

which many thoughtful Frenchmen deplore, and which has become more unfortunate since Paris has grown to be the centre of amusement for the dissipated classes of Europe, is an experience which no other country need wish to undergo. Germany has not begun to produce more work or better work since she has given herself a capital; indeed, he who looks back over her annals since the middle of last century will think that so far as scholarship, metaphysics, and possibly even poetry are concerned, she gained from that very want of centralization which Goethe regretted. Great critics realize so vividly the defects of the system they see around them that they sometimes underrate the merits that go with those defects. It may be that in the next age American cities will profit by their local independence to develop varieties greater than they now exhibit, and will evolve diverse types of literary and artistic production. Europe will watch with curiosity the progress of an experiment which it is now too late for any of her great countries to try.

CHAPTER CXIV

AMERICAN ORATORY

ORATORY is an accomplishment in which Europeans believe that Americans excel; and that this is the opinion of the Americans themselves, although they are too modest to express it, may be gathered from the surprise they betray when they find an Englishman fluent before an audience. Fifty years ago they had the advantage (if it is an advantage) of much more practice than any European nation; but now, with democracy triumphant in England and France, the proportion of speeches and speaking to population is probably much the same in all three countries. Some observations on a form of effort which has absorbed a good deal of the talent of the nation, seem properly to belong to an account of its intellectual life.

Oratorical excellence may be said to consist in the combination of five aptitudes —

Invention, that is to say, the power of finding good ideas and weaving effective arguments.

Skill and taste in the choice of appropriate words.

Readiness in producing appropriate ideas and words at short notice.

Quickness in catching the temper and tendencies of the particular audience addressed.

Weight, animation, and grace in delivery.

Such excellence as the Americans possess, such superiority as they may claim over Englishmen, consists rather in the three latter of these than in the two former.

The substance of their speeches is not better than one finds in other countries, because substance depends on the intellectual resources of the speaker and on the capacity of the audience for appreciating worthy matter. Neither is the literary form better, that is to say, the ideas are not clothed in any choicer language. But there is more fluency, more readiness, more

self-possession. Being usually nimbler in mind than an Englishman, and feeling less embarrassed on his legs, an American is apt to see his point more clearly and to get at it by a more direct path. He is less frequently confused and clumsy, less prosy also, because his sympathy with the audience tells him when they begin to tire, and makes him sensible of the necessity of catching and holding their attention. I do not deny that American speakers sometimes weary the listener, but when they do so it is rather because the notions are commonplace and the arguments unsound than because, as might happen in England, ideas of some value are tediously and pointlessly put. It is true that with the progress of democracy, and the growing volume of speeches made, the level of average public speaking has in Britain risen within the last twenty or thirty years, while the number of great orators has declined till now scarce any are left. Still, if one is to compare the two countries, the English race seems to have in America acquired a keener sensitiveness of sympathy. That habit of deference to others, and that desire to be in accord with the sentiments of others, which equality and democratic institutions foster, make the American feel himself more completely one of the audience and a partaker of its sentiments than an average English speaker does. This may have the consequence, if the audience be ignorant or prejudiced, of dragging him down to its level. But it makes him more effective. Needless to add that humour, which is a commoner gift in America than elsewhere, often redeems an otherwise uninteresting address, and is the best means of keeping speaker and audience in touch with one another.

A deliberate and even slow delivery is the rule in American public speaking, as it is in private conversation. This has the advantage of making a story or a jest tell with more effect. There is also, I think, less stiffness and hesitation among American than among English speakers, greater skill in managing the voice, because more practice in open-air meetings, greater clearness of enunciation. But as regards grace, either in action or in manner, the Teutonic race shows no more capacity on the other side of the Atlantic than it has generally done in England for rivalling the orators of Italy, Spain, and France.

