

## LECTURE XXI.

### ACTION.

FROM style we pass to *action*. By this we intend all those functions of the body, by its organs and members, which convey to the audience the orator's thoughts and feelings. I shall treat this subject under the two heads of *utterance* and *gesture*; the first relating to the management of the voice, the second to the posture of the body and the employment of its limbs and features as aids to expression. You are all familiar with the exalted estimate of good action uttered by Demosthenes. The classic masters concur in making it, at the least, the half of the orator's power. Our experience has taught us all what is its potent and enchanting effect, when it is made the vehicle of truly eloquent sentiments. Let me not be understood as encouraging the attempt to substitute a fine action for these. "As the body without the spirit is dead," so action without just thought and emotion is an empty counterfeit. But as the spirit without the body would be invisible and impalpable to us mortals, and incapable of all converse and influence, so the most powerful thought without rhetorical action is inefficient in oral discourse.

It is not my purpose to enter into full details upon these subjects. One reason which forbids is the brevity

of our remaining time; another consideration is the belief that detailed and technical rules on this head can never make an orator. In truth, the main foundation for right or wrong action has been laid long before you come here, in the mode of reading to which you were trained in the primary school, and in the habits of utterance formed in the society amidst which you were reared. The great teachers of correct expression are the mother and the master of the reading-school. And then it must be your own ear, taste, heart and intellect which shall teach you the right emphasis and gesture. He who has the gift of native ear and sensibility will learn how to speak from listening to good models. There is no other tuition which is efficacious, and there is, for such a pupil, no other that is needed. But yet attention and diligence may do much to amend our faults and to perfect our taste. It is with this view I am to point out to you briefly the elements of rhetorical action. I treat first of utterance.

Speech is addressed to the ear. Its first requisite is, therefore, audibility: we must so utter it as to be heard. This simple remark will suggest to your good sense the rule as to the general gauge of loudness. The voice should be always loud enough to be heard throughout the audience, and, except in animated passages, it should not be much louder. To secure that result, it is well to direct the eyes generally toward the farthest circle of hearers; for the voice will naturally adjust itself to the distance of those we address. This rule is useful also in guarding us against the distraction of our attention and the loss of our thread of thought, by noting too closely any individual countenance or trivial

event in the audience near us. But there is an element more essential to audibility than loudness: this is distinctness. By distinctness I mean these traits: clearness or purity of tone, due deliberation or separation of the syllables, and especially careful articulation. The public speaker must never move so rapidly as to huddle his syllables. While he observes due accent and emphasis, he must give space for the distinct enunciation of both the vowels and consonants of all unaccented syllables. There is a tendency growing in this our material age to a curtness and hurry of enunciation, which threaten to destroy the melody and the very identity of the English as a spoken language. This fashion is to disregard the characteristic vowel-sounds of all syllables except the one which bears the accent, and to reduce them to the *e* mute of the French or to the *shewa* sound of the Hebrew. Such speakers pronounce the adjective "capital," for instance, as though it were "*cáp'tle*;" "cardinal" in their mouths is "*cárd'nle*," "memory" is "*mém'ry*," "governor" is "*gúv'n'r*," "innocent" is "*innic'nt*." This detestable usage would reduce our noble tongue to a torrent of sibilant dissyllables. It is the vowels which are heard: they constitute the real voice of language; the consonants are but the checks or stoppages which the tongue, teeth, lips and palate impose upon the stream of sound. To suppress or diminish the vowel-sounds tends, therefore, to substitute for the music of the flowing river the perpetual gurgle and clatter of the valves of the mill. Rhetorical melody resides in the vowel-sounds. If you would possess this charming grace of speech, the vowels must be each one distinctly uttered.

It is true that the consonants give the articulation: they give to human language that grand peculiarity which distinguishes it from the cries and songs of beasts and birds, and thus renders it symbolical of an infinite diversity of thought, while the merely vowel-sounds of the animal world only express a few instinctive passions. Both vowels and consonants should, then, receive their full enunciation.

Next to distinctness of utterance perhaps the most essential requisite is orthoepy. The shade of sound, given to letters and combinations of letters, must be that established for each word by polite usage. The accent (on words of more than one syllable) must be placed on the syllable appointed for it by the same standard. In a word, the whole enunciation of the public speaker should be such as marks the man of breeding and polish. If your hearer is himself a gentleman, his taste requires this culture in the man who claims to instruct him; if he is a peasant, its possession always confers influence over him.

