

"A FEW WORDS ON ORATORY."

(Paper read before the University Literary Society, 17th Dec., 1886.)

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,—

In this evening's paper it is proposed to make a few remarks on oratory or eloquence, a matter which a considerable number amongst us will probably claim as one specially their own, or, at any rate, as one to some proficiency in which we hope to attain.

The subject is one of no small consequence, and which, to do justice to, would require much more time and attention than is likely to be allotted to the preparation of a short essay to be read at an ordinary weekly meeting of our club, and, perhaps, on hearing the title to the present paper, you will be inclined to ask, with the poet Horace—"Quid dignum tanto feret hic promissar hiatu?" How is the promise given with such a flourish of trumpets likely to be fulfilled? However, from the constitution of our Society, a member is encouraged to treat of, and discuss, subjects, the introduction of which might otherwise appear somewhat bold.

To mankind naught is so sweet as the sound of the human voice.

You will recollect the word, put in the mouth of Robinson Crusoe, appalled and overborne by the fearful solitude of his island domain:—

"I am out of humanity's reach,
I must finish my journey alone,
Never hear the sweet music of speech—
I start at the sound of my own."—*Cowper.*

I remember once hearing a musician, of no mean ability, make the remark that all musical instruments were made to resemble, as far as possible in their several sounds, the various intonations of the human voice.

It is almost needless to point out the power, force, and influence of eloquence in all ages, for he who has acquired the art of oratory is possessed, in a free country, of the most powerful engine which one man can make use of over his fellows. To what agency did St. Paul owe his marvellous success in spreading the doctrines of Christianity, but to his great gift of language, and his passionate appeals were attended with all the greater effect from their being clothed in language, the grace and beauty of which at once charmed and convinced his hearers.

Peter the Hermit succeeded, by his preaching, in enlisting thousands in the service of the Cross, and by the same influence induced the flower of the Christian chivalry to expend their treasure and sacrifice their lives in the attempt to wrest the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the Infidels. But to go further and multiply examples would be an easy but unnecessary task.

"Nestor, the leader of the Phylan host,
The smooth-tongued chief, from whose persuasive lips,
Sweeter than honey, flowed the stream of speech;
Two generations of the sons of men
For him were past and gone, who, with himself,
Were born and bred on Pryor's lovely shore,
And o'er the third he now held royal sway."

Language is the dress of thought, or the incarnation of thought and oratory. Eloquence, or the art of public speaking, whose object is to please and persuade, Lord Chesterfield tells his son, is so very useful in every part of life, and so absolutely essential in most, that a man can make no figure, or at least but a poor figure, without it; in Parliament, in the church, or in the law, and even in common conversation, a man that has acquired an easy and habitual eloquence, who speaks properly and accurately, will have a great advantage over those who speak incorrectly and inelegantly.

You will all recollect Hamlet's advice to the players:—

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand;—but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness; and it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters—to very rags—to split the ears of the groundlings; who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod. Pray you avoid it." * * * "Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor; suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." And so on.

In the ancient world eloquence flourished, especially and almost exclusively, in the free countries where the government was by the people, whose approval of the policy of those aspiring to lead had first to be obtained before such policy could be put in execution; for where the people had no voice there was there little room for eloquence, and we see that in proportion as the liberty of the ancient Greek states vanished so did the art of eloquence decline.

It is chiefly to Athens that we must look for the birth and growth of ancient oratory, and it was there also that it flourished to a degree such as has never since been equalled.

A country composed in great part of lofty mountains and beautiful valleys, of which that of Tempé enjoyed a world-wide reputation for romantic grandeur, a mythology which gave to every mountain top and every grove and valley, and almost, indeed, to every bush and thicket, a god or goddess, and a nymph to every fountain; a history replete with noble traditions and tales of heroic feats performed on behalf of their country, and a gorgeous southern sky, tinting every object of nature, and giving it a hue of romance, all combined to foster amongst the Greeks a highly sensitive and poetic imagination, and tended in no small degree to the attainment; and perfection of those higher but chastened and elegant flights of eloquence for which their orators of note were so famous; but it was, above all, to the free and popular constitution of Athens that Grecian oratory owed its great success.

From the extremely democratic nature of the Athenian institutions, it was almost a necessity that anyone who aspired to attain a high position in the State should be a master of eloquence; the whole public business, both political and judicial, was trans-