

Po wafting the harvests of Lombardy to the granaries of Venice, and carrying back the silks of Bengal and the furs of Siberia to the palaces of Milan. With peculiar pleasure, every cultivated mind must repose on the fair, the happy, the glorious Florence, on the halls which rang with the mirth of Pulci, the cell where twinkled the midnight lamp of Politian, the statues on which the young eye of Michael Angelo glared with the frenzy of a kindred inspiration, the gardens in which Lorenzo meditated some sparkling song for the May-day dance of the Etrurian virgins. Alas, for the beautiful city! Alas, for the wit and the learning, the genius and the love!

“Le donne, e i cavalier, gli affanni, e gli agi
Che ne ’nvogliava amore e cortesia
Là dove i cuor son fatti sì malvagi.” *

A time was at hand, when all the seven vials of the Apocalypse were to be poured forth and shaken out over those pleasant countries, a time of slaughter, famine, beggary, infamy, slavery, despair.

In the Italian States, as in many natural bodies, untimely decrepitude was the penalty of precocious maturity.

Early greatness and decline.

Their early greatness, and their early decline, are principally to be attributed to the same cause,

the preponderance which the towns acquired in the political system.

In a community of hunters or of shepherds, every man easily and necessarily becomes a soldier. His ordinary avocations are perfectly compatible with all the duties of military service. However remote may be the expedition on which he is bound, he finds it easy to transport with him the stock from which he derives his subsistence. The whole people is an army; the whole year a march. Such was the state of society which facilitated the gigantic conquests of Attila and Timour.

But a people which subsists by the cultivation of the earth is in a very different situation. The husbandman is

Husbandmen and soldiers.

bound to the soil on which he labours. A long campaign would be ruinous to him. Still his pursuits are such as give to his frame both the active and the passive strength necessary to a soldier. Nor do they, at least in the infancy of agricultural science, demand his uninterrupted attention. At particular times of

* Dante *Purgatorio* xiv.

the year he is almost wholly unemployed, and can, without injury to himself, afford the time necessary for a short expedition. Thus the legions of Rome were supplied during its earlier wars. The season during which the fields did not require the presence of the cultivators sufficed for a short inroad and a battle. These operations, too frequently interrupted to produce decisive results, yet served to keep up among the people a degree of discipline and courage which rendered them, not only secure, but formidable. The archers and billmen of the Middle Ages, who, with provisions for forty days at their backs, left the fields for the camp, were troops of the same description.

But when commerce and manufactures begin to flourish a great change takes place. The sedentary habits of the desk and the loon render the exertions and hardships of war insupportable. The occupations of traders and artisans require their constant presence and attention. In such a community there is little superfluous time; but there is generally much superfluous money. Some members of the society are, therefore, hired to relieve the rest from a task inconsistent with their habits and engagements.

The history of Greece is, in this, as in many other respects, the best commentary on the history of Italy. Five hundred years before the Christian era, the citizens of the republics round the Ægean Sea formed perhaps the finest militia that ever existed. As wealth and refinement advanced, the system underwent a gradual alteration. The Ionian States were the first in which commerce and the arts were cultivated, and the first in which the ancient discipline decayed. Within eighty years after the battle of Plataea, mercenary troops were everywhere plying for battles and sieges. In the time of Demosthenes, it was scarcely possible to persuade or compel the Athenians to enlist for foreign service. The laws of Lycurgus prohibited trade and manufactures. The Spartans, therefore, continued to form a national force long after their neighbours had begun to hire soldiers. But their military spirit declined with their singular institutions. In the second century, Greece contained only one nation of warriors, the savage highlanders of Ætolia, who were at least ten generations behind their countrymen in civilization and intelligence.

Changes made by commerce and manufactory.

All the causes which produced these effects among the Greeks acted still more strongly on the modern Italians. Instead of a power like Sparta, in its nature warlike, they had among them an ecclesiastical state, in its nature pacific. Where there are numerous slaves, every freeman is induced by the strongest motives to familiarize himself with the use of arms. The commonwealths of Italy did not, like those of Greece, swarm with thousands of these household enemies. Lastly, the

mode in which military operations were conducted during the prosperous times of Italy was peculiarly unfavourable to the formation of an efficient militia. Men covered with iron from head to foot, armed with ponderous lances, and mounted on horses of the largest breed, were considered as composing the strength of an army. The infantry was regarded as comparatively worthless, and was neglected till it became really so. These tactics maintained their ground for centuries in most parts of Europe. That foot soldiers could withstand the charge of heavy cavalry was thought utterly impossible, till, towards the close of the fifteenth century, the rude mountaineers of Switzerland dissolved the spell, and astounded the most inexperienced generals by receiving the dreaded shock on an impenetrable forest of pikes.

The use of the Grecian spear, the Roman sword, or the modern bayonet, might be acquired with comparative ease. But nothing short of the daily exercise of years could train the man-at-arms to support his ponderous panoply, and manage his unwieldy weapon. Throughout Europe this most important branch of war became a separate profession. Beyond the Alps, indeed, though a profession, it was not generally a trade. It was the duty and the amusement of a large class of country gentlemen. It was the service by which they held their lands, and the diversion by which, in the absence of mental resources, they beguiled their leisure. But in the Northern States of Italy, as we have already remarked, the growing power of the cities, where it had not exterminated this order of men, had completely changed their habits. Here,

therefore, the practice of employing mercenaries became universal at a time when it was almost unknown in other countries.

When war becomes the trade of a separate class, the least dangerous course left to a government is to form that class into a standing army. It is scarcely possible, that men can pass their lives in the service of one state, without feeling some interest in its greatness. Its victories are their victories. Its defeats are their defeats. The contract loses something of its mercantile character. The services of the soldier are considered as the effects of patriotic zeal, his pay as the tribute of national gratitude. To betray the power which employs him, to be even remiss in its service, are in his eyes the most atrocious and degrading of crimes.

An unfortunate system.

When the princes and commonwealths of Italy began to use hired troops, their wisest course would have been to form separate military establishments. Unhappily this was not done. The mercenary warriors of the Peninsula, instead of being attached to the service of different powers, were regarded as the common property of all. The connection between the state and its defenders was reduced to the most simple and naked traffic. The adventurer brought his horse, his weapons, his strength, and his experience, into the market. Whether the King of Naples or the Duke of Milan, the Pope or the Signory of Florence, struck the bargain, was to him a matter of perfect indifference. He was for the highest wages and the longest term. When the campaign for which he had contracted was finished, there was neither law nor punctilio to prevent him from instantly turning his arms against his late masters. The soldier was altogether disjoined from the citizen and from the subject.

The natural consequences followed. Left to the conduct of men who neither loved those whom they defended, nor hated those whom they opposed, who were often bound by stronger ties to the army against which they fought than to the state which they served, who lost by the termination of the conflict, and gained by its prolongation, war completely changed its character. Every man came into the field of battle impressed with the knowledge that, in a few days, he might be taking the pay of the power against which he was then employed, and fighting by the side of his enemies against his associates. The strongest interests and the strongest feelings concurred to mitigate the hostility of those who had lately

been brethren in arms, and who might soon be brethren in arms once more. Their common profession was a bond of union not to be forgotten even when they were engaged in the service of contending parties. Hence it was that operations, languid and indecisive beyond any recorded in history, marches, and counter-marches, pillaging expeditions and blockades, bloodless capitulations and equally bloodless combats, make up the

Military history of Italy. military history of Italy during the course of nearly two centuries. Mighty armies fight from sunrise to sunset. A great victory is won. Thousands of prisoners are taken; and hardly a life is lost. A pitched battle seems to have been really less dangerous than an ordinary civil tumult.

Courage was now no longer necessary even to the military character. Men grew old in camps, and acquired the highest renown by their warlike achievements, without being once required to face serious danger. The political consequences are too well known. The richest and most enlightened part of the world was left undefended to the assaults of every barbarous invader, to the brutality of Switzerland, the insolence of France, and the fierce rapacity of Arragon. The moral effects which followed from this state of things were still more remarkable.

Among the rude nations which lay beyond the Alps, valour was absolutely indispensable. Without it none could be eminent; few could be secure. Cowardice was, therefore, naturally considered as the foulest reproach. Among the polished Italians, enriched by commerce, governed by law, and passionately attached to literature, everything was done by superiority of intelligence. Their very wars, more pacific than the peace of their neighbours, required rather civil than military qualifications. Hence, while courage was the point of honour in other countries, ingenuity became the point of honour in Italy.

From these principles were deduced, by processes strictly analogous, two opposite systems of fashionable morality.

Opposite systems of morality. Through the greater part of Europe, the vices which peculiarly belong to timid dispositions, and which are the natural defence of weakness, fraud, and hypocrisy, have always been most dis-

reputable. On the other hand, the excesses of haughty and daring spirits have been treated with indulgence, and even with respect. The Italians regarded with corresponding lenity those crimes which require self-command, and address, quick observation, fertile invention, and profound knowledge of human nature.

Such a prince as our Henry the Fifth would have been the idol of the North. The follies of his youth, the selfish ambition of his manhood, the Lollards roasted at slow fires, the prisoners massacred on the field of battle, the expiring lease of priestcraft renewed for another century, the dreadful legacy of a causeless and hopeless war bequeathed to a people who had no interest in its event, everything is forgotten but the victory of Agincourt. Francis Sforza, on the other hand, was the model of the Italian hero. He made his employers and his rivals alike his tools. He first overpowered his open enemies by the help of faithless allies; he then armed himself against his allies with the spoils taken from his enemies. By his incomparable dexterity, he raised himself from the precarious and dependent situation of a military adventurer to the first throne of Italy. To such a man much was forgiven, hollow friendship, ungenerous enmity, violated faith. Such are the opposite errors which men commit, when their morality is not a science but a taste, when they abandon eternal principles for accidental associations.

We have illustrated our meaning by an instance taken from history. We will select another from fiction. Othello murders his wife; he gives orders for the murder of his lieutenant; he ends by murdering himself. Yet he never loses the esteem and affection of a Northern reader, his intrepid and ardent spirit redeeming everything. The unsuspecting confidence with which he listens to his adviser, the agony with which he shrinks from the thought of shame, the tempest of passion with which he commits his crimes, and the haughty fearlessness with which he avows them, give an extraordinary interest to his character. Iago, on the contrary, is the object of universal loathing. Many are inclined to suspect that Shakspeare has been seduced into an exaggeration unusual with him, and has drawn a monster who has no archetype in human

Henry V. and Francis Sforza.

Characters of Othello and Iago.

nature. Now we suspect that an Italian audience in the fifteenth century would have felt very differently. Othello would have inspired nothing but detestation and contempt. The folly with which he trusts the friendly professions of a man whose promotion he had obstructed, the credulity with which he takes unsupported assertions, and trivial circumstances, for unanswerable proofs, the violence with which he silences the exculpation till the exculpation can only aggravate his misery, would have excited the abhorrence and disgust of the spectators. The conduct of Iago they would assuredly have condemned; but they would have condemned it as we condemn that of his victim. Something of interest and respect would have mingled with their disapprobation. The readiness of the traitor's wit, the clearness of his judgment, the skill with which he penetrates the dispositions of others and conceals his own, would have insured to him a certain portion of their esteem.

So wide was the difference between the Italians and their neighbours. A similar difference existed between the Greeks of the second century before Christ, and their masters the Romans. The conquerors, brave and resolute, faithful to their engagements, and strongly influenced by religious feelings, were, at the same time, ignorant, arbitrary, and cruel. With the vanquished people were deposited all the art, the science, and the literature of the Western world. In poetry, in

Greeks and
Romans.

philosophy, in painting, in architecture, in sculpture, they had no rivals. Their manners were polished, their perceptions acute, their invention ready; they were tolerant, affable, humane; but of courage and sincerity they were almost utterly destitute. The rude warriors who had subdued them, consoled themselves for their intellectual inferiority, by remarking that knowledge and taste seemed only to make men atheists, cowards, and slaves. The distinction long continued to be strongly marked, and furnished an admirable subject for the fierce sarcasms of Juvenal.

The citizen of an Italian commonwealth was the Greek of the time of Juvenal and the Greek of the time of Pericles, joined in one. Like the former, he was timid and pliable, artful and mean. But, like the latter, he had a country. Its independence and prosperity were dear to him. If his character were degraded

by some base crimes, it was, on the other hand, ennobled by public spirit and by an honourable ambition.

A vice sanctioned by the general opinion is merely a vice. The evil terminates in itself. A vice condemned by the general opinion produces a pernicious effect on the whole character.

Vice sanctioned or condemned.

