitter instead of sweetening: those reproaches which poison instead of healing. In an attempt to destroy evil at its source we attempt, in order to punish a fault, to mortify passion. Our punishment, for example, for laziness, consist in imposing an individual task which does not damage the common work. As differences in social status make no difference to our affection for the pupils, so also does it make no difference in the application of our rules, in the distribution of rewards: we have none of those odious distinctions which engender arrogance and indocility in some, jealousy and resentment in others. In order to inspire trust in all we witness to a universal kindness: every teacher concerns himself with equal ardour with the progress of each one of his pupils.

However, if we are faced with any rebellious spirits whose will cannot be bowed to the Rule, then having exhausted every means suggested by moderation and persevering charity, our practice is, and will invariably be, to send home those whom we cannot conquer for fear that the example of a spoilt will should deprave the others. This point, in the judgement of Rollin, that enlightened judge, is important and decisive for the discipline of a College. In effect, it is always better that one be abandoned rather than the good of several be destroyed.

Laws, however wise they might be, would be a feeble barrier against disorder if one did not attract the minds and heart of the children to them. Law alone is a hard and imperious mistress whose yoke man will attempt to shake off as soon as he can do so with impunity. It is necessary, therefore, that education, that sweet and beguiling mistress, enemy of all constraint, make submission easier by making the duty sweet. In a word, we must go to the root of evil to control passion - that is to say, at childhood.

In order to succeed more safely in containing the passions, we attempt to give them a useful direction by leading them and thus we develop the spirit at the same time as the heart. Born hostile to work, children must find something agreeable in it. Besides, study (as Quintilian observes) depends on an unforced will: "Studium discendi voluntate, quae cogi non potest, constat". One must, as kind Fénelon says "seek every way of making those things which you demand from children agreeable to them. Make them understand that the pain in those things which are annoying will soon be followed by pleasure: show them the usefulness of what you are teaching them". So you must gain the children's good will. We try to make to burn in their hearts the powerful fire of competition by putting the image of glory before the ghost of pleasure. That is why we have these various rewards, titles, and honourable decorations to distinguish the most studious of our pupils. They are childish rewards, in truth, but they are for the children just what sometimes even more vain distinctions are for adults, but with this difference: often it is by favour that adults receive them, but children receive them by merit alone. In our rewards we do not give preference to talent over wisdom, rather crowning success or just effort. This is why we divide our classes into two, each part competing against the other, watching and keeping the other to task. This is why we have debates and classical arguments where memory is pitted against memory, mind against mind in order to sharpen the point of one by the point of another. So in one great bound we deploy every means - sometimes leading to tears caused by noble competition: fertile tears, precious tears. From this also come these individual rewards, these solemn prizes which work towards the discovery of an interest in self-esteem, in duty and in virtue; which make them love each other and which sweeten the difficulties of effort by setting them in the perspective of success. From this come these public exercises where a desire to satisfy the expectations of the public gives or develops talent and gives a felicitous reward to the intellectual faculties. From this also comes our insistence on varying

our exercises and works so as to avoid what, for Youth, is the mortal enemy of a taste for duty, monotonous uniformity. This explains the games and recreations which slice up the occupations of the day, the week and they year, for fear that a too heavy application of mental power might end up by damaging the body. We must avoid, says Rollin, the self-flattering pleasure of seeing children shine before their time, since these precocious fruits rarely come to maturity. It is true, says the gentle Fénelon, that one must hasten to write in their heads whilst letters can be easily formed there, but one must be careful in the choice of the images one wishes to engrave there, since one should not pour into so small and precious a reservoir anything but that which is exquisite and which one wishes to remain their for the rest of their lives.

To pure manners we attempt to add sweet and pleasant manners: the most precious stones have to be polished to be seen at their best, and the most secure merit becomes more agreeable and estimable through politeness. We therefore do not tolerate quarrels, invective nor that vulgarity which can degrade or wound the honest man. As civility acts as a support or ornament of virtue, so we apply ourselves to the task of adding modesty and decency to the bearing of our children; moderation and urbanity into their arguments; restraint and maturity into their actions; correctness into their language; clarity into their pronunciation; regularity into their gestures; aptness and dignity into all their movements.

