

ARTICLE VII.

LATENT POWER OF THE PULPIT.

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By divine appointment the chief agency in enlarging the kingdom of the blessed Redeemer is the prophet's lips touched with a coal from off the altar. God's word written is no substitute for that word preached. Rather it is a silent John Baptist heralding the voice.

The Christian pulpit preaches an unchangeable Christ, indeed, but preaches him, if wisely, so that distinguished by whatever peculiarities each generation shall look and be saved. This is the age of multiplying books, with consequent lack of deep, self-searching reflection. Its intellectual objection is external, not internal. Hence, in a literary era, not less but greater need of the *preacher* who shall arouse the dormant soul into self-intelligence.

Protestantism makes each individual judge of personal obligation, and the amount and character of his religious instruction. While this develops a sense of personal accountability and a consequent spiritual stature among the people, it increases the difficulties of the Protestant pulpit. Where other sects have an impressive ritual to fascinate the eye and attract the attention, this has apostolic simplicity. Wisdom, therefore, will ignore no legitimate element of power. In some quarters an addition of liturgical forms is advocated. The press, both secular and religious, is clamoring for wider scientific knowledge among the clergy. Theological seminaries are seeking a profounder erudition for their graduates. The church is crying for learning and impressive unction in her ministry. "So many kinds of voices" call for this or that, but rarely one for voice itself. "It is a significant fact that, notwithstanding . . . the increasing demands which the platform, the pulpit,

the stage, the lecture-room make upon the eloquence of those who address large bodies of listeners, oratory is the one art which meets with signal neglect from us." Are these words, opening an article in a recent *Nineteenth Century*, as inapplicable as could be wished to America and to the American pulpit?

Expression in the pulpit sustains to impression on the pew an intimate and vital relation which prudence must regard. Particularly at present is care necessary lest amid attractive lines of scholarly preparation, bewildering in number and brilliancy, no place be found or made for the more commonplace, but not less essential, art of successful communication. If the sermon be "intended," as Professor S. Phelps's definition has it, "for popular effect," then the sermonizer's bounden duty is to use every proper agency to that end. "A great matter with most of our hearers," says Richard Baxter, "lies in the pronunciation and tone of the voice. The best matter will not move them, unless movingly delivered." Just so far, then, as the pulpit is jealous of effecting that immediate and definite impression which is its chief province, must it not add to its learning literary art; and to literary art, befitting utterance?

Important as this is for sermonizing, it is still more so in reading the Scriptures. The word of God is currently thought to need only to be lifted from the silence of the page and vocalized in order to accomplish its appropriate results. But a Bible reader does far more than pronounce the printed words. He is also their interpreter. Thousands of churchgoers depend upon the public reading of the Bible for their knowledge of its contents. This fact alone raises the reading of the pulpit into a sublime opportunity. But when we realize that this voicing of the divine word is for such hearers its ultimate mould, its final clothing in flesh, this article of reading becomes an overwhelming responsibility. It becomes an interpretation not only of the form, but also of the spirit, of the revelation of God. Every inflection, every pause, every cadence, is not only important to the understanding of the facts as stated, but it is also heavy with true or false impression of the divine character. Whoever reads shall make the twenty-fifth of Matthew express the malice of

revenge or the pity of rejected compassion. A faculty, natural or acquired, of just and sympathetic expression has endowed many, in the pulpit and out, with ability to interpret Scripture by simple reading, not achieved in the most erudite of sermons. Princes and peers of the realm, we are told, counted it a privilege to stand in the dismal corridors of Newgate, among felons and outcasts, merely to share with them the opportunity of hearing Elizabeth Fry read the parable of the Prodigal Son. The masterly reading of hymns by the late Dr. E. H. Chapin drew numbers to his services; and Dr. S. H. Cox's rendition of "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" made these words at once a sermon and a hymn of praise.

"As warm milk is fitter to nourish a babe than that which is cold," runs the quaint phrase of an old Puritan writer, "so the word of God delivered by a lively voice hath a greater congruity and suitableness to the work of grace." For modern commentary on this ancient text take this word of Dr. T. L. Cuyler. Having opportunity to occupy the pew for several successive Sabbaths, he observed that each sermon was mightily helped or hindered, made or marred, by its delivery. "The range and effect of the projectile," he wrote to the *Congregationalist*, "depended very much upon the power that sent it forth. A good thought clumsily shaped or tamely uttered seemed to fall lifeless from the lips; whereas, a more common thought well rounded like a bullet and discharged with a percussion penetrated every ear and heart."

