

ON HISTORY AGAIN.

[The following singular Fragment on *History* forms part, as may be recognised, of the Inaugural Discourse delivered by our assiduous 'D. T.' at the opening of the *Society for the Diffusion of Common Honesty*. The Discourse, if one may credit the Morning Papers, 'touched in the most wonderful manner, didactically, poetically, almost prophetically, on all things in this world and the next, in a strain of sustained or rather of suppressed passionate eloquence rarely witnessed in Parliament or out of it: the chief bursts were received with profound silence,'—interrupted, we fear, by snuff-taking. As will be seen, it is one of the didactic passages that we introduce here. The Editor of this Magazine is responsible for its accuracy, and publishes, if not with leave given, then with leave taken.—O. Y.]

* * * HISTORY recommends itself as the most profitable of all studies: and, truly, for such a being as Man, who is born, and has to learn and work, and then after a measured term of years to depart, leaving descendants and performances, and so, in all ways, to vindicate himself as vital portion of a Mankind, no study could be fitter. History is the Letter of Instructions, which the old generations write and posthumously transmit to the new; nay it may be called, more generally still, the Message, verbal or written, which all Mankind delivers to every man; it is the only *articulate* communication (when the inarticulate and mute, intelligible or not, lie round us and in us, so strangely through every fibre of our being, every step of our activity) which the Past can have with the Present, the Distant with what is Here. All Books, therefore, were they but Song-books or treatises on Mathematics, are in the long run historical documents,—

as indeed all Speech itself is: thus might we say, History is not only the fittest study, but the only study, and includes all others whatsoever. The Perfect in History, he who understood, and saw and knew within himself, *all* that the whole Family of Adam had hitherto *been* and hitherto *done*, were perfect in all learning extant or possible; needed not thenceforth to *study* any more; had thenceforth nothing left but to *be* and to *do* something himself, that others might make History of it, and learn of *him*.

Perfection in any kind is well known not to be the lot of man: but of all supernatural perfect-characters this of the Perfect in History (so easily conceivable too) were perhaps the most miraculous. Clearly a faultless monster which the world is not to see, not even on paper. Had the Wandering Jew, indeed, begun to wander at Eden, and with a Fortunatus' Hat on his head! Nanac Shah too, we remember, steeped himself three days in some sacred Well; and there learnt enough: Nanac's was a far easier method; but unhappily not practicable,—in this climate. Consider, however, at what immeasurable distance from this Perfect Nanac your highest Imperfect Gibbons play their part! Were there no brave men, thinkest thou, before Agamemnon? Beyond the Thracian Bosphorus, was all dead and void; from Cape Horn to Nova Zembla, round the whole habitable Globe, not a mouse stirring? Or, again, in reference to Time:—the Creation of the World is indeed old, compare it to the Year One; yet young, of yesterday, compare it to Eternity! Alas, all Universal History is but a sort of Parish History; which the 'P. P. Clerk of this Parish,' member of 'our Alehouse Club' (instituted for what 'Psalmody' is in request there) puts together,—in such sort as his fellow-members will praise. Of the *thing* now gone silent, named Past, which was once Present, and loud enough, how much do we know? Our 'Letter of Instructions' comes to us in the saddest state; falsified, blotted out, torn, lost, and but a shred of it in existence; this too so difficult to read, or spell.

Unspeakably precious meanwhile is our shred of a Letter, is our written or spoken Message, such as we have it. Only he who understands what has been, can know what should be and will be. It is of the last importance that the individual have ascertained his relation to the whole; 'an individual helps not,' it has been written; 'only he who unites with many at the proper hour.' How easy, in a sense, for

your all-instructed Nanac to work without waste of force (or what we call fault); and, in practice, act new History, as perfectly as, in theory, he knew the old! Comprehending what the given world was, what it had and what it wanted, how might his clear effort strike in at the right time and the right point; wholly increasing the true current and tendency, nowhere cancelling itself in opposition thereto! Unhappily, such smooth-running, ever-accelerated course is nowise the one appointed us; cross currents we have, perplexed backflows; innumerable efforts (every new man is a new effort) consume themselves in aimless eddies: thus is the River of Existence so wild-flowing, wasteful; and whole multitudes, and whole generations, in painful unreason, spend and are spent on what can never profit. Of all which, does not one half originate in this which we have named want of Perfection in History;—the other half, indeed, in another want still deeper, still more irremediable?