The former is a local malady, the latter a constitutional taint. When the reputation of the offender is lost, he too often flings the remains of his virtue after it in despair. The Highland gentleman who, a century ago, lived by taking black mail from his neighbours, committed the same crime for which Wild was accompanied to Tyburn by the huzzas of two hundred thousand people. But there can be no doubt that he was a much less depraved man than Wild. The deed for which Mrs. Brownrigg was hanged sinks into nothing, when compared with the conduct of the Roman who treated the public to a hundred pair of gladiators. Yet we should greatly wrong such a Roman if we supposed that his disposition was as cruel as that of Mrs. Brownrigg. In our own country, a woman forfeits her place in society by what, in a man, is too commonly considered as an honourable distinction, and, at worst, as a venial error. The consequence is notorious. The moral principle of a woman is frequently more impaired by a single lapse from virtue than that of a man by twenty years of intrigues. Classical antiquity would furnish us with instances stronger, if possible, than those to which we have referred.

We must apply this principle to the case before us. Habits of dissimulation and falsehood, no doubt, mark a man of our age and country as utterly worthless and abandoned. But it by no means follows that a similar judgment would be just in the case of an Italian of the Middle Ages. On the contrary, we frequently find those faults which we are accustomed to consider as certain indications of a mind altogether depraved, in company with great and good qualities, with generosity, with benevolence, with disinterestedness. From such a state of society, Palamedes, in the admirable dialogue of Hume, might have drawn illustrations of his theory as striking as any of those with which Fourli furnished him. These are not, we well know, the lessons which historians are generally most careful to teach, or readers most

willing to learn. But they are not therefore useless. How Philip disposed his troops at Chæronea, where Hannibal crossed the Alps, whether Mary blew up Darnley, or Siquier shot Charles the Twelfth, and ten thousand other questions of the same description, are in themselves

The way to read history. unimportant. The inquiry may amuse us, but the decision leaves us no wiser.

He alone reads history aright who, observing how powerfully circumstances influence the feelings and opinions of men, how often vices pass into virtues and paradoxes into axioms, learns to distinguish what is accidental and transitory in human nature from what is essential and immutable.

In this respect no history suggests more important reflections than that of the Tuscan and Lombard commonwealths. The character of the Italian statesman seems, at first sight, a collection of contradictions, a phantom as monstrous as the portress of hell in Milton, half divinity, half snake, majestic and beautiful above, grovelling and poisonous below. We see a man whose thoughts and words have no connection with each other, who never hesitates at an oath when he wishes to seduce, who never wants a pretext when he is inclined to betray. His cruelties spring, not from the heat of blood, or the insanity of uncontrolled power, but from deep and cool meditation. His passions, like well-trained troops, are impetuous by rule, and in their most headstrong fury never forget the discipline to which they have been accustomed. His whole soul

Character of Machiavelli. is occupied with vast and complicated schemes of ambition: yet his aspect

and language exhibit nothing but philosophical moderation. Hatred and revenge eat into his heart: yet every look is a cordial smile, every gesture a familiar caress. He never excites the suspicion of his adversaries by petty provocations. His purpose is disclosed only when it is accomplished. His face is unruffled, his speech is courteous, till vigilance is laid asleep, till a vital point is exposed, till a sure aim is taken; and then he strikes for the first and last time. Military courage, the boast of the sottish German, of the frivolous and prating Frenchman, of the romantic and arrogant Spaniard, he neither possesses nor values. He shuns danger, not because he is insensible to shame, but because, in the society in which he lives, timidity has ceased to be

shameful. To do an injury openly is, in his estimation, as wicked as to do it secretly, and far less profitable. With him the most honourable means are those which are the surest, the speediest, and the darkest. He cannot comprehend how a man should scruple to deceive him whom he does not scruple to destroy. He would think it madness to declare open hostilities against rivals whom he might stab in a friendly embrace, or poison in a consecrated wafer.

Yet this man, black with the vices which we consider as most loathsome, traitor, hypocrite, coward, assassin, was by no means destitute even of those virtues which we generally consider as indicating superior elevation of character. In civil courage, in perseverance, in presence of mind, those barbarous warriors, who were foremost in the battle or the breach, were far his inferiors. Even the dangers which he avoided with a caution almost pusillanimous never confused his perceptions, never paralyzed his inventive faculties, never wrung out one secret from his ready tongue, and his inscrutable brow. Though a dangerous enemy, and a still more dangerous accomplice, he could be a just and beneficent ruler. With so much unfairness in his policy, there was an extraordinary degree of fairness in his intellect. Indifferent to truth in the transactions of life, he was honestly devoted to truth in the researches of speculation. Wanton cruelty was not in his nature. On the contrary, where no political object was at stake, his disposition was soft and humane. The susceptibility of his nerves and the activity of his imagination inclined him to sympathize with the feelings of others, and to delight in the charities and courtesies of social life. Perpetually descending to actions which might seem to mark a mind diseased through all its faculties, he had nevertheless an exquisite sensibility, both for the natural and the moral sublime, for every graceful and every lofty conception. Habits of petty intrigue and dissimulation might have rendered him incapable of great general views, but that the expanding effect of his philosophical studies counteracted the narrow tendency. He had the keenest enjoyment of wit, eloquence, and poetry. The fine arts profited alike by the severity of his judgment, and by the liberality of his patronage. The portraits of some of the remarkable Italians of those times are

Remarkable characteristics.

perfectly in harmony with this description. Ample and majestic foreheads, brows strong and dark, but not frowning, eyes of which the calm full gaze, while it expresses nothing, seems to discern everything, cheeks pale with thought and sedentary habits, lips formed with feminine delicacy, but compressed with more than masculine decision, mark out men at once enterprising and apprehensive, men equally skilled in detecting the purposes of others, and in concealing their own, men who must have been formidable enemies and unsafe allies, but men, at the same time, whose tempers were mild and equable, and who possessed an amplitude and subtlety of intellect which would have rendered them eminent either in active or in contemplative life, and fitted them either to govern or to instruct mankind.

Every age and every nation has certain characteristic vices, which prevail almost universally, which scarcely any person scruples to avow, and which even rigid moralists but faintly censure. Succeeding generations change the fashion of their morals, with their hats and their coaches; take some other kind of wickedness under their patronage, and wonder at the depravity of their ancestors. Nor is this all. Posterity, that high court of appeal which is never tired of eulogizing its own justice and discernment, acts on such occasions like a Roman dictator after a general mutiny. Finding the delinquents too numerous to be all punished, it selects some of them at

Decimation. hazard, to bear the whole penalty of an offence in which they are not more deeply implicated than those who escape. Whether decimation be a convenient mode of military execution, we know not; but we solemnly protest against the introduction of such a principle into the philosophy of history.

In the present instance, the lot has fallen on Machiavelli, a man whose public conduct was upright and honourable, whose views of morality, where they differed from those of the persons around him, seemed to have differed for the better, and whose only fault was, that, having adopted some of the maxims then generally received, he arranged them more luminously, and expressed them more forcibly, than any other writer.

Having now, we hope, in some degree cleared the personal character of Machiavelli, we come to the consideration of his

works. As a poet, he is not entitled to a high place. The comedies deserve attention.

The Decennali are merely abstracts of the history of his own times in rhyme. The style and versification are sedulously modelled on those of Dante. But the manner of Dante, like that of every other great original poet, was suited only to his own genius and to his own subject. The distorted and rugged diction which gives to his unearthly imagery a yet more unearthly character, and seems to proceed from a man labouring to express that which is inexpressible, is at once mean and extravagant when it is employed

Poems of
Machiavelli.

by an imitator. The moral poems are in every point superior. That on Fortune in particular, and that on Opportunity, exhibit more justness of thought and fertility of fancy. The Golden Ass has nothing but the name in common with the Romance of Apuleius—a book which, in spite of its original plan and its detestable style, is among the most fascinating in the Latin language, and in which the merits of Le Sage and Radcliffe, Bunyan and Crébillon, are singularly united. The poem of Machiavelli, which is evidently unfinished, is carefully copied from the earlier cantos of the Inferno. The writer loses himself in a wood. He is terrified by monsters and relieved by a beautiful damsel. His protectress conducts him to a large menagerie of emblematical beasts, whose peculiarities are described at length. This man, as well as the plan of the Divine Comedy, is carefully imitated, whole lines are transferred from it. But they no longer produce their wonted effect. Virgil advises the husbandman, who removes a plant from one spot to another, to mark its bearings on the cork and to place it in the same position with regard to the different points of the heaven in which it formerly stood. A similar care is necessary in poetical transplantation. Where it is neglected, we perpetually see the flowers of language which have bloomed on one soil wither on another. Yet the Golden Ass is not altogether destitute of merit. There is considerable ingenuity in the allegory, and some vivid colouring in the descriptions.

The Mandragola, in particular, is superior to the best of Goldoni, and inferior only to the best of Molière. It is the work of a man who, if he had devoted himself to the drama, would probably have

The Man-
dragola.

attained the highest eminence, and produced a permanent and salutary effect on the national taste. This we infer, not so much from the degree, as from the kind of its excellence. There are compositions which indicate still greater talent, and which are perused with still greater delight, from which we should have drawn very different conclusions. Books quite worthless are quite harmless. The sure sign of the general decline of an art is the frequent occurrence, not of deformity, but of misplaced beauty. In general, Tragedy is corrupted by eloquence, and Comedy by wit.

The real object of the drama is the exhibition of human character. This, we conceive, is no arbitrary canon, originating in local and temporary associations, like those which regulate the number of acts in a play, or of syllables in a line. It is the very essence of a species of composition in which every idea is coloured by passing through the medium of an imaginative mind. To this fundamental law every other regulation is subordinate. The situations which most signally develop character form the best plot. The mother tongue of the passion is the best style.

This principle, rightly understood, does not debar the poet from any grace of composition. There is no style in which some man may not, under some circumstances, express himself. There is therefore no style which the drama rejects, none which it does not occasionally require. It is in the discernment of place, of time, and of person, that the inferior artists fail. The brilliant rhodomontade of Mercutio, the elaborate declamation of Antony, are, where Shakspeare has placed them, natural and pleasing. But Dryden would have made Mercutio challenge Tybalt in hyperboles as fanciful as those in which he describes the chariot of Mab.

Shakspeare,
Dryden, and
Corneille.

Corneille would have represented Antony as scolding and coaxing Cleopatra with all the measured rhetoric of a funeral oration.

No writers have injured the Comedy of England so deeply as Congreve and Sheridan. Both were men of splendid wit and polished taste. Unhappily, they made all their characters in their own likeness. Their works bear the same relation to the legitimate drama which a transparency bears to a painting. No delicate touches, no hues imperceptibly

fading into each other: the whole is lighted up with an universal glare. Outlines and tints are forgotten in the common blaze which illuminates all. The flowers and fruits of the intellect abound; but it is the abundance of a jungle, not of a garden, unwholesome, bewildering, unprofitable from its very plenty, rank from its very fragrance. Every fop, every boor, every valet, is a man of wit. The very butts and dupes, Tattle, Wit-would, Puff, Acres, outshine the whole Hôtel de Rambouillet. To prove the whole system of this school absurd, it is only necessary to apply the test which dissolved the enchanted Florimel, to place the true by the false Thalia, to contrast the most celebrated characters which have been drawn by the writers of whom we speak with the Bastard in King John, or the Nurse in *The Comedy of Romeo and Juliet*. It was not surely from want of *England* wit that Shakspeare adopted so different a manner. Benedict and Beatrice throw Mirabel and Millamant into the shade. All the good sayings of the facetious houses of Absolute and Surface might have been clipped from the single character of Falstaff without being missed. It would have been easy for that fertile mind to have given Bardolph and Shallow as much wit as Prince Hal, and to have made Dogberry and Verges retort on each other in sparkling epigrams. But he knew, to use his own admirable language, that such indiscriminate prodigality was, "from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was, and is, to hold, as it were, the mirror up to Nature."

This digression will enable our readers to understand what we mean when we say that in the *Mandragola*, Machiavelli has proved that he completely understood the nature of the dramatic art, and possessed talents which would have enabled him to excel in it. By the correct and vigorous delineation of human nature, it produces interest without a pleasing or skilful plot, and laughter without the least ambition of wit. The lover, not a very delicate or generous lover, and his adviser the parasite, are drawn with spirit. The hypocritical confessor is an admirable portrait. He is, if we mistake not, the original of Father Dominic, the best comic character of Dryden. But old Nicias is the glory of the piece. We cannot call to mind

Merits of the
Mandragola.

anything that resembles him. The follies which Molière ridicules are those of affectation, not those of fatuity. Coxcombs and pedants, not simpletons, are his game. Shakspeare has indeed a vast assortment of fools; but the precise species of which we speak is not, if we remember right, to be found there. Shallow is a fool. But his animal spirits supply, to a certain degree, the place of cleverness. His talk is to that of Sir John what soda-water is to champagne. It has the effervescence though not the body or the flavour. Slender and Sir Andrew Aguecheek are fools, troubled with an uneasy consciousness of their folly, which, in the latter, produces a most edifying meekness and docility, and in the former, awkwardness, obstinacy, and confusion. Cloten is an arrogant fool, Osric a foppish fool, Ajax a savage fool; but Nicias is, as Thersites says of Patroclus, a fool positive. His mind is occupied by no strong feeling; it takes every character, and retains none; its aspect is diversified, not by passions, but by faint and transitory semblances of passion, a mock joy, a mock fear, a mock love, a mock pride, which chase each other like shadows over its surface, and vanish as soon as they appear. He is just idiot enough to be an object, not of pity or horror, but of ridicule. He bears some resemblance to poor Calandrino, whose mishaps, as recounted by Boccaccio, have made all Europe merry for more than four centuries. He perhaps resembles still more closely Simon da Villa, to whom Bruno and Buffalmacco promised the love of the Countess Civilari.* Nicias is, like Simon, of a learned profession; and the dignity with which he wears the doctoral fur, renders his absurdities infinitely more grotesque. The old Tuscan is the very language for such a being. Its peculiar simplicity gives even to the most forcible reasoning and the most brilliant wit an infantine air, generally delightful, but to a foreign reader sometimes a little ludicrous. Heroes and statesmen seem to lisp when they use it. It becomes Nicias incomparably, and renders all his silliness infinitely more silly.