Skill in this art of *trajection*, which the ministry might confessedly acquire and convert into a potent auxiliary, seems at present its most conspicuous need. Apart altogether from any discussion of tendencies, or comparison of studies, it must be confessed that this vast power is practically latent in the pulpit. Is that pulpit justifiable on grounds either of expediency or of morality in allowing it to remain latent? Dumb scholarship is not edifying. It is still better to speak five words with the understanding, as Paul declares, "That with my voice I might instruct others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue." Theoretically church fathers endorse the Pauline

view. We find it set down that "a student of our seminaries is to be able to deliver what he has composed in a natural and acceptable manner."¹ Literary or oratorical gifts are considered compensatory for mental lack, indicated by low scholarship.² Finding such gifts rated so highly, we look to see great care taken to awaken them where dormant and to increase them where marked. Commissioners, Visitors, Examiners, assemble, however, and pass upon the candidate's Theology, Philosophy, Hebrew, Greek, Ecclesiastical History, Theory of Preaching, and if there be any other "ology" or "ism," upon that also, but who asks concerning his ability to tell all this? Acquaintance with the pulpit is sufficient, though not satisfactory, evidence of the result of such neglect. One there finds reading to be practically a lost art; hymns made ludicrous by infelicitous rendering, the Scriptures really perverted instead of interpreted; men of excellent mental ability and furniture nicknamed from ridiculous peculiarities of speech; preachers able to attract and feed thousands speaking to hundreds, or even scores, because no more can hear.³

Nor are these defects confined to clerical "ne'er-do-weels." Instances in which even uncommon powers fall immeasurably short of their due effect, simply through defective expression, come within the circle of every one's observation. There is one eminent father in the church, to be more specific, whose rare gifts have given him a commanding influence in spite of a pitiful, whining tone reserved exclusively for pulpit use, which affects the profane with emotions the reverse of solemn. Another's profound thought received such mumbling, inarticulate utterance that, beyond a very short radius, the multi-

¹Pres, Digest, p. 378.

²Minutes, Gen. Assembly, 1884, p. 81.

³ Except for the infrequency of his church-going, what pity that every congregation had not its Johnny Darbyshire, who attends divine service for the first time in his life and cries out to the clergyman: "Speak up, man, speak up! What art mumbling at there, man? We canna hear what thou sayest here." Urged by his friends to apologize, he does it after this fashion. "What, I reckon I've affronted thee with bidding thee speak up. But thou *should* speak up, man; thou should speak up, or what art perched up aloft there for?"

tudes of would-be auditors are transformed perforce into spectators.

For this state of things the ministry has the remedy in its own hands and is itself, to that extent, responsible for its continuance. No sufficient reformation will come about, however, until it becomes habitual, traditional, in a word, fashionable, to study how to deliver as well as to prepare a sermon, and how to render the word of God as well as to understand it. The absurdity of bestowing all attention upon the thing to be said and none upon the manner of saying it is as patent as that which assiduously regards the rapier's temper without an effort to learn its use. This negligence lies intrenched behind the fallacy, "whoever has anything to say can say it." It is unnecessary to dignify such foolishness by serious refutation. This line, however, relating to Carlyle's lecturing experience, from one of his recently recovered letters to Emerson is so true, and of such general application, that it deserves quotation for itself: "Extempore speaking, especially in the way of lecture [I find], is an art or craft that requires an apprenticeship, which I have never served." Perhaps he had nothing to say! Is this the explanation of George A. Sala's ill success as a lecturer, or of Matthew Arnold's failure on the platform during his first visit to America? Fulness of matter, therefore, is no guarantee of successful speech, though neither is there any without it. The full jug empties slowest. This very abundance of matter is usually a witness that the critical, the constructive, the analytical faculties have been developed at the expense of the faculties of expression. Add earnestness to fulness and still it will not suffice. Earnestness, though atoning for many vocal deficiencies, cannot make good, want of skill in expression. One may be never so earnest and still offend, bringing ridicule upon the cause he espouses, or, what is worse, falsify his message in its delivery. In the words of the venerable Dr. Park: "There have been some who reasoned justly and felt right, but their style of writing and speaking was so ill-conformed to God's laws for the proclaiming of his word that the hearer learned a

falsehood where the reader would have learned a truth."⁴

Since, therefore, the divinest truths may be uttered not only in a way to repel rather than to attract, but even in such a way as directly to reverse their meaning, this matter of delivery ceases to be a question of culture merely. It enters also, and emphatically, as has been already hinted, into the region of morals. On this point John Quincy Adams's instruction of a former generation is equally applicable to ours. He maintained, "If we admit that the art of oratory qualifies the ministers of the gospel to perform, in higher perfection, the duties of his station, we can no longer question whether it be proper for his cultivation. It is more than proper; it is one of his most solemn and indispensable duties."⁵

