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THE RHETORIC OF ORATORY AND HOW TO TEACH IT¹

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AN AFTER-DINNER speaker who was assigned the subject, "The World, the Flesh, and the Devil," said that he would skip the world, touch lightly upon woman, and go at once to the Devil. In treating the subject assigned me this afternoon, I will practically skip the first term, "The Rhetoric of Oratory," and touch more or less lightly upon two or three aspects of "How to Teach It."

It is interesting to note in passing, however, that *rhetoric* is derived from a Greek word meaning the art of speaking, and that prior to the invention of printing, the rhetoric of oratory was the only rhetoric known. Again, it will clear the air if we understand that by the much abused term, *oratory*, which has no universally accepted meaning, we mean persuasive speech—speech that induces belief in the speaker's message and that reaches those impelling motives which incite the listener to action.

Now, that there is a rhetoric for discourse addressed to a hearer as distinguished from composition addressed to a reader, no one can doubt; and an adequate course of training in Public Speaking must include a course in speech composition, involving considerable practice in writing. Such a course must by no means supplant oral composition, but should be supplementary to, and corrective of, the practise in extempore speaking and debating. The need for training in oratorical composition arises from the fact, first, that nothing can take the place of drill in organization and expression that come from practise in reducing one's thoughts to writing, and secondly, there are still innumerable occasions in the midst of the hurly-burly of modern life that afford ample time to plan and compose a speech in advance of its delivery. Whether or not the composition is delivered from memory is another story.

A comprehensive course in oratorical composition should include (1) a study of the rhetoric of persuasion, (2) an intensive

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and critical study of a few oratorical masterpieces, and (3) practise in the writing and delivery of speeches that illustrate the various forms of present-day public address, and prepared for different types of audiences, hypothetical or actual.

The general qualities of style that must characterize effective oral discourse—the need of absolute clearness as the speaker proceeds, or what Mr. Phillips, in his *Effective Speaking*, calls “instant intelligibility,” the need of a central idea that represents the speaker’s purpose, the use of iteration by means of restatement and reënforcement of the main points, the illuminating effect of illustration and the specific instance and concreteness until the thought is visualized, the direct discourse which reveals an audience sense, the adaptation of one’s style to reach a particular audience—all these matters have been dealt with by ancient and modern authors, and I would not presume to treat them, even if time permitted, before this gathering. What I desire to stress is this: It is of vital importance that we approach the teaching of speech composition from the proper viewpoint. Let me therefore call your attention to three aspects of my subject which teachers are prone to disregard. These are: (1) The rhetoric of oratory must be taught, in large measure, by actual speech composition on the part of the students: an ounce of practise is worth pounds of theory. (2) The subject-matter of speeches, both for illustrative purposes and for the student’s work in composition, should be related to problems of present-day interest and importance. (3) The type of address to be studied and practised should be the brief, incisive kind that our times demand.

(1) Most beginning teachers of Public Speaking first approach their work of instruction with much the same attitude as graduates of the teacher-training classes from our normal schools and college departments of pedagogy. They are steeped in “methods.” Moreover, the very nature of our subject requires constant attention to methods. The danger is, that we are apt to waste precious time in expounding this or that theory or system, and, like the typical pedagogue, we are apt to think that a particular system in which we have been trained—and which being interpreted usually means “my system”—is a sure cure for all the speaker’s ailments. As one grows in experience and wisdom, he cares less for theory and aims more for practical results.

In my first class in speech composition wherein we used a text-book as the basis for the work, the text was first completed before assigning any written exercises. The students responded finely to the oral quizzes on the text, and gave good analyses of the exercises appended to each chapter. The theory was mastered. Practise in speech composition followed, and these brilliant students almost uniformly violated every principle of the rhetoric of oratory. The moral is, that each lesson, as the subject is developed, must be supplemented by appropriate written work.

(2) If we keep in view the demands for training in citizenship, the subjects for speech-composition should be related to such local, state, or national problems as are constantly pressing for solution. Most teachers, I assume, will readily agree to this proposition, and yet, our interscholastic and intercollegiate oratorical contests are still, not infrequently, sad exhibitions of the violation of the principle just announced. At the University of Texas we have tried to avoid the typically unreal, unoriginal, and insincere contest-oratorion by requiring our students, in the local tryouts for representation in our State oratorical contest, to speak upon a Texas public question, listing a dozen such questions from which choice must be made. In class work, the ideal subject is, of course, a local problem that requires first-hand treatment and is of personal import to the writer and speaker.

Further, the oratorical masterpieces to be studied as models of style should be those by modern speakers who deal with live subjects. This dictum may not find ready acceptance by all teachers, but I am convinced that much time is wasted in the study of oratorical productions that have only an historical interest. I can imagine an excellent course in oratorical composition without mentioning Demosthenes or Cicero or Burke, or even Webster. I think that more valuable examples, on the score both of subject-matter and of style, can be found in Phillips and Beecher and Grady and Curtis, or even better still, in such living models as Beveridge or Roosevelt, supplemented by the classic phrasing of President Wilson. Such speakers furnish better models for present-day demands than the traditional classics.

(3) Finally, the typical speech for class-work should be the short, pointed, straight-from-the-shoulder treatment that our times demand. In a course in oratorical composition I would not

allow more than one speech of fifteen minutes in length, one of ten minutes, perhaps, and the assignments otherwise should consist of the treatment of a single topic, with a five-minute limit. The formal, elaborate discourse is today rarely needed, but the brief, pointed discussion of a single topic on which the speaker must single-shot just as straight forwardly and strikingly and persuasively as he can, is the sort of speech that demands our study.

If, then, a course in speech composition be so conducted that ample practise is had in writing along with the study of theory; if the subjects for speeches and the models of style deal with living problems of the day and living speakers; and if a short, pointed, five-minute speech be considered the desideratum, we have gone a long way toward vitalizing a course in persuasive speech and making it of real practical value.