Here, however, let us grant that Nature, in regard to such historic want, is nowise blameable: taking up the other face of the matter, let us rather admire the pains she has been at, the truly magnificent provision she has made, that this same Message of Instructions might reach us in boundless plenitude. Endowments, faculties enough we have: it is her wise will too that no faculty imparted to us shall rust from disuse; the miraculous faculty of Speech, once given, becomes not more a gift than a necessity; the Tongue, with or without much meaning, will keep in motion; and only in some La Trappe, by unspeakable self-restraint, forbear wagging. As little can the fingers that have learned the miracle of Writing lie idle: if there is a rage of speaking, we know also there is a rage of writing, perhaps the more furious of the two. It is said, ‘so eager are men to speak, they will not let one another get to speech;’ but, on the other hand, writing is usually transacted in private, and every man has his own desk and inkstand, and sits independent and unrestrainable there. Lastly, multiply this power of the Pen some ten thousand fold; that is to say, invent the Printing-Press, with its Printers’ Devils, with its Editors, Contributors, Booksellers, Billstickers, and see what it will do! Such are the means wherewith Nature, and Art the daughter of Nature, have equipped their favourite, man, for publishing himself to man.

Consider now two things: first, that one Tongue, of average velocity, will publish at the rate of a thick octavo volume per day; and then

how many nimble enough Tongues may be supposed to be at work
 on this Planet Earth, in this City London, at this hour! Secondly, that
 a Literary Contributor, if in good heart and urged by hunger, will
 many times, as we are credibly informed, accomplish his two Maga-
 5 zine sheets within the four-and-twenty hours; such Contributors being
 now numerable not by the thousand, but by the million. Nay, taking
 History, in its narrower, vulgar sense, as the mere chronicle of ‘oc-
 currences,’ of things that can be, as we say, ‘narrated,’ our calculation
 is still but a little altered. Simple Narrative, it will be observed, is the
 10 grand staple of Speech: ‘the common man,’ says Jean Paul, ‘is copious
 in Narrative, exiguous in Reflexion; only with the cultivated man is
 it otherwise, reversewise.’ Allow even the thousandth part of human
 publishing for the emission of Thought, though perhaps the mil-
 lionth were enough, we have still the nine hundred and ninety-nine
 15 employed in History proper, in relating occurrences, or conjecturing
 probabilities of such; that is to say, either in History or Prophecy,
 which is a new form of History;—and so the reader can judge with
 what abundance this life-breath of the human intellect is furnished in
 our world; whether Nature has been stingy to him or munificent.
 20 Courage, reader! Never can the historical inquirer want pabulum,
 better or worse: are there not forty-eight longitudinal feet of small-
 printed History in thy Daily Newspaper?

The truth is, if Universal History is such a miserable defective
 ‘shred’ as we have named it, the fault lies not in our historic organs,
 25 but wholly in our misuse of these; say rather, in so many wants and
 obstructions, varying with the various age, that pervert our right use
 of them; especially two wants that press heavily in all ages: want of
 Honesty, want of Understanding. If the thing published is not true,
 is only a supposition, or even a wilful invention, what can be done
 30 with it, except abolish it and annihilate it? But again, Truth, says
 Horne Tooke, means simply the thing *trowed*, the thing believed; and
 now, from this to the thing *itself*, what a new fatal deduction have we
 to suffer! Without Understanding, Belief itself will profit little: and
 how can your publishing avail, when there was no vision in it, but
 35 mere blindness? For as in political appointments, the man you ap-
 point is not he who was ablest to discharge the duty, but only he who
 was ablest to be appointed: so too, in all historic elections and selec-
 tions, the maddest work goes on. The event worthiest to be known

is perhaps of all others the least spoken of; nay some say, it lies in the very nature of such events to be so. Thus, in those same forty-eight longitudinal feet of History, or even when they have stretched out into forty-eight longitudinal miles, of the like quality, there may not be the forty-eighth part of a hair'sbreadth that will turn to anything. Truly, in these times, the quantity of printed Publication that will need to be consumed with fire before the smallest permanent advantage can be drawn from it, might fill us with astonishment, almost with apprehension. Where, alas, is the intrepid Herculean Dr. Wag-tail, that will reduce all these paper-mountains into tinder, and extract therefrom the three drops of Tinder-water Elixir!

