

# ORATORY AND ORATORS.

## A LECTURE BY MR. RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

### POWERS OF ELOQUENCE AND ITS DISTINGUISHING ELEMENTS—THE TRUE ORATOR A HERO.

Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered a lecture before his towns-people in Concord, Mass., on Wednesday evening, this being understood to be the only lecture he will deliver this Winter. We take the following report of his address from the Boston Advertiser:

He said: "I don't know of any kind of history, except the event of a battle, to which the people listen with more interest than to any anecdote of eloquence, and the wise think it better than the battle. It is a triumph of pure power, and it has a beautiful and prodigious surprise in it. For men can see and understand the means by which a battle is gained. They count the armies, they see the cannon and musketry, the cavalry, the character and advantages of the ground, so that the result is often predicted by the observer with great certainty before the charge is sounded. Not so in a court of law, or in a Legislature. Who knows before the debate begins what the preparation and what the means are for the combatants? The facts, the reasoning, the logic, above all the sentiment, the flame, the passion, the continuous energy of will which is presently to be let loose on this bench of Judges, or on this miscellaneous assembly gathered from the streets—these are all invisible, unknown; indeed, much power is to be anticipated which is not yet called into existence, but is to be suggested on the spot by the unexpected turn things may take at the appearance of new evidence, or by an unlooked-for bias in the Judges or in the audience. It is eminently the art which flourishes—the art of speech, the art of eloquence is that art which flourishes in free countries. It is an old proverb that every people has its prophet, and every class of people its orator. Our community runs through a long scale of mental power, from the highest refinement to savage ignorance. There are not only the wants of the intellectual, the learned, the poetic men and women to be met, but also the vast interests of property, public and private. The mining, the manufacturing interests, trade, railroads, all these must have their advocates of each improvement and each interest. Then the political questions which agitate millions and which find or form a class of men, by nature or habit, fit to discuss and deal with them and make them intelligible and acceptable leaders. Here is one of whom we had no note, but on a certain occasion it appears that he has a great virtue, never suspected; that he can paint what has occurred and what must occur with such clearness to a company as though they saw it done before their eyes. By leading their thought he leads their will, and can make them do gladly what an hour ago they could not believe they would be led to do at all. He makes them glad or angry, or penitent, at his pleasure; of course makes friends and fills desponding men with hope and joy. After Sheridan's speech in Parliament at Warren Hastings, Mr. Pitt, the Prime Minister, moved an adjournment, that the House might recover from the overpowering effect of Sheridan's oratory—the delight that sudden eloquence gives at the moment is so rich. An old Greek orator once said he had a way to cure the distempers of men's minds by words. The orator is that physician, whether he speak from the capitol or on a cart; he is the benefactor that lifts men above themselves and creates a higher longing than he satisfies. The orator, in fact, is he whom every man is seeking when he goes into the courts, into the conventions, into the popular assembly—though often it has been with disappointment, yet never giving over the hope—he finds him, perhaps, in the senate, when the forest has cast out some wild, heavy-browed bantling, to show the same energy in the court or forum which he had learned in driving the cattle to the hills or in scrambling through thickets in the winter frost, or through the swamp in search of his game. In the fierceness of his brow, in the majesty of his mien, nature has marked her son; and in his artificial and perhaps unworthy place in company, she reminds you of the lessons taught him in early days by the torrent, in the gloom of the pine woods where he wandered, the companion of the wild birds or the hunter of the deer. Or you may find him in some lowly Bethel by the sea-side, where the hard-featured, seared, and wrinkled Methodist becomes the poet of the sailor fisherman, while he pours out the abundant streams of his thought, through a language all glittering and fiery with imagination. A man who never knew a looking-glass or a critic; a man whom college course or patronage never incited, whom praise cannot spoil; a man who carries his audience by infusing his soul into them, who speaks by the right of being the person in the assembly who has the most to say, and so makes the other speakers appear little and cowardly before his face. For a time he throws all others into the shade, and every listener gladly consents to be nothing in his presence, surprised and carried away in the new flood of his eloquence. Who can wonder at the influence of eloquence on young and ardent minds? Uncommon boys follow uncommon men, and I think every one of us can remember when our first experience made us for a time the victim or the worshiper of the first master of this art whom we happened to see in the court-house or in the caucus.

