Knowledge vs. Eloquence

Speaker: Crassus

On the Orator [I. xiv. 59-63]

Indeed in handling those causes which everybody acknowledges to be within the exclusive sphere of oratory, there is not seldom something to be brought forth and employed, not from practice in public speaking — the only thing you allow the orator — but from some more abstruse branch of knowledge. I ask, for instance, whether an advocate can either assail or defend a commander-in-chief without experience of the art of war, or sometimes too without knowledge of the various regions of land or sea? Whether he can address the popular assembly in favour of the passing or rejection of legislative proposals, or the Senate concerning any of the departments of State administration, if he lack consummate knowledge — practical as well as theoretical — of political science? Whether a speech can be directed to inflaming or even repressing feeling and passion — a faculty of the first importance to the orator — unless the speaker has made a most careful search into all those theories respecting the natural characters and the habits of conduct of mankind, which are unfolded by the philosophers?

And I rather think I shall come short of convincing you on my next point — at all events I will not hesitate to speak my mind: your natural science itself, your mathematics, and other studies which just now you reckoned as belonging peculiarly to the rest of the arts, do indeed pertain to the knowledge of their professors, yet if anyone should wish by speaking to put these same arts in their full light, it is to oratorical skill that he must run for help.

If, again, Philo, that master-builder who constructed an arsenal for the Athenians, described the plan of his work very eloquently to the

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

1. *Do you happen to know a great orator in your discipline? What makes him or her impressive to you?*
2. *What does the assertion of Socrates mean? Do you agree with Crassus that the assertion "has in it some plausibility but no truth"?*
3. *What's special about your major? Being an orator majoring in a particular field of study, are you able to speak eloquently about the greatness and uniqueness of your own major?*

people, his eloquence must be ascribed not to his architectural, but rather to his oratorical ability. So too, if Marcus Antonius here had had to speak on behalf of Hermodorus upon the construction of dock-yards, having got up his case from his client, he would then have discoursed gracefully and copiously of an art to which he was not a stranger. Asclepiades also, he with whom we have been familiar both as physician and as friend, at the time when he was surpassing the rest of his profession in eloquence, was exhibiting, in such graceful speaking, the skill of an orator, not that of a physician.

In fact that favourite assertion of Socrates — that every man was eloquent enough upon a subject that he knew — has in it some plausibility but no truth; it is nearer the truth to say that neither can anyone be eloquent upon a subject that is unknown to him, nor, if he knows it perfectly and yet does not know how to shape and polish his style, can he speak fluently even upon that which he does know.

Gifts of Nature

Speaker: Crassus

On the Orator [I. xxv. 113-117]

In the first place natural talent is the chief contributor to the virtue of oratory. For certain lively activities of the intelligence and the talents alike should be present, such as to be at once swift in invention, copious in exposition and embellishment, and steadfast and enduring in recollection; and if there be anyone disposed to think that these powers can be derived from art, what will he say of those other attributes which undoubtedly are innate in the man himself: the ready tongue, the ringing tones, strong lungs, vigour, suitable build and shape of the face and body as a whole? And, in saying this, I do not mean that art cannot in some cases give polish, but there are some men either so tongue-tied, or so discordant in tone, or so wild and boorish in feature and gesture, that, even though sound in talent and in art, they yet cannot enter the ranks of the orators. Others there are, so apt in these same respects, so completely furnished with the bounty of nature, as to seem of more than human birth, and to have been shaped by some divinity.

Great indeed are the burden and the task that he undertakes, who puts himself forward, when all are silent, as the one man to be heard concerning the weightiest matters, before a vast assembly of his fellows. For there is hardly a soul present but will turn a keener and more penetrating eye upon defects in the speaker than upon his good points. Thus any blunder that may be committed eclipses even those other things that are praiseworthy. Not that I am pressing these considerations with the idea of frightening young men away altogether from the pursuit of oratory, should they possibly lack some natural endowment. For who does not observe that Gaius Coelius, a man of

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

1. *Based on personal experiences, how do you perceive the contribution of natural talent to the good quality of public speaking?*
2. *Do you have in your mind a great speech by a speaker who is not gifted in such a way as Crassus and Antonius defined in this excerpt?*
3. *Has the world that we live in made public speaking more promising for a person who is not as talented as Crassus and Antonius viewed?*

my own time and of new family, reached high renown as the result of that very modest degree of eloquence which — such as it was — he had succeeded in attaining? Who again does not know that Quintus Varius, your own contemporary, a man of wild and repellent aspect, has attained great popularity in public life, through whatever practical ability of that kind he has possessed?