We may add, that the verses with which the *Mandragola* is interspersed, appear to us to be the most spirited and correct of all that Machiavelli has written in metre. He seems to have entertained the same opinion; for he has introduced

* Decameron Giorn VIII., Nov. 9.

some of them in other places. The contemporaries of the author were not blind to the merits of this striking piece. It was acted at Florence with the greatest success. Leo the Tenth was among its admirers, and by his order it was represented at Rome.†

Verses introduced elsewhere.

The *Clizia* is an imitation of the *Casina* of Plautus, which is itself an imitation of the lost *κληρουμένοι* of Diphilus. Plautus was, unquestionably, one of the best Latin writers. His works are copies; but they have in an extraordinary degree the air of originals. We infinitely prefer the slovenly exuberance of his fancy and the clumsy vigour of his diction to the artfully-disguised poverty and elegant languor of Terence. But the *Casina* is by no means one of his best plays; nor is it one which offers great facilities to an imitator. The story is as alien from modern habits of life, as the manner in which it is developed from the modern fashion of composition. The lover remains in the country and the heroine in her chamber during the whole action, leaving their fate to be decided by a foolish father, a cunning mother, and two knavish servants. Machiavelli has executed his task with judgment and taste. He has accommodated the plot to a different state of society, and has very dexterously connected it with the history of his own times. The relation of the trick put on the doting old lover is exquisitely humorous. It is far superior to the corresponding passage in the Latin comedy, and scarcely yields to the account which Falstaff gives of his ducking.

The plot of the *Clizia*.

Two other comedies without titles, the one in prose, the other in verse, appear among the works of Machiavelli. The former is very short, lively enough, but of no great value. The latter we can scarcely believe to be genuine. Neither its merits nor its defects remind us of the reputed author. It was first printed in 1796, from a manuscript discovered in the celebrated library of the Strozzi. Its genuineness, if we have been rightly informed, is

† Nothing can be more evident than that Paulus Jovius designates the *Mandragola* under the name of the *Nicias*. We should not have noticed what is so perfectly obvious, were it not that this natural and palpable misnomer has led the sagacious and industrious Bayle into a gross error.

established solely by the comparison of hands. Our suspicions are strengthened by the circumstance that the same manuscript contained a description of the plague of 1527, which has also, in consequence, been added to the works of Machiavelli. Of this last composition,

Doubt as to authorship. the strongest external evidence would scarcely induce us to believe him guilty. Nothing was ever written more detestable in matter and manner. The narrations, the reflections, the jokes, the lamentations, are all the very worst of their respective kinds at once trite and affected, threadbare tinsel from the Rag Fairs and Monmouth Streets of literature. A foolish schoolboy might perhaps write such a piece, and, after he had written it, think it much finer than the incomparable introduction of the Decameron. But that a shrewd statesman, whose earliest works are characterized by manliness of thought and language, should, at near sixty years of age, descend to such puerility, is utterly inconceivable.

The little novel of Belphegor is pleasantly conceived, and pleasantly told.

Belphegor. But the extravagance of the satire in some measure injures its effect. Machiavelli was unhappily married; and his wish to avenge his own cause and that of his brethren in misfortune, carried him beyond even the licence of fiction. Jonson seems to have combined some hints taken from this tale, with others from Boccaccio, in the plot of *The Devil is an Ass*, a play which, though not the most highly finished of his compositions, is perhaps that which exhibits the strongest proofs of genius.

The political correspondence of Machiavelli, first published in 1767, is unquestionably genuine, and highly valuable. The unhappy circumstances in which his country was placed during the greater part of his public life gave extraordinary encouragement to diplomatic talents. From the moment that Charles the Eighth descended from the Alps, the whole character of Italian politics was changed. The governments of the Peninsula ceased to form an independent system. Drawn from their old orbit by the attraction of the larger bodies which now approached them, they became mere satellites of France and Spain. All their disputes, internal and external, were decided by foreign influence. The contests of opposite factions were carried on, not as formerly, in the senate-house or in

the market-place, but in the antechambers of Louis and Ferdinand. Under these circumstances, the prosperity of the Italian States depended far more on the ability of their foreign agents, than on the conduct of those who were entrusted with the domestic administration. The ambassador had to discharge functions far more delicate than transmitting orders of knighthood, introducing tourists, or presenting his brethren with the homage of his high consideration. He was an advocate to whose management the dearest interests of his clients were entrusted, a spy clothed with an inviolable character. Instead of consulting the dignity of those whom he represented, by a reserved manner and ambiguous style, he was to plunge into all the intrigues of the court at which he resided, to discover and Court intrigue. flatter every weakness of the prince who governed his employers, of the favourite who governed the prince, and of the lacquey who governed the favourite. He was to compliment the mistress and bribe the confessor, to panegyryze or supplicate, to laugh or weep, to accommodate himself to every caprice, to lull every suspicion, to treasure every hint, to be everything, to observe everything, to endure everything. High as the art of political intrigue had been carried in Italy, these were times which required it all.

On these arduous errands Machiavelli was frequently employed. He was sent to treat with the King of the Romans and with the Duke of Valentino. He was twice ambassador at the Court of Rome and France. Rome, and thrice at that of France. In these missions, and in several others of inferior importance he acquitted himself with great dexterity. His despatches form one of the most amusing and instructive collections extant. We meet with none of the mysterious jargon so common in modern state papers, the flash language of political robbers and sharpers. The narratives are clear and agreeably written; the remarks on men and things clever and judicious. The conversations are reported in a spirited and characteristic manner. We find ourselves introduced into the presence of the men who, during twenty eventful years, swayed the destinies of Europe. Their wit and their folly, their fretfulness and their merriment, are exposed to us. We are admitted to overhear their chat, and to watch their familiar gestures. It is

interesting and curious to recognize, in circumstances which elude the notice of historians, the feeble violence and shallow cunning of Louis the Twelfth; the bustling insignificance of Maximilian, cursed with an impotent pruriency for renown, rash yet timid, obstinate yet fickle, always in a hurry, yet always too late; the fierce and haughty energy which gave dignity to the eccentricities of Julius; the soft and graceful manners which masked the insatiable ambition and the implacable hatred of Borgia.

We have mentioned Borgia. It is impossible not to pause for a moment on the name of a man in whom the political morality of Italy was so strongly personified, partially blended with the sterner lineaments of the Spanish character. On two important occasions Machiavelli was admitted to his society; once, at the moment when his splendid villany achieved its most signal triumph, when he caught in one snare and crushed at one blow all his most formidable rivals; and again when, exhausted by disease and overwhelmed by misfortunes, which no human prudence could have averted, he was the prisoner of the deadliest enemy of his house. These interviews between the greatest speculative and the greatest practical statesman of the age are fully described in the Correspondence, and form perhaps the most interesting part of it. From some passages in *The Prince*, and perhaps also from some indistinct traditions, several writers have supposed a connection between those remarkable men much closer than ever existed. The Envoy has even been accused of prompting the crimes of the artful and merciless tyrant. But from the official documents it is clear that their intercourse, though ostensibly amicable, was in reality hostile. It cannot be doubted, however,

Machiavelli that the imagination of
and Borgia. Machiavelli was strongly
impressed, and his specu-

lations on government coloured, by the observations which he made on the singular character and equally singular fortunes of a man who under such disadvantages had achieved such exploits; who, when sensuality, varied through innumerable forms, could no longer stimulate his sated mind, found a more powerful and durable excitement in the intense thirst of empire and revenge; who emerged from the sloth and luxury of the Roman purple the first prince and general of the age; who, trained in an

unwarlike profession, formed a gallant army out of the dregs of an unwarlike people; who, after acquiring sovereignty by destroying his enemies, acquired popularity by destroying his tools; who had begun to employ for the most salutary ends the power which he had attained by the most atrocious means; who tolerated within the sphere of his iron despotism no plunderer or oppressor but himself; and who fell at last amidst the mingled curses and regrets of a people of whom his genius had been the wonder, and might have been the salvation. Some of those crimes of Borgia which to us appear the most odious would not, from causes which we have already considered, have struck an Italian of the fifteenth century with equal horror. Patriotic feeling also might induce Machiavelli to look with some indulgence and regret on the memory of the only leader who could have defended the independence of Italy against the confederate spoilers of Cambray.

On this subject Machiavelli felt most strongly. Indeed the expulsion of the foreign tyrants, and the restoration of that golden age which had preceded the irruption of Charles the Eighth, were projects which, at that time, fascinated all the master-spirits of Italy. The magnificent vision delighted the great but ill-regulated mind of Julius. It divided with manuscripts and saucers, painters and falcons, the attention of the frivolous Leo. It prompted the generous treason of Morone. It imparted a transient energy to the feeble mind and body of the last Sforza. It excited for one moment an honest ambition in the false heart of Pescara. Ferocity and insolence were not among the vices of the national character. To the discriminating cruelties of politicians, committed for great ends on select victims, the moral code of the Italians was too indulgent. But though they might have recourse to barbarity as an expedient, they did not require it as a stimulant. They turned with loathing from the atrocity of the strangers who seemed to love blood for its own sake, who, not content with subjugating, were impatient to destroy, who found a fiendish pleasure in razing magnificent cities, cutting the throats of enemies who cried for quarter, or suffocating an unarmed population by thousands in the

caverns to which it had fled for safety. Such were the scenes which daily excited the terror and disgust of a people among whom, till lately, the worst that a soldier had to fear in a pitched battle was the loss of his horse and the expense of his ransom. The swinish intemperance of Switzerland, the wolfish avarice of Spain, the gross licentiousness of the French, indulged in violation of hospitality, of decency, of love itself, the wanton inhumanity which was common to all the invaders, had made them objects of deadly hatred to the inhabitants of the Peninsula.* The wealth which had been accumulated during centuries of prosperity and repose was rapidly melting away. The intellectual superiority of the oppressed people only rendered them more keenly sensible of their political degradation. Literature and taste, indeed, still disguised with a flush of hectic loveliness and brilliancy the ravages of an incurable decay. The iron had not yet entered into the soul. The time was not yet come when eloquence was to be gagged, and reason to be hoodwinked, when the harp of the poet was to be hung on the willows of Arno, and the right hand of the painter to forget its

Warnings of
decadence.

cunning. Yet a discern-
ing eye might even then
have seen that genius and

learning would not long survive the state of things from which they had sprung, that the great men whose talents gave lustre to that melancholy period had been formed under the influence of happier days, and would leave no successors behind them. The times which shine with the greatest splendour in literary history are not always those to which the human mind is most indebted. Of this we may be convinced, by comparing the generation which follows them with that which had preceded them. The first fruits which are reaped under a bad system often spring from seed sown under a good one. Thus it was, in some measure, with the Augustan age. Thus it was with the age of Raphael and Ariosto, of Aldus and Vidar.

Machiavelli deeply regretted the misfortune of his country, and clearly discerned the cause and the remedy. It was the military system of the Italian people

* The opening Stanzas of the Fourteenth Canto of the *Orlando Furioso* give a frightful picture of the state of Italy in those times. Yet, strange to say, Ariosto is speaking of the conduct of those who called themselves allies.

which had extinguished their value and discipline, and rendered their wealth an easy prey to every foreign plunderer. The Secretary projected a scheme alike honourable to his heart and to his intellect, for abolishing the use of mercenary troops, and for organizing a national militia.

Scheme for a
national
militia.