We reckon the Bar, the Senate, journalism, and the pulpit peaceful professions; but you cannot escape the demand for courage in these, and certainly there is no true orator who is not a hero. His attitude in the rostrum or the pulpit requires that he counterbalance his oratory. He is the challenger, and must answer all comers. The orator must often stand with forward foot in the attitude of the defensive. His speech must be just ahead of the assembly, ahead of the whole human race, or it is superfluous. His speech is not to be distinct from action. It is the electricity of action. It is action as the General's word of command and the chart of battle is action. He must feel that the speaker compromises himself; his oratory counts for something or nothing; it is the key to the charge and the fight, or let him be silent. You go to a town meeting where the people are called to some disagreeable duty, such as often occurred during the war—on an occasion of a new draft, for instance. They go unwilling. They have spent their money once or twice very freely; they have sent their best men, the young and ardent, those of a martial temperament, who answered the first draft or the second, and it is not easy to see who else can be spared or induced to go. The silence and coldness of the assembly, after the meeting has been called to order and the purpose stated, are not very encouraging. Then a good man rises in the cold and malicious assembly and they say: 'Well, Sir, it would be more prudent to be silent; why not rest, Sir, on your good record? Nobody doubts your power, but for the present objects, we know all about it. We are tired of being pushed into patriotism by people who stay at home.' But he, taking no counsel of such things, but only of the inspiration of his to-day's feelings, surprises them with his tidings, with his better knowledge, his larger view, his steady gaze at the new and future, of which they had not thought, and they are interested like so many children, and he gains the victory by prophesying where they expected repetition. He knew they were looking behind and he was looking ahead, and therefore it was right to speak. Then the observers say, 'What a God-send is this manner of a man to a town, and what faculties he has! He is put together like a Waltham watch, or like a locomotive just finished at the Treadwell works.'

Nothing indicates more universal health than eloquence, and the special ingredients of this force are clear perception, memory, power of statement, logic, imagination, or the skill to clothe your thought, passion, which is the key, and the grand will, which, when legitimate and abiding, we call character, and is the idea of highest manhood. I don't know but I may as well state frankly why I chose this dangerous subject, which, of course, only calls attention to the defects of the speaker who hazards it—it was simply because it would give me an opportunity of reading to you a few examples of eloquence that have given me great pleasure in their different styles. As soon as a man shows rare power of expression, like Chatham, Erskine, Webster, Patrick Henry, Phillips, all the great interests, whether of State or of property, seek him to be their spokesman, so that he is at once a potentate—a ruler of men. A worthy gentleman, Mr. Alexander, on listening to the debates in the Scottish Kirk, and, himself attempting to speak, failing in his first endeavor, and delighted by the talent of Dr. Hugh Blair, called on him, and offered him £1,000 sterling if he would teach him to speak with propriety in public. It sounds like a simple proposition, and if it were kept by the scholar, and with equal earnestness by the master, it might be successful. In 1848 I was in England, and saw Mr. Atstin, a barrister, who was said to receive £30,000 a year for services rendered railroad companies. He presented the desires of railroad companies to the Railroad Committee of Parliament, and such was his power that it was found to be well deserved. The great and growing interests at stake in this country must pay proportionate prices to their advocates and defenders.

