

LECTURE XXII.

ACTION.—CONTINUED.

YOU all know, young gentlemen, how important right emphasis is to the point and perspicuity of your utterance. I have not claimed that emphasis is an elementary power of the voice, because, as we have seen, the stress which is placed on the emphatic word may be composed of several elements. It may be made of an increase of dynamic power, of a prolongation of the quantity, of an elevation of the pitch, and of the *ictus* or explosive impulse. Where all these expedients are combined we have an instance of the strongest possible emphasis. Now, it is impossible to indicate by mechanical rules where the stress should fall in the utterance of a sentence. The obvious design of emphasis is to make the word or phrase which receives it more salient than its neighbours. The principle which must govern is consequently this: that those words shall receive the emphasis which are cardinal to the meaning of the sentence. Thus, in the words, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," the emphatic word is *great*, because the main object of the speaker is to direct attention to that predicate of the idol. So in Luke xxiv. 34, "The Lord is risen indeed," the emphatic words are *is* and *indeed*; because the opinion of the apostle has been, "he has *not* risen;" they now desire to assert the opposite:

“he *is* risen.” In Rom. x. 13, “For whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” the context shows us that *whosoever* is the emphatic word, seeing that the point the apostle makes from this declaration of the prophet is, the invitation is common to Jew and Gentile.

It is, therefore, only a correct appreciation of the meaning of the sentence, which can direct you in placing the emphasis. Does not this fact also evince how essential right emphasis is to a pleasing and perspicuous utterance? It is the chief element of just expression. The pleasure which it gives the hearer is not merely sensuous, like melody of voice, but intellectual and moral also, because it expounds to the ear and understanding the thought of the discourse. There is no viler or more lamentable mannerism, therefore, than the recurrence of emphasis by a mechanical, instead of an intelligent formula. Some speakers fall into the custom of interposing an emphatic word between every eight or twelve, without regard to the demands of the sense. Others, with every second or third paragraph, alternate from soft to loud at the impulse of mere bodily habit. The stress and *ictus* of voice may, in either case, fall on the word or passage to which it is wholly inappropriate; and it is hard to decide whether the effect is to the attentive and judicious listener more ludicrous or tiresome. Perpetual vigilance is the only condition of right rhetorical action.

I trust that you now comprehend the means of acquiring that flexibility of utterance which is so great a grace. The voice of the animated speaker should sway with perpetual undulations, as variable as the tides of thought

and feeling which gush through it from the soul. It may change, from loud to soft, from rapid to deliberate, from low to high, from didactic to emotional, from protracted to explosive, or from pure to rough. Not only is this variety true to nature and to the sentiment of oratorical discourse, but it relieves the hearer's ears and the speaker's throat, while it charms the attention and beguiles us of the lapse of time. There is a grave error to which energetic minds are very liable: it is that of attempting to be brilliant, emphatic or impassioned throughout the whole discourse. No monotony is so dreary as that of the speech which is monotonously hoisterous. Take your model here from Nature. She does not thunder all the year; she gives us sunshine, gentle breezes, a sky checkered with lights and shades, the stiffening gale, and sometimes the rending storm. So no hearer can endure a tempest of rhetoric throughout the discourse. An appearance of unremitting and equal intensity is insincere, for no man's soul actually remains in that state throughout a discourse. Flow and ebb characterize human emotions as truly as the seas, and affectation is always, in the orator, the damning sin. I have already indicated that the impression of movement and climax is not according to the absolute, but the relative force of the action. It is the change from the less energetic to the more energetic, which affects the hearer. Now he who, from the first, has risen to his highest level of animation, has left himself no room to rise farther; he has, therefore, wholly deprived himself of the means for signaling a new access of awakening ideas or emotion. There are, in some mountainous regions, table lands which are thousands of feet

above the level of the ocean, but when the traveller has once ascended into them, he finds them as flat and wearisome, and sometimes as malarious, as the marshes next the shore. Picturesque scenery is only composed of diversified hills and vales.

Need I remind you that the action of the sacred orator should always possess that profound simplicity which we saw was necessary for his style? The reasons which demand it are the same. Their application is so obvious that I need not repeat them; I only renew my emphatic testimony in their favour.