The commonest American defect is a turgid and inflated style. The rhetoric is Rhodian rather than Attic, overloaded with tropes and figures, apt to aim at concealing poverty or triteness in thought by exaggeration of statement, by a profusion of ornament, by appeals to sentiments too lofty for the subject or the occasion. The florid diction of the debating club or the solemn pomp of the funeral oration is frequently invoked when nothing but clearness of exposition or cogency of argument is needed. These faults have probably sprung from the practice of stump oratory, in which the temptation to rouse a multitude by declamation is specially strong. A man straining his voice in the open air is apt to strain his phrases also, and command attention by vehemence. They have been increased by the custom of having orations delivered on certain anniversaries, and especially on the Fourth of July, for on these great occasions the speaker feels bound to talk "his very tallest." Public taste, which was high in the days after the Revolution, when it was formed and controlled by a small number of educated men, began to degenerate in the first half of this century. Despite the influence of several orators of the first rank, incessant stump speaking and the inordinate vanity of the average audience brought a florid or inflated style into fashion, which became an easy mark for European satire. Of late years a reaction for the better seems to have set in. There are still those who imitate Macaulay or Webster without the richness of the one or the stately strength of the other. The newspapers, in acknowledging that a lecturer is fluent or lucid, still complain if he is not also "eloquent." Commemorative addresses, which are far more abundant than in Europe, usually sin by over-finish of composition. But on the whole there has been an improvement in the taste of listeners and in the style of speeches. Such improvement would be more rapid were it not for the enormous number of speeches by people who have really nothing to say, as well as by able men on occasions when there is nothing to be said which has not been said hundreds of times before. This is, of course, almost equally true of England, and indeed of all popularly governed countries. Those who disparage popular government may fairly count profusion of speech as one of the drawbacks to democracy, and a drawback which shows no signs of disappearing.

As respects the different kinds of oratory, that of the pulpit seems to show an average slightly higher than in England. The visitor naturally hears the best preachers, for these are of course drawn to the cities, but whether he takes cities or rural districts he forms the impression that mere dulness and commonplace are less common than in Great Britain, though high excellence may be equally rare. Even when the discourse is read, it is read in a less mechanical way, and there is altogether more sense of the worth of vivacity and variety. The average length of sermons is a mean between the twenty minutes of an Anglican minister and the fifty minutes of Scotland. The manner is slightly less conventional, because the American clergyman is less apt than his European brother to feel himself a member of a distinct caste.

Forensic oratory seems to stand neither higher nor lower than it does in England, whose bar is not at this moment adorned by any speakers whom men go to hear simply for the sake of their eloquence, as men flocked to listen to Erskine or Brougham or Follett. In America, as in England, there are many powerful advocates, but no consummate artist. Whether this is due to the failure of nature to produce persons specially gifted, or to the absence of trials whose issues and circumstances are calculated to rouse forensic ability to exceptional efforts, or to a change in public taste, and a disposition to prefer the practical to the showy, is a question which is often asked in England, and no easier to answer in America.

Congress, for reasons explained in the chapter treating of it, is a less favourable theatre for oratory than the great representative assemblies of Europe. The House of Representatives has at no period of its history shone with lights of eloquence, though a few of Clay's great speeches were delivered in it. There is some good short brisk debating in Committee of the Whole, but the set speeches are mostly pompous and heavy. The Senate long maintained a higher level, partly from the smaller size of its chamber, partly from its greater leisure, partly from the superior ability of its members. Webster's and Calhoun's greatest efforts were made on its floor, and produced an enormous effect on the nation. At present, however, the "full-dress debates" in the Senate want life, the long set speeches being fired off rather with a view to their circulation

in the country than to any immediate effect on the assembly. But the ordinary discussions of bills, or questions of policy, reveal plenty of practical speaking power. If there be little passion and no brilliancy, there is strong common-sense put in a plain and telling form.

