

ON PUBLIC SPEAKING IN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES—THEIR DISTINCT CHARACTERISTICS AND USES.

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE HALIFAX MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.

By George R. Young, Esq.

This subject has been selected with a due appreciation of the responsibility it entails. It is one of peril and difficulty to any Lecturer—for in referring to the golden ages of the mind, and to the noblest and polished passages of the great masters of eloquence in ancient and modern times, his language and force of expression must suffer from comparison. "The brilliant lights in the hemisphere above will reflect on the dim world below." But personal considerations of this kind ought not to weigh upon us here. We bring our offerings to a blessed altar. It is our duty, however moderate or even inadequate our powers may be to the task, to communicate knowledge upon those subjects, whether of science, or philosophy, or letters, upon which we have spent the vigils of a past life—on which we can shed the "lights" of observation and experience, and to which we can bring the fruits of a long, if not successful, study. The first enquiry is one which has long been familiar to me; and in bringing before you the conclusions to which I and others have come, and the evidence upon which they are founded, I trust I shall be able to correct some general and erroneous impressions, and prove the importance, in a novel and important light, of these and similar institutions. In this utilitarian age we all subscribe to the principle that theory and speculation are little entitled to respect, unless they have a practical and useful end.

The powers of language—of transferring ideas by the means of abstract sounds—of making the music of the voice convey abroad and to those around us, the world of thoughts which crowd upon the human mind, as that peculiar and god-like gift which distinguishes man above the lower animals. The latter, it is true, have their own symbols of utterance for their appetites and passions. The lion has its roar, the horse its neigh, the dog its bark, and the bird its song; they can communicate thus to each other their wants and pains; but to this limit their intercourse is confined—the experience and knowledge acquired by one, which at best is little superior to the range of instinct, is confined to and dies with the individual, while man, gifted with higher powers, and brought nearer to that "Divine Essence," of which the mind is an emanation, can instruct, please and animate his kindred; send down his experience and acquirements to after ages even by the slender and fading thread of tradition; and now, by the invention of letters and the press, which give a visible form and perpetuity to language, the discoveries of every great intellect—the ideas it creates and the elegance in which they are clothed—become the property, the enjoyment, and the inheritance of mankind. The produce of mind so blended with matter, is made communicative. Science adds to science, knowledge to knowledge; man is ever progressive, pressing forward to some higher and imagined excellence, elevating here, in short, his own divine nature, and preparing himself better for that immortality, and that wider and nobler range of contemplation, which in an after state of existence is expected to burst upon him.

We speak of the pleasures of society, and of the exquisite enjoyments which are derived from the exercise of the social affections. What is the charm which gathers us here? We come here voluntarily, a multitude—and yet bound together by a kinder and mutual tie. Hand may be pressed to hand—eye may turn to eye—glances may be exchanged which animate and thrill—the deaf and the dumb may be sensible to these and respond to them; but how little do these compare to the thousand other exquisite sensations, which can be conveyed by the tongue giving audible, and if I can use the expression, existence and form,—social creation and communicative force, to the knowledge, the imaginings and judgments of a single mind. The researches and productions of one come thus—in an instant and as if by miracle—to be extended and transferred to a thousand; the speaker, in fact, for a time lives within each of you; and thus the sober and solitary labours of the student, the facts gleaned in exhausting study, the ideas nursed in wild and cheerless abstraction, and the thoughts collated and refined by the curious chemistry of the mind, come to vivify, improve, and fascinate, not a circle, but a world. Homer awakened song in Greece, and has taught every subsequent age to admire the chastened majesty of the epic—Demosthenes, in arousing Athens, has left his specimens of oratory as examples for future times,—Galileo gave to the range of the telescope order and science, and opened a pathway which has since led to a thousand brilliant discoveries,—Bacon, Shakspeare, and Scott, were each the wonders of their age; and in their different spheres have left invaluable inheritances to literature. None of these have lived for themselves or for their country. Their