For, indeed, looking at the activity of the historic Pen and Press through this last half-century, and what bulk of History it yields for that period alone, and how it is henceforth like to increase in decimal or vigesimal geometric progression,—one might feel as if a day were not distant, when perceiving that the whole Earth would not now contain those writings of what was done in the Earth, the human memory must needs sink confounded, and cease remembering!—To some the reflection may be new and consolatory, that this state of ours is not so unexampled as it seems; that with memory and things memorable the case was always intrinsically similar. The Life of Nero occupies some diamond pages of our Tacitus: but in the parchment and papyrus archives of Nero's generation how many did it fill! The Author of the *Vie de Sénèque*, at this distance, picking up a few residuary snips, has with ease made two octavos of it. On the other hand, were the contents of the then extant Roman memories, or, going to the utmost length, were all that was then *spoken* on it, put in types, how many 'longitudinal feet' of small-pica had we,—in belts that would go round the Globe!

History, then, before it can become Universal History, needs of all things to be compressed. Were there no epitomising of History, one could not remember beyond a week. Nay, go to that with it, and exclude compression altogether, we could not remember an hour, or at all: for Time, like Space, is *infinitely* divisible; and an hour, with its events, with its sensations and emotions, might be diffused to such expansion as should cover the whole field of memory, and push all else over the limits. Habit, however, and the natural constitution of man, do themselves prescribe serviceable rules for remembering; and

keep at a safe distance from us all such fantastic possibilities;—into which only some foolish Mahomedan Caliph, ducking his head in a bucket of enchanted water, and so beating out one wet minute into seven long years of servitude and hardship, could fall. The rudest
5 peasant has his complete set of Annual Registers legibly printed in his brain; and, without the smallest training in Mnemonics, the proper pauses, subdivisions, and subordinations of the little to the great, all introduced there. Memory and Oblivion, like Day and Night, and indeed like all other Contradictions in this strange dualistic Life of
10 ours, are necessary for each other's existence: Oblivion is the dark page, whereon Memory writes her light-beam characters, and makes them legible; were it all light, nothing could be read there, any more than if it were all darkness.

As with man and these autobiographic Annual-Registers of his, so
15 goes it with Mankind and its Universal History, which also is *its* Autobiography: a like unconscious talent of remembering and of forgetting again does the work here. The transactions of the day, were they never so noisy, cannot remain loud forever; the morrow comes with its new noises, claiming also to be registered: in the immeasur-
20 able conflict and concert of this chaos of existence, figure after figure sinks, as *all* that has emerged must one day sink: what cannot be kept in mind will even go out of mind; History contracts itself into readable extent; and at last, in the hands of some Bossuet or Müller, the whole printed History of the World, from the Creation downwards,
25 has grown shorter than that of the Ward of Portsoken for one solar day.

Whether such contraction and epitome is always wisely formed, might admit of question; or rather, as we said, admits of no question. Scandalous Cleopatras and Messalinas, Caligulas and Commoduses,
30 in unprofitable proportion, survive for memory; while a scientific Pancirollus must write his Book of Arts Lost; and a moral Pancirollus, were the vision lent him, might write a still more mournful Book of Virtues Lost; of noble men, doing, and daring, and enduring, whose heroic life, as a new revelation and development of Life itself, were
35 a possession for all, but is now lost and forgotten, History having otherwise filled her page. In fact, here as elsewhere, what we call Accident governs much; in any case, History must come together not as it should, but as it can and will.