Of the forty-seven State and Territorial legislatures not much need be said. In them, as in the House of Representatives, the bulk of the work is done in committees, and the opportunities for displays of eloquence are limited, which it is well should be the case. They are good enough schools to form a practical business speaker, and they do form many such. But the characteristic merits and defects of transatlantic oratory are more fully displayed on the stump and in those national and State nominating conventions whereof I have already spoken. So far as the handling great assemblies is an art attainable by a man who does not possess the highest gifts of thought and imagination, it has been brought to perfection by the heroes of these mass meetings. They have learned how to deck out commonplaces with the gaudier flowers of eloquence; how to appeal to the dominant sentiment of the moment: above all, how to make a strong and flexible voice the means of rousing enthusiasm. They scathe the opposite party by vigorous invective; they interweave stories and jokes with their declamatory passages so as to keep the audience constantly amused. They deliver contemptible clap-trap with an air of hearty conviction. The party men who listen, because there are few present at a mass meeting, and still fewer at a convention, except members of the party which has convoked the gathering, are better pleased with themselves than ever, and go away roused to effort in the party cause. But there has been little argument all through, little attempt to get hold of the reason and judgment of the people. Stimulation, and not instruction or conviction, is the aim which the stump orator sets before himself; and the consequence is that an election campaign is less educationally valuable than one conducted in England, though by men less practised and skilful in speaking, usually proves to English electors. It is worth remarking that the custom which in England requires a representative to deliver at least once a year an address to his constituents, setting forth his view of the political situation and explaining his own

speeches and votes during the preceding session, does not seem to be general in the United States. In fact the people of the Northern States receive less political instruction by the living voice than do those of England. When an instructive address has to be given, it takes the form of a lecture, and is usually delivered by some well-known public man, who receives a fee for it.

There are three kinds of speech which, though they exist in most European countries, have been so much more fully developed beyond the Atlantic as to deserve some notice.

The first of these is the Oration of the Occasion. When an anniversary comes round — and celebrations of an anniversary are very common in America — or when a sort of festival is held in honour of some public event, such for instance as the unveiling of a statue, or the erection of a monument on a battlefield, or the opening of a city hall or State capitol, or the driving the last spike of a great railroad, a large part of the programme is devoted to speaking. The chief speech is entrusted to one eminent person, who is called the Orator of the Day, and from whom is expected a long and highly finished harangue, the length and finish of which are wearisome to a critical outsider, though the people of the locality are flattered. Sometimes these speeches contain good matter — I could mention instances where they have embodied personal recollections of a distinguished man in whose honour the celebration was being held — but the sort of artificial elevation at which the speaker usually feels bound to maintain himself is apt to make him pompous and affected.

Although public dinners are less frequent than in England, speeches of a complimentary and purely "epideictic" nature of the English public banquet type are very common. There is scarcely an occasion in life which brings forty or fifty people together on which a prominent citizen or a stranger from Europe is not called upon "to offer a few remarks." No subject is prescribed for him: often no toast has to be proposed or responded to:¹ he is simply put on his legs to talk upon anything in heaven or earth which may rise to his mind. The

¹ Of course there are often toasts given at public dinners; but they seem to be fewer in number than in England, and more varied, more judiciously adapted to the special occasion.

European who is at first embarrassed by this unchartered freedom, presently discovers its advantages, for it enables him so to construct his speech as to lead up to whatever joke, or point, or complimentary observations he has ready at hand. There is also more opening for variety than the conventional uniformity of an English toast-list permits.