SPEAKER: ANTONIUS — *On the Orator* [I. xxviii. 126-128]

Now as for that remark of yours that there were very many qualifications which an orator must derive from nature, or he would not be greatly aided by tuition, I thoroughly agree with you; and in this respect I most particularly approved of that very eminent instructor Apollonius of Alabanda, who, though teaching for hire, would not for all that suffer such pupils as, in his judgement, could never turn out to be orators, to waste their labour with him, but would send them on their ways, and urge and exhort them to pursue those arts for which he thought them respectively fitted.

It is enough, indeed, for acquiring all other crafts, just to be a man like other men, and able to apprehend mentally and to preserve in the memory what is taught, or even crammed into the learner, should he chance to be dull beyond the ordinary. No readiness of tongue is needed, no fluency of language, in short none of those things — natural state of looks, expression, and voice — which we cannot mould for ourselves. But in an orator we must demand the subtlety of the logician, the thoughts of the philosopher, a diction almost poetic, a lawyer's memory, a tragedian's voice, and the bearing almost of the consummate actor. Accordingly no rarer thing than a finished orator can be discovered among the sons of men. For attributes which are commended when acquired one apiece, and that in but modest degree, by other craftsmen in their respective vocations, cannot win approval when embodied in an orator, unless in him they are all assembled in perfection.

Justification for Fear

Speaker: Crassus

On the Orator [I. xxvi. 119-122]

In my view, even the best orators, those who can speak with the utmost ease and elegance, unless they are diffident in approaching a discourse and diffident in beginning it, seem to border on the shameless, although that can never come to pass. For the better the orator, the more profoundly is he frightened of the difficulty of speaking, and of the doubtful fate of a speech, and of the anticipations of an audience. On the other hand, the man who can do nothing in composition and delivery that is worthy of the occasion, worthy of the name of an orator, or of the ear of the listener, still seems to me to be without shame, be he never so agitated in his speaking. For it is not by feeling shame at what is unbecoming, but in not doing it, that we must escape the reproach of shamelessness. As for him who is unashamed — as I see is the case with most speakers, I hold him deserving not merely of reprimand, but of punishment as well.

Assuredly, just as I generally perceive it to happen to yourselves, so I very often prove it in my own experience, that I turn pale at the outset of a speech, and quake in every limb and in all my soul. In fact, as a very young man, I once so utterly lost heart in opening an indictment, that I had to thank Quintus Maximus for doing me the supreme service of promptly adjourning the hearing, the moment he saw that I was broken-down and unnerved by fear.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

1. *Were you once crippled by stage fright? If so, try to bring back some memories of what you experienced and what you have done afterwards.*
2. *Does this discussion between Crassus and Antonius bring you some new thinking about the fear of public speaking, as a speaker and also as a listener?*

Speaker: Antonius

On the Orator [I. xxvii. 122-125]

I have often noticed, Crassus, that, as you say, both you and the other orators of the first rank — although in my opinion no one has

ever been your peer — are deeply disturbed when you are beginning a speech. Now on investigating the reason of this — how it was that the greater an orator's capacity, the more profoundly nervous he was — I discovered this twofold explanation.

First, those who had learned from experience and knowledge of human nature understood that even with the most eminent orators, the fate of a speech was sometimes not sufficiently in accordance with their wish; wherefore, as often as they spoke, they were justifiably fearful, lest what could possibly happen sometime should actually happen then.

Second, there is something of which I often have to complain, that, whenever tried and approved exponents of the other arts have done some work with less than their wonted success, their inability to perform what they knew how to perform is explained by their being out of the humour or hindered by indisposition (people say, 'Roscius was not in the mood for acting today', or 'He was a little out of sorts'); whereas, if it is an orator's shortcoming that is being criticized, the same is thought due to stupidity. But stupidity finds no apology, since no man's stupidity is set down to his having been 'out of sorts' or 'that way inclined.' So in oratory we confront a sterner judgement, for judgement is passing upon us as often as we speak. And moreover, one mistake in acting does not instantly convict a player of ignorance of acting, but an orator, censured on some point of speaking, is under an established suspicion of dullness once for all, or at any rate for many a day.