

FATHER TAYLOR (AND ORATORY)

I have never heard but one essentially perfect orator--one who satisfied those depths of the emotional nature that in most cases go through life quite untouched, unfed--who held every hearer by spells which no conventionalist, high or low--nor any pride or composure, nor resistance of intellect--could stand against for ten minutes.

And by the way, is it not strange, of this first-class genius in the rarest and most profound of humanity's arts, that it will be necessary, (so nearly forgotten and rubbed out is his name by the rushing whirl of the last twenty-five years,) to first inform current readers that he was an orthodox minister, of no particular celebrity, who during a long life preached especially to Yankee sailors in an old fourth-class church down by the wharves in Boston--had practically been a seafaring man through his earlier years--and died April 6, 1871, "just as the tide turned, going out with the ebb as an old salt should"? His name is now comparatively unknown, outside of Boston--and even there, (though Dickens, Mr. Jameson, Dr. Bartol and Bishop Haven have commemorated him,) is mostly but a reminiscence.

During my visits to "the Hub," in 1859 and '60 I several times saw and heard Father Taylor. In the spring or autumn, quiet Sunday forenoons, I liked to go down early to the quaint ship-cabin-looking church where the old man ministered--to enter and leisurely scan the building,

the low ceiling, everything strongly timber'd (polish'd and rubb'd apparently,) the dark rich colors, the gallery, all in half-light--and smell the aroma of old wood--to watch the auditors, sailors, mates, "matlows," officers, singly or in groups, as they came in--their physiognomies, forms, dress, gait, as they walk'd along the aisles--their postures, seating themselves in the rude, roomy, undoor'd, uncushion'd pews--and the evident effect upon them of the place, occasion, and atmosphere.

The pulpit, rising ten or twelve feet high, against the rear wall, was back'd by a significant mural painting, in oil--showing out its bold lines and strong hues through the subdued light of the building--of a stormy sea, the waves high-rolling, and amid them an old-style ship, all bent over, driving through the gale, and in great peril--a vivid and effectual piece of limning, not meant for the criticism of artists (though I think it had merit even from that standpoint,) but for its effect upon the congregation, and what it would convey to them.

Father Taylor was a moderate-sized man, indeed almost small, (reminded me of old Booth, the great actor, and my favorite of those and preceding days,) well advanced in years, but alert, with mild blue or gray eyes, and good presence and voice. Soon as he open'd his mouth I ceas'd to pay any attention to church or audience, or pictures or lights and shades; a far more potent charm entirely sway'd me. In the course of the sermon, (there was no sign of any MS., or reading from notes,) some of the parts would be in the highest degree majestic and

picturesque. Colloquial in a severe sense, it often lean'd to Biblical and Oriental forms. Especially were all allusions to ships and the ocean and sailors' lives, of unrival'd power and life-likeness.

Sometimes there were passages of fine language and composition, even from the purist's point of view. A few arguments, and of the best, but always brief and simple. One realized what grip there might have been in such words-of-mouth talk as that of Socrates and Epictetus. In the main, I should say, of any of these discourses, that the old Demosthenean rule and requirement of "action, action, action," first in its inward and then (very moderate and restrain'd) its outward sense, was the quality that had leading fulfilment.

I remember I felt the deepest impression from the old man's prayers, which invariably affected me to tears. Never, on similar or any other occasions, have I heard such impassion'd pleading--such human-harassing reproach (like Hamlet to his mother, in the closet)--such probing to the very depths of that latent conscience and remorse which probably lie somewhere in the background of every life, every soul. For when Father Taylor preach'd or pray'd, the rhetoric and art, the mere words, (which usually play such a big part) seem'd altogether to disappear, and the live feeling advanced upon you and seiz'd you with a power before unknown. Everybody felt this marvellous and awful influence. One young sailor, a Rhode Islander, (who came every Sunday, and I got acquainted with, and talk'd to once or twice as we went away,) told me, "that must be the Holy Ghost we read of in

the Testament."

I should be at a loss to make any comparison with other preachers or public speakers. When a child I had heard Elias Hicks--and Father Taylor (though so different in personal appearance, for Elias was of tall and most shapely form, with black eyes that blazed at times like meteors,) always reminded me of him. Both had the same inner, apparently inexhaustible, fund of latent volcanic passion--the same tenderness, blended with a curious remorseless firmness, as of some surgeon operating on a belov'd patient. Hearing such men sends to the winds all the books, and formulas, and polish'd speaking, and rules of oratory.

Talking of oratory, why is it that the unsophisticated practices often strike deeper than the train'd ones? Why do our experiences perhaps of some local country exhorter--or often in the West or South at political meetings--bring the most definite results? In my time I have heard Webster, Clay, Edward Everett, Phillips, and such celebres yet I recall the minor but life-eloquence of men like John P. Hale, Cassius Clay, and one or two of the old abolition "fanatics" ahead of all those stereotyped fames. Is not--I sometimes question--the first, last, and most important quality of all, in training for a "finish'd speaker," generally unsought, unreck'd of, both by teacher and pupil? Though may-be it cannot be taught, anyhow. At any rate, we need to clearly understand the distinction between oratory and elocution. Under the latter art, including some of high order, there is indeed no

scarcity in the United States, preachers, lawyers, actors, lecturers, &c. With all, there seem to be few real orators--almost none.

I repeat, and would dwell upon it (more as suggestion than mere fact)--among all the brilliant lights of bar or stage I have heard in my time (for years in New York and other cities I haunted the courts to witness notable trials, and have heard all the famous actors and actresses that have been in America the past fifty years) though I recall marvellous effects from one or other of them, I never had anything in the way of vocal utterance to shake me through and through, and become fix'd, with its accompaniments, in my memory, like those prayers and sermons--like Father Taylor's personal electricity and the whole scene there--the prone ship in the gale, and dashing wave and foam for background--in the little old sea-church in Boston, those summer Sundays just before the secession war broke out.