The third form of discourse specially characteristic of the United States is the Lecture. It is less frequent and less fashionable now than forty years ago, partly from the rise of monthly magazines full of excellent matter, partly because other kinds of evening entertainment have become more accessible to people outside the great cities. With the decline of Puritan sentiment the theatre is now more popular than it then was. But the Lecture is still far more frequent and more valuable as a means of interesting people in literary, scientific, and political questions than anywhere in Europe, except possibly in Edinburgh. And the art of lecturing has been developed in a corresponding measure. A discourse of this kind, whatever the merits of its substance, is usually well arranged, well composed to meet the taste of the audience, and above all, well delivered. Eminent Englishmen who go to lecture in America are frequently criticised as ignorant of what may be called the technical part of their business. They may know a great deal, it is said, but they do not know how much the audience knows, and assume a lower level of intelligence and knowledge than exists, with the result of displeasing the latter. They are monotonous in manner, and unskilled in elocution. The European lecturer, on the other hand, confesses himself annoyed not only by the irreverent comments of the press but by the apparent coldness of the audience, which, though it will applaud heartily at the end if well satisfied, refuses him the running encouragement of cheers, even when he invites them by pausing to drink a glass of water.

This grave reserve in American listeners surprises Europeans,¹ especially those who have observed the excitability shown on presidential campaigns. It seems to arise from the

¹ A story is told of Edmund Kean acting before an audience in New England which he found so chilling that at last he refused to come on for the next scene unless some applause were given, observing that such a house was enough to extinguish Etna.

practical turn of their minds as well as from their intelligence. In an election campaign it is necessary and expedient to give vent to one's feelings; in listening to a lecture it is not. One comes to be instructed or entertained, and comes with a critical habit formed by hearing many lectures as well as reading many books. Something may also be due to the large proportion of women in an American audience at lectures or other non-political occasions.

A stranger is, on the whole, inclined to think that the kind of oratory in which the Americans show to most advantage is neither the political kind, abundant as it is, nor the commemorative oration, assiduously as it is cultivated, but what may be called the lighter ornamental style, such as the after-dinner speech. The fondness of the people for anecdotes, and their skill in telling them, the general diffusion of humour, the readiness in catching the spirit of an occasion, all contribute to make their efforts in this direction more easy and happy than those of the English, while furnishing less temptation for the characteristic fault of a straining after effect. I have already observed that they shine in stump speaking, properly so called — that is, in speaking which rouses an audience but ought not to be reported. The reasons why their more serious platform and parliamentary oratory remains somewhat inferior to that of Europe are, over and above the absence of momentous issues, probably the same as those which have, though perhaps less in the great cities, affected the average of newspaper writing. In Europe the leading speakers and writers have nearly all belonged to the cultivated classes, and, feeling themselves raised above their audiences, have been in the habit of obeying their own taste and that of their class rather than the appetite of those whom they addressed. In England, for instance, the standard of speaking by public men has been set by parliamentary debate, because till within the last few decades the leading politicians of the country had all won their reputation in Parliament. They carried their parliamentary style with them into popular meetings, and aspirants of all classes imitated this style. It sometimes erred in being too formal and too prolix; but its taste was good, and its very plainness obliged the speaker to have solid matter. In America, on the other hand, stump oratory is older, or at least quite as

old as, congressional oratory, and the latter has never gained that hold on the ideas and habits of the people which parliamentary debate held in England. Hence speaking has generally moved on a somewhat lower level, not but what there were brilliant popular orators in the first days of the Republic, like Patrick Henry, and majestic parliamentary orators like Daniel Webster in the next generation, but that the volume of stump speaking was so much greater than in England that the fashion could not be set by a few of the greatest men, but was determined by the capacities of the average man. The taste of the average man was not raised by the cultivated few to their own standard, but tended to lower the practice, and to some extent even the taste, of the cultivated few. To seem wiser or more refined than the multitude, to incur the suspicion of talking down to the multitude, and treating them as inferiors, would have offended the sentiment of the country, and injured the prospects of a statesman. It is perhaps a confirmation of this view that, while pompousness has flourished in the West, the most polished speakers have generally belonged to New England, where the level of average taste and knowledge was exceptionally high. One of these speakers, the late Mr. Wendell Phillips, was, in the opinion of competent critics, an opinion which those who remember his conversation will be inclined to agree with, one of the first orators of the present century, and not more remarkable for the finish than for the transparent simplicity of his style, which attained its highest effects by the most direct and natural methods.