Let me now commend to you the same truth which we found so fruitful when considering the question of style. Speaking is but talking dignified. Therefore a natural utterance is cardinal to good elocution. Notice how intelligent and well-bred people speak in conversation; how they indicate the divisions or punctuations of their thoughts; how they express their sentiments by emphasis; how they vary their utterance to correspond with the varieties of their emotions: here you have your lesson. It is a model to be modified, indeed, by the facts that as an orator, you speak continuously, upon a grave subject, and to a crowd, instead of one person or

a few. You will add gravity and dignity to your utterance; you will emit a greater volume or breadth of sound; you will, in animated passages, employ those intonations of passion which, in social conversation, can rarely find their proper occasion. But, above all, be natural; with these modifications, speak as unaffected people talk. Away with all affectations of tones and emphasis. Let your ear and taste be trained by good usage, and then, having possessed your mind and heart with the "thoughts that breathe and words that burn," let them find their own intonations.

Especially do the natural tones of unaffected persons display the beauty and charm of flexibility. When we listen, for instance, to the animated conversation of children or young persons in their seasons of freedom, we perceive that the outline of the sound is as mobile and undulatory as the surface of the sea when gently agitated with billows. There is no approach to monotony. The variety is as endless as the diversified play of sentiment in their bounding hearts. This quality of flexibility the orator must practice in all directions. To comprehend these, you must be acquainted with the powers of that wondrous instrument, the human voice, whose structure bespeaks so clearly its Creator's skill. It is susceptible of diversity in no less than seven different respects, and each of these is most expressive of sentiment. First, the tones of the voice may differ in *pitch*. This is the difference described popularly by the words "high or low," and in the language of art by the place of the note upon the musical scale. Those who have any acquaintance with music know that it is not any interval of pitch whatsoever, which constitutes a

“tone” in the scale, but three certain intervals of fixed degree, called “tones major,” “tones minor” and “semitones.” And the octave, or ladder of seven descending or ascending intervals, which is the universal standard of melody, is composed of five major and minor steps and two half-steps or semitones. Now, in speaking, just as much as in singing, changes of pitch in the voice, when they occur, should be conformed to this natural musical scale—that is to say, when the speaker raises or depresses the pitch of his voice, he should raise or depress it by some musical interval, or, in other words, by the space of one or more tones of the octave. This is essential to melody. When Nature would express inquiry, quick surprise, sharp decision of will, and other vivid sentiments, she teaches us to raise the pitch of the voice upon the significant word or phrase. The greater the rise, the more vivid is the expression. Thus, the rising inflection in an ordinary interrogation will not ascend above that musical interval known to musicians as a third, or a step composed of one major and one minor tone. In an expression of amazement, or sharp negation, it may rise through a fifth or even a whole octave. A depression of the pitch through a third marks the period of a sentence. The prevalence of a depressed pitch gives to a passage the expression of gravity and solemnity. The transition by minor intervals (intervals composed of minor tones and semitones) is the natural expression of pensive, pathetic and supplicatory sentiments.

When we speak of inflections of pitch, we imply, of course, that the speech, like the piece of music, has its dominant key-note, from which the voice ascends or

descends along the scale, and to which it returns. This key-note, besides, is more prevalent in speaking than in singing: the speaker returns to it and dwells upon it more constantly. Now, different voices are classed according as their prevalent tone is found lower or higher upon the musical scale, as bass, tenor or falsetto. The first is impressive and majestic, but more liable to monotony, and it costs the speaker an exertion more dangerous to the health of the organs of speech to make it audible to a multitude. The falsetto voice is both grating and effeminate; and he must have no mean powers of thought and emotion, who can give his hearers the pleasure of eloquence with such an instrument of expression. The tenor voice is therefore usually to be preferred for public speaking. He whose prevalent pitch is in this intermediate degree, but who is occasionally capable of a wide compass, from the deep thunder of the bass to the clear clarion-note of the alto, has the happiest vocal power. The tenor tones are purer, more resonant and more penetrating than the bass. You see an evidence of this fact in the manner in which one calls a person from a distance: he naturally elevates the pitch as well as the loudness of his voice. Every speaker should therefore cultivate his tenor tones and use them as his customary key-notes. He should so speak as to project his aspirations well forward into the fauces; for the organs are thus made capable of tenfold exertion without detriment to their health. And especially should he eschew the mischievous trick of affecting solemnity of voice, by sinking it into a guttural bass and suppressing the expiration to the larynx: he who thus swallows his tones will

almost provoke the judicious hearer to say amen! to the disease which he will infallibly contract.

