

THE MCGILL GAZETTE.

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COLLEGIATE ORATORY.

WE have often wondered, as we perused our exchanges and read of the magnificent orations delivered on grandiloquent subjects by American students, what was really the truth of the case. We had noticed that there seemed to be, in the better universities, nothing of this "oratory." The merits and demerits of William Tell, the beauties of "Starry Nights," and the metaphysical rights and wrongs of "Faith" were descanted upon in many a college; but Harvard and Yale, and one or two other colleges, were free from the "oration" fever. We say we wondered at this. We were not so rash as to imagine that the majority of our contemporaries, in ascribing to their college orators the gifts of Demosthenes and Cicero, were guilty of wilful falsehood; nor could we understand how sensible professors would tolerate a score of flashy speeches on one Commencement Day. Surely, we thought, there must be something in this oratory. We imagined many a Pitt; we conjured up many a Sheil, many a Macaulay, and we were inclined to attach some importance to the prevalent teaching of "oratory." An article which appeared in the New York *Nation* some time since, however, dispelled our dreams. The *Nation* had attended a "competition in oratory" held in New York last year, at which the representatives of half a dozen colleges strove to gain the laurel. Now, there is no journal in America whose opinion upon a subject of this nature is more valuable than the *Nation's*. What, then, was the conclusion arrived at by the *Nation* as to the oratory displayed at this competition? The *Nation* says: "This entertainment more than confirmed the doubts we have often expressed in these columns, as to the expediency of encouraging displays of this

character, and as to the wholesomeness of their influence on mental training." The actual facts differ considerably from the lavish encomiums so freely made on American college oratory. The *Nation* says that the immaturity of the contestants was very apparent, and that 'the choice of subjects was in itself an indication of a strong love for generalities, of a taste for hazy thinking, for sounding rather than exact expression."

The subjects were vague and general—subjects about which "one can talk by the hour and say nothing," and the *Nation* thinks that "if the cultivation of oratory drives a young man in on such topics, it affords an argument of a very strong kind for avoiding it during a period of mental growth and discipline." As an example of the subjects chosen by the committees, we may mention those named by the *Nation*:—"The Ideal Man," "Principle," "Everlasting Man."

High praise is bestowed by the *Nation* on the elocution of the competitors. This we can well understand. Manner, not matter, is sought after; declamation is mistaken for oratory; a flourish of the hand is esteemed more than a brilliant sentence or a pointed argument. The fault, we think, lies in the system. American colleges avoid *debates*. Oration, and speeches on separate subjects, are common, but debating, where fact is met by fact, where the vigour and effect of a speech is gauged by the material, not by the style of its delivery, seems to be uncommon and uncared for. Few can deny that true oratory is best taught by debates. A man may talk for years on "Xantippe" before a looking-glass, and still be no public speaker. These two things are essentially different in their results. The one breeds logic, the other rhetoric. A happy medium, we think, exists in our own college, and without egotism or a too wanton display of self-esteem, we think we can congratulate ourselves on having in our University Literary Society as good a