The exertions which he made to effect this great object ought alone to rescue his name from obloquy. Though his situation and his habits were pacific, he studied with intense assiduity the theory of war. He made himself master of all its details. The Florentine government entered into his views. A council of war was appointed. Levies were decreed. The indefatigable minister flew from place to place in order to superintend the execution of his design. The times were, in some respects, favourable to the experiment. The system of military tactics had undergone a great revolution. The cavalry was no longer considered as forming the strength of an army. The hours which a citizen could spare from his ordinary employments, though by no means sufficient to familiarize him with the exercise of a man-at-arms, might render him a useful foot-soldier. The dread of a foreign yoke, of plunder, massacre, and conflagration, might have conquered the repugnance to military pursuits which both the industry and the idleness of great towns commonly generate. For a time the scheme promised well. The new troops acquitted themselves respectably in the field. Machiavelli looked with parental rapture on the success of his plan, and began to hope that the arms of Italy might once more be formidable to the barbarians of the Tagus and the Rhine. But the tide of misfortune came on before the barriers which should have withstood it were prepared. For a time, indeed, Florence might be considered as peculiarly fortunate. Famine and sword and pestilence had devastated the fertile plains and stately cities of the Po. All the curses denounced of old against Tyre seemed to have fallen on Venice. Her merchants already stood afar off, lamenting for their great city. The time seemed near when the sea-weed should overgrow her silent Rialto, and the fisherman wash his nets in the deserted arsenal. Naples had been four times conquered and reconquered by tyrants equally indifferent to its welfare, and equally greedy for its spoils.

Florence, as yet, had only to endure degradation and extortion, to submit to the mandates of foreign powers, to buy over and over again, at an enormous price, what was already justly her own, to

Ill-requited
energies. return thanks for being wronged, and to ask pardon for being in the right. She was at length deprived of the blessings even of this infamous and servile repose. Her military and political institutions were swept away together. The Medici returned, in the train of foreign invaders, from their long exile. The policy of Machiavelli was abandoned; and his public services were requited with poverty, imprisonment, and torture.

The fallen statesman still clung to his project with unabated ardour. With the view of vindicating it from some popular objections, and of refuting some prevailing errors on the subject of military

Writings on
the Art of War. science, he wrote his seven books on the Art of War. This excellent work is in

the form of a dialogue. The opinions of the writer are put into the mouth of Fabrizio Colonna, a powerful nobleman of the Ecclesiastical State, and an officer of distinguished merit in the service of the King of Spain. He visits Florence on his way from Lombardy to his own domains. He is invited to meet some friends at the house of Cosimo Rucellai, an amiable and accomplished young man, whose early death Machiavelli feelingly deplores. After partaking of an elegant entertainment, they retire from the heat into the most shady recesses of the garden. Fabrizio is struck by the sight of some uncommon plants. His host informs him, that, though rare in modern days, they are frequently mentioned by the classical authors, and that his grandfather, like many other Italians, amused himself with practising the ancient methods of gardening. Fabrizio expresses his regret that those who, in later times, affected the manners of the old Romans should select for imitation the most trifling pursuits. This leads to a conversation on the decline of military discipline and on the best means of restoring it. The institution of the Florentine militia is ably defended; and several improvements are suggested in the details.

The Swiss and the Spaniards were, at that time, regarded as the best soldiers in Europe. The Swiss battalion consisted of pikemen, and bore a close resemblance to the Greek phalanx. The

Spaniards, like the soldiers of Rome, were armed with the sword and the shield. The victories of Flamininus and Æmilius over the Macedonian kings seem to prove the superiority of the weapons used by the legions. The same experiment had been recently tried with the same result at the battle of Ravenna, one of those tremendous days into which human folly and wickedness compress the whole devastation of a famine or a plague. In that memorable conflict, the infantry of Arragon, the old companions of Gonsalvo, deserted by all their allies, hewed a passage through the thickest of the imperial pikes, and effected an unbroken retreat, in the face of the gendarmerie of De Foix, and the renowned artillery of Este. Fabrizio, or rather Machiavelli, proposes to combine the two systems, to arm the foremost lines

Combined
systems.

with the pike for the purpose of repulsing calvary, and those in the rear with the sword, as being a weapon better adapted for every other purpose. Throughout the work the author expresses the highest admiration of the military science of the ancient Romans, and the greatest contempt for the maxims which had been in vogue amongst the Italian commanders of the preceding generation. He prefers infantry to cavalry, and fortified camps to fortified towns. He is inclined to substitute rapid movements and decisive engagements for the languid and dilatory operations of his countrymen. He attaches very little importance to the invention of gunpowder. Indeed he seems to think that it ought scarcely to produce any change in the mode of arming or of disposing troops. The general testimony of historians, it must be allowed, seems to prove that the ill-constructed and ill-served artillery of those times, though useful in a siege, was of little value on the field of battle.

Of the tactics of Machiavelli we will not venture to give an opinion; but we are certain that his book is most able and interesting. As a commentary on the history of his times, it is invaluable. The ingenuity, the grace, Style of writing and the perspicuity of the style, and the eloquence and animation of particular passages, must give pleasure even to readers who take no interest in the subject.

The Prince and the Discourses on Livy were written after the fall of the Republican Government. The former was

dedicated to the Young Lorenzo de' Medici. This circumstance seems to have disgusted the contemporaries of the writer far more than the doctrines which have rendered the name of the work odious in later times. It was considered as an indication of political apostasy. The fact, however, seems to have been that Machiavelli, despairing of the liberty of Florence, was inclined to support any government which might preserve her independence. The interval which separated a democracy and a despotism, Soderini and Lorenzo, seemed to vanish when compared with the difference between the former and the present state of Italy, between the security, the opulence, and the repose which it had enjoyed under her native rulers, and the misery in which it had been plunged since the fatal year in which the first foreign tyrant had descended from the

The Prince. Alps. The noble and pathetic exhortation with which The Prince concludes shows how strongly the writer felt upon this subject.

The Prince traces the progress of an ambitious man, the Discourses the progress of an ambitious people. The same principles on which, in the former work, the elevation of an individual is explained, are applied in the latter, to the longer duration and more complex interest of a society. To a modern statesman the form of the Discourses may appear to be puerile. In truth Livy is not an historian

Discourses on Livy. on whom much reliance can be placed, even in cases where he must have possessed considerable means of information. And his first Decade, to which Machiavelli has confined himself, is scarcely entitled to more credit than our Chronicle of British Kings who reigned before the Roman invasion. But his commentator is indebted to him for little more than a few texts which he might as easily have extracted from the Vulgate or Decameron. The whole train of thought is original.

On the peculiar immorality which has rendered The Prince unpopular, and which is almost equally discernible in the Discourses, we have already given our opinion at length. We have attempted to show that it belonged rather

Faults peculiar to the age. to the age than to the man, that it was a partial taint, and by no means implied general depravity. We cannot, however deny that it is a great blemish,

and that it considerably diminishes the pleasure which, in other respects, those works must afford to every intelligent mind.

It is, indeed, impossible to conceive a more healthful and vigorous constitution of the understanding than that which these works indicate. The qualities of the active and the contemplative statesman appear to have been blended in the mind of the writer into a rare and exquisite harmony. His skill in the details of business had not been acquired at the expense of his general powers. It had not rendered his mind less comprehensive; but it had served to correct his speculations, and to impart to them that vivid and practical character which so widely distinguishes them from the vague theories of most political philosophers.

Every man who has seen the world knows that nothing is so useless as a general maxim. If it be very moral and very true, **Uselessness of general maxims.** it may serve for a copy to a charity-boy. If, like those of Rochefoucault, it be sparkling and whimsical, it may make an excellent motto for an essay. But few indeed of the many wise apophthegms which have been uttered, from the time of the Seven Sages of Greece to that of Poor Richard, have prevented a single foolish action. We give the highest and the most peculiar praise to the precepts of Machiavelli when we say that they may frequently be of real use in regulating conduct, not so much because they are more just or more profound than those which might be culled from other authors, as because they can be more readily applied to the problems of real life.

There are errors in these works. But they are errors which a writer situated like Machiavelli could scarcely avoid. They arise, for the most part, from a single defect, which appears to us to pervade his whole system. In his political scheme, the means had been more deeply considered than the ends. **Means more considered than ends.** The great principle, that societies and laws exist only for the purpose of increasing the sum of private happiness, is not recognized with sufficient clearness. The good of the body, distinct from the good of the members, and sometimes hardly compatible with the good of the members, seems to be the object which he proposes to himself. Of all political fallacies, this

has perhaps had the widest and the most mischievous operation. The state of society in the little commonwealths of Greece, the close connection and mutual dependence of the citizens, and the severity of the laws of war, tended to encourage an opinion which, under such circumstances, could hardly be called erroneous. The interests of every individual were inseparably bound up with those of the state. An invasion destroyed his cornfields and vineyards, drove him from his home, and compelled him to encounter all the hardships of a military life. Peace restored him to security and comfort. A victory doubled the number of his slaves. A defeat perhaps made him a slave himself. When Pericles, in the Peloponnesian war, told the Athenians, that, if their country triumphed, their private losses would speedily be repaired, but that, if their arms failed of success, every individual amongst them would probably be ruined, he spoke no more than the truth. He spoke to men whom the tribute of vanquished cities supplied with food and clothing, with the luxury of the bath and the amusements of the theatre, on whom the greatness of their country conferred rank, and before whom the members of less prosperous communities trembled; and to men who, in case of a change in the public fortunes, would, at least, be deprived of every comfort and every distinction which they enjoyed. To be butchered on the smoking ruins of their city, to be dragged in chains to a slave-market, to see one child torn from them to dig in the quarries of Sicily, and another to guard the harems of Persepolis, these were the frequent and probable consequences of national calamities. Hence,

Patriotism
among the
Greeks.

among the Greeks, patriotism became a governing principle, or rather an ungovernable passion.

Both their legislators and their philosophers took it for granted that, in providing for the strength and greatness of the state, they sufficiently provided for the happiness of the people. The writers of the Roman empire lived under despots, into whose dominion a hundred nations were melted down, and whose gardens would have covered the little commonwealths of Phlius and Plataea. Yet they continued to employ the same language, and to cant about the duty of sacrificing everything to a country to which they owed nothing.

Causes similar to those which had influenced the disposition of the Greeks operated powerfully on the less vigorous and daring character of the Italians. They, too, were members of small communities. Every man was deeply interested in the welfare of the society to which he belonged, a partaker in its wealth and its poverty, in its glory and its shame. In the age of Machiavelli this was peculiarly the case. Public events had produced an immense sum of misery to private citizens.

The Northern invaders had brought want to their boards, infamy to their beds, fire to their roofs, and the knife to their throats. It was natural that a man who lived in times like these should overrate the importance of those measures by which a nation is rendered formidable to its neighbours, and undervalue those which make it prosperous within itself.

Public events
and private
citizens.

Nothing is more remarkable in the political treatises of Machiavelli than the fairness of mind which they indicate. It appears where the author is in the wrong, almost as strongly as where he is in the right. He never advances a false opinion because it is new or splendid, because he can clothe it in a happy phrase, or defend it by an ingenious sophism. His errors are at once explained by a reference to the circumstances in which he was placed. They evidently were not sought out; they lay in his way, and could scarcely be avoided. Such mistakes must necessarily be committed by early speculators in every science.

Fairness of
mind.

In this respect it is amusing to compare The Prince and the Discourses with the Spirit of Laws. Montesquieu enjoys, perhaps, a wider celebrity than any political writer of modern Europe. Something he doubtless owes to his merit, but much more to his fortune. He had the good luck of a Valentine. He caught the eye of the French nation, at the moment when it was waking from the long sleep of political and religious bigotry; and, in consequence, he became a favourite. The English, at that time, considered a Frenchman who talked about constitutional checks and fundamental laws as a prodigy not less astonishing than the learned pig or the musical infant. Specious but shallow, studious of effect, indifferent to truth, eager to build a system, but careless

of collecting those materials out of which alone a sound and durable system can be built, the lively President constructed theories as rapidly and as slightly as card-houses, no sooner projected than completed, no sooner completed than blown away, no sooner blown away than forgotten. Machiavelli errs only because his experience, acquired in a very peculiar state of society, could not always enable him to calculate the effect of institutions differing from those of which he had observed the operation. Montesquieu errs, because he has a fine thing to say, and is resolved to say it. If the phenomena which lie before him will not suit his purpose, all history must be ransacked. If nothing established by authentic testimony can be racked or chipped to suit his Procrustean hypothesis, he puts up with some monstrous fable about Siam, or Bantam, or Japan, told by writers compared with whom Lucian and Gulliver were veracious, liars by a double right, as travellers and as Jesuits.

Propriety of thought, and propriety of diction, are commonly found together. Obscurity and affectation are the two greatest faults of style. Obscurity of expression generally springs from confusion of ideas; and the same wish to dazzle at any cost which produces affectation in the manner of a writer, is likely to produce sophistry in his reasonings. The judicious and candid mind of Machiavelli shows itself in his

Machiavelli compared with Montesquieu. luminous, manly, and polished language. The style of Montesquieu, on the other hand, indicates in every page a lively and ingenious, but an unsound mind. Every trick of expression, from the mysterious conciseness of an oracle to the flippancy of a Parisian coxcomb, is employed to disguise the fallacy of some positions, and the triteness of others. Absurdities are brightened into epigrams; truisms are darkened into enigmas. It is with difficulty that the strongest eye can sustain the glare with which some parts are illuminated, or penetrate the shade in which others are concealed.