Remark nevertheless how, by natural tendency alone, and as it were without man's forethought, a certain fitness of selection, and this even to a high degree, becomes inevitable. Wholly worthless the selection could not be, were there no better rule than this to guide it: that men permanently speak only of what is extant and actively alive beside them. Thus do the things that have produced fruit, nay whose fruit still grows, turn out to be the things chosen for record and writing of; which things alone were great, and worth recording. The Battle of Châlons, where Hunland met Rome, and the Earth was played for, at sword-fence, by two earth-bestridding giants, the sweep of whose swords cut kingdoms in pieces, hovers dim in the languid remembrance of a few; while the poor police-court Treachery of a wretched Iscariot, transacted in the wretched land of Palestine, centuries earlier, for 'thirty pieces of silver,' lives clear in the heads, in the hearts of all men. Nay moreover, as only that which bore fruit was great; so of all things, that whose fruit is still here and growing must be the greatest, the best worth remembering; which again, as we see, by the very nature of the case, is mainly the thing remembered. Observe too how this 'mainly' tends always to become a 'solely,' and the approximate continually approaches nearer: for triviality after triviality, as it perishes from the living activity of men, drops away from their speech and memory, and the great and vital more and more exclusively survive there. Thus does Accident correct Accident; and in the wondrous boundless jostle of things (an aimful POWER presiding over it, say rather, dwelling *in* it), a result comes out that may be put up with.

Curious, at all events, and worth looking at once in our life, is this same compressure of History, be the process thereof what it may. How the 'forty-eight longitudinal feet' have shrunk together after a century, after ten centuries! Look back, from end to beginning, over any History; over our own *England*: how, in rapidest law of perspective, it dwindles from the canvass! An unhappy Sybarite, if we stand within two centuries of him and name him Charles Second, shall have twelve times the space of a heroic Alfred; two or three thousand times, if we name him George the Fourth. The whole Saxon Hephtharchy, though events, to which Magna Charta, and the world-famous Third Reading, are as dust in the balance, took place then,—for did not England, to mention nothing else, get itself, if not represented in

Parliament, yet converted to Christianity?—the whole Saxon Hep-
 tarchy, I say, is summed up practically in that one sentence of Milton's,
 the only one succeeding writers have copied, or readers remembered,
 of the 'fighting and flocking of kites and crows.' Neither was that an
 5 unimportant wassail-night when the two black-browed Brothers,
 strongheaded, headstrong, Hengst and Horsa (*Stallion* and *Horse*),
 determined on a man-hunt in Britain, the boar-hunt at home having
 got over-crowded; and so, of a few hungry Angles, made an English
 Nation, and planted it here, and—produced *thee*, O Reader! Of
 10 Hengst's whole campaignings scarcely half a page of good Narrative
 can now be written; the *Lord-Mayor's Visit to Oxford* standing, mean-
 while, revealed to mankind in a respectable volume. Nay what of this?
 Does not the Destruction of a Brunswick Theatre take above a mil-
 lion times as much telling as the Creation of a World?

15 To use a ready-made similitude, we might liken Universal History
 to a magic web; and consider with astonishment how, by philosophic
 insight and indolent neglect, the evergrowing fabric wove itself for-
 ward, out of that ravelled, immeasurable mass of threads and thrums,
 which we name *Memoirs*; nay, at each new lengthening, at each new
 20 *epoch*, changed its whole proportions, its hue and structure to the
 very origin. Thus, do not the records of a Tacitus acquire new mean-
 ing, after seventeen hundred years, in the hands of a Montesquieu?
 Niebuhr must reinterpret for us, at a still greater distance, the writ-
 ings of a Titus Livius: nay, the religious archaic chronicles of a Hebrew
 25 Prophet and Lawgiver escape not the like fortune; and many a pon-
 derous Eichhorn scans, with new-ground philosophic spectacles, the
 revelation of a Moses, and strives to reproduce for this century what,
 thirty centuries ago, was of plainly infinite significance to all. Consid-
 er History, with the beginnings of it stretching dimly into the remote
 30 Time; emerging darkly out of the mysterious Eternity: the ends of it
 enveloping *us* at this hour, whereof we at this hour, both as actors
 and relators, form part! In shape we might mathematically name it
Hyperbolic-Asymptotic; ever of *infinite* breadth around us; soon shrink-
 ing within narrow limits; ever narrowing more and more into the
 35 infinite depth behind us. In essence and significance it has been
 called 'the true Epic Poem, and universal Divine Scripture, *whose*
 "plenary inspiration" no man, out of Bedlam, or in it, shall bring
 in question.' * * *