knowledge and productions have been left to adorn and beautify the great and catholic history of letters,—and hence it may be said that a gifted mind in literature, like a lustrous star, renders brilliant to itself not only the narrow orb in which it moves, but freed from the laws of the physical world—can step, as it were, out of its own body, traverse illimitable space, people the universe with its systems of worlds—give to each of them their millions—pierce the throne and sanctuary of the Most High,—and then, come back to the fire-side, the forum, or to the Institute, reveal in words its own bright course and revelations to others, or by the use of the pen and the press, record them upon a physical, tangible, and enduring tablet. Are not these mighty achievements? Is not the improvement of a spirit such as this worthy of us all? Have you, as the members of one general system, no power over the destinies of the Provincial mind? It will be my object in following out this inquiry to show you the influence you possess, and ought to exercise.

Passing from these observations, for what purpose it may be first enquired, was this power of utterance and of language conferred upon man; and second, in what does eloquence consist? Let me answer these enquiries in plain language. There may be eloquence at the domestic hearth, as well as in the Senate—in the simple lessons of piety and virtue delivered by the parent to his children, as in the elaborate and finished speech of the Advocate—in the sermons of the Christian pastor, as well as in the orations of the Statesman, who speaks to an assembled nation. In every phase of our intercourse with each other, eloquence may be employed. Its office is to teach well, to persuade effectually, to animate to action. Some possess one of its attributes—not all. There are men who are powerful to convey facts and general principles—to transfer their own impressions to others. This is the eloquence of the schoolmen and of professors. Another class are eloquent to convince. They think clearly and can deliver their thoughts in logical order, and in appropriate and luminous language. Others speak only to the understanding, to the dominion is confined—they have not reached or touched the feelings. Neither of these, however, exhibit oratory or eloquence, in its highest and sublimest sense. The perfect orator is he who can teach and can persuade, and unites to these the rare and mighty power of exciting—animating and leading on. He addresses himself to the heart and to the judgment—he enforces conviction and enkindles the passions, and thus controuls and guides the minds of his audience by a magical and mysterious influence. Every sound is hushed—breath even seems suspended, and nothing is heard save the varied and telling intonations of his voice. All other thought is beat down by the rush, the grandeur, and moral force of his own; and for a time he occupies the proud situation of being the "centre point," of which the general intelligence acknowledges the supremacy, and to the power of which it is subservient. The finest definition of eloquence I have ever read is to be found in the eulogy written by Mr. Webster on the death of Adams. "Eloquence consists not," he says, "in the learning of the schools—it is not found in the melody or beauty of language—logic has it not—philosophy alone does not own it—it consists in clear and lucid thought, delivered in plain, but powerful expression—speaking to the understanding and the heart—convincing, moving, and leading to high and generous action; from the fervid, thrilling and irresistible impressions of the hour."

It is not within the scope of this lecture to describe, with the precision of an elocutionist, the different styles of public speaking, and the characteristics which distinguish them. These may form an appropriate subject for some subsequent occasion; but in drawing those broad lines of distinction which are known by students to exist between the ancient and modern schools of Oratory, it is of importance to settle this principle—that both the audience and the subject—the time and the prize, are admitted to exercise a wonderful, and almost mysterious influence upon human powers. This is founded unquestionably upon the strength and action of the social relations—upon the ambition which is wisely implanted in the human heart, of earning the admiration or seeking the love of our species, of playing a prominent part on the theatre of life, of exercising a useful influence upon the freedom or destinies, not of our own circle only, but of a nation; and hence it will be found that the reputation of all great orators has been founded in those stirring times when some great public emergency had occurred, and the mind, with that boundless elasticity which seems inherent to its own nature, rose as if inspired, shook off the languor which before had restrained it; and exhibited a force and genius till then unknown even to its own possessor. Providence, it is said, tempers the wind to the shorn lamb; and in the mysteries of its decrees, the mind, when called upon, when involved in the battle of great and clashing events, may be endowed with fresher gifts and acquire fitter adap-

tations to work out the mighty work for which it has been designed.