The political works of Machiavelli derive a peculiar interest from the mournful earnestness which he manifests whenever he touches on topics connected with the calamities of his native land. It is difficult to conceive any situation more painful than that of a great man, condemned to watch the lingering agony

of an exhausted country, to tend it during the alternate fits of stupefaction and raving which precede its dissolution, and to see the symptoms of vitality disappear one by one, till nothing is left but coldness, darkness, and corruption. To this joyless and thankless duty was Machiavelli called. In the energetic language of the prophet, he was "mad for the sight of his eyes which he saw," disunion in the council, effeminacy in the camp, liberty extinguished, commerce decaying, national honour sullied, an enlightened and flourishing people given over to the ferocity of ignorant savages. Though his opinions had not escaped the contagion of that political immorality which was common among his countrymen, his natural disposition seems to have been rather stern and impetuous than pliant and artful. When the misery and degradation of Florence and the foul outrage which he had himself sustained recur to his mind, the smooth craft of his profession and his nation is exchanged for the honest bitterness of scorn and anger. He speaks like one sick of the calamitous times and abject people among whom his lot is cast. He pines for the strength and glory of ancient Rome, for the fasces of Brutus and the sword of Scipio, the gravity of the curule chair, and the bloody pomp of the triumphal sacrifice. He seems to be transported back to the days when eight hundred thousand Italian warriors sprung to arms at the rumour of a Gallic invasion. He breathes all the spirit of those intrepid and haughty patricians who forgot the dearest ties of nature in the claims of public duty, who looked with disdain on the elephants and on the gold of Pyrrhus, and listened with unaltered composure to the tremendous tidings of Cannæ. Like an ancient temple deformed by the barbarous architecture of a later age, his character acquires an interest from the very circumstances which debase it. The original proportions are rendered more striking by the contrast which they present to the mean and incongruous additions.

The influence of the sentiments which we have described was not apparent in his writings alone. His enthusiasm, barred from the career which it would have selected for itself, seems to have found a vent in desperate levity. He enjoyed a vindictive pleasure in outraging the opinions of a society which he despised. He became careless of the

decencies which were expected from a man so highly distinguished in the literary and political world. The Levity and sarcastic bitterness of his conversation disgusted those who were more inclined to accused his licentiousness than their own degeneracy, and who were unable to conceive the strength of those emotions which were concealed by the jests of the wretched, and by the follies of the wise.

The historical works of Machiavelli still remain to be considered. The life of Castruccio Castracani will occupy us for a very short time, and would scarcely

Historical works.

have demanded our notice, had it not attracted a much greater share of public attention than it deserves. Few books, indeed, could be more interesting than a careful and judicious account, from such a pen, of the illustrious Prince of Lucca, the most eminent of those Italian chiefs, who, like Pisistratus and Gelon, acquired a power felt rather than seen, and resting, not on law or on prescription, but on the public favour and on their great personal qualities. Such a work would exhibit to us the real nature of that species of sovereignty, so singular and so often misunderstood, which the Greeks denominated tyranny, and which, modified in some degree by the feudal system, reappeared in the common-wealths of Lombardy and Tuscany. But this little composition of Machiavelli is in no sense a history. It has no pretensions to fidelity. It is a trifle, and not a very successful trifle. It is scarcely more authentic than the novel of Belphegor, and is very much duller.

The last great work of this illustrious man was the history of his native city. It was written by the command of the Pope, who, as chief of the house of Medici, was at that time sovereign of

History of Florence.

Florence. The characters of Cosmo, of Piero, and of Lorenzo, are, however, treated with a freedom and impartiality equally honourable to the writer and to the patron. The miseries and humiliations of dependence, the bread which is more bitter than every other food, the stairs which are more painful than every other ascent, had not broken the spirit of Machiavelli. The most corrupting post in a corrupting profession had not depraved the generous heart of Clement.

The History does not appear to be the fruit of much industry or research. It is unquestionably inaccurate. Inaccuracies. rate. But it is elegant, lively, and picturesque, beyond any other in the Italian language. The reader, we believe, carries away from it a more vivid and a more faithful impression of the national character and manners than from more correct accounts. The truth is, that the book belongs rather to ancient than to modern literature. It is in the style, not of Davila and Clarendon, but of Herodotus and Tacitus, and the classical histories may almost be called romances founded in fact. The relation is, no doubt, in all its principal points, strictly true. But the numerous little incidents which heighten the interest, the words, the gestures, the looks, are evidently furnished by the imagination of the author. The fashion of later times is different. A more exact narrative is given by the writer. It may be doubted whether more exact notions are conveyed to the reader. The best portraits are perhaps those in which there is a slight mixture of caricature; and we are not certain that the best histories are not those in which a little of the exaggeration of fictitious narrative is judiciously employed. Something is lost in accuracy; but much is gained in effect. The fainter lines are neglected; but the great characteristic features are imprinted on the mind for ever.

The History terminates with the death of Lorenzo de' Medici. Machiavelli had, it seems, intended to continue his narrative to a later period. But his death prevented the execution of his design; and the melancholy task of recording the desolation and shame of Italy devolved on Guicciardini.

Machiavelli lived long enough to see the commencement of the last struggle for Florentine liberty. Soon after his death monarchy was finally established, not such a monarchy as that of which Cosmo had laid the foundations deep in the institutions and feelings of his countrymen, and which Lorenzo had embellished with the trophies of every science and every art; but a loathsome tyranny, proud and mean, cruel and feeble, bigoted and lascivious. The character of Machiavelli was hateful to the new masters of Italy; and those parts of his theory which were in strict accordance with their own daily practice afforded

a pretext for blackening his memory. His works were misrepresented by the learned, misconstrued by the ignorant, censured by the Church, abused with all the rancour of simulated virtue by the minions of a base despotism, and the priests of a baser superstition. The name of the man whose genius had illuminated all the dark places of policy, and to whose patriotic wisdom an oppressed people had owed their last chance of emancipation and revenge, passed into a proverb of infamy. For more than two hundred years his bones lay undistinguished. At length an English nobleman paid the last honours to the greatest statesman of Florence. In the Church

of Santa Croce a monument was erected to his memory, which is contemplated with reverence by all who can distinguish the virtues of a great mind through the corruptions of a degenerate age, and which will be approached with still deeper homage when the object to which his public life was devoted shall be attained, when the foreign yoke shall be broken, when a second Proccita (Procida) shall avenge the wrongs of Naples, when a happier Rienzi shall restore the good estate of Rome, when the streets of Florence and Bologna shall again resound with their ancient war-cry, *Popolo; popolo; muoiano i tiranni!*



Photo by]

[Walker & Boutall

JOHN DRYDEN.

From the painting by SIR G. KNELLER, in the National Portrait Gallery.)

Macaulay's Essays]

[Page 49

DRYDEN.

(EDINBURGH REVIEW, JAN., 1828.)

The Poetical Works of JOHN DRYDEN. In 2 volumes. University Edition. London, 1826.

THE public voice has assigned to Dryden the first place in the second rank of our poets,—no mean station in a table of

Rank amongst poets.

intellectual precedency so rich in illustrious names.

It is allowed that, even of the few who were his superiors in genius, none has exercised a more extensive or permanent influence on the national habits of thought and expression. His life was commensurate with the period during which a great revolution in the public taste was effected; and in that revolution he played the part of Cromwell. By unscrupulously taking the lead in its wildest excesses, he obtained the absolute guidance of it. By trampling on laws, he acquired the authority of a legislator. By signaling himself as the most daring and irreverent of rebels, he raised himself to the dignity of a recognized prince. He commenced his career by the most frantic outrages. He terminated it in the repose of established sovereignty,—the author of a new code, the root of a new dynasty.

Of Dryden, however, as of almost every man who has been distinguished either in the literary or in the political world, it may be said that the course which he pursued, and the effect which he produced, depended less on his personal qualities than on the circumstances in which he was placed. Those who have read history

Discrimination in reading.

with discrimination, know the fallacy of those panegyrics and invectives,

which represent individuals as effecting great moral and intellectual revolutions, subverting established systems, and imprinting a new character on their age. The difference between one man and another is by no means so great as the superstitious crowd supposes. But the

same feelings which, in ancient Rome, produced the apotheosis of a popular emperor, and, in modern Rome, the canonization of a devote prelate, lead men to cherish an illusion which furnishes them with something to adore. By a law of association, from the operation of which even minds the most strictly regulated by reason are not wholly exempt, misery disposes us to hatred, and happiness to love, although there may be no person to whom our misery or our happiness can be ascribed. The peevishness of an invalid vents itself even on those who alleviate his pain. The good-humour of a man elated by success often displays itself towards enemies. In the same manner, the feelings of pleasure and admiration, to which the contemplation of great events gives birth, make an object where they do not find it. Thus, nations descend to the absurdities of Egyptian idolatry, and worship stocks and reptiles—Sacheverells and Wilkeses. They even fall prostrate before a deity to which they have themselves given the form which commands their veneration, and which, unless fashioned by them, would have remained a shapeless block. They persuade themselves that they are the creatures of what they have themselves created. For, in fact, it is the age that forms the man, not the man that forms the age. Great minds do indeed react on the society which has made them what they are; but they only pay with interest what they have received. We extol Bacon, and sneer at Aquinas. But if their situations had been changed, Bacon might have been the Angelical Doctor, the most subtle Aristotelian of the schools; the Dominican might have led forth the sciences

from their house of bondage. If Luther had been born in the tenth century, he would have effected no reformation. If he had never been born at all, it is evident that the sixteenth century could not have elapsed without a great schism in the church. Voltaire, in the days of Louis the Fourteenth, would probably have been, like most of the literary men of that time, a zealous Jansenist, eminent among the defenders of efficacious grace, a bitter assailant of the lax morality of the Jesuits, and the unreasonable decisions of the Sorbonne. If Pascal had entered on his literary career, when intelligence was more general, and abuses at the same time more flagrant, when the church was polluted by the Iscariot Dubois, the court disgraced by the orders of Canillac, and the nation sacrificed to the juggles of Law; if he had lived to see a dynasty of harlots, an empty treasury and a crowded harem, an army formidable only to those whom it should have protected, a priesthood just religious enough to be intolerant, he might possibly, like every man of genius in France, have imbibed extravagant prejudices against monarchy and Christianity. The wit which blasted the sophisms of Escobar—the impassioned eloquence which defended the sisters of Port Royal—the intellectual hardihood which was not beaten down even by Papal authority, might have raised him to the Patriarchate of the Philosophical Church. It was long disputed whether the honour of inventing the method of Fluxions belonged to Newton or to Leibnitz. It is now generally allowed that these great men made the same discovery at the same time. Mathematical science, indeed, had then reached such a point, that if neither of them had ever existed, the principle must inevitably have occurred to some person within a few years. So in our own time the doctrine of rent, now universally received by political economists, was propounded, almost at the same moment, by two writers unconnected with each other. Preceding speculators had long been blundering round about it; and it could not possibly have been missed much longer by the most heedless inquirer. We are inclined to think that, with respect to every great addition which has been made to the stock of human knowledge, the case has been similar; that without Copernicus we should have been Copernicans,—that without Columbus America would have been discovered,—

that without Locke we should have possessed a just theory of the origin of human ideas. Society indeed has its great men and its little men, as the earth has its mountains and its valleys. But the inequalities of intellect, like the inequalities of the surface of our globe, bear so small a proportion to the mass, that, in calculating its great revolutions, they may safely be neglected. The sun illuminates the hills, while it is still below the horizon; and truth is discovered by the highest minds a little before it becomes manifest to the multitude. This is the extent of their superiority. They are the first to catch and reflect a light, which, without their assistance, must, in a short time, be visible to those who lie far beneath them.

The same remark will apply equally to the fine arts. The laws on which depend the progress and decline of poetry, painting, and sculpture, operate with little less certainty than those which regulate the periodical returns of heat and cold, of fertility and barrenness. Those who seem to lead the public taste are, in general, merely outrunning it in the direction which it is spontaneously pursuing. Without a just apprehension of the laws to which we have alluded, the merits and defects of a Dryden can be but imperfectly understood. We will, therefore, state what we conceive them to be.

The ages in which the masterpieces of imagination have been produced, have by no means been those in which taste has been most correct. It seems that the creative faculty, and the critical faculty, cannot exist together in their highest perfection. The causes of this phenomenon, it is not difficult to assign.

