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

A LECTURE DELIVERED BEFORE THE HALIFAX MECHANICS' INSTITUTE: DECEMBER, 1839.

By George R. Young, Esq.  
(Concluded.)

We come to the golden age of Louis the Great, and our own Queen Anne. The reputation of it is founded upon that of the great men whom it produced. It had poets, philosophers, historians, and statesmen; and under their guardianship, literature, science, and politics, rose before the world in new aspects, and seemed to be refreshed with new vigour and strength. It would here be out of place to dwell upon all the improvements gained to future times by the labours and devotion of these gifted minds—but in tracing the causes which led to the excellence which oratory has acquired, it is right to point to the improvements effected by the writers of that age upon the structure and the harmony of the English style. In Shakespeare there is a well of the pure old English—a mellowed force and ripeness of expression which every scholar admires the more deeply it is studied; but Dryden, Milton, Addison, wove a pure and classic elegance into English literature, and led to that richness and power for which the national style has since been distinguished. They thus prepared one of the essential and primary elements for the rise of the new and modern school of oratory.

Previous to the era of the American and French Revolutions, it cannot be said that Europe produced any orators of surpassing excellence. Coke, Raleigh, Cromwell, Hale, Bolingbroke, Sel-den, Walpole; however high they may rank as literary men, have left no splendid orations as ornaments to our literature. That these men spoke well—that they could argue and persuade—that some of them were gifted with powers of public speaking of a peculiar and even lofty kind, cannot be questioned; but of fine orations, they have left none; and it was consigned to the elder Pitt, gifted with the noblest talents, inspired by his sympathies for the freedom and destinies of the New World, his just indignation at the employment of the Indians, against those who were struggling for the great battle of human rights—to give to the world some specimens of oratory, equal to the productions of ancient times, and which led to that splendid age of parliamentary eloquence, with which St. Stephen's was then, and has since, been adorned.

Let it not be supposed that in speaking thus lightly of the oratory which is known from the age of Henry VIII. up to the reign of George III., I intend to say that public speaking of a high order did not exist. The eloquence of the Puritans in England—of the Covenanters in Scotland—of several speakers in Parliament, are spoken of as impassioned and dramatic by the historians of their own times; and in drawing the above distinctions, I wish it to be understood that they refer only to perfect and exquisite efforts. We speak not of their own intrinsic merits,—but of their excellencies, when weighed in the scale of comparison with the productions of other times.

Before the age of Chatham, it cannot be doubted that the Catholic fathers of the French Church had exhibited a force of eloquence of the very purest school. The sermons of Bourdaloue, Fenelon, and Massillon, produced those electric and moving effects upon their audience, which come only from the loftiest powers of the human mind. Blair, in his lectures upon the pulpit, has described these powerfully; and such instances prove beyond doubt, that even in these later times, the gifts of oratory were exquisitely prized, and that the hearts of the people were ready to yield to the fascinating sympathies which the orator, and he only, can produce.

There can be no doubt that the partition of Poland in the Old World, and the separation of the old American Colonies in the New, gave rise to that war of opinions and principles with which the intelligent part of mankind has since been agitated. In the British Parliament—the most exciting, the most chaste, and the noblest field of eloquence which the modern world has ever yet seen—these events, and those which followed them, called for the highest efforts of the human mind, and that iron resolution of the soul fitted to struggle with, and master mighty issues. The revolution in America was followed by the revolution in France—the fiercest struggle, which had ever been seen between the aristocratic and the popular powers. It enkindled genius, and aroused the feelings and the passions of the most collected and philosophical. The war which desolated Europe, and threatened to destroy the older dynasties, built upon the prejudices of a former age, and crushing freedom of action and the generous expansion of the mind—was then begun,

and induced Great Britain to bring her influence to uphold the balance of power. Then came the impeachment of Warren Hastings—the Union with Ireland. This continued succession of great events gave that impulse to the public mind, and created that broad sympathy in national feeling, which rendered the English Parliament, for some thirty years, a scene of masterly and splendid eloquence. In this period there were the elder and younger Chatham, Fox, Burke, Sheridan, Grattan, Canning, Curran, Erskine—all statesmen, or lawyers, who were the master spirits of their time, and have left reputations for eloquence inferior only to the ancient masters, because they lived in, and spoke to another age, and to an audience of a far different character, from the subtle and ingenious Athenians, or the Roman Senate or Comitia.

