# EXTEMPORE SPEAKING

## FOR SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

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GINN & COMPANY

BOSTON · NEW YORK · CHICAGO · LONDON

610.1

The Athenæum Press
GINN & COMPANY · PROPRIETORS · BOSTON · U.S.A.

# PREFACE

This book, the result of practical experience in the class room, has been prepared to supply a treatise on extempore speaking, primarily for school and college students. The general principles of the science and art of extempore speech were fully treated by Quintilian and others in ancient times, and are also set forth in such modern books as Bautain's "Art of Extempore Speaking," Pittenger's "Extempore Speech," Buckley's "Extemporaneous Oratory," Thomas Wentworth Higginson's "Hints on Writing and Speech-Making," and Brander Matthews' "Notes on Speech-Making." While these authors have been freely consulted in the preparation of this book, their treatises are not adaptable for use as text-books. The present volume aims to present the subject in a manner adapted to the needs of both teachers and students, by reclassifying principles and methods, making the methods as specific in treatment as possible, and by adding, at the end of each chapter and in the Appendix, suggestions and topics for class exercises. A large number of modern speeches have also been incorporated, in order that there might be no lack of illustrative material.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. THE DESIRABILITY OF TRAINING STUDENTS IN EXTEMPORE SPEECH

Writing on the education of an orator, in his "Institutes of Oratory," Quintilian says that "the richest fruit of all our study, and the most ample recompense for the extent of our labor, is the *faculty of speaking extempore*. . . . There arise indeed innumerable occasions where it is absolutely necessary to speak on the instant. What system of pleading will allow of an orator being unprepared for sudden calls? What is to be done when we have to reply to an opponent? What profit does much writing, constant reading, and a long period of life spent in study, bring us, if there remains with us the same difficulty in speaking that we felt at first? . . . Not that I make it an object that an orator should prefer to speak extempore; I only wish that he should be able to do so."

If "the faculty of speaking extempore" — of thinking on one's feet — was a need in Quintilian's time, how much more frequent and constant is the demand at the present time, under the conditions of American life and government. What are the schools and colleges doing to meet this demand? Of those institutions where any instruction at all is offered in public speaking, the vast

majority, probably, carry the student no farther than practice in speaking declamations and memorized orations. But the training of the student for practical life, — training him in the power of rising before an audience and expressing his thoughts in his own language, — this is rarely attempted. True, there has been some change in recent years. The revival of intercollegiate debating, and the increased attention being given in schools and colleges to instruction and practice in debate, are significant departures from the old-time school and college oratory; and an openly avowed movement in the same direction is the proposed organization of state universities for the purpose of holding contests in extempore speaking. In their preliminary announcement the promoters of this movement say:

"We are conceiving of the cultivation of oratory not as an acquisition of arts of rhetoric and elocution alone, but rather as including also development of all the intellectual and personal powers required for the work of the public speaker in dealing with living problems; and we propose a radical departure from the present method in oratorical contests, and approve the plan suggested by Professor Edgar George Frazier, head of the department of public speaking at the University of Kansas, in accordance with which memorized declamations shall be replaced by the discussion of some question of great import, upon which the contestants shall have made thorough preparation, while the particular phase of the subject to which any one speaker in a contest shall confine himself shall be unknown until the day of competition."

These words may well be heeded by every teacher of public speaking. How often do we find that the school or college graduate who has won prizes with memorized orations is handicapped in the actual contests of after life, when he finds that memorized speeches will not always avail him. On the other hand, his classmate who failed to win prizes with set speeches, but who has learned to think on his feet, carries causes and wins verdicts.

## II. EXTEMPORE SPEAKING FOR PREPARATORY AND HIGH SCHOOLS

The question may be raised, Can extempore speaking be advantageously taught to pupils in preparatory and high schools? Unquestionably yes; but of course any plan adopted must be suited to the ages of the pupils.

