

## THE SCAFFOLDING OF RHETORIC

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[This article was never published, though some of the ideas it contained were incorporated in Savrola, the novel WSC was writing.]

Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the gift of oratory. He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a great king. He is an independent force in the world.

Abandoned by his party, betrayed by his friends, stripped of his offices, whoever can command this power is still formidable. Many have watched its effects. A meeting of grave citizens, protected by all the cynicism of these prosaic days, is unable to resist its influence. From unresponsive silence they advance to grudging approval and thence to complete agreement with the speaker. The cheers become louder and more frequent; the enthusiasm momentarily increases; until they are convulsed by emotions they are unable to control and shaken by passions of which they have resigned the direction.

It is however freely written and frequently remarked that the day of oratory is passing. The newspaper report and the growing knowledge of men have, it is said, led to the decline of rhetoric. Now no rhetorician would be likely to admit that his art had lost its powers, and if this proposition be generally affirmed, the conclusion follows that there are at present no orators. But it by no means follows that the future will be equally barren. There was once a party in the state that thought that the power of personality in politics was a thing of the past, that took as a motto 'Measures not Men', and forthwith proceeded to blindly follow a great man for thirty years. Human weakness appears to be one of the few unvarying features of life and we are convinced that those primary forces which

from earliest antiquity have appealed to men will continue to influence their actions. The sentimental and emotional parts of the human mind will even derive new vigour from the spread of education and the easiness of intercourse. Nor does this belief depend on speculation alone. The people of the United States of America are more highly educated than any other great community in the world. Whatever can add to the improvement of the individual whether by material inventions or political institutions is there found in greater proportion than elsewhere. In no country does so great a volume of educated public opinion exist and yet in no country is the influence of oratory so marked.

The nature of so great and permanent a force may well claim and has often received careful investigation. Is it born or acquired? Does it work for good or ill? Is it real or artificial? Such are the questions that philosophers from the days of Aristotle have revolved. Nor do they remain unanswered. And yet, with respect to the oratory of the English speaking peoples, there is room for further inquiry. It appears that there are certain elements inherent in all rhetoric: that there are certain features common to all the finest speeches in the English language. In painting partly mechanical arrangements of colour give pleasure to the eye. In music certain combinations of chords and discords are agreeable to the ear. And the art of oratory has also its 'values' and its 'thorough base': and this it is the ambitious aim of this article to examine.

As the analysis proceeds we shall observe that rhetorical power is neither wholly bestowed nor wholly acquired, but cultivated. The peculiar temperament and talents of the orator must be his by nature. Their development is encouraged by practice. The orator is real. The rhetoric is partly artificial. Partly, but not wholly; for the nature of the artist is the spirit of his art, and much that appears to be the result of study is due to instinct. If we examine this strange being by the light of history we shall discover that he is in character sympathetic, sentimental and earnest: that he is often as easily influenced by others as others are by him. Indeed the orator is the embodiment of the passions of the multitude. Before he can inspire them with any emotion he must be swayed by it himself. When he would rouse their indignation his heart is filled with anger. Before he can move their tears his own must flow. To convince them he must himself believe. His opinions may change as their impressions fade, but every orator means what he says at the moment he says it. He may be often inconsistent. He is never consciously insincere.

The dominion of matter over mind her rebellious slave, is in this state of human development almost absolute: nor can we proceed with this inquiry without briefly considering the indispensable physical attributes of the orator. First of all a striking presence is a necessity. Often small, ugly or deformed he is invested with a personal significance, which varying in every case defies definition. Sometimes a slight and not unpleasing stammer or impediment has been of some assistance in securing the attention of the audience, but usually a clear and resonant voice gives expression of his thoughts.

The direct, though not the admitted, object which the orator has in view is to allay the commonplace influences and critical

faculties of his audience, by presenting to their imaginations a series of vivid impressions which are replaced before they can be too closely examined and vanish before they can be assailed. The following appear to be the six principal elements by which this object is attained.

I. Correctness of diction. Knowledge of a language is measured by the nice and exact appreciation of words. There is no more important element in the technique of rhetoric than the continual employment of the best possible word. Whatever part of speech it is it must in each case absolutely express the full meaning of the speaker. It will leave no room for alternatives. Words exist in virtue of no arbitrary rule but have been evolved by the taste and experience of mankind and the instinct of language is implanted very deeply in the human character. There are few audiences so ignorant as to be incapable of admiring correct diction for even if they have never heard the word before they will, if it be rightly used understand its meaning. The Scotch have been described as a 'stern and dour' folk. 'Dour' is a rare and uncommon word: but what else could it convey to the AngloSaxon mind than the character of the people of a cold, grey land, severe, just, thrifty and religious. So powerful indeed is the fascination of correct expression that it not only influences the audience, but sometimes even induces the orator, without prejudice to his sincerity, to adapt his principles to his phrases.

The unreflecting often imagine that the effects of oratory are produced by the use of long words. The error of this idea will appear from what has been written. The shorter words of a language are usually the more ancient. Their meaning is more ingrained in the national character and they appeal with greater force to simple understandings than words recently introduced from the Latin and the Greek.