4. Nevertheless, in vain would we try to tie will to duty; it would never hold well unless it was attached by conscience, and the most powerful knot of conscience - is it not religion? The Empire of religion is much more widespread than that of the law: laws can disguise men's actions, religion goes as far as controlling the mind. Actions can be hidden from human vigilance, but the most intimate passion cannot be hidden from Divine vigilance. So it is that laws, and all human effort, cannot submit a man to their yoke except under certain circumstances; religion makes man cherish that yoke on every occasion. So religion is the most powerful as well as the sweetest support of good order, it is the surest guarantee of the rights of people to happiness. This must religion be the soul as well as the completion of all those duties to which I have alluded. In effect, as Rollin whom I so much like to quote, asks, what is a Christian Master charged with the education of youth? He is, says Rollin, "a man between whose hands Jesus Christ has placed a certain number of children whom he ransomed with his blood and for whom he gave his life whom he regards as members of himself and as his brothers and his inheritors who will reign and will serve God with him and through him for all eternity. And precisely why has he entrusted them to him? Is it to make of them poets, orators, philosophers, wise men? Who would dare say that or even think it? He gave them to him in order to conserve in them the precious and inestimable deposit of innocence which he imprinted in their souls through baptism and to make real Christians of them. That is what is the goal and end of the education of children: all the rest serves simply as means to that end." There, ladies and gentlemen, is what the great man says and in our College the principles of and a taste for religion are inculcated along with the principles of and a taste for learning. We make our pupils think, along with profane truths, of those of the Gospel. Religion presides at all our exercises: it animates the courage of some, the zeal of others; by the modesty of piety it tempers pride in knowledge; it consecrates the language of the Muses through that of the Saints; it applauds even their least efforts, and by the divine eyes of faith it ennobles and perfects everything and gives to everything a merit of which God alone is the motive and of which He alone can be the reward.

The first duty of education is to aim the tender mind of the young towards the veneration of the Creator, to engrave in its yet innocent heart the sweet necessity of pleasing Him, and the powerful reasons that one has for loving Him. As a result, one stimulates them from time to time, by simple and pious exhortations and by the frequentation of the Sacraments towards the practice of piety, that is to say towards everything which could make the virtues of Christianity take root in their souls. In carefully planned instruction, pitched at the level of their intelligence, they are instructed in the principal duties of the Religion which we insinuate into their hearts by printing them in their minds. At the same time we are careful not to tire the children with an excess of information or scrupulosity. Wisdom only shows itself to children at intervals and with a smiling face. All is lost, says Fénelon; "you work in vain if the child gets a sad and dull impression of virtue, and if freedom and indiscipline are shown with a kind face."

It would leave much to be desired if education were a matter of simple precepts. In fact the growing passions of the children seek only to communicate themselves from one to the other, to mutually validate themselves, and the College would become the graveyard of their innocence if a gentle but continual surveillance were not to curb their unfortunate tendencies. Please God there are no parents here who have already learned from experience the sad truth of what I am proposing. Just like that bloom which appears on the surface of fruit at dawn, the slightest stain tarnishes the virtue of childhood. This explains our care to remove from the sight of the children all those objects which might excite the passions and from which there exudes an infectious and pestilential breath capable of infecting those who breathe it in without fear or precaution. This explains our care that in our College everything teaches and inspires virtue - inscriptions, pictures, statues, even games, and that everything which strikes the eyes and ears of the pupils gives out a healthy breath which unconsciously penetrates the soul of the children and which, helped by what the teachers say and yet more by their example, inspires in them from the earliest age a taste for goodness and honesty. This also explains our library, most carefully chosen for our pupils so that in offering them the cup of knowledge they do not sully their lips with the cup of impiety and licentiousness. These days there are, alas, only too many of those wretched works which, like so many poisonous flowers, exhale an lethal odour which is as dangerous as it is attractive to the passions. This explains above all our continued efforts not to adopt, except in cases of extreme necessity, that imperious and austere manner which makes the children tremble, hardens their hearts and denies that conscience without which there is no fruit to be expected from education. We prefer to try and make ourselves loved by them so that they can be free with

us and not be afraid to let us see their failings. To ensure success in this matter we look particularly kindly on those children who hide nothing from us: we never appear surprised by their bad tendencies - on the contrary we sympathise with their weaknesses. Nevertheless there is no lack of the use of authority when trust and persuasion have been shown to be ineffective, but it is only after having exhausted every avenue offered by open, friendly and familial methods which allow us to see the children at their most natural and allow us to know and understand them that we would have recourse to authority. We are convinced that we would not achieve our goal by forcing the children by authority alone to observe our rules. Everything would be changed into an unhealthy formality, perhaps even into hypocrisy. We would give them a disgust for that good for which we only seek to inspire in them a love.

Through this continued support of religion, and this careful supervision, the children will develop the habit of work, joy in virtue, a taste for reflection, amenability to advice, an understanding of honour: in a word, all that will support and encourage them in the acquisition of those qualities proper to great men.

You will have seen, ladies and gentlemen, that we continually seek to use the full scope of our authority: the powerful resource of wise rules, the more powerful resource of competition, and the yet more powerful resource of religion.