Still further, in the parable of the talents, the Head of the church has taught us that each one is accountable, both for what he is and for what he might become. Impartial observation can scarcely hold the general ministry guiltless at this point. Granted that in these days of mental ferment there is great demand upon the pulpit. It is nothing new. The nature of the demand, or rather the thing demanded, varies from age to age, but never since the Master sent forth his disciples under the great commission, has there been call for anything less than the pulpit's utmost power. Neither can it to-day prove its sincere desire to accomplish most effectively its ministry of reconciliation while neglecting to acquire that skill in expression which would enable it to proclaim its grand tidings in a form so clear as to penetrate, so beautiful as to win, and so forcible as to convince.

Existing deficiencies cannot, however, be charged upon the ministry to the entire exculpation of the seminaries. They do not furnish in this department facilities at all equivalent to those

⁴ What a boon to long-suffering audiences could such preachers overhear this dialogue *Thes.*—"This fellow doth not stand upon points."

Lys.—"He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt, he knows not the stop. A good moral, my lord; it is not enough to speak, but to speak true."—*Mid-Sum. Nights Dream, Act V. Scene 1.*

⁵ Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory.

provided in others. It is the Greek, the Arabic, the polemic, not the oratorical, chair that is reinforced. Still pertinent as when Lectures on Pulpit Eloquence were published, is Dr. Campbell's lament that "the training of young men, who are intended for public speakers, to read and speak properly and gracefully, is so much and so universally neglected in latter times." Palter with it as we may, we cannot change the fact that among all other qualities and functions, the Christian preacher is a public speaker, and must have the same qualifications, be able to meet the same standards of criticism, and to satisfy the legitimate demands made upon his brother speakers, if he is to retain his rank among them. Yet it is by no means uncommon to find students and even clergymen themselves affecting contempt for oratorical skill, calling this "knack" of proper expression an external and factitious thing, a cheap veneer of the schools; whereas it is simply ability to put forth one's individuality unhindered, a clearing of obstructions from the channel that the current of speech may flow unvexed to its goal. There is just so much water. No system of sluices, dams, or jetties, can increase it. Regulate, guide, distribute they may, but, after all, the stream will not rise above its fountain nor exceed its supply. The most, therefore—let those who dread artificial eloquence take courage—that can be done is simply to break up the fountains of the great deep by opening the eyes to see, the heart to feel the truth, remove every impediment of defective utterance, *then let it flow*. To this no one can take exception unless he should fatuously claim that it was not better to speak effectively than ineffectively, intelligibly than unintelligibly, successfully than unsuccessfully. Even admitting that all this will render little assistance to those hearers who really wish to be instructed, it would still remain true that the unconverted and the indifferent must be interested before they wish to be instructed. Neither will the bare voicing of thought, however terse, or of doctrines, however sound, meet the just and natural demands of church goers. More than mere pulseless learning and logic is necessary; it must be learning alive and logic on fire. For this reason Bishop Middleton's

maxim holds always true. "*Manner is something with everybody, and everything with some.*" Good habits of speech are the etiquette of the speaker. Hence Emerson's dictum, "Give a boy address and accomplishments, and you give him the mastery of palaces and fortune where he goes," may be set over against this admonition of an acceptable writer on sacred rhetoric: "The outward appearance is the first thing that strikes us in a person; the expression is the first thing that strikes us in a discourse. Take care, at least, that in neither there be anything to make an unfavorable impression which may preclude all further inquiry and regard." If, on the other hand, you charm the senses and create no obstacle in them, you leave the way open to the soul—and there is no other avenue to it.

This, however, is an art which must be learned like any other. If one attempts to follow that sovereign specific of pretentious ignorance which advises to "be natural," avoiding all external aid, it will be only to discover, with Fontenelle, that "to despise theory is to have the excessively vain pretension to do without knowing what one does." *The natural in expression, as in every other art, can be secured only through labor.* Art is nature perfected.

Those rules of old discovered, not devised,
Are nature still, but nature methodized.

