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The College Oration and the Classic Tradition...

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Recently I had occasion, after a lapse of several years, to judge the oratorical contest in a college forensic tournament. The experience brought home to me forcibly the futility and ineptness of college oratory as currently practiced in the tournament situation. I hope it is not a sign of premature senility to observe that I do not believe college oratory is as good as it was twenty-five years ago, and that it has fallen completely from the heights it attained when it was the training ground for William Jennings Bryan and Robert M. La Follette, Sr. I do not believe that college oratory, as now conducted in most institutions, serves any useful function in our speech training program, or that any distinguished speakers of the future will attribute their success to participation in oratorical contests in college tournaments. There are no doubt exceptions—institutions in which real training in the skills of oratory is given—but they are certainly in the minority.

The writer of the treatise we know as Longinus, *On the Sublime*, protesting against the degeneracy of the oratory of the schools of the first century A. D., found excellence in oratory in five principles: (1) grandeur of thought—the power of forming great conceptions, based on nobility of character and on study of great models; (2) the power of experiencing genuine feeling; (3) the development of imagery through figurative language, appropriate to the idea and the emotion; (4) noble diction, words appropriate to the breadth of conception and feeling; (5) effective sentence movement.¹

In contrast to this elevated conception, college orations as I have heard them have consistently had one or more of these faults: they have been mere arguments, more suitable to debate or extempore speaking than to oratory; they have been indirect in both composition and delivery, ignoring even the imaginary audience characteristic of the tournament for one still more remote from reality; they have been dominated by devices of arrangement and tricks of organization; they have been stylistically inept and inappropriate, turgid and trite, Asiatic rather than Attic; their subject matter has been shallow and ill-reasoned. It would be too much to expect the college orator to meet the standard of the perfect orator, but the impossibility of attaining a standard need not deter us from trying.

It seems to me that our present method of speech training is in no way designed to equip our students for oratory. The average first course in public speaking is designed, quite properly I think, to make the individual a more effective citizen in his ordinary contacts with groups of his fellows. He ought to be a more useful member of his club or church, to be able to ask a question in a public forum, to give a book review or a committee report, or to discuss from the floor the business affairs of organizations to which he belongs. But none should expect the first course to be adequate preparation for the preacher, the lawyer, the

lecturer—or the college orator. All of these speakers need more detailed study of the elements of persuasion, critical analysis and briefing of arguments, and experience with details of oral style.

Nor is tournament debating adequate preparation for participation in oratory. The debater is absorbed in the logical relationship of ideas, and the often sterile concept of argument from authority. Furthermore he is constantly speaking in an emotional vacuum, without an audience; and the practice in many tournaments of compelling a debater to take both sides unfits him for the passionate defense of an idea which oratory demands. Whatever the merits of debate as a proving ground for logical thinking and flexibility in controversy (and I do not dispute them), it is certainly not preparation for oratory.

Students in advanced courses in persuasion, speech composition, and the history of public address are better prepared to write an oration, unless these courses are merely Speech I in disguise with a new upper division number. Yet it seems to me that if oratory is to resume a worthy place in our speech programs, certain specific training is needed to prepare the student for this distinct form of public address. Its counterparts lie in the sermon, the inspirational address, state papers on historic occasions which have set forth great concepts of government or social principles—any speech delivered on an occasion when emotions were stirred and when fundamental principles of human relationships were at stake.

Directors of forensics should abandon the idea that oratory is a mass activity. The student who aspires to this skill should first have read widely from the best models of British and American oratory and from the classics. He should, so far as possible, avoid choosing as his models orations by other students. Quintilian tells us that the mere imitator always lags behind his model²; the student who makes the orations of other students his models soon becomes a mere imitation of an imitation. The decline of college oratory must certainly be ascribed, in part at least, to the failure of our students to go back to real speeches as models, even to the fragments which used to appear in the elocution books.

If we return to the classical principles of oratory which have been the inspiration of great speakers throughout the Christian era, we can abstract four basic concepts which the college orator should follow:

- (1) The subject matter of oratory should be questions not merely of temporary expediency, but those involving significant moral and spiritual choices of lasting importance.
- (2) Real oratory should move the feelings

(1) Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Tr. by W. Rhys Roberts, University Press, Cambridge, 1935.

(2) Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Tr. by H. E. Butler, Book X, 2, G. P. Putnam Sons, New York, 1921-22.

without insulting the intelligence; oratory should be attempted only by those who are capable of deep and honest feeling on the subjects they select.

(3) The only excuse for any kind of public speaking is the presence of an audience, and college oratory is no exception.