To give the different styles of these speakers—to quote their finer passages and reflect upon them—is a labour which, if any of us here are competent to such a task, would be supererogatory. That they nearly approached to a classic standard, and copied more closely the finest examples of ancient times—in the use of metaphor—in freedom and amplitude of illustration—in an embellishment, amounting almost to ornate poetic figure—in an appeal to the passions and the finer feelings of the heart,—cannot be questioned. Let any student study the best speeches of the last Pitt, Fox, Sheridan, Burke, or even Erskine, and he will see at once that they indulge in a classic freedom and play of imagination, which would not suit the grave and more chastened taste of a modern audience. Some of these, it is known, prepared their speeches with elaborate and exquisite care. Fox was a diligent student of the classics, during the whole period of his public life. Sheridan wrote passages, and had them committed to memory, ready to be spoken in their proper place. Burke, too, wrote out and committed many of his most celebrated speeches; and Curran's have come down to us corrected by his own hand. These men brought to the inspiration of the hour, the thoughts and tropes elaborated by previous study; and hence it is that many of their efforts have the appearance of disquisitions—refined thoughts dressed in apt and chastened language—passages of polished and exquisite skill—political philosophy woven into gorgeous language, and the passions deified and addressed;—all widely different from the resolute but practical talent—the epigrammatic point and the lively illustration, best fitted now for a warm and eager debate.

In the biographies of these statesmen and orators of the last age, their mode of preparation is described, and such is the change of taste arising from the spread of letters and general intelligence, that if any speaker were to confess now that he subjected his mind to such careful training, it would be injurious to his public reputation, and would induce men to think he was unfitted to wrestle in the tournament of a modern popular assembly. The tone of eloquence—the characteristics of public speaking have since changed.

In the era of the Revolution in France the National Assembly had a band of orators superiorly gifted. Robespierre, Danton, Mirabeau, were all adepts in the art; but this is a scene to which none ought to turn, except to execrate. In America the Revolution called out some master minds. Patrick Henry, Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams, were men who could address a popular assembly, with decided and wonderful effect; and no doubt felt the inspiration of that bold destiny they were summoned to occupy in the history of human freedom. But the debates in Ireland during the rebellion of 1798, and when the Union with England was first proposed, brought out a galaxy of talent and displays of eloquence which have scarcely been surpassed in any former age. The public mind was then agitated with an ominous catastrophe. "Coming events cast their shadows before." The great mass of the Irish population—long suffering under religious persecution, and living in the hope, which, although long deferred, so far from being extinct, burned day by day with the freshness of a new life—that their emancipation would yet be achieved by the influence and action of their own domestic Parliament,—saw in the Union a death-blow to their political and religious freedom, and the perpetuity of a yoke which had then galled till it festered on the national flesh. In the national character of Ireland, all the elements of genuine oratory are combined—deep feeling and passion—warm imaginative powers—fluent and ready utterance; and it is freely admitted that at this period the splendid talent of the nation even surpassed itself, and produced specimens of oratory, which, for boldness of conception, pathos, and patriotic ardour, rank among the first in the standard of modern times.