The second part of action is *gesture*. If you will recall the strict, etymological meaning of this Latin word, you will have a correct conception of what I include in it. It is the carrying, the port of the outer man in speaking. Do not now suppose that I am about to give you a code of rules in detail, commanding you to expand the arms when a certain sentiment is uttered, to bow the head at another, to strike downward with the hands at another, to frown at another. Such a set of motions, borrowed from abroad and practiced with premeditation, could only make an insufferable coxcomb. The essential requisite of *gesture* is, that it must be self-prompted: it must be the unpremeditated expression of the speaker's impulse. I am ready to make two admissions, yea, to claim these two facts as of high importance: that a graceful port is advantageous to the preacher, and that there is a natural sign-language, which recognizes the correspondence of certain gestures and looks to certain thoughts and feelings. But the former must be gained, not by deliberate artifice in the act of speaking, but by the habitudes of good society,

by self-control, and by the culture of the principles of sincerity, courtesy, modesty and dignity, which make the true gentleman. A graceful port in public speaking is not, generically, different from the same accomplishment in the parlour. Now, when the youth has only gotten to that stage where he moves, speaks, sits, walks, bows, in calculated and mechanical compliance with the rules he is learning from his dancing-master; when every person of experience is reminded, by every motion he makes, of the back-board and the trammels and the drill of posture-making, do they call his manners graceful? His awkwardness is only illustrated and made more grotesque. He must accustom himself to good society, and especially must he rise above his crude self-importance and conceit, to a temper of unaffected modesty and benevolence, until ease and propriety of movement are as natural to him and as unstudied, as the flutter of the bird and the gambols of the squirrel are to them. Then only is he called a graceful man in society—graceful because he no longer studies self-display and is no longer acting a part. A graceful carriage in the pulpit is to be acquired in the same way; and until you are so habituated to appropriate postures and movements that you fall into them without effort—because you cannot without effort avoid it—you are only the more awkward the more you practice the artifices of gesture.

The intercourse of barbarians by signs, who have no common language, the wonderful art of communicating with the deaf and dumb, and the effects of pantomimic acting, teach us that looks and gestures have, to an astonishing extent, a natural correspondence with ideas.

He who is master of this sign-language has, indeed, an almost magic power. When the orator can combine it with the spoken language, he acquires thereby exceeding vivacity of expression. Not only his mouth, but his eyes, his features, his fingers, speak. The hearers read the coming sentiment upon his countenance and limbs almost before his voice reaches their ears: they are both spectators and listeners; every sense is absorbed in charmed attention. You may ask me: Should not the preacher study to possess this power? I answer: Yes, by all means; but it is the wrong time to study it when you are in the actual delivery of your discourse, because, unless the looks and hands speak the unstudied language of Nature in their pantomime, they are false and displeasing. The foundation for this power of expression must be possessed first, in a quick and just sensibility. The public speaker should then study the gestures of natural feeling by observing the port of children, of gifted and animated women in social converse, and of true orators. When he sees the right motion coupled with the right sentiment by one of these, his own heart will avouch it and his mind will remember it. The satisfaction and sense of power which he will experience, in employing this vehicle of expression for his own animated sentiments, will soon teach him to use his acquisitions without effort. Let him now so master his subject by faithful preparation, when about to preach, that he shall be thoroughly at ease touching his command over it. And let him also master his self-importance, his conceit, his lust of applause, so as to forget himself in his sacred task. Let him throw himself into his topic without taking care

for gesture, and the gesture will take care of itself. I would testify to you (I pray you note my testimony) that constraint, awkwardness, exaggeration in the rhetorical action usually proceed from one or both of these two causes—the embarrassment of the mind from the consciousness of deficient preparation and mastery of the subject, or the embarrassment of the self-love from overweening concern about one's own appearance. Let your heart be right; let your preparation be perfect, and your previous social training will suggest the right gesture.