The second capacity of variety which the voice possesses is the *dynamic*—the change of force. This is expressed popularly by the words “loud and soft.” It is a different quality from that of pitch; for the practiced vocalist can utter a note low and loud or high and soft. It is partly by the dynamic change that we effect both rhythm and emphasis. The accented syllable, or the emphatic word, receives more force. Loudness is recognized as the natural expression of anger, triumph, confidence, dogmatism, earnestness and the animated sentiments generally; while the softer tones are suitable for quiet narration, didactic statement and the expression of the gentle emotions. There is no caution more necessary for the ambitious young speaker, than that he must not be high and loud throughout his discourse. It is not the absolute pitch or dynamic force, but the relative dynamic increment, which produces the impression of power and animation. He, therefore, who was already loudest where the sentiment was quiet, has deprived himself effectually of the power of expressing his rise to more vivid sentiments. Let me also commend to you the all-important rule: *Begin softly.*<sup>1</sup> Use no more voice at first than is necessary to be audible to the rear benches. Appropriateness usually requires this, because the thoughts and sentiments of the introductory passages are usually calm. Movement demands it; for if you begin at your loudest, there is then no

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<sup>1</sup> See the strong concurrence of the Abbé Bautain in this rule, *Art of Extempore Speech*, chap. xx.

louder voice to be employed as you approach your climax. Especially does the economy of your own health and strength exact this policy; for a sudden and powerful exertion of the voice at once roughens it, irritates the larynx and induces a hoarseness equally distressing to hearer and speaker. But if the organs are warmed to their work gradually until the circulation of the blood is quickened, the secretion of the natural lubricating fluids stimulated, and the whole body nerved by mental excitement, then the force may be gradually increased, and powerful and protracted exertions made with marvellous impunity. At no time, however, should the loudness of the voice be increased to an extravagant degree. A deafening bawl, tearing at once the speaker's throat and the listeners' ears, is the natural expression of no moral emotion: it excites only disgust and fatigue, and disqualifies the voice for future use. "Pray you, avoid it."<sup>1</sup>

Third, the voice varies its expression of sentiment by the greater or less *time* which it expends in uttering syllables. This is the element named by the prosodists quantity. The voice is supposed to occupy twice as much time upon a long syllable as upon a short. The relation of a long to a short is that of a semibreve to a minim, or of a minim to a crotchet, or of a crotchet to a quaver. It is this difference of quantity which makes

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<sup>1</sup> "Oh, 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."—*Hamlet: Advice to Players.*

rhythm, or number, and on it are founded all metres. Quantity also enters into accent and emphasis, as a chief element of that prominence, which these are designed to give to particular syllables and words. They are also marked in part by the greater force or loudness of voice expended upon them. Not only is the short syllable more quickly pronounced than the adjacent long, in all discourse, but the stream of utterance, as a whole, flows at some times far more rapidly than at others. A slow or deliberate utterance expresses serious thought, meditation or deliberation of mind and sadness. Acceleration of utterance gives vivid expression to animating sentiments.

But the voice possesses a fourth power by which it denotes its most forcible emphasis. This I denominate *ictus*. It is not the same with loudness, for a syllable may be made relatively very loud without *ictus*; nor is it the same with brevity, for a forcible *ictus* may be upon a long syllable. It is the sudden delivery of the breath upon the beginning of the syllable with an explosive force. This is effected by the very quick and spasmodic contraction of the muscles of the breast and larynx, ejecting the air upon the opening of the syllable, like the gases discharged from a fire-arm. But the current of vowel sound thus explosively begun does not always terminate as suddenly; it may be continued into a syllable both loud and long. This quality, *ictus*, is exceedingly expressive. It signifies, in argumentative passages, the highest dogmatic certainty, and in emotional, the most vehement, sudden and determined passions. The orator should, therefore, take care how he expends this most peculiar means of expression upon insignif-

icant statements or unimpressive emotions. The word made emphatic by dynamic force, elevation of pitch and *ictus* at once, is his Olympic thunderbolt; he should beware how he launches it, save when there is a *nodus vindice dignus*.

The fifth quality of voice is that intrinsic trait so hard to describe in words, but so manifest to every good ear, which the French artists denominate *timbre*. It is not equivalent to dynamic force, nor to pitch, nor to *ictus*, but it is the essential characteristic with which Nature stamps each kind of musical sound, whether loud or soft, high or low, sudden or protracted. It is the peculiar thrill which each instrument has as its own. Let, for instance, a violin and a flute, or a piano and a trombone, sound the same note in perfect unison of pitch and with the same loudness. Every ear perceives that there are two instruments, not one. Why does not the tone affect the ear as one? It is because the note of a violin has its own *timbre* distinct from that of a flute, and a piano different from a trombone's, although in unison in every other respect. So the human voice has its own *timbre* distinct from all the other sounds of nature. The voice of a male has a different *timbre* from that of a female. The latter is pitched naturally one octave higher than the former. But if the male elevates his voice to the same pitch with the female *contralto*, and puts it in unison, the difference is appreciable still. What is yet more wonderful, the voice of each person has its own individual *timbre*, by which his friends distinguish it in singing and speaking amidst other voices in unison with it. This quality may be greatly improved without obliterating or revolutionizing it, by judicious practice.