It is true, that the man who is best able to take a machine to pieces, and who most clearly comprehends the manner in which all its wheels and springs conduce to its general effect, will be the man most competent to form another machine of similar power. In all the branches of physical and moral science which admit of perfect analysis, he who can resolve will be able to combine. But the analysis which criticism can effect of poetry is necessarily imperfect. One element must for ever elude its researches; and that is the very element by which poetry is poetry. In the description of nature, for example, a judicious reader will easily detect an incongruous image. But he will find it

impossible to explain in what consists the art of a writer who, in a few words, brings some spot before him so vividly that he shall know it as if he had lived there from childhood; while another, employing the same materials, the same verdure, the same water, and the same flowers, committing no inaccuracy, introducing nothing which can be positively pronounced superfluous, omitting nothing which can be positively pronounced necessary, shall produce no more effect than an advertisement of a capital residence and a desirable pleasure-ground. To take another example, the great features of the character of Hotspur are

Character of Hotspur.

obvious to the most superficial reader. We at once perceive that his courage is splendid, his thirst of glory intense, his animal spirits high, his temper careless, arbitrary, and petulant; that he indulges his own humour without caring whose feelings he may wound, or whose enmity he may provoke, by his levity. Thus far criticism will go. But something is still wanting. A man might have all those qualities, and every other quality which the most minute examiner can introduce into his catalogue of the virtues and faults of Hotspur, and yet he would not be Hotspur. Almost everything that we have said of him applies equally to Falconbridge. Yet, in the mouth of Falconbridge, most of his speeches would seem out of place. In real life this perpetually occurs. We are sensible of wide differences between men whom, if we were required to describe them, we should describe in almost the same terms. If we were attempting to draw elaborate characters of them, we should scarcely be able to point out any strong distinction; yet we approach them with feelings altogether dissimilar. We cannot conceive of them as using the expressions or the gestures of each other. Let us suppose that a zoologist should attempt to give an account of some animal—a porcupine, for instance—to people who had never seen it. The porcupine, he might say, is of the genus mammalia, and the order glires. There are whiskers on its face; it is two feet long; it has four toes before, five behind, two foreteeth, and eight grinders. Its body

Creative and critical faculty.

is covered with hair and quills. And when all this had been said, would any one of the auditors have formed a just idea of a porcupine? Would any two of them have

formed the same idea? There might exist innumerable races of animals, possessing all the characteristics which have been mentioned, yet altogether unlike to each other. What the description of our naturalist is to a real porcupine, the remarks of criticism are to the images of poetry. What it so imperfectly decomposes, it cannot perfectly re-construct. It is evidently as impossible to produce an Othello or a Macbeth by reversing an analytical process so defective, as it would be for an anatomist to form a living man out of the fragments of his dissecting-room. In both cases, the vital principle eludes the finest instruments, and vanishes in the very instant in which its seat is touched. Hence those who, trusting to their critical skill, attempt to write poems, gives us, not images of things, but catalogues of qualities. Their characters are allegories; not good men and bad men, but cardinal virtues and deadly sins. We seem to have fallen among the acquaintances of our old friend Christian: sometimes we meet Mistrust and Timorous; sometimes Mr. Hate-good and Mr. Love-lust; and then again Prudence, Piety, and Charity.

That critical discernment is not sufficient to make men poets, is generally allowed. Why it should keep them from becoming poets, is not perhaps equally evident. But the fact is, that poetry requires not an examining, but a believing frame of mind. Those feel it most, and write it best, who forget that it is a work of art; to whom its imitations, like the realities from which they are taken, are subjects not for connoisseurship, but for tears and laughter, resentment and affection, who are too much under the influence of the illusion to admire the genius which has produced it; who are too much frightened for Ulysses in the cave of Polyphemus, to care whether the pun about Outis be good or bad; who forget that such a person as Shakspeare ever existed, while they weep and curse with Lear. It is by giving faith to the creations of the imagination that a man becomes a poet. It is by treating those creations as deceptions, and by resolving them, as nearly as possible, into their elements, that he becomes a critic. In the moment in which the skill of the artist is perceived, the spell of the art is broken.

These considerations account for the absurdities into which the greatest

writers have fallen, when they have attempted to give general rules for composition, or to pronounce judgment on the works of others. They are unaccustomed to analyse what they feel; they, therefore, perpetually refer their emotions to causes which have not in the slightest degree tended to produce them. They feel pleasure in reading a book. They never consider that this pleasure may be

Effect of Ideas. the effect of ideas, which some unmeaning expression, striking on the first link of a chain of associations, may have called up in their own minds—that they have themselves furnished to the author the beauties which they admire.

Cervantes is the delight of all classes of readers. Every schoolboy thumbs to pieces the most wretched translations of his romance, and knows the lantern jaws of the Knight Errant, and the broad cheeks of the Squire, as well as the faces of his own playfellows. The most experienced and fastidious judges are amazed at the perfection of that art which extracts inextinguishable laughter from the greatest of human calamities, without once violating the reverence due to it; at that discriminating delicacy of touch, which makes a character exquisitely ridiculous, without impairing its worth, its grace, or its dignity. In Don

Don Quixote. Quixote are several dissertations on the principles of poetic and dramatic writing. No passages in the whole work exhibit stronger marks of labour and attention; and no passages in any work with which we are acquainted, are more worthless and puerile. In our time they would scarcely obtain admittance into the literary department of the *Morning Post*.

Dante's Divine Comedy. Every reader of the *Divine Comedy* must be struck by the veneration which

Dante expresses for writers far inferior to himself. He will not lift up his eyes from the ground in the presence of Brunetto, all whose works are not worth the worst of his own hundred cantos. He does not venture to walk in the same line with the bombastic Statius. His admiration of Virgil is absolute idolatry. If indeed it had been excited by the elegant, splendid, and harmonious diction of the Roman poet, it would not have been altogether unreasonable; but it is rather as an authority on all points of philosophy, than as a work of imagination, that he values the *Æneid*. The most trivial pass-

ages he regards as oracles of the highest authority, and of the most recondite meaning. He describes his conductor as the sea of all wisdom—the sun which heals every disordered sight. As he judged of Virgil, the Italians of the fourteenth century judged of him; they were proud of him; they praised him; they struck medals bearing his head; they quarrelled for the honour of possessing his remains; they maintained professors to expound his writings. But what they admired was not that mighty imagination which called a new world into existence, and made all its sights and sounds familiar to the eye and ear of the mind. They said little of those awful and lovely creations on which later critics delight to dwell—*Farinata* lifting his haughty and tranquil brow from his couch of everlasting fire—the lion-like repose of *Sordello*—or the light which shone from the celestial smile of *Beatrice*. They extolled their great poet for his smattering of ancient literature and history; for his logic and his divinity; for his absurd physics, and his more absurd metaphysics; for everything but that in which he pre-eminently excelled. Like the fool in the story, who ruined his dwelling by digging for gold, which, as he had dreamed, was concealed under its foundations, they laid waste one of the noblest works of human genius, by seeking in it for buried treasures of wisdom, which existed in their own wild reveries. The finest passages were little valued till they had been debased into some monstrous allegory. Louder applause was given to the lecture on fate and free-will, or to the ridiculous astronomical theories, than to those tremendous lines which disclose the secrets of the tower of hunger; or to that half-told tale of guilty love, so passionate and so full of tears.

We do not mean to say, that the contemporaries of Dante read with less emotion than their descendants of *Ugolino* groping among the wasted corpses of his children, or of *Francesca*, starting at the tremulous kiss, and dropping the fatal volume. Far from it. We believe that they admired these things less than ourselves, but that they felt them more. We should perhaps say, that they felt them too much to admire them. The progress of a nation from barbarism to civilization produces a change similar to that which takes place during the progress of an individual from infancy to

mature age. What man does not remember with regret the first time that he read

Robinson
Crusoe.

Robinson Crusoe? Then, indeed, he was unable to appreciate the powers of the writer; or rather, he neither knew nor cared whether the book had a writer at all. He probably thought it not half so fine as some rant of Macpherson about dark-browed Foldath, and white-bosomed Strinadona. He now values Fingal and Temora only as showing with how little evidence a story may be believed, and with how little merit a book may be popular. Of the romance of Defoe he entertains the highest opinion. He perceives the hand of a master in ten thousand touches, which formerly he passed by without notice. But though he understands the merits of the narrative better than formerly, he is far less interested by it. Xury, and Friday, and pretty Poll, the boat with the shoulder-of-mutton sail, and the canoe which could not be brought down to the water edge, the tent with its edge and ladders, the preserve of kids, and the den where the old goat died, can never again be to him the realities which they were. The days when his favourite volume set him upon making wheelbarrows and chairs, upon digging caves and fencing huts in the garden, can never return. Such is the law of our nature. Our judgment ripens, our imagination decays. We cannot at once enjoy the flowers of the spring of life, and the fruits of its autumn, the pleasures of close investigation, and those of agreeable error. We cannot sit at once in the front of the stage and behind the scenes. We cannot be under the illusion of the spectacle, while we are watching the movements of the ropes and pulleys which dispose it.

The chapter in which Fielding describes the behaviour of Partridge at the theatre, affords so complete an illustration of our proposition, that we cannot refrain from quoting some parts of it.

'Partridge gave that credit to Mr. Garrick which he had denied to Jones, and fell into so violent a trembling that his knees knocked against each other. Jones asked him what was the matter, and whether he was afraid of the warrior upon the stage?'—'O, la, sir,' said he, 'I perceive now it is what you told me. I am not afraid of anything, for I know it is but a play; and if it was really a ghost, it could do one no harm at such a distance and in so much company; and yet, if I was frightened, I am not the only person.'—'Why, who,' cries Jones, 'dost thou take to be such a coward here

besides thyself?'—'Nay, you may call me a coward if you will; but if that little man there upon the stage is not frightened, I never saw any man frightened in my life.' . . . He sat with his eyes fixed partly on the ghost and partly on Hamlet, and with his mouth open; the same passions which succeeded each other in Hamlet, succeeding likewise in him.

'Little more worth remembering occurred during the play, at the end of which Jones asked him which of the players he liked best. To this he answered, with some appearance of indignation at the question, 'The King without doubt.'—'Indeed, Mr. Partridge,' says Mrs. Miller, 'you are not of the same opinion with the town; for they are all agreed that Hamlet is acted by the best player who was ever on the stage.'—'He the best player!' cries Partridge, with a contemptuous sneer; 'why, I could act as well as he myself. I am sure, if I had seen a ghost, I should have looked in the very same manner, and done just as he did. And then, to be sure, in that scene, as you called it, between him and his mother, where you told me he acted so fine, why, any man, that is, any good man, that had such a mother, would have done exactly the same. I know you are only joking with me; but indeed, madam, though I never was at a play in London, yet I have seen acting before in the country, and the King for my money; he speaks all his words distinctly, and half as loud again as the other. Anybody may see he is an actor.'

In this excellent passage Partridge is represented as a very bad theatrical critic. But none of those who laugh at him possess the tithe of his sensibility to theatrical excellence. He admires in the wrong place; but he trembles in the right place. It is indeed because he is so much excited by the acting of Garrick, that he ranks him below the strutting, mouthing performer, who personates the King. So, we have heard it said, that in some parts of Spain and Portugal, an actor who should represent a depraved character finely, instead of calling down the applause of the audience, is hissed and pelted without mercy. It would be the same in England, if we, for one moment, thought that Shylock or Iago was standing before us. While the dramatic art was in its infancy at Athens, it produced similar effects on the ardent and imaginative spectators. It is said that they blamed Æschylus for frightening them into fits with his Furies. Herodotus tells us, that when Phrynichus produced his tragedy on the fall of Miletus, they fined him in a penalty of a thousand drachmas, for torturing their feelings by so pathetic an exhibition. They did not regard him as a great artist, but merely as a man who had given them pain. When they woke from the dis-

tressing illusion, they treated the author of it as they would have treated a messenger who should have brought them fatal and alarming tidings which turned out to be false. In the same manner, a child screams with terror at the sight of

Imagination and reason. a person in an ugly mask. He has perhaps seen the mask put on. But his imagination is too strong for his reason, and he entreats that it may be taken off.

We should act in the same manner if the grief and horror produced in us by works of the imagination amounted to real torture. But in us these emotions are comparatively languid. They rarely effect our appetite or our sleep. They leave us sufficiently at ease to trace them to their causes, and to estimate the powers which produce them. Our attention is speedily diverted from the images which call forth our tears to the art by which those images have been selected and combined. We applaud the genius of the writer. We applaud our own sagacity and sensibility, and we are comforted.