Every thoughtful teacher must certainly admit that the results of such efforts as are at present made to teach public speaking in the schools are unsatisfactory. And these unsatisfactory results — there are doubtless many exceptions, but speaking generally — are due not so much to lack of time as to wrong methods. Though there has been general improvement in recent years, we are still too much under the influence of the traditional elocutionist. The teachers who are trained at all to teach public speaking come largely from schools where the idea of entertainment — not conviction or persuasion — is paramount. There is no true conception of the sort of public speaking that students need. The practical needs of the future citizen are lost sight of, and much of the instruction given is fitted only to the clown or the actor.

If a boy or girl can, with approved screechings and contortions, present "The Midnight Ride of Jennie McNeal," or "Curfew Shall Not Ring To-Night," or can render a story or poem in dialect, the teacher's ambition is fulfilled and the parent's cup of joy is full, however excruciating the performance to the average hearer. Hence the general prejudice among educators against elocutionary training; and not until we eliminate the sort of training above described can we hope — or deserve — to see this prejudice removed. I would not be understood to decry all reciting or declaiming. If a girl recites from the standard poets or other good literature, or the boy declaims selections from good speeches on questions of the day, the practice is valuable in many ways. But in the schools generally, is there not too much mere declaiming? Cannot instruction in public speaking be made more practical? Why not give pupils training in that sort of speaking they will be called upon to practice in actual life?

Let the pupils have practice in telling what they know, without memorizing the language in advance. They do this in a way, to be sure, in class-room recitations; and let the extempore exercises be in the nature of a class recitation, without questions or interruptions by the teacher. Thus will the pupils learn to *talk* in the presence of an audience, and that is the very sort of speaking they should learn. This plan has the further advantage of requiring no special training on the part of the teacher. How the plan can be adapted in a particular school is, of course, for the individual teacher to work out. Some general suggestions, however, may be helpful. Whenever the curriculum provides for

instruction in public speaking, by all means let some time, especially with advanced students, be devoted to class exercises in speaking extempore. When no regular instruction is provided, let fifteen, twenty, or thirty minutes be set aside on two, three, or even the five days of the school week, and immediately following the opening exercises, for what may be termed "morning talks." At first let the teacher announce some general subject, and assign topics on this subject to a certain number of the more advanced pupils. Several mornings, for example, might be devoted respectively to Shakespeare, Emerson, Longfellow, and other noted authors. Let one pupil give a brief biographical sketch, another a history of a certain play, or poem, or book, another a quotation therefrom, and so on with other productions of the author. With a view to leading up to extempore speaking proper, several more mornings might well be devoted to calling for miscellaneous quotations from standard authors, two or three such periods, perhaps, being assigned to the class in English literature. And then a large number of exercises could be devoted to talks, each about three minutes in length, on current events and questions of the day. The exercises could occasionally be varied by having debates, preferably on questions of local interest, assigning in advance the affirmative and negative leaders and their respective colleagues.

In conducting these exercises, eliminate, so far as possible, the horror which the average pupil feels toward rhetorical exercises. Do not call the speakers to the platform, let them simply rise from their seats and speak with the audience about them, as they would in a class recitation. Aside from requiring pupils to speak

distinctly enough to be heard, do not, especially in the earlier efforts, stimulate self-consciousness by criticising their delivery. The interest should chiefly center in *what* they say, and the aim should be to direct the pupils' minds to this point of view.

If the schedule of recitations will not permit these morning talks, substitute similar exercises, at least occasionally, for the Friday afternoon rhetoricals. In order to allow more, or all, of the pupils to take part, the school may be divided into as many sections as there are teachers, each teacher meeting one of the sections in his or her recitation room.

The individual teacher will, of course, devise other means and ways to meet local conditions. In any event, some such informal talks as have been suggested will be found a vast improvement, in interest and in practical results, over the usual school rhetorical. The author has observed[1] the "morning talks" above described during several years' trial, and can testify to their practicability, their interest, and their efficiency in developing in boys and girls the ability to think on their feet; not the original thinking, to be sure, that we expect of minds more mature, but such practice, during the formative period, is a long stride in the right direction.

