

ADDRESS BY

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At the Dedication of the

GEORGE C. GORDON LIBRARY

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President Storke, Mr. Anderson, teachers, students, parents, friends of Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

The George C. Gordon Library which we all are dedicating here today differs in so many ways from any library I have ever known that I can doubt my competence to celebrate its singular virtues. I know indeed for a fact that I cannot say exactly what it means that this library will contain among other things the Worcester Area Computation Center, the heart of which will be an IBM 360-40 Computer making use of three disc drives, two tape units, a 1,000 card-per-minute reader, a 300 card per-minute punch, and a 1,100 line-per-minute printer, the combined memory of the computer being 131,000 units. Neither am I familiar with other devices of which this library, I am sure, has every reason to be proud: electronic data retrieval systems, microfilm readers, and audio-visual aids too numerous to mention. Nor have I the capacity to imagine the time -- but this has been taken into account by those who planned the library -- when micro-form storage will be total and stacks, therefore, may be dispensed with. The one new feature which I find myself able to comprehend is a night study room that will be open twenty-four hours a day. I frankly envy the students who will have the run of such a room. I can remember many a night when at ten or eleven o'clock the lights began to go out and I was told I

must leave the books I was desperately trying to finish. I rejoice with a whole generation of students that will be under no obligation to save its eyes.

Now I am not proud of my incompetence with respect to the features I listed first. I wish I knew about disc drives and data retrieval systems; but I do not, and I am willing, therefore, to be set down as an ignorant man. I say this seriously and humbly, in full awareness of the revolutions that have taken place in the handling of human knowledge. The libraries I used to haunt had virtually nothing in them but books. I loved those books, and dedicated myself to the lonely task of mastering them to the extent I was able. Nor am I sorry now that so much of my life was lived among them; indeed, there was a time when they were my life, and I thought any other life was unworthy. If I do not think so now, it is because I know, or fancy I do, that the life to which they referred was even more important and beautiful than they. We make such discoveries as this only as we grow older, and as we learn that the truth about the world will be forever beyond our reach. It is beyond our reach whether we grope for it with words or with numbers I wish it had been with numbers, too, the other language that men use. The human mind expresses itself in two languages, one of which I lack. Let us say once more that I am anything but proud of this.

Perhaps that is why I am so much interested in the new curriculum at Worcester Tech which will provide a program leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science in Humanities and Technology, or as I would put it, in Words and Numbers. The only difficulty here is with the term "Humanities." Is not technology human too? "Technē" in Greek meant "art," strangely enough, or is it strange? The arts of man are manifold, just as his studies are. All of them are human because they are his; all of them, literary or

scientific, are humanities in any generous understanding of the term. I take it, therefore, as a sign of maturity in Worcester Tech that henceforth the two languages of man will work in partnership, each one, I trust, enlightening the other.

Not that both of them together, no matter how perfectly they are meshed, may expect to unearth the entire truth about the world, which must ever remain mysterious. The author of the Apocryphal book, "The Wisdom of Solomon", addressed the maker of the universe as "Thou who madest all things in number, weight, and measure." He made them so, I assume this author meant, without necessarily making men perfect in their power to number, weigh, and measure. Try as they may, they will not reckon the full score. The truth about the world is conceivably so simple that the cunning intellect of man cannot see it as it is. So simple, as -- I hope I shall not be misunderstood -- so superficial. The surface of things is not as easy to see as we might suppose, and yet the truth may lie right there, notwithstanding our many brave attempts to dig beneath it. I once dallied with this idea in a poem which I named "How Deep to Go:"

How deep to go, how dark,
O you that made all things in number,
How deep, how dark shall my desire descend?
And is there any happy coming
Home from that cold end?

There have been those that dived,
O you that made all things in weight,
Until solidity, that locks things in,
Suspending mind and body both --
Where did that death begin?

Why should it not be good,
O you that made all things in measure,
Not to sink deeper than the nether side
Of this we see, this film of the world
Spread now so fine, so wide?

How near, and yet how changed,
O you whose glass stands always full,
How bright might this reality then be,
By undermirror watched; how warm,
And how quicksilver free.

Perhaps I was thinking of Shakespeare who profundity we praise though all he did was render the surface of life without flaw. He is the most lifelike of poets – I might even say, of men. The mirror he holds up to nature shows it, we like to think, exactly as it is. He was master of life's surface: a thing so difficult to be that no one else has managed it as he did.

