

composition, known as rhetoric, with the rules of which I have at present nothing to do, except in so far as I may be able to apply them in the course of this essay. Its remote and primitive signification is the art of correctly expressing visible objects and invisible thoughts through the use of a medium apparently the most inadequate conceivable for that purpose. This medium, I need not tell you, consists in the symbols known as the *alphabet*; and it is to the consideration of this wonderful invention, if invention it can be deemed, that I now solicit your attention. It is so small that it can be contained on the surface of a ten cent piece, yet so elastic and expansive that it can be and is actually spread over the surface of the earth. It may be compared to the burning bush seen by Moses in the desert, diffusing light, warmth and comfort all around, yet remaining unconsumed and inconsumable; or with equal propriety it may be likened to the sacred fire, which, according to heathen mythology, Prometheus stole from the gods. Where would be the boasted civilization of the present, and of all preceding centuries without that magic little talisman? We have only to glance at the savage to answer the question. His accomplishments, in the sphere of education, are confined within the narrowest limits. He may excel in the chase or in the use of the bow; he may exhibit more or less skill in the construction of a canoe, in the elegant carving of a war-club, or in the manufacture of a snow-shoe; but there is the extent, the *Ultima Thule* of his acquirements and accomplishments.

I have already remarked that the alphabet is one of the principal, if not the chief root of the tree of knowledge, whose branches extend over a large portion of the habitable globe. Its perennial leaves distil the dew of science, and its fruit is recognized in the marvellous and varied works accomplished by human skill and industry. But if the vast majority of its beautiful leaves distil the honey of wisdom, there is also a large minority, no less beautiful, that are impregnated with the poison of immorality and unbelief. Against these pernicious and soul destroying leaves it is not my province to sound the alarm, lest fascinated by their insinuating style, you should be tempted, in an evil hour, to stretch

forth the hand and grasp; for it is written: "In whatsoever day thou eatest this forbidden fruit, thou shalt surely die."

Many learned theories have been set afloat to account for the origin, and to discover the inventor of the alphabet. We learn that Cadmus brought it from Egypt into Greece. But that is no proof of his being the inventor. At most he could have invented no more than the symbols or characters used by the Greeks. Neither can it fairly be ascribed to Enoch. For although he is the first on record to have written a book, the art of writing must have been known previous to his day; for a book without readers would have been then as now, a dead loss. That the art of writing must have been known to man at a very early date is proved from the high civilization of those primitive times.

The human race had then acquired a knowledge of the use of the different metals. They had attained to considerable proficiency in the knowledge of music and in the manufacture of musical instruments, circumstances, which tho' affording no positive, yet furnish indirect proof that the art of writing in some form, was known. The most natural system that a man ignorant of the alphabet could adopt, would be the image of the object desired. If he required his neighbor's axe, and his messenger happened to be a deaf mute, he would naturally draw the image of an axe on some clean surface, and thus obtain the object wanted. He would never dream of making an image of the sound caused by the mere uttering of the word. He could not form an intelligible fac-simile of a thing that is at once invisible, impalpable and intangible. That such images however have been and are still extensively employed, is perfectly true.

The Chinese and Japanese use over 40,000 characters to express very inadequately their thoughts; and as new ideas are constantly occurring, these hieroglyphics must naturally augment in the same ratio.

As man therefore never can and never could, produce a sensible image of an abstraction, such as virtue, vice, happiness, etc., we are reduced to the necessity of concluding, I may say, almost of believing that his knowledge of the