But apart from all speculations of a doubtful character, I refer to the experience of every man who is in the habit of addressing an audience, and of that audience who hears him, that there are times and seasons and subjects in and on which the same individual speaks with greater perspicuity, force and animation, than at others. Every man, skilled in the art, will practise it best who, forgetting himself, the worthless and ignoble vanity of display—casts his thoughts into the hearts and upon the feelings of his auditory, and endeavours to make every word, argument, and metaphor tell upon them. He looks to the end, and goes onward. A dignitary of the Church, when addressing the Bench of Bishops, would pursue a very different order of speaking than if he spoke only to his rectory. A politician, a rougher and bolder style of eloquence, at the House of Commons;—and an Advocate, it is known, has one style of tactics for a Jury, and another when he speaks to the Bench in the sober and chastened oratory fitted for a legal argument. All these are examples which prove the existence of the social sympathies, and the respect which is paid to them. There are some rare examples, like Brougham and O'Connell, who have the power of indulging in several styles, with the same mastery and effect; but it is clear that even they would violate the admitted rules of ratiocination and oratorical effect if they did not, on every successive occasion, adapt themselves both to their auditory and to their subjects. If skill in oratory then be the application of means to ends,—if they be the best orators who pursue this adaptation closely,—if the human mind have the plastic and expansive power of moulding itself to meet and master the exigencies in which it is placed,—it would seem to follow, as a necessary corollary, that the greatest orators will be found among a people best fitted to appreciate their efforts, and at a period too, when the events and circumstances in which they were cast, were most likely to elicit and brace every latent gift and talent of the mind.

A reference to these principles are of essential importance in illustrating the opposite characteristics of the ancient and modern schools of oratory; and if we carry them with us, they will relieve our research of much obscurity and doubt. They are the ground on which theory is built—or rather the causes to which the different characteristics of the two styles must be attributed.

I do not intend to enter here into the history of eloquence—to trace it to its origin, and to describe the excellence it has reached even among savage tribes. History has the records of some specimens of this kind, which, for force, pathos, and dignity, are equal to the purset productions of the schools,—we will go at once into the sources of classic history, and to the two golden ages of letters, by which its tablets are adorned.

In the age of Demosthenes, it is admitted, that the people of Athens had reached a high degree of intellectual improvement. They were acute, subtle, ingenious—trained amid the perfect models of the arts, and with a form of Government which rendered them curious and recondite in public affairs. All the circumstances by which they were surrounded were favourable to sagacity and even refinement of mind. Their statues, their temples, their olympiads, their public assemblies, subjected them daily to an education of an intellectual and refining kind. But there were other causes which operated upon the speakers of that age.

"The orator of old was the Parliamentary debater, the speaker at public meetings, the preacher, the newspaper, the published sermon, the pamphlet, the volume, all in one. When he was to speak Greece flocked to Athens, and his address was the object of anxious expectation for months before, and the subject of warm comment for months after the display of his powers."

"Nor is it enough to say that the rostrum of old monopolized in itself all the functions of the press, the senate, the school, and the pulpit also, in our days. It was a rival to the stage also. The people, fond as they were of theatrical exhibitions, from having no other intellectual entertainment, were really as much interested in oratorical displays as sources of recreation. They regarded them, not merely with the interest of citizens hearing State affairs, discussed, in which they took a deep concern, and on which they were called to give an opinion; but as auditors and spectators at a dramatic performance, by which they were to be moved and pleased, and on which they were to exercise their critical faculties, ripened by experience, and sharpened by the frequent contemplation of the purest models."

That the orators of Greece felt the sharpness of the ordeal through which they were to pass, and prepared for a public oration with all the study and care necessary to produce dramatic effect, cannot be doubted from the evidence which has come down to us. They