Yet even Shakespeare rendered less than all of nature that exists. No man can do that, and no man ever will; nor, I venture to insist, will any combination or team of men; nor will any machine. For one thing, there is the future: a part of nature surely, a portion of the surface; yet no man can know it, though there are those of us that try. It is there to be seen if we only had the eyes; and indeed we say of certain men that they do see it, or rather did see it when the rest of us did not. What was there was plain to them, though nobody else had enough vision even to suspect its presence. Yes, we say this of rare and extraordinary men; and by that very token we admit how much is bound to escape even the best of us, and we need not be unhappy that this is so. I, for one, would be uncomfortable in a world that was altogether easy to understand. It would be like knowing the future – all of it – and that, as the Greeks made clear in many a myth, was like nothing so much as living under a curse.

There are those these days who say that the job of what they call the humanities is to save us from what they call science and technology. When they say this they mean, I think, by the humanities something soft and weak: something squeamish, something

timorous that wants the world to be what it always was. But what was the world? It was something that both poets and mathematicians, both philosophers and scientists, were in league to comprehend if only they could. And it should be the hope of men today that the league continue to exist. The engineer, it is often said, does things because he can: builds roads where no roads need to be, moves earth that might better stay put, devises instruments of destruction that no sane mind desires, merely because he knows how these things can be done. The gods do things because they can, the saying goes, and so do engineers. We are helpless in their hands. Yet what are engineers but men? And why should they, being men, have no capacity to ask what other men can ask: why should such and such be done? They have the capacity, of course; and it is my faith that they can and do make use of it. Or if some of them do not, then the program of studies here at Worcester Tech leading to a degree in Humanities and Technology should make them less numerous than they were before. The final questions are for all men to ask, and to answer as wisely as they can. Men cannot be gods. Even engineers cannot. They can be nothing more than men: creatures, that is to say, gifted with the power to ask hard questions, and answer some of them well.

But it is a library, not the human race, that we are dedicating today, so let us return to it – pausing on the way to express our pleasure that in the Gordon Library there will be places to look at pictures and listen to music, and seminar rooms in which to thrash out problems that torment the intellect. I am reminded suddenly of someone – I forget his name – who once remarked that the three deadliest inventions had been the dictionary, the museum, and the library: things that preserved life, not promoted it, and so the end of everything was dust and death. I cannot agree with him if only because

libraries, as I have said, were once for me the very stuff of life, and I know that this is true for millions now. Mr. Dooley was more interesting when he wrote with his matchless candor: “Libries niver encouraged lithrachoor anny more thin tombstones encourage livin’.” But I cannot agree with him either, since books for me have never been tombstones. It might mean more to say, as some have said, that the very existence of libraries, as of dictionaries and museums, indicates a weakening in the muscles of man’s memory. There was a time, we hear, when men remembered because they had to; the handy substitute of the printed page was not available. So they memorized epic poems, histories, and collections of laws, and they could repeat these in their entirety without error. It is obvious that we live in no such time. We cannot do without articles and books – many millions of them – and even these we must use bibliographies and card catalogues to find; or microfilm indexes; or computer cards that someone else has programmed. We do not trust our memories, nor do we need to, and the consequence, just possibly, is a feebleness of mind that walls of glass and marble assist us to forget.

Computers, to be sure, have what their makers call memory – 131,000 units of it in the system soon to be active here. But I cannot believe that it is the same thing. Man’s memory, when it is strong and clear, has no counterpart in any world I know of. Memory, said the Greeks, was the mother of the Muses. But it was – and is – much more important than that. It is the sire of all intellectual endeavor; it is the mainspring of the mind, a thing that I for one must still admit I believe in. Nor can I imagine a time when memory will not seem as beautiful and great as it seemed to St. Augustine, who in his Confessions, where he was endeavoring to remember his own life, paid to it the richest tribute it has ever received.