But I have already said the character of public speaking has undergone a decided change. With these names, the classic lights have been extinguished. The same style is no longer attempted. We have become a business and more prosaic age. The mystic learning of the schools, and the embellishments of rhetoric have

lost their charms. This is an age of action—not of fancy and speculative contemplation. All intellectual efforts are weighed by their utility, and by their adaptation to the every day business of life. It is the business of a speaker now chiefly to persuade. He addresses cultivated and thinking minds. He has to adduce facts; not to elaborate theories; and these causes combined, give to the public speaking of the present day a scope and character widely different from the eloquence of the ancients, and force it to draw upon the memory and the judgment, rather than upon the imagination and the passions—the orator has to pursue logical deduction, rather than to throw off the figures of a refined and matured genius.

Let it not be supposed that in a distinction of this kind, I am accusing you with a theory of my own. The distinction is brought out in Moore's Life of Sheridan; and I quote the passage entire—"In politics, too, he (Sheridan) had the advantage of entering on his career at a time, when habits of business, and a knowledge of details were less looked for in public men than they are at present, and when the House of Commons was, for various reasons, a more open play-ground for eloquence and wit. The great increase of public business since then has necessarily made a considerable change in this respect. Not only has the time of the Legislature become too precious to be wasted upon the mere gymnastics of rhetoric, but even those graces, with which true oratory surrounds her statements, are but impatiently borne, where the statement itself is the primary and pressing object of the hearer. Burke, we know, was even too much addicted to what a Falconer would call raking, or flying wide of his game; but there was hardly one of his great contemporaries, who, if beginning his career at present, would not find it in some degree necessary, to conform his style to the taste for business and matter of fact that is prevalent. Mr. Pitt would be compelled to curtail the march of his sentences. Mr. Fox would have to repent himself frequently; nor would Sheridan venture to enliven a question of evidence by a long and pathetic appeal to filial piety." In addition to the change in the character and taste of the House of Commons, which, while it has lowered the value of some of the qualifications possessed by Sheridan, has created a demand for others of a more useful and less splendid kind, which his education and habits of life would have rendered less easily attainable by him, we must take into account the prodigious difference produced by the general movement of the whole civilized world towards knowledge—a movement, which no public man, however great his natural talents, could now lag behind with impunity, and which requires nothing less than the versatile and encyclopaedic powers of a Brougham to keep pace with."—Vol. 1. p. 464. London Edition.

In an article upon the orators in the Reformed Parliament, contained in the Dublin Review for October, 1838—a work of genuine talent, and conducted with all the spirit of a leading periodical—there is the following view of the declension of Parliamentary eloquence, p. 435.

"There is no longer in either House a Burke, with lively and impassioned images, with profound knowledge, and in a tone as philosophical as captivating, to enchain the attention, and to inculcate, in the most flowing periods, and the most measured but alluring sentences, the favourite doctrines of the statesman—the energy of a Fox; the ever-ready, ever-biting retort of a Pitt; the keen wit, the pointed satire, the brilliant imagination, the overpowering eloquence of a Canning, are yet wanting; and there exists not one legislator, who, with an almost inexhaustible flow of words the best chosen, and of flowers of rhetoric the most carefully culled,—who, with a quickness of fancy, and with an acute sense of the ridiculous, can alike amuse and convince a reluctant audience,—in a word, who can supply the place of a Sheridan?"

"Part of this retrogression may, perhaps, be attributed to a cause which, although somewhat startling, is nevertheless true, this ora-

\* Hume, in his Essay upon Eloquence, (vol. 1. p. 109) thus expresses himself:—"Now, to judge by the rule, ancient eloquence, that is, the sublime and passionate, is of a much greater taste than the modern, or the argumentative and rational; and if properly executed will always have more command and authority over mankind. We are satisfied with our mediocrity, because we have had no experience of any thing better; but the ancients had experience of both, and, upon comparison, gave the preference to that kind of which they have left us such applauded models. For, if it mistake not, our modern eloquence is of the same style or species, with that which ancient critics denominated attic eloquence, that is, calm, elegant, and subtle, which instructed the reason more than affected the passions, and never raised its tone above argument or common discourse." This opinion has been attacked, and in justice to the historian, it may be said, that if he had lived to the present day he would have been found to entertain views in some respects modified.