Yet, though we think that in the progress of nations towards refinement, the reasoning powers are improved at the expense of the imagination, we acknowledge, that to this rule there are many apparent exceptions. We are not, however, quite satisfied that they are more than apparent. Men reasoned better, for example, in the time of Elizabeth than in the time of Egbert; and they also wrote better poetry. But we must distinguish between poetry as a mental act, and poetry as a species of composition. If we take it in the latter sense, its excellence depends, not solely on the vigour of the imagination, but partly also on the instruments which the imagination employs. Within certain limits, therefore, poetry may be improving, while the poetical faculty is decaying. The vividness of the picture presented to the reader, is not necessarily proportioned to the vividness of the prototype which exists in the mind of the writer. In the other arts we see this clearly. Should a man, gifted by nature with all the genius of Canova, attempt to carve a statue without instruction as to the management of his chisel, or attention to the anatomy of the human body, he would produce something compared with which the Highlander at the door

of a snuff-shop would deserve admiration. If an uninitiated Raphael were to attempt a painting, it would be a mere daub; indeed, the connoisseurs say, that the early works of Raphael are little better. Yet, who can attribute this to want of imagination? Who can doubt that the youth of that great artist was passed amidst an ideal world of beautiful and majestic forms? Or, who will attribute the difference which appears between his first rude essays, and his magnificent Transfiguration, to a change in the constitution of his mind? In poetry, as in painting and sculpture, it is necessary that the imitator should be well acquainted with that which he undertakes to imitate, and expert in the mechanical part of his art. Genius will not furnish him with a vocabulary: it will not teach him what word most exactly corresponds to his idea, and will not make him a great descriptive poet, till he has looked with attention on the face of nature; or a great dramatist, till he has felt and witnessed much of the influence of the passions. Information and experience are, therefore, necessary; not for the purpose of strengthening the imagination, which is never so strong as in people incapable of reasoning—savages, children, madmen, and dreamers; but for the purpose of enabling the artist to communicate his conceptions to others.

In a barbarous age the imagination exercises a despotic power. So strong is the perception of what is unreal, that it often overpowers all the passions of the mind, and all the sensations of the body. At first, indeed, the phantasm remains undivulged, a hidden treasure, a wordless poetry, an invisible painting, a silent music, a dream of which the pains and pleasures exist to the dreamer alone, a bitterness which the heart only knoweth, a joy with which a stranger intermeddeth not. The machinery, by which ideas are to be conveyed from one person to another, is as yet rude and defective. Between mind and mind there is a great gulf. The imitative arts do not exist, or are in their lowest state. But the actions of men amply prove, that the faculty which gives birth to those arts is morbidly active. It is not yet the inspiration of poets and sculptors; but it is the amusement of the day, the terror of the night, the fertile source of wild superstitions. It turns the clouds

Imagination in a barbarous age.

into gigantic shapes, and the winds into doleful voices. The belief which springs from it is more absolute and undoubting than any which can be derived from evidence. It resembles the faith which we repose in our own sensations. Thus, the Arab, when covered with wounds, saw nothing but the dark eyes and the green kerchief of a beckoning Houri. The Northern warrior laughed in the pangs of death when he thought of the mead of Valhalla.

The first works of the imagination are, as we have said, poor and rude, not from the want of genius, but from the want of materials. Phidias could have done nothing with an old tree and a fish-bone, or Homer with the language of New Holland.

Yet the effect of these early performances, imperfect as they must necessarily be, is immense. All deficiencies are supplied by the susceptibility of those to whom they are addressed. We all know what pleasure a wooden doll, which may be bought for sixpence, will afford to a little girl. She will require no other company. She will nurse it, dress it, and talk to it all day. No grown-up man takes half so much delight in one of the incomparable babies of Chantrey. In the same manner, savages are more affected by the rude compositions of their bards than nations more advanced in civilization by the greatest masterpieces of poetry.

In process of time, the instruments by which the imagination works are brought to perfection. Men have not more imagination than their rude ancestors. We strongly suspect that they have much less. But they produce better works of imagination. Thus, up to a certain period, the diminution of the poetical powers is far more than compensated by the improvement of all the appliances and means of which those powers stand in need. Then comes the short period of splendid and consummate excellence. And then, from causes against which it is vain to struggle, poetry begins to decline.

Progress of language. The progress of language, which was at first favourable, becomes fatal to it, and, instead of compensating for the decay of the imagination, accelerates that decay, and renders it more obvious. When the adventurer in the Arabian tale anointed one of his eyes with the contents of the magical box, all the riches of the earth, however widely dispersed,

however sacredly concealed, became visible to him. But when he tried the experiment on both eyes, he was struck with blindness. What the enchanted elixir was to the sight of the body, language is to the sight of the imagination. At first it calls up a world of glorious illusions; but when it becomes too copious, it altogether destroys the visual power.

As the development of the mind proceeds, symbols, instead of being employed to convey images, are substituted for them. Civilized men think, as they trade, not in kind, but by means of a circulating medium. In these circumstances, the sciences improve rapidly, and criticism among the rest; but poetry, in the highest sense of the word, disappears. Then comes the dotage of the fine arts, a second childhood, as feeble as the former, and far more hopeless. This is the age of critical poetry, of poetry by courtesy, of poetry to which the memory, the judgment, and the wit, contribute far more than the imagination. We readily allow, that many works of this description are excellent: we will not contend with those who think them more valuable than the great poems of an earlier period. We only maintain that they belong to a different species of composition, and are produced by a different faculty.

It is some consolation to reflect, that this critical school of poetry improves as the science of criticism improves; and, that the science of criticism, like every other science, is constantly tending towards perfection. As experiments are multiplied, principles are better understood.

In some countries, in our own, for example, there has been an interval between the downfall of the creative school and the rise of the critical, a period during which imagination has been in its decrepitude, and taste in its infancy. Such a revolutionary interregnum as this will be deformed by every species of extravagance.

The first victory of good taste is over the bombast and conceits which deform such times as these. But criticism is still in a very imperfect state. What is accidental is for a long time confounded with what is essential. General theories are drawn from detached facts. How many hours the action of a play may be allowed to occupy,—how many similes an Epic Poet may introduce into his

first book,—whether a piece which is acknowledged to have a beginning and an end, may not be without a middle, and other questions as puerile as these, formerly occupied the attention of men of letters in France, and even in this country. Poets, in such circumstances as these, exhibit all the narrowness and

Science of criticism. feebleness of the criticism by which their manner has been fashioned. From outrageous absurdity they are preserved indeed by their timidity. But they perpetually sacrifice nature and reason to arbitrary canons of taste. In their eagerness to avoid the *mala prohibita* of a foolish code they are perpetually rushing on the *mala in se*. Their great predecessors, it is true, were as bad critics as themselves, or perhaps worse: but those predecessors, as we have attempted to show, were inspired by a faculty independent of criticism; and, therefore, wrote well while they judged ill.

In time men begin to take more rational and comprehensive views of literature. The analysis of poetry, which, as we have remarked, must at best be imperfect, approaches nearer and nearer to exactness. The merits of the wonderful models of former times are justly appreciated. The frigid productions of a later age rated at no more than their proper value. Pleasing and ingenious imitations of the manner of the great

Partial revival of poetry. masters appear. Poetry has a partial revival, a

Saint Martin's Summer, which, after a period of dreariness and decay, agreeably reminds us of the splendour of its June. A second harvest is gathered in, though, growing on a spent soil, it has not the heart of the former. Thus, in the present age, Monti has successfully imitated the style of Dante; and something of the Elizabethian inspiration has been caught by several eminent countrymen of our own. But never will Italy produce another *Inferno*, or England another *Hamlet*. We look on the beauties of the Modern imitations with feelings similar to those with which we see flowers disposed in vases, to ornament the drawing-rooms of a capital. We doubtless regard them with pleasure, with greater pleasure, perhaps, because, in the midst of a place ungenial to them, they remind us of the distant spots on which they flourish in spontaneous exuberance. But we miss the sap, the freshness, and the bloom. Or, if we may

borrow another illustration from Queen Scheherezade, we would compare the writers of this school to the jewellers who were employed to complete the unfinished window of the palace of Aladdin. Whatever skill or cost could do was done. Palace and bazaar were ransacked for precious stones. Yet the artists, with all their dexterity, with all their assiduity, and with all their vast means, were unable to produce anything comparable to the wonders which a spirit of a higher order had wrought in a single night.

The history of every literature with which we are acquainted confirms, we think, the principles which we have laid down. In Greece we see the imaginative school of poetry gradually fading

Schools of poetry.

into the critical. Æschylus and Pindar were succeeded by Sophocles, Sophocles by Euripides, Euripides by the Alexandrian versifiers. Of these last, Theocritus alone has left compositions which deserve to be read. The splendid and grotesque fairyland of the Old Comedy, rich with such gorgeous hues, peopled with such fantastic shapes, and vocal alternately with the sweetest peals of music and the loudest burst of elvish laughter, disappeared for ever. The masterpieces of the New Comedy are known to us by Latin translations of extraordinary merit. From these translations, and from the expressions of the ancient critics, it is clear that the original compositions were distinguished by grace and sweetness, that they sparkled with wit, and abounded with pleasing sentiment; but that the creative power was gone. Julius Cæsar called Terence a half Menander,—a sure proof that Menander was not a quarter Aristophanes.

The literature of the Romans was merely a continuation of the literature of the Greeks. The pupils started from the point at which their masters had, in the course of many generations, arrived. They thus almost wholly missed the period of original invention. The only Latin poets whose writings exhibit much vigour of imagination are Lucretius and Catullus. The Augustan age produced nothing equal to their finer passages.

Roman and Greek literature.

In France, that licensed jester, whose jingling cap and motley coat concealed more genius than ever mustered in the saloon of Ninon or of Madame Geoffrin,

was succeeded by writers as decorous and as tiresome as gentlemen-ushers.

The poetry of Italy and of Spain has undergone the same change. But no-

Change in
poetry.

where has the revolution been more complete and violent than in England.

The same person who, when a boy, had clapped his thrilling hands at the first representation of the *Tempest*, might, without attaining to a marvellous longevity, have lived to read the earlier works of Prior and Addison. The change, we believe, must, sooner or later, have taken place. But its progress was accelerated, and its character modified, by the political occurrences of the times, and particularly by two events, the closing of the theatres under the commonwealth, and the restoration of the House of Stewart.

We have said that the critical and poetical faculties are not only distinct, but almost incompatible. The state of our literature during the reigns of Elizabeth and James the First is a strong confirmation of this remark. The greatest works of imagination that the world has ever seen were produced at that period.

National taste
in sixteenth
century.

The national taste, in the meantime, was to the last degree detestable. Alliterations, puns, antithetical forms of expression lavishly employed

where no corresponding opposition existed between the thoughts expressed, strained allegories, pedantic allusions, everything, in short, quaint and affected, in matter and manner, made up what was then considered as fine writing. The eloquence of the bar, the pulpit, and the council-board, was deformed by conceits which would have disgraced the rhyming shepherds of an Italian academy. The King quibbled on the throne. We might, indeed, console ourselves by reflecting that his Majesty was a fool. But the Chancellor quibbled in concert from the wool-sack; and the Chancellor was Francis Bacon. It is needless to mention Sidney and the whole tribe of Euphuists. For Shakspeare himself, the greatest poet that ever lived, falls into the same fault whenever he means to be particularly fine. While he abandons himself to the impulse of his imagination, his compositions are not only the sweetest and the most sublime, but also the most faultless that the world has ever seen. But as soon as his critical powers come into play, he sinks to the level of Cowley; or rather he does ill, what Cowley did well. All

that is bad in his works is bad elaborately, and of malice aforethought. The only thing wanting to make them perfect was, that he should never have troubled himself with thinking whether they were good or not. Like the angels in Milton, he sinks 'with compulsion and laborious flight.' His natural tendency is upwards. That he may soar, it is only necessary that he should not struggle to fall. He resembles an American Cacique, who, possessing in unmeasured abundance the metals which in polished societies are esteemed the most precious, was utterly unconscious of their value, and gave up treasures more valuable than the imperial crowns of other countries, to secure some gaudy and far-fetched, but worthless bauble, a plated button, or a necklace of coloured glass.

We have attempted to show that, as knowledge is extended and as the reason develops itself, the imitative arts decay. We should, therefore, expect that the corruption of poetry would commence in the educated classes of society. And this, in fact, is almost constantly the case. The few great works of imagination which appear in a critical age, are, almost without exception, the works of uneducated men. Thus, Works of uneducated men. at a time when persons of quality translated French romances, and when the Universities celebrated royal deaths in verses about Tritons and Fauns, a preaching tinker produced the *Pilgrim's Progress*. And thus a ploughman startled a generation which had thought Hayley and Beattie great poets, with the adventures of Tam O'Shanter. Even in the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth the fashionable poetry had degenerated. It retained few vestiges of the imagination of earlier times. It had not yet been subjected to the rules of good taste. Affection had completely tainted madrigals and sonnets. The grotesque conceits, and the tuneless numbers of Donne, were, in the time of James, the favourite models of composition at Whitehall and at the Temple. But though the literature of the Court was in its decay, the literature of the people was in its perfection. The Muses had taken sanctuary in the theatres, the haunts of a class whose taste was not better than that of the Right Honourables and singular good Lords who admired metaphysical love-verses, but whose imagination retained all its freshness and vigour; whose censure and

approbation might be erroneously bestowed, but whose tears and laughter were never in the wrong. The infection which had tainted lyric and didactic poetry had but slightly and partially touched the drama. While the noble and the learned were comparing eyes to burning-glasses, and tears to terrestrial globes, coyness to an enthymeme, absence to a pair of compasses, and an unrequited passion to the fortieth remainderman in an entail, Juliet leaning from the balcony, and Miranda smiling over the chess-board, sent home many spectators, as kind and simple-hearted as the master and mistress of Fletcher's *Ralpho*, to cry themselves to sleep.