## III. CAN EXTEMPORE SPEAKING BE ACQUIRED?

Again, the question arises, Can we learn to speak extempore? Is it a thing that can be taught at all? Is it an art natural to some, but incapable of acquirement by others? In answer to these queries, let us

[1] At the Ithaca (N.Y.) High School.

take encouragement from the testimony and experiences of some noted orators.

Pericles, the greatest of Greek statesmen, was also according to tradition the greatest orator of his day. Though a note to Plutarch's "Life of Pericles" says that the latter "wrote down his orations before he pronounced them in public, and indeed, was the first who did so," yet Professor Bredif, in his "Political Eloquence of Greece," declares: "Pericles never wrote his orations. Like Aristides, Themistocles, and the ancient orators, he improvised after laborious meditation. The impression produced was immediate and lasting; 'he left the goad in the minds of his hearers.'"

Concerning the two preëminent orators of the ancient world, Demosthenes and Cicero, there is much conflicting testimony. Doubtless most of their orations that have come down to us were carefully written out in advance. So manifest was the preparation of Demosthenes that other envious orators ridiculed him, saying that all his arguments "smelled of the lamp." "Yet," says Plutarch, "while he chose not often to trust the success of his powers to fortune, he did not absolutely neglect the reputation which may be acquired by speaking on a sudden occasion." Lord Brougham contends that Demosthenes' reported orations are in the form as prepared for delivery, but that he added much to them while speaking.

When time permitted, Cicero's orations were usually written and delivered from memory, but when pressed for time he spoke extempore, and with the vanity natural to him he commended some of his extemporized speeches as superior to his written productions.

Passing by such celebrated extemporizers as St. Paul, Chrysostom, Peter the Hermit, Savonarola, Bossuet, and Martin Luther, let us take two or three examples from the orators of the eighteenth century.

Mirabeau, ugly but powerful, is typical as an orator of the French Revolution. Most of his famous speeches were written out in advance, but he never was confined to his prepared text. It is said that he would receive notes as he ascended the tribune and weave them, without apparent reflection, into the texture of his discourse. Powerful as Mirabeau was in his premeditated discourse, his extempore utterance was irresistible. "He roared, he stamped, he shook his shock of hair, and trod the tribune with the imperial air of a king. His habitual grave and solemn tones were gone, and in their place rang out accents of thunder and heartrending pathos, and all without losing his self-control. But these improvised efforts were short, and wisely ended when the blow was struck. He was not subject to the common infirmity of extemporaneous speakers, not knowing when to stop and how." [1]

Of the group of famous parliamentary orators in England during the eighteenth century, William Pitt, Lord Mansfield, and Charles James Fox will serve as examples.

In his speaking Pitt habitually employed the extempore method. Along with his gifts, natural and acquired, he had a marked susceptibility for being aroused by the occasion. His overwhelming spontaneity and high personal character swept everything before him. It is said that such was the excitement when he spoke that it was

[1] Sears, "History of Oratory," 245.

impossible to report him, and the speech which in its delivery and publication overthrew Walpole's ministry was reduced to writing by Dr. Johnson.

Mansfield was preëminent as an extempore speaker. At an early age he gave promise of that ready command of his mother tongue which was later shown in his speeches. This was secured by a constant translation and retranslation of Greek and Roman orators, which also gave him a knowledge of the principles of eloquence, a study which he began to pursue with all diligence upon his entry into the university. This he continued after beginning his law studies, especially in the practice of extempore speaking, for which he prepared himself with such fullness and accuracy that his notes were useful to him in after life, both at the bar and on the bench.

The fame of Fox as a parliamentary orator and debater is well known, although he began awkwardly and abounded in repetitions. He was an extempore speaker solely. Oratorically Fox's ambition was to become a powerful debater, "one who goes out in all weathers," instead of carrying with him to the House a set speech drawn up beforehand. In this course he persevered until he became the acknowledged leader of the Whig party in the House of Commons. He answered well to his own definition of an orator, — "one who can give immediate, instantaneous expression to his thoughts." He mastered his subject and accumulated facts. As to how he should use these facts he depended upon the mood of the assembly he rose to address. Burke affirmed him to be "the most brilliant and accomplished debater the world ever saw." Macaulay says of him:

"At his first appearance in Parliament he showed himself superior to all his contemporaries in command of language. He could pour forth a long succession of round and stately periods without premeditation, without ever pausing for a word, without ever repeating a word. . . . He was at once the only man who could, without notes, open a budget, and the only man who, as Windham said, could speak that most elaborately effusive and unmeaning of human compositions, a king's speech, without premeditation."