There is still another power of expression by which the note of the voice indicates profound emotion. The human characteristic of man's voice just described co-operates powerfully here. This is the inimitable gift of man; it is the power of his soul mysteriously speaking through the corporeal, and almost spiritualizing its materiality. If you listen to a mechanical instrument, a bugle or an organ, you will perceive that the musical movement, the change of dynamic force, of time, of accent, of rhythm, may be expressive of emotion, but the sounds themselves, apart from the movement, have no expression. With the human voice it is different; a single note suggests often some sentiment, and awakens it in the hearer. The feeling in man's voice consists partly in its peculiar *timbre*, but it involves also another element, a peculiar tremulousness, a quiver or thrill, to which the heartstrings never fail to vibrate. Nature has furnished every man's vocal organs with the exquisite nerves which respond unbidden to true emotion. Genuine feeling never fails, in natural conditions, to communicate this tremour to the tones. The child has it spontaneously in every outcry of his transport, his grief, or his terror. Artistic speakers and singers expend boundless labour to imitate it, but only with partial success. If profound emotion is felt, the person of cultivated taste and simplicity of character will find himself clothed with that magic power without effort, and the hearts of hearers will be moved "as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind."

The seventh characteristic of voice to which I would call your attention is *purity of tone*. This is most important to the resonance and penetration, to the smooth-

ness and sweetness, of the voice, and to the health and endurance of the organs of speech. The sound which rasps the hearer's ear always rasps the speaker's throat. Purity is not pitch, nor softness, nor loudness, nor *timbre*, for it may be either present or lacking under every variety of these qualities. It is regularity and unity of the atmospheric waves propagated by a given tone. Every ear recognizes the difference of voices in this respect. The tones of the good speaker enter the ear with the roundness, smoothness and solidity at once of a polished marble shaft. The impure voice seems to us a ragged beam, spongy and meagre in its central body, but swelled out and roughened all over with an investment of horrid *spiculæ*. To explain this difference we must resort to the theory of sound. This phenomenon, as you are aware, is the result of a series of little atmospheric billows, propagated by a vibration in some elastic body which is in contact with the air. The increase of pitch is caused by the diminished breadth and greater rapidity of these waves. The air, being a perfectly mobile and elastic medium, obeys the impact of the vibrating body, and receives and transmits just so many wavelets or molecular pulsations per second of time, as that body has vibrations. Now, a pure tone is evidently one in which these little billows are each distinctly defined, uniform in size and duration, and unmingled with any competing or cross-movements of the air. Thus, in a piano, a perfect sounding-board, firmly fastened at its ends, transmits to the air the very series of wavelets received by it from the vibrating chord which is stretched across it. Because the board is one and perfect, that series is regular, uniform and

single. The result is a tone of perfect purity. But let us suppose the sounding-board cracked; then the stronger fragment will vibrate more rapidly than the weaker; there will be a mixed pulsation of two sets of wavelets propagated from them into the air, and they will impress the ear with a cracked or impure tone. Again, the very same distress is caused to a sensitive ear by sounding together two musical chords which are not in harmonic relation; we feel the same roughness or jar which characterized the single impure tone. This fact confirms my explanation.

It is clear, hence, that purity of tone is the result of the right control of the larynx and lungs, under the guidance of a good ear. The vocal chords or vibrating cartilages of the larynx, whose pulsations propagate sound from the human throat, are controlled in their tension by nerves and muscles of the greatest delicacy, which obey the speaker's will. One cause of impure tone is, doubtless, that the vocal chords are not kept exactly at an equal tension during the emission of the note, and hence a mixed or crossed series of atmospheric wavelets is produced. Another cause is the ejection of too much breath against those chords; so that the current of air from the lungs, instead of flowing through the aperture *pari passu* with the musical waves, is ejected with a hissing or strident effect. The whisper evinces this, which is the most impure of all the sounds of the human voice, and also demands the greatest expenditure of breath. This virtue of voice must be the result, therefore, first, of the possession of a correct ear and healthy organs of speech; next, of moderation in the expiration of the breath; and last, of attention

and care in the management of the throat during the emission of sound.

Purity of tone should, of course, be the usual quality of our speech; but an impure tone is occasionally most expressive, and enhances by contrast the melody of the rest. The sentiment suggested by this roughness is, like itself, harsh and startling. A harrowing catastrophe is revealed in a whisper; rebuke and obijuration naturally assume a strident voice. The introduction of such tones at appropriate passages corresponds, in eloquent speech, to the occasional discords, by which the musician enhances his stream of harmony.