Nature wields a club; art feathers an arrow. Natural expression hurls language at the target; trained expression leaves the shafts of speech quivering in the bull's-eye. The physical is all that stands between soul and soul. Discipline enables the most effectively to pluck his thought from his own consciousness and graft it into the conscience of his hearer. He is at his best when most unreservedly the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. The more freely this finds utterance through his vocal organs, the more direct and potent the result. "Preachers," and the intensest conviction of the sainted Thomas H. Skinner finds expression in the words, "Preachers cannot be too well acquainted with the theory of elocution. . . . The spirituality of pulpit action, and the part in it belonging to the

Holy Ghost, interfere in no degree with the highest culture in reference to it. The part which the Spirit has in it, imposes as its corollary, an obligation on the preacher to give to delivery his principal regard."⁶

This is not to minish aught of learning, but to add an art through which in impressive forms this learning may communicate with life. A mind which erudition has qualified to grasp the truth in its breadth and to discriminate its delicate shadings, must be joined with faculties trained fittingly to express it before the intellectual and physical requirements of a successful preacher are met. Since the great orators and writers of antiquity, who took such care that kingly thought should go forth attended for retinue by every grace of diction and every elegance and power of form, are our unattained models still, what has made it unbecoming in those appointed to utter in men's ears far weightier messages, and the sublimest of all thoughts to bestow at least a fairly proportionate attention upon *how* these things shall be spoken?

True expression, like the unchanging sun,
Clears and improves whate'er it shines upon.
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.

There is, of course, no patent process whereby to produce a Wilberforce or a Summerfield from every stripling who may be found in a school of the prophets. Few may be able, like Rufus Choate, to cause the mouth to water for certain dishes by naming them, or make men weep, with Whitefield, over "Mesopotamia," or through pronunciation of the word "lost," bring conviction to souls, as did Nettleton, but all may gain something where these gained so much, in study of the art of expression.

Let not the aim of this plea be misunderstood. No specific is sought for making "eloquent preachers." This were simply to make angels weep. Here is no place for the dramatic and artificial methods of the professional elocutionist; still less for the airs of the amateur, proud of his elocution. What is wanted is ability to deliver a sermon, to read a hymn or a passage of

⁶Discuss. in Theol., pp. 178, 184.

Scripture so truthfully and so simply that no one shall once think of its delivery as either good or bad, but only of his own duty, of God's grace, of Christ's love, whatever is the truth set forth.

We cultivate the mind, the eye, the ear, the hand. Shall we not likewise cultivate the tongue, that it may present thought impressively and accurately? One who professes to interpret God's word to man, has no right to misrepresent the solemnity of Christ's "woes," the awe of Eliphaz' vision, the reverence of Solomon's dedicatory prayer, the joy of Mary's Magnificat, the hopefulfulness of Paul's "persuasion," David's sorrow for Absalom, Jeremiah's pathos, and the tenderness of John xvii, by forcing them all into a single mould.

All that discriminates between a man and an automaton in speaking, or between a speaker and a book in conveying knowledge, is that the mysterious element of life permeating every syllable and varying emphasis, rate, tone, and feeling at will, interprets the subtle and elusive shades of meaning which the untrained ear and eye cannot of themselves discern. If this be not achieved, what is the preacher "perched up aloft there for?"

Now these things may be taught. Hindrances may be overcome. Efficiency may be augmented. The preacher as well as any other man may learn to avoid excess of emphasis; to sustain the entire sentence; to close the droning *os rotundum*; to shun exclusive use of upper registers; to relax the tension of official constraint,—in short, the science of Saxon speech, man to man. He who is to go forth an ambassador for Christ, a herald of the mercy and the severity of Jehovah, an instructor as well, of whole generations by his Sabbath reading from divine revelation, surely ought not to be thrust out of his pupil days without being taught so much as the interpretive force of a comma, or the power of expression in a pause. It is not so done in other professions. A youth who will handle nothing more momentous than the shoes of his fellow-man, must spend years in giving skill to his hand. The musician must practice chords and scales weary months and years, developing his mind by study and his fingers by practice before he is thought capable of interpreting the great composers. Ought it to be expected

that one training in the routine drill of the academy, in the critical and technical work of the college, in the rigid lines of systematic theology and Penateuchal criticism, will be able spontaneously to interpret the infinitely deeper harmonies which dwell in a fervent psalm of David, trembling with contrition or quivering with exultant joy! Every licentiate must needs have careful training in the Greek accents and tenses of Paul's epistles, but he is expected to be able by native grace so to render the broken, sobbing sentences of Second Corinthians as to reveal the Apostle's tumultuous zeal and vehement love, and cause a congregation to realize that these Bible scribes were men of like passions with ourselves, sympathetic with human need and weakness. Of evils resulting from the inevitable failure, the negative, and therefore unnoticed, are perhaps even greater than the positive. The public has learned to regard a poor delivery as characteristic of the pulpit. Church goers suffer in silence or absent themselves from the sanctuary. Above all, a listless rendering gives no hint of the riches in the treasure house of God's word, and listening audiences do not learn to prize and appropriate it to themselves. Is it strange that there is cessation of interest in the exposition of a book which appears in itself uninteresting? Worthy presentation of the divine word goes far to commend it, and the trained faculties which accomplish this will secure also a closer and more willing attention to the discourse based upon it.