(4) The style of oratory should be polished, but should never lose contact with the audience. The hearer should never be aware of devices of style and arrangement, the sole purpose of which is to clarify thought and intensify feeling, not to excite admiration.

The student orator should read widely not merely in the immediate subject matter of his speech, but in the historical background and philosophical concepts out of which his theme grows. If his subject is freedom of speech, it is not enough that he know the familiar Voltaire cliché; he should know the history of the long struggle for freedom; he should read Milton's *Areopagitica*, Mill's *Essay on Liberty*, and Erskine's *Defense of Tom Paine*, rather than relying exclusively on *In Fact* and *The New Republic*. Without historical perspective, he is not equipped to meet Longinus' test of "grandeur of thought," nor to make the moral judgments his theme demands. Even Frederick Douglass, who spoke from the depths of his own bitter experience with slavery, found himself unable to do justice to his theme without reference to the historic framework of man's eternal struggle for liberty. And it was the *Columbian Orator*, with speeches by the great eighteenth century British parliamentarians, that gave him his inspiration.³

Yet the orator cannot be coldly intellectual. He cannot permit himself to dwell on the historical aspects of his theme alone. No man can be an orator who is not himself capable of deep feeling, and who cannot make others feel with him. As Cicero's Antonius put it:

It is not easy to cause the judge to be angry with him with whom you desire him to be angry, if you yourself appear to take the matter coolly; . . . nor will he be moved to pity, unless you give him plain indications of your own feelings. . . ; for as no fuel is so combustible as to kindle without the application of fire, so no disposition of mind is so susceptible of the impressions of the orator as to be animated by strong feeling, unless he himself approach it full of inflammation and ardour.⁴

Neither Longinus' concept of grandeur of thought, nor Cicero's view of the importance of feeling is compatible with the attitude of the college sophomore who says: "I gotta write an oration for a tournament next weekend. Anybody got an idea?"

No principle is more important in classic rhetoric than the central role of the audience in determining the structure of the speech. Aristotle devoted more than a third of his treatise to audience analysis⁵, and other classical writers also give the audience a prominent position. The college forensic tournament, with its almost total lack of audiences, has been self-defeating in this important rhetorical concept. Nevertheless the college student who would be an orator cannot ignore even the limited audience to whom he is speaking. Those actually present are almost always connected with a col-

lege community as students or faculty. Why then should the "orator" deliver an imaginary speech to Congress, an imaginary address to a jury, or a letter to mother. How can he expect to influence his audience by treating them as eavesdroppers? The college oration, no matter what its subject matter, must develop within the framework of the attitudes, feelings, and prejudices of the college audience to which it is addressed.

To ask the orator to use the same constructions and diction one would expect of the debater or the extempore speaker is to render the whole experience of writing and memorizing a speech completely futile. But this does not justify the bombastic effects often created by college orators interested only in personal display. Every oration should be written, dissected, and rewritten with only one criterion in mind: Does this wording say, with greater clarity and cogency than any other, exactly what I want it to say? Does it compel my audience to think about the idea I advance rather than to consider the wording itself. This concept of style, which Spencer labeled the *principle of economy*,⁶ leaves ample opportunity for vivid descriptive words, for figures of speech, and for arrangements of words, phrases and sentences especially adapted to convey the mood of the orator. But it offers no room to the writer who is in love with the sound of words and the flowing rhythm of phrases for their own sake. The communicative purpose must remain paramount.

But above all, college students should be made to realize that there is no easy road to excellence in oratory. The young orator can find no better advice than that given by Quintilian to his students:

Let no man hope that he can acquire eloquence merely by the labor of others. He must burn the midnight oil, persevere to the end and grow pale with study; he must form his own powers, his own experience, his own methods; he must not require to hunt for weapons, but must have them ready for immediate use, as though they were born with him and not derived from the instruction of others. The road may be pointed out, but our speed must be our own. Art has done enough in publishing the resources of eloquence; it is for us to know how to use them.⁷

(3) Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Miller, Orton and Mulligan, New York, 1855.

(4) Cicero, *De Oratore*, Tr. by J. S. Watson, Book II, 45, Bohn Classical Library.

(5) Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Tr. by Lane Cooper, D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1932.

(6) Herbert Spencer, *The Philosophy of Style*, D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1924.

(7) Quintilian, *op. cit.*, Book VII, 10.

Do you know of anyone who walked off with the wrong top-coat at the 1949 Delta Sigma Rho Congress? The switch took place at the Business Meeting on Friday night, April 1, in Parlor A of the Congress Hotel. Please contact Dr. Franklyn S. Haiman, School of Speech, Northwestern University. He has the Carson, Pirie, Scott coat that was left behind.