And so I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses. Further there is stored in the memory the thoughts we think, by adding to or taking from or otherwise modifying the things that sense has made contact with, and all other things that have been entrusted to and laid up in memory, save such as forgetfulness has swallowed in its grave. When I turn to memory, I ask it to bring forth what I want: and some things are produced immediately, some take longer as if they had to be brought out from some more secret place of storage; some pour out in a heap, and while we are actually wanting and looking for something quite different, they hurl themselves upon us in masses as though to say: "May it not be we that you wanted?" I brush them from the face of my memory with the hand of my heart, until at last the thing I want is brought to light from some hidden place. All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory. In my memory are sky and earth and sea, ready at hand along with all the things that I have ever been able to perceive in them and have not forgotten. And in my memory, too, I meet myself – I recall myself, what have I done, when and where and in what state of mind I was when I did it. Great is the power of memory, exceedingly great, a spreading limitless room within me. Who can reach its uttermost depth? Yet it is a faculty of my soul and belongs to my nature. In fact, I cannot totally grasp all that I am. Thus the mind is not large enough to contain itself. In memory also are all such things as we have learned of the liberal sciences and have not forgotten, lying there as if in a more inward place, which yet is no place; and of these I have not the images but the things themselves. For what grammar is or the art of disputation, how many kinds of questions there are – whatever I know of such matter is in my memory. The memory also contains the innumerable principles and laws of numbers and dimensions; and none of these have been impressed upon by it by any bodily sense, seeing that they have neither color nor sound nor scent nor taste nor feel. With all my bodily senses I have perceived the numbers we use in counting; but the basic numbers by which we count are not the same as these, nor images of these; but really are. The mind and memory are not two separate things – when we forget something, we say: "It was not in my mind," or "It escaped my mind." Thus we call the memory mind.

Emerson, sitting in his study not many miles from here, wrote fifteen centuries later: "We estimate a man by how much he remembers. We like signs of richness in an individual, and most of all we like a great memory. Memory performs the impossible for man; holds together past and present, gives continuity and dignity to human life. This is the companion, this is the tutor, the poet, the library, with which you travel."

If memory is a library, the perhaps we are permitted to reverse the terms and say that in a library is stored the memory of a race. And it is well to remember the remark of St. Augustine that memory contains knowledge of “how many kinds of questions there are.” For there are many kinds, and in some generations certain ones of them appear to be forgotten. Questions beginning with “what” and “how” are not finally more important than those beginning with “why” and “whether”. A perfect library would remind us of them all, and a perfect memory would rejoice in being reminded. For though we can never possess the whole truth about the world, it is nothing less than this that as men, gifted uniquely with what we call intellect, we must desire.

The intellect itself has many caverns and recesses, and in different centuries has been occupied with different problems. Latterly, we have assumed that for any given phenomenon there is only one true explanation: the physical, the scientific one. Science means knowledge; but for most persons of our day this means knowledge of the physical world, of nature as it waits to be numbered, weighed and measured. No sensible man ever despised this kind of knowledge; indeed, we could not live on the earth without it, and we need more of it every day. Yet there are further forms and dimensions of truth, and these have a way of returning themselves to our attention if we persist too long in ignoring them. I am thinking now of Dante, who in his Comedy set out to explore the whole of man’s existence: existence on earth, but in Hell and Heaven too, which for him were extensions or reflections of the truth as all men encounter it. My own poem, “Dante Alighieri,” endeavors to describe the patience, the particularity, with which he journeyed through his subject:

As if a cabinet became alive,
And the recesses in it, the small curios,

Burned with an equal being, the huge world
Let him come in; made itself little and patient;
Lasted in shape and singing till his eye,
His delicate ear, solved secrets and moved on.
He wound his way in miniature, beholding
All that can be in corners, all that can shine
In curves a candle, intense and sudden, shows.
But it went far and deep, that shelving place,
Till light itself, a penitent, broke sweetly
And swelled; and swelled again, beyond the mountain
Whose top was tawny spring; swelled, and in bursting
Circles blinded his thought. So he fell down
And down. Yet not to nowhere, for the cabinet
Kept him. As the brain holds every object,
Ticketed, in caverns, so this world
This man who most enlarged it; who with mouse steps
Measured its last echo, singing little,
Singing long of all that may be and that is.

All that is and all that may be – the assignment is enormous, but sooner or later men accept it. Not the whole of it in any generation, but as much of it as can be mastered them.

Which brings me back to your studies here in the humanities and technology: neither one nor the other exclusively, I understand, but the two of them as they shed light on one another, supposing that is possible. My faith, if you care to hear it, is that such a thing is not only possible but necessary in the world that stretches ahead of us. What are the kinds of questions this world will ask of us? What are the kinds of questions it behooves us to ask of this world? The question itself is difficult. But I hope you will not despair of finding the best answers of which man is now capable.