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THE LYCEUM.

No. IV.

ON THE PRACTICE OF APPLAUDING PUBLIC SPEAKERS.

I was lately in a city of this Union, where the governor of the state, after having that day reviewed a large body of handsomely uniformed and well disciplined troops, was, at night, to deliver an Address before a Mechanics' Association. I made one of the multitude, that crowded the immense Church where the orator spoke.

Various causes wound up my interest to a very high pitch.—The Association was one for the moral and intellectual improvement of a numerous and important class of our countrymen; an object high in the regards of all who hope for the permanence of our republican institutions. The speaker was, by general admission, unrivalled in *set* oratory, among living Americans—whether we look to *grace* in delivery, or to beauty and force of composition. He was the governor of a GREAT state (for “The MIND 's the measure of the man”); and here, doffing the robes of civil office as well as the gaudier finery of military parade, he, as a plain citizen, was to address an humble Mechanics' Association upon ‘the importance of the mechanic arts to civilization, and to happiness.’ The vastness of the throng, the newness of the people to me, and their being reputed to have some striking peculiarities,—raised my curiosity on tiptoe, to see how *they* could appreciate what fell from one of the most accomplished scholars on this continent. And I was equally curious to see, how *he* would contrive, without descending from the dignity of learning or from his habitual elegance of style, to make himself understood and relished by such an assembly; and by what mode of operation he would work out the design of his address—namely, to impress mechanics with such a self-respect, as might elevate their conduct and characters, and impress all others with a just and salutary respect for mechanical pursuits.

The Address was, in most respects, happy beyond my expectations. But what was my surprise, to find every *very* fine passage followed by thunders of applause, from a large part of the audience!—hands clapping—canes, feet, umbrellas, rattling upon the floor!—The sobriety of the people—their puritan descent—the supposed character of the speaker—the (supposed) sacredness of the place—had all been, to my mind, infallible guarantees against the appearance there of a practice at nearly all times indecorous and irrational,

but *then* and *there*, hardly less shocking than female drunkenness.

The practice of applauding public speakers, has but lately begun to appear in the rural parts of the United States. It was brought over, sometime before the cholera, from Europe; and was long confined to our cities and large towns, whence it spread gradually into the villages. Now, it is seen and heard even in the country,—where, one would think, the natives are by no means polished enough yet, for such a refinement to have gotten foothold among them.—At first, every where, it appeared only in circuses, and puppet shows; and in menageries, where that graceful gentleman, Dandy Jack, astonishes the multitude by his elegant costume, his comely physiognomy, and his wonderful performances upon a shaggy Shetland pony. Then it passed into the Theatres; where, however, it was for a long time the appropriate meed of Harlequin, and of such comic actors as bent their bodies and twisted their features into the funniest shapes, or sung a droll song in the funniest manner. At length, rising in its objects,—from *fun*, it came to be exercised upon *humor*; and by degrees also upon wit, pathos, and fine sentiment or fine acting of any kind.

Those who had witnessed and practised applauses at the circus, puppet show, menagerie, and theatre, set the fashion of practising them also towards public speakers: first only upon the fourth of July, at dinner speeches, and in popular meetings; afterwards in places where, certainly, those uncivilized rustics, George Washington, Patrick Henry, James Otis, Josiah Quincy junior, and Roger Sherman, never would have expected to see them—in courts of justice, and legislative halls. There have been repeated instances of loud applause at fine bursts of declamation or keen thrusts of sarcasm, in advocates or legislative orators; at the acquittal of a popular criminal, or the adoption of a favorite measure. The dignified decorum of the United States Senate has thus been violated; and the customary disorder of the other House been thus heightened. Both in that Senate, and in the Virginia Legislature, applauses have been followed by their natural counterpart,—*hisses*.—The evil has even shown itself on devotional occasions. It is not long since, in a Virginia village, the close of a rather too animated, controversial sermon, was greeted by a commencing, but quickly suppressed *roll* of applause: and a few years before, some students of a learned University honored a public *prayer* of their chaplain with a full peal.

It must be confessed, however, that as this practice has risen in the subjects of its exercise, it has sunk in the character of its practisers: as it has been applied to more and more intellectual *occasions*, this has been done by more and more unintellectual *persons*: so that, in general, the most violent and boisterous in their bodily manifestations of delight at any passage in a speech, are those who least understand its meaning. They are either ill-taught boys, or men of no better minds or manners: men, who, like Tony Lumpkin, are never likely to attain years of discretion, or habits of decency, though they live to the age of Methuselah.

It is with deep uneasiness, that the friends to good order and to free government have marked the progress of this bad practice. It is decidedly *mobbish*, in its nature and tendencies. Even in the theatre, it often

drowns a fine sentence, so that an attentive listener cannot catch its import; and with its adjunct, *hissing*, leads to many a theatrical disturbance. But when it appears in a Court of Justice, or a Hall of Legislation there is cause for serious alarm at the danger to our institutions. Dignity and order are essential characteristics, and indispensable supports, of popular government; and when *they* are driven from its very sanctuaries,—we may well tremble for the result.—The process is obvious, by which the practice of applauding may lead to a tumultuary obstruction of public justice, or of regular and necessary legislation. Applause at what is pleasing, naturally suggests, and provokes, hisses at what is displeasing. Hisses lead to high words: and these, amongst us, are but a prelude to blows. When blows begin, either among the spectators, or between spectators and officers or members of the house,—there is but one step more to a violent interference of a mob, with the proceedings of a legislature. Surely, no one can hear of applauses or hisses in the lobby of such an assembly, without remembering, and shuddering while he remembers, the ferocious and bloody Parisian mobs, who, stationed in the gallery, swayed at will the National Assembly of revolutionary France.

It is trifling with the subject, to urge that a speaker is encouraged and inspired, by applause. As well might he be inspired by brandy; nay, better—for it would make him more reckless, and be a less fatal example. Whoever needs either the one or the other kind of inspiration, had better not set up for an orator. The best inspiration will ever be, a thorough knowledge of his subject, and a deep feeling of the truths he utters: his best encouragement,—glistening tears in every eye, or smiles on every cheek before him, and the profound, attentive silence that will reign if he deserves applause; a silence interrupted only, if interrupted at all, by a suppressed chuckle of delight; and succeeded, when he has done, by a low murmur of praise or assent, pervading his audience. These are the most expressive tributes which an enlightened auditory can give: the most inestimable, which enlightened eloquence can desire. These were the tributes which Fenelon describes as paid by an assembly of sages and warriors, to the goddess of wisdom herself; and to Telemachus, inspired by her influence. It was an incense worthy of the divinity who received, and of the wise and brave men who offered it.

Mrs. Siddons, and her gifted relative Mrs. Butler, both, have spoken of the *necessity* of applause, to sustain them in acting a high and difficult part, on the stage. But they had the prejudices, and the vicious taste, acquired by long familiarity with that bad theatrical usage; and their suffrage, in determining the present question, is no more to be regarded, than that of a tippler is, about the relative merits of alcohol and cold water, when his thirst has become morbid from the excessive use of strong drink. Admitting, however, that the physical exhaustion attending the utterance of a long tragic part, requires the breathing-times which applauses afford,—shall this justify them in the case of an ORATOR,—in whom a *ranting* or *theatrical delivery* is proverbially reprehensible?

Banish the usage then, from all grave occasions of public speaking; and, for fear of the *precedent*, from

light occasions also. It were wise, if practicable—and I believe it practicable—to banish it too, from the theatre, and from every scene, of *intellectual* recreation or instruction. Its only appropriate places are the circus, the puppet-show, and the bear-garden.

MI.