All the speeches of great English rhetoricians except when addressing highly cultured audiences display a uniform preference for short, homely words of common usage so long as such words can fully express their thoughts and feelings. It suffices to mention as a famous example the name of John Bright. Indeed the great sayings of most countries have been expressed in aboriginal words. 'Wir fuerchten allein Gott' said Bismarck, and thereby gave an impulse to the German nation which has not yet died away. What can be more simple? The words employed are all among those that the human mind would earliest evolve.

II. Rhythm. The great influence of sound on the human brain is well known. The sentences of the orator when he appeals to his art become long, rolling and sonorous. The peculiar balance of the phrases produces a cadence which resembles blank verse rather than prose. It would be easy to multiply examples since nearly every famous peroration in the English language might be quoted. We prefer to allude only to the opening lines of Dr Johnson's 'Rasselas' as a remarkable instance of correctness of diction and rhythm which in a speech could not have failed to produce a tremendous effect upon an audience.

III. Accumulation of Argument. The climax of oratory is reached by a rapid succession of waves of sound and vivid pictures. The audience is delighted by the changing scenes presented to their imagination. Their ear is tickled by the rhythm of the language. The enthusiasm rises. A series of facts is brought forward all pointing in a common direction. The end appears in view before it is reached. The crowd anticipate the conclusion and the last words fall amid a thunder of assent.

IV. Analogy. The affection of the mind for argument by analogy may afford a fertile

theme to the cynical philosopher. The ambition of human beings to extend their knowledge favours the belief that the unknown is only an extension of the known: that the abstract and the concrete are ruled by similar principles: that the finite and the infinite are homogeneous. An apt analogy connects or appears to connect these distant spheres. It appeals to the everyday knowledge of the hearer and invites him to decide the problems that have baffled his powers of reason by the standard of the nursery and the heart. Argument by analogy leads to conviction rather than to proof, and has often led to glaring error.

In spite of the arguments of the cynic the influence exercised over the human mind by apt analogies is and has always been immense. Whether they translate an established truth into simple language or whether they adventurously aspire to reveal the unknown, they are among the most formidable weapons of the rhetorician. The effect upon the most cultivated audience is electrical.

V. They (Frontier wars) are but the surf that marks the edge and advance of the wave of civilisation.

(Lord Salisbury. Guildhall.)  
reference Date?

Our rule in India is, as it were, a sheet of oil spread over and keeping free from storms a vast and profound ocean of humanity.

(Lord Randolph Churchill.)  
reference?

A strong nation may no more be confiding of its liberties than a pure woman of her honour.

(Bishop of Derry. Albert Hall, 1892)

.... whose (Wilke's companions) morals were in no more danger of being corrupted by a loose book than a negro of being tanned by a warm sun.

(Lord Macaulay. Essay on the Earl of Chatham.)

It is impossible to imagine any form of argument that could keep the field in the face of these or similar analogies. One such will make a speech or mar a measure.

VI. A tendency to wild extravagance of language to extravagance so wild that reason recoils is evident in most perorations. The emotions of the speaker and the listeners are alike aroused and some expression must be found that will represent all they are feeling. This usually embodies in an extreme form the principles they are supporting. Thus Mr Pitt wishing to eulogise the freedom possessed by Englishmen:

'The poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the forces of the Crown. It may be frail; its roof may shake: the wind may blow through it; the storms may enter, the rain may enter but the King of England cannot enter! All his forces dare not cross the threshold of the ruined tenement.

(Earl of Chatham. Speech on the Excise Bill.)

or Mr Bryan anxious to display the superiority of a silver over a gold standard:

--You shall not press a crown of thorns upon the brow of labour or crucify humanity on a cross of gold.

(Mr Bryan. Speech. 1896.)

The effect of such extravagances on a political struggle is tremendous. They become the watchwords of parties and the creeds of nationalities. But upon the audience the effect is to reduce pressure as when a safety valve is opened. Their feelings are more than adequately expressed. Their enthusiasm has boiled over. The orator who wished to incite his audience to a deed of violence would follow his accumulative argument, his rhythmical periods, his vivid word-pictures, by a moderate and reasonable conclusion. The cooling drink will be withheld from the thirsty man. The safety valves will be screwed down and the people will go out into the night to find the expression of their feelings for themselves. But a fortunate circumstance protects society from this danger. The man who can inspire the crowd by words, is as we have already observed, under their influence himself. Nor can he resist the desire to express his opinions in an extreme form or to carry his argument to the culmination. But for this cunning counterpoise rhetoric would long since have been adjudged a crime.

We conceive that by this analysis we have displayed the principal element of English oratory. So detailed and disconnected an examination of the

structure favours the impression that rhetoric is to be regarded as an artificial science, which may be acquired by any who possess the physical qualifications. Experience shows that this conclusion would be incorrect. Throughout the country are men who speak well and fluently, who devote opportunity, talent and perseverance to improving their speaking and yet never deserve to be called orators. The subtle art of combining the various elements that separately mean nothing and collectively mean so much in an harmonious proportion is known to a

very few. Nor can it ever be imparted by them to others. Nature guards her secrets well and stops the mouths of those in whom she confides. But as the Chemist does not despair of ultimately bridging the chasm between the organic and the inorganic and of creating the living microcosm from its primordial elements, so the student of rhetoric may indulge the hope that Nature will finally yield to observation and perseverance, the key to the hearts of men.