If I may point out another peculiar advantage of this establishment, it is that through the zeal of the town authorities this College has been put back into the hands of ministers of religion. Up until our recent unfortunate times, in which a tyrannical government subjugated education to its unjust and impious ends, it was ministers of this same religion who ran the College so wisely. If anyone still doubts the wisdom of this development and the reality of our present advantage, I would ask them to whom they would believe it best to confide the burden of education except to those on whom decency has imposed an unshakeable yoke? to those who are never distracted from a continual and indispensable application to study by the cares of the world? to those whose sacred functions demand irreproachable habits? to those whose state calls them to meditate unceasingly on the spirit of religion, its holy doctrine, and on that tenderness which it demands of them by applying to them the words of God to Moses: "carry these children in your hearts and care for them in charity as a tender nurse"? To whom could you best entrust the development of those good habits which are at the root of public order? Does wisdom not demand that they be established by those whose consecration binds them to holiness and who have divine authority for their function?

Perhaps there will be those who will find fault with the simple tone I am using, even to the extent of suspecting my intentions. As a reply I would only ask them to reserve judgement and to appreciate the instruments I am happy enough to have at my disposal. I will make a vow here with the honesty of a heart incapable of dissimulation: I would willingly sacrifice on the altar of truth and justice all the honour which has been heaped on me for the success which has been enjoyed in the development of this College. Look upon the teachers to whom you confide the precious deposit of the knowledge and behaviour of your children.... And you, my worthy collaborators, allow me, by way of recognition of your service, through love of justice and truth, to mention something of which your modesty will make you disapprove: allow me to make the parents of your pupils aware of the feelings which inspire you, and of the generous efforts you have made for their children which give you the inalienable right to their gratitude.

To whom, in fact, ladies and gentlemen, have you entrusted your children? To teachers who, in the education of the young, seek only the glory of God and the honour of religion: to disinterested teachers who distribute their gifts without ever selling them: who have sacrificed for your children their rest and their own interests - I would go as far as to say they have sacrificed a part of their reputation by stooping to accept a ministry which is seen as humble in the eyes of the common. To teachers who unite taste with knowledge, zeal with talent, discernment with piety, good manners with habits: who make every effort to join equanimity with sweetness of character: young enough to come down to the level of their disciples, as Fénelon would have wished, going as far as to share in their games in order to attract all their trust, but reserved enough to command respect, and to lead them in the paths of knowledge and of virtue. Exact without being severe, they do not demand everything from everyone - in order to get something out of each one. They applaud effort where it is not possible to applaud victory. Knowing the importance of their commitments and the difficulty of fulfilling them without knowing the characters and the quality of spirit of their pupils, they study each one in order to see what can be demanded of him: they study the needs of each one to see which of those needs it would be right to satisfy: they study the character of each one to know to what degree that character should be developed or constrained.

In a nutshell, they seek to bring to perfection what is good in their pupils, to add what is lacking and to reform that of which they disapprove.

I offer you, gentlemen of the staff, the praise which you deserve and my sincere gratitude for the trouble and care you have given to the children.

Such is, ladies and gentlemen, our goal, such are the means we have used to achieve them, such are the sacrifices to which we are condemned in order to live up to your expectations, to redeem the debt we have contracted with the Motherland, and to lead our College not to that point of perfection which leaves nothing to be desired, and which human weakness will never achieve, but to that point which is the happy result of continuous effort. Yes, oh Belgium my Motherland, such are the offerings which we hasten to offer on your altars. The Foreigner for some time wished to

paralyse our efforts towards your joy by closing off to us almost every way of serving you: but each day saw us raising our arms to heaven to call down God's attention on your happiness. Our churches were witness to the supplications which we addressed unceasingly. Now that a brighter light has started to shine for you: may you, under the sweet influence of a Prince who joins domestic virtue with that of a Sovereign, enjoy peace within and respect without. You, oh God, protector of our Kingdom, send down on the throne of the Master whom you have given us the spirit of charity and of humanity; make to shine on the thrones of our Pontiffs the spirit of zeal and knowledge; give the judges a spirit of moderation and justice; make to shine with ever greater brilliance the torch of the faith of our Fathers. May the angel of peace protect us, and keep from our provinces the demon of war; make to flow on our happy countryside a river of abundance! Inspire in its inhabitants feelings worthy of your munificence, impart your blessings to our children, and conserve in us that gentle affection which lightens all their burdens, and strengthen in them that happy disposition which they have received from your bounty.

And you, my dear children, receive today the public expression of my satisfaction. Continue, redouble your efforts, and you will make yourselves worthy of your parents' love, your country's affection and your teachers' kindness.