But the power which so fascinates and astonishes the nations is a talent which is universal. All men are competitors in this art. We have all attended meetings called for some business in which no one had beforehand any great interest. Every speaker rises unwillingly, and his speech is a bad apology. But it is only the first plunge which is formidable: a deep interest and sympathy which is the ice, loosens the tongue, and will carry the cold and fearful person into self-possession and possession of the audience. Go into an assembly well interested—some angry political meeting on the eve of a crisis. Then it appears that eloquence is as natural as swimming, an art which all can learn, but so few do. It only needs that they should be pushed forward into deep water, without cork, and, after struggling for a few moments, they soon find their element. The most hard-fisted, brawny laborer sometimes turns out, in a public assembly, to be a fluent and effective orator. He is filled with a certain creative heat which perhaps comes to him only once in his life. Whenever there is grand eloquence there is great accumulation of heat, which expands all the faculties into power. Every man may have that experience once. Those whom we admire, the great orators, have some habit of heat, or a certain control of it, an art of husbanding it, as if their hand was on the organ stop, and they could use it temperately, and now let it on in its full power. I recollect that Jenny Lind, when in this country, complained of the halls, that they did not give her room enough for her voice, and she exulted in an opportunity given her in great halls. She even sometimes sang in halls above railroad depots. It is so with men with this talent. They sometimes had themselves cold while in private company, and pressed for words, but gave them a commanding and occasion, the inspiration of a great multitude, and they surprise by new and unlooked-for powers. Before they were out of place, and oftentimes cautious in a public. To be sure there are specialties in this art. A good voice has a charm in speech as in song. Sometimes itself chains attention, and

cating a rare sensibility, especially when trained well in all its powers. The voice often indicates what is the range of the speaker's mind. Many people have no ear for music, but every one has an ear for skillful reading. Every one of us has at some time been a victim of a well-trained voice, perhaps been repelled once for all by a harsh, indelicate speaker. The voice, indeed, is so delicate, and indicates the state of mind so minutely, that I have heard an eminent preacher say that he learns from the first tones of his voice on Sunday morning whether he is to have a successful day. A singer cares little for the words of a song. A good singer will make any words glorious. The same holds with the orator. I call him in a church a good reader who can weave poetry into any hymn in the hymn-book, a thing which any orator can do.

But all this is the gymnastics, the education of eloquence, and not eloquence itself. It is said that one of the best orators of his time was the late President John Quincy Adams. I have heard that no man could read the Bible with such powerful effect as he. I can easily believe it, though I never heard him speak but twice, and then in his old age, when his fine voice was much broken, but the words he could speak with that cracked organ showed what power might have belonged to it in earlier manhood. If indignation makes good verses, as Horace says, it is not less true that indignation makes an excellent speech. In the early days of this man, some of the audience will recall, Mr. Adams was drawn while a Senator—no, was appointed Professor of rhetoric or oratory in Harvard College. When he read his first lecture there, in 1806, not only the students heard him with delight, but the hall was crowded by Professors and by unusual visitors. I remember when I entered college hearing of the coaches in which in that old time his friends came out from Boston to hear him. While still Professor he was elected to the United States Senate, and while there took such a course in the debates of that session as astonished and grieved his friends in Boston. When on his return from Washington he resumed his lectures at Cambridge, his class attended, but the coaches from Boston did not come, and indeed many of his past friends deserted him. In 1809 he was appointed Minister to Russia, and resigned his charge at the university. His last lecture contains some nervous allusions to the treatment he had received from his old friends, which showed how much it had stung him, and which made a profound impression on the class of students to which he said it. Every one has felt how superior in force is the language of the street to that of the academy. Ought not the scholar to be able to convey his meaning in terms as sharp and strong as the porter or truckman use? The language of the men of the street is strong, nor can you mend it by what you call parliamentary. You say, 'If he could only express himself.' But he does already better than any one can do it for him. A man who knows himself about the matter in hand, can always get the ear of an audience to the exclusion of everybody else. The power of their speech is that it is perfectly understood by all, and I believe it to be true that when any orator at the bar or in the Senate rises in his thought he descends in his language. That is, that when he rises to any height of thought or of passion, he comes down to a level with the ear of all his audience. It is the oratory of John Brown and of Abraham Lincoln, the one at Charlestown, the other at Gettysburg, in the two best specimens of oratory we have had in this country. I observe that all distinguished poetry is written in the oldest and simplest English words. There is a point above coarseness and below refinement where propriety resides."

Mr. Emerson mentioned as one of the first in the list of the elements of oratory, manliness or presence of mind, saying that it could be produced to a large extent by education and mingling with men of various classes. He considered also the power of statement. "Speak what you do know and believe," he said, "as if you were unanswerable for every word." He closed by reading extracts from the speeches of prominent orators.