Once let the ministry realize the magnitude of this talent, so long hidden in a napkin, and it will soon be set to earning usury against the Lord's coming. Should such a conviction become general among the clergy, that fact will, of itself, create the "school" as essential to any concerted movement toward improvement of ministerial expression as it has been found to be in philosophy, literature, music, or painting. After exactly half a century of waiting, may we not hope that the sage prediction of Dr. James Rush is about to be verified, and that "the authoritative influence of oratorical fashion" is at last about "to produce a general belief in the simple truism that—

IF WE WISH TO READ [OR SPEAK] WELL, WE MUST FIRST LEARN HOW."7

Signs of this popular interest are already in the air. Laymen are learning to urge upon the pulpit greater attention to expression and to look for increase of power from this source. The increasing number and sale of books which profess to teach this art are among the indications that the ministry is beginning to seek help in this branch of their work. The discovery soon follows, however, that the silent volume upon the library shelf is of little practical value; whence the increasing clerical attendance upon summer and other schools where these things are taught. The Church, however, cannot afford to leave this matter any longer to individual zeal and sporadic efforts at betterment. The existence of this latent power in the pulpit and the rich results awaiting its exercise constitute in themselves an imperative demand for a Professorship of Oratory in every Seminary. This, too, in addition to the chair of Homiletics already full in most of our seminaries and its time fully occupied. There is needed a teacher of effective expression, elocution pure and simple, who will receive a fair proportion of students' time and do for them what should have been done in the preparatory schools and colleges, but which, with few exceptions, has not. If necessary, turn the grindstone another year rather than send reapers into the harvest field with sickles half ground.

Just here emerges the spectre of practicality, inquiring whence the financial provision for this enlargement of seminary facilities. The answer is no more difficult than in the case of lectureships on harmony of science and religion, adjunct professorships of Greek, and similar chairs already established in various seminaries to meet widening demands. Some steward of God's money will endow this chair as one or another has endowed other chairs, furnished libraries, provided scholarships, built needed edifices. Once let the church at large feel and earnestly state its obligation to provide this help for its ministry, and some Morgan or Dodge, Marquand or McCormick will be

⁷ *Human Voice, Pref.*, p. 12.

prompt to acknowledge that he has come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Failing such a response, there remains the possibility of an Alumni professorship. The graduates of each school of divinity may unite to enable their *alma mater* to speak her message in a manner befitting its intrinsic worth. This has been done for other and not more important departments, and for institutions of a different kind. The sons of Levi, once awakened, would make their deep poverty abound to the riches of their liberality to perform this thing. The very agitation of effort to do this will be instructive and so helpful. Furthermore, when public sentiment shall require it, students may do much for themselves and for each other by mutual drill and criticism in reading and elocutionary clubs. For this art of effective speaking is not a trick of voice nor mannerism of gesticulation that may be caught in half an hour. It includes such unpoetical elements as strengthening of pectoral and abdominal muscles, discipline of vocal chords, habitual use of right methods of breathing. Like the drill of the soldier, the training of the racing crew, the development of the acrobat, it involves years of systematic study and practice. In this way the whole personality of the speaker becomes capable of harmonious action, and, instead of imitating the superficial idiosyncrasies of a casual instructor, each man cultivates the voice and manner suited to his temperament, and which, when cultivated, will be found *natural* to him. This, of course, cannot all be completed in the seminary. But what is done for other parts of the curriculum can be done for this. The student may be started right, and with the impulse of intelligent enthusiasm to give momentum to his after work.

When the utmost is done, we need fear no inundation of eloquence. The orator will still be born, not made. But those who occupy our pulpits will be easy of address, fluent of utterance, forcible of speech. Even with this latent power converted into active, the millennium may not be imminent, but the churches will be fuller, congregations better instructed, audi-

ences more impressed. The fruit of this intellectual, or even physical, sowing will be spiritual in its reaping. For the success of Moody and similar men in attracting and helping the multitudes unites with that of confessed masters of sacred eloquence as a precious evidence that the silent depths of the popular heart may still be stirred by breezes from Galilee—if only that divine breath be not diverted in the medium.