Of English parliamentary orators in more modern times two illustrious examples should be mentioned, — John Bright and William E. Gladstone.

Probably no modern orator in England has surpassed Bright in mastery of his audience and in leaving a permanent personal impress. He began his public career by committing his speeches to memory, but, says one of his contemporaries, "he soon abandoned so clumsy and exhausting a method of address. Instead of memoriter reproductions, he held impromptu rehearsals at odd hours in his father's mill before Mr. Nuttall, an intelligent workman and unsparing critic; but even now his perorations are written out with the greatest care." Answering an inquiry as to his method, Bright himself said:

"As to modes of preparation, it seems to me that every man would readily discover what suits him best. To write speeches and then commit them to memory is a double slavery which I could not bear. To speak without preparation, especially on great and solemn topics, is rashness, and cannot be recommended. When I intend to speak on anything that seems to me important, I consider what it is I wish to impress upon my

audience. I do not write my facts or my arguments, but make notes on two or three or four slips of note paper, giving the line of argument and the facts as they occur to my mind, and I leave the words to come at call while I am speaking. There are occasionally short passages which for accuracy I may write down, as sometimes also — almost invariably — the concluding words or sentences may be written down. The advantage of this plan is that while it leaves a certain and sufficient freedom to the speaker, it keeps him within the main line of the original plan upon which the speech was framed, and what he says, therefore, is likely to be more compact, and not wandering and diffuse."

Probably the most wonderful purely extempore speaker of the modern English-speaking world was William E. Gladstone. Possessed of "the most omnivorous and untiring brain in England, perhaps in the whole world," he was able to extemporize in a fascinating manner and hold an audience for hours while he discussed complicated questions of diplomacy and legislation. In reply to an inquiry as to the best method of preparing public discourses, Gladstone wrote:

"I should certainly found myself on a double basis, compounded as follows: first, of a wide and thorough general education . . .; second, of the habit of constant and searching reflection on the subject of any proposed discourse. Such reflection will naturally clothe itself in words, and of the phrases it supplies many will rise spontaneously to the lips. I will not say that no other forms of preparation can be useful, but I know little of them, and it is on these, beyond all doubt, that I should advise the young principally to rely."

Turning now to American orators, we find that the most famous representative of the early period of our history, Patrick Henry, never wrote a line of his speeches. The sparks of his eloquence flew hot from the anvil of his thought. He owed his success to early practice in conversation and public speaking, and to the courage and readiness with which he met a crisis.

We are apt to think of the great triumvirate — Calhoun, Clay, and Webster — as less ready in purely extemporaneous speech than the average legislator of to-day, and yet each of these three great orators showed a gradual development in facility as extempore speakers. Calhoun cultivated extempore speaking with great success while in the law school at Litchfield, and he pursued this method in the "iron logic" of his speeches in Congress. Clay, too, early practiced the extempore method in a debating club at Richmond, and his yet earlier practice with cornfield or woods as an audience is well known. The testimony of Webster, quoted in Chapter II (p. 41), might at first glance appear adverse to the extempore method, but he referred to the preparation of the matter, not the language. Webster was not as ready a man as Calhoun or Clay. He usually wrote out or thought out in sentences his set orations, but his arguments in court and most of his speeches in the Senate were extemporaneous. Edward Everett says that when Webster made his trip at the opening of the Erie Railroad, he showed his power in extempore speech in the proper sense of the term. "He made eleven speeches," says Everett, "distinguishing between speeches and mere snatches of remarks at stations. They were made when he was well advanced in years, and