You will perceive a close analogy between this precept and the advice which I gave you concerning style, that you should write fluently and without stopping to chill your vein at that time by debating forms of locution. But I urged you, after the work of composition was done, to subject your writing to severe review. The like review should be made of your action after you have spoken, and for the same purpose. The manner of the sermon which has been uttered is, of course, irrevocable; you devote that season of lassitude and repose which follows the toil of delivery to this process of severe recollection and criticism, for the sake of future sermons. While you sit or recline in solitude, recovering your strength, you will recall the inflections and emphasis of your voice, your posture and the movements of your limbs, the changes of your countenance, every part of your action, and will pass sentence upon it. You will be conscious that in one passage your emphasis was erroneous, that in another the force of your voice was extravagant, that in another your movements of body were awkward and inappropriate. Every such

recollection disciplines your taste and self-control for future efforts. When you enter the pulpit next, your watchfulness and self-recollection should exercise themselves only as safeguards, not as prompters of artifice. Their influence will be only repressive of erroneous action, not suggestive; for the heart itself should be the only positive prompter of the action. Let the gestures and intonations make themselves, only, under the watch of your self-consciousness.

But you may ask, How can the speaker recollect himself so closely, if he obeys the injunction of generous self-forgetfulness urged in other places? You may suppose that I have been inconsistent in these precepts. But you will find, that a generous and sincere excitement in a well-disciplined soul does not confuse the self-consciousness, but only makes it more distinct and quick. That species of passion which leaves a man ignorant of what he is doing is too extravagant for rhetoric, and is the characteristic of a weak and confused mind. If you find that you are swept along to that extreme, it is because you have not thoroughly mastered your subject by preparation. The brave and able soldier in the heat of battle is as much more self-possessed than at ordinary seasons, as he is more aroused. His senses are not squandered by the fire of his soul, but collected; his excitement only makes every faculty more tense and collected. It should be so with the orator. While his soul flashes with the white heat of passion, it is self-poised and steady as the sun in his orbit. Let me again cite the invaluable testimony of Shakespeare's experience: "He uses all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest and (as I may say) whirlwind

of his passion, he must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness."

As I enjoined simplicity of utterance, so I would require moderation and dignity of gesture. The posture in the pulpit should be steady and erect, but not immoveable. The action should never degenerate into mimicry, or theatrical pantomime. While animated and expressive, it should ever retain the gravity and earnestness of the gospel herald.

There are two expedients of preparation against which I wish to utter my protest. The one is that of going through the action of a discourse before a mirror. Those who practice it claim, that it is legitimate the speaker should use this means to ascertain how his gesture will appear to his audience; that he may in time correct what is awkward. The objection is that the audience is not there; that consequently the speaker does not exactly realize the feelings of the actual orator in the presence of his hearers, and that his gestures will therefore be artificial and false. The moral effect of such preparation is moreover unhealthy. It fosters an unmanly attention to manner rather than matter, and I am persuaded that its tendency is to degrade the style of action. The other usage is that of declaiming aloud in solitude the discourse to be delivered.¹ Here again my objection is that the process is unavoidably artificial; the audience is not present, and the author has not the unaffected emotion which he will feel, if his heart is right before God, in the actual delivery. The only re-

¹ Cicero de Orat., L. i., c. 33, § 150: Vere etiam illud dicitur, *Perverse dicere homines perverse dicendo facillime consequi.*

sult of his solitary practice is therefore mischievous. The intonations which he so laboriously associates with each particular passage are deficient, heartless, inanimate, or else exaggerated and fantastical; and when his soul is really thrown into the current of his discourse in its actual delivery, he will find them, if he is to speak at all well, erroneous, and obstructions to be gotten out of the way at the critical moment. If he had devoted all his labour to the preparation of his thought and style, and left the utterance to the prompting of the moment, together with the guidance of his general preparation, the tones would have been fresher and more appropriate. Should not the public speaker have any solitary practice, then, in utterance? I answer, yes; much of it. But it will be better for him to use any other composition whatever for such practice, than the one which he is about to deliver. Oratorical utterance and gesture must be at the moment unstudied, otherwise they cannot have the charm of nature. The object of practice in private, then, is only the general culture of the voice, taste and manner. If you attempt by such means to decide in advance precisely how this particular sentence, or that, is to be delivered, you will assuredly decide ill; because it is a matter which can only be well decided by the natural impulse of the moment.