No species of fiction is so delightful to us as the old English drama. Even its inferior productions possess a charm not to be found in any other kind of poetry. It is the most lucid mirror that ever was held up to nature. The creations of the great dramatists of Athens produce the effect of magnificent sculptures, conceived by a mighty imagination, polished with the utmost delicacy, embodying ideas of ineffable majesty and beauty, but cold, pale, and rigid, with no bloom on the cheek, and no speculation in the eye. In all the draperies, the figures, and the faces, in the lovers and the tyrants, the Bacchanals and the Furies, there is the same marble chillness and deadness. Most of the characters of the French stage resemble the waxen gentlemen and ladies in the window of a perfumer, rouged, curled, and bedizened, but fixed in such stiff attitudes, and staring with eyes expressive of such utter unmeaningness, they cannot produce an illusion for a single moment. In the English plays alone is to be found the warmth, the mellowness, and the reality of painting. We know the minds of the men and women, as we know the faces of the men and women of Vandyke.

The excellence of these works is in a great measure the result of two peculiarities, which the critics of the French school consider the defects,—from the mixture of tragedy and comedy, and from the length and extent of the action. The former is necessary to render the drama a just representation of a world, in which the laughers and the weepers are perpetually jostling each other,—in which every event has its serious and its ludicrous side. The latter enables us to form

an intimate acquaintance with characters with which we could not possibly become familiar during the few hours to which the unities restrict the poet. In this respect, the works of Shakespeare, in particular, are miracles of art. In a piece, which may be read aloud in three hours, we see a character gradually unfold all its recesses to us. We see it change with the change of circumstances. The petulant youth rises into the politic and warlike sovereign. The profuse and courteous philanthropist sours into a hater and scorner of his kind. The tryant is altered, by the chastening of affliction, into a pensive moralist. The veteran general, distinguished by coolness, sagacity, and self-command, sinks under a conflict between love, strong as death, and jealousy, cruel as the grave. The brave and loyal subject passes, step by step, to the extremities of human depravity. We trace his progress from the first dawnings of unlawful ambition, to the cynical melancholy of his impenitent remorse. Yet, in these pieces, there are no unnatural transitions. Nothing is omitted: nothing is crowded. Great as are the changes, narrow as is the compass within which they are exhibited, they shock us as little as the gradual alterations of those familiar faces which we see every evening and every morning. The magical skill of the poet resembles that of the Dervise in the *Spectator*, who condensed all the events of seven years into the single moment during which the king held his head under the water.

It is deserving of remark, that at the time of which we speak, the plays even of men not eminently distinguished by genius,—such, for example, as Jonson, were far superior to the best works of imagination in other departments. Therefore, though we conceive that, from causes which we have already investigated, our poetry must necessarily have declined, we think that, unless its fate had been accelerated by external attacks, it might have enjoyed an euthanasia, that genius might have been kept alive by the drama, till its place could, in some degree, be supplied by taste,—that there would have been scarcely any interval between the age of sublime invention, and that of agreeable imitation. The works of Shakspeare, which were not appreciated with any degree of justice before the middle of the eighteenth century, might then have been

the recognized standards of excellence during the latter part of the seventeenth ; and the great Elizabethan writers might have been almost immediately succeeded by a generation of poets similar to those who adorn our own times.

But the Puritans drove imagination from its last asylum. They prohibited theatrical representations, and stigmatized the whole race of dramatists as enemies of morality and religion. Much that is objectionable may be found

Puritan prohibitions.

in the writers whom they reprobated; but whether they took the best measures for stopping the evil, appears to us very doubtful, and must, we think, have appeared doubtful to themselves, when, after the lapse of a few years, they saw the unclean spirit whom they had cast out return to his old haunts, with seven others fouler than himself.

By the extinction of the drama, the fashionable school of poetry,—a school without truth of sentiment or harmony of versification,—

Fashionable school of poetry.

without the powers of an earlier, or the correctness of a latter age,—was left to enjoy undisputed ascendancy. A vicious ingenuity, a morbid quickness to perceive resemblances and analogies between things apparently heterogeneous, constituted almost its only claim to admiration. Suckling was dead. Milton was absorbed in political and theological controversy. If Waller differed from the Cowleian sect of writers, he differed for the worse. He had as little poetry as they, and much less wit; nor is the languor of his verses less offensive than the ruggedness of theirs. In Denham alone the faint dawn of a better manner was discernible.

But, low as was the state of our poetry during the civil war and the Protectorate, a still deeper fall was at hand. Hitherto our literature had been idiomatic. In mind as in situation, we had been islanders. The revolutions in our taste, like the revolutions in our Government, had been settled without the interference of strangers. Had this state of things continued, the same just principles of reasoning, which, about this time, were applied with unprecedented success to every part of philosophy, would soon have conducted our ancestors to a sounder code of criticism. There were already strong signs of improvement. Our prose had at length worked itself clear from

those quaint conceits which still deformed almost every metrical composition. The parliamentary debates, and the diplomatic correspondence of that eventful period, had contributed much to this reform. In such bustling times, it was absolutely necessary to speak and write to the purpose. The absurdities of Puritanism had, perhaps, done more. At the time when that odious style, which deforms the writings of Hall and Lord Bacon, was almost universal, had appeared that stupendous work, the English Bible,—a book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice

The English Bible.

to show the whole extent of its beauty and power. The respect which the translators felt for the original, prevented them from adding any of the hideous decorations then in fashion. The groundwork of the version, indeed, was of an earlier age. The familiarity with which the Puritans, on almost every occasion, used the Scriptural phrases, was no doubt very ridiculous; but it produced good effects. It was a cant; but it drove out a cant far more offensive.

The highest kind of poetry is, in a great measure, independent of those circumstances which regulate the style of composition in prose. But with that inferior species of poetry which succeeds to it, the case is widely different. In a few years, the good sense and good taste which had weeded out affectation from moral and political treatises, would, in the natural course of things, have effected a similar reform in the sonnet and the ode. The rigour of the victorious sectaries had relaxed. A dominant religion is never ascetic. The government connived at theatrical representations. The influence of Shakspeare was once more felt. But darker days were approaching. A foreign yoke was to be imposed on our literature. Charles, surrounded by the companions of his long exile, returned to govern a nation which ought never to have cast him out, or never to have received him back. Every year which he had passed among strangers, had rendered him more unfit to rule his countrymen. In France he had seen the refractory magistracy humbled, and royal prerogative, though exercised by a foreign priest in the name of a child, victorious over all opposition. This spectacle naturally gratified a prince to whose family the opposition of Parliaments had

been so fatal. Politeness was his solitary good quality. The insults which he had suffered in Scotland, had taught him to prize it. The effeminacy and apathy of his disposition fitted him to excel in it. The elegance and vivacity of the French manners fascinated him. With the political maxims, and the social habits of his favourite people, he adopted their taste in composition; and, when seated on the throne, soon rendered it fashionable, partly by direct patronage, but still more by that contemptible policy which, for a time, made England the last of the nations, and raised Louis the Fourteenth to a height of power and fame, such as no French sovereign had ever before attained.

It was to please Charles that rhyme was first introduced into our plays. Thus, a rising blow, which would at any

time have been mortal, was dealt to the English Drama, then just recovering from its languishing condition. Two detestable manners, the indigenous and the imported, were now in a state of alternate conflict and amalgamation. The bombastic meanness of the new style was blended with the ingenious absurdity of the old; and the mixture produced something which the world had never before seen, and which, we hope, it will never see again,—something, by the side of which the worst nonsense of all other ages appears to advantage,—something, which those who have attempted to caricature it, have, against their will, been forced to flatter,—of which the tragedy of Bayes is a very favourable specimen. What Lord Dorset observed to Edward Howard, might have been addressed to almost all his contemporaries:—

“As skilful divers to the bottom fall
Swifter than those who cannot swim at all;
So, in this way of writing without thinking,
Thou hast a strange alacrity in sinking.”

From this reproach some clever men of the world must be excepted, and among them Dorset himself. Though by no means great poets, or even good versifiers, they always wrote with meaning, and sometimes with wit. Nothing indeed more strongly shows to what a miserable state literature had fallen, than the immense superiority which the occasional rhymes, carelessly thrown on paper by men of this class, possess over the elaborate productions of almost all the professed authors. The reigning

taste was so bad, that the success of a writer was in inverse proportion to his labour, and to his desire of excellence. An exception must be made for Butler, who had as much wit and learning as Cowley, and who knew, what Cowley never knew, how to use them. A great command of good homely English distinguishes him still more from the other writers of the time. As for Gondibert, those may criticise it who can read it. Imagination was extinct. Taste depraved. Poetry, driven from palaces, colleges, and theatres, had found an asylum in the obscure dwelling, where a Great Man, born out of due season, in disgrace, penury, pain, and blindness, still kept uncontaminated a character and a genius worthy of a better age.

Everything about Milton is wonderful; but nothing is so wonderful as that, in an age so unfavourable to poetry, he should have produced the greatest of modern epic poems. We are not sure that this is not in some degree to be attributed to his want of sight. The imagination is notoriously most active when the external world is shut out. In sleep its illusions are perfect. They produce all the effect of realities. In darkness its visions are always more distinct than in the light. Every person who amuses himself with what is called building castles in the air, must have experienced this. We know artists, who, before they attempt to draw a face from memory, close their eyes, that they may recall a more perfect image of the features and the expression. We are therefore inclined to believe, that the genius of Milton may have been preserved from the influence of times so unfavourable to it, by his infirmity. Be this as it may, his works at first enjoyed a very small share of popularity. To be neglected by his contemporaries was the penalty which he paid for surpassing them. His great poem was not generally studied or admired, till writers far inferior to him had, by obsequiously cringing to the public taste, acquired sufficient favour to reform it.

Of these, Dryden was the most eminent. Amidst the crowd of authors who during the earlier years of Charles the Second, courted notoriety by every species of absurdity and affectation, he speedily became conspicuous. No man exercised so much influence on the age. The

Genius of
Milton.

Dryden's
influence.

reason is obvious. On no man did the age exercise so much influence. He was perhaps the greatest of those whom we have designated as the critical poets; and his literary career exhibited, on a reduced scale, the whole history of the school to which he belonged,—the rudeness and extravagance of its infancy,—the propriety,—the grace,—the dignified good sense,—the temperate splendour of its maturity. His imagination was torpid, till it was awakened by his judgment. He began with quaint parallels and empty mouthing. He gradually acquired the energy of the satirist, the gravity of the moralist, the rapture of the lyric poet. The revolution through which English literature has been passing, from the time of Cowley to that of Scott, may be seen in miniature within the compass of his volumes.

His life divides itself in two parts. There is some debatable ground on the common frontier; but the line may be drawn with tolerable accuracy. The year 1678 is that on which we should be inclined to fix as the date of a great change in his manner. During the preceding period appeared some of his courtly panegyrics—his *Annus Mirabilis*, and most of his plays; indeed, all his rhyming tragedies. To the subsequent period belong his best dramas,—*All for Love*, *The Spanish Friar*, and *Sebastian*,—his satires, his translations, his didactic poems, his fables, and his odes.

Of the small pieces which were presented to chancellors and princes, it would scarcely be fair to speak. The greatest advantage which the Fine Arts derive from the extension of knowledge is, that the patronage of individuals be-

comes unnecessary. Some writers still affect to regret the age of patronage. None but bad writers have reason to regret it. It is always an age of general ignorance. Where ten thousand readers are eager for the appearance of a book, a small contribution from each makes up a splendid remuneration for the author. Where literature is a luxury, confined to few, each of them must pay high. If the Empress Catherine, for example, wanted an epic poem, she must have wholly supported the poet;—just as, in a remote country village, a man who wants a mutton chop is sometimes forced to take the whole sheep;—a thing which never happens where the demand

is large. But men who pay largely for the gratification of their taste, will expect to have it united with some gratification to their vanity. Flattery is carried to a shameless extent; and the habit of flattery almost inevitably introduces a false taste into composition. Its language is made up of hyperbolical commonplaces,—offensive from their triteness,—still more offensive from their extravagance. In no school is the trick of overstepping the modesty of nature so speedily acquired. The writer, accustomed to find exaggeration acceptable and necessary on one subject, uses it on all. It is not strange, therefore, that the early panegyrical verses of Dryden should be made up of meanness and bombast. They abound with the conceits which his immediate predecessors had brought into fashion. But his language and his versification were already far superior to theirs.

The *Annus Mirabilis* shows great command of expression, and a fine ear for heroic rhyme. Here its merits end. Not only has it no claim to be called poetry; but it seems to be the work of a man who could never, by any possibility, write poetry. Its affected similes are the best part of it. Gaudy weeds present a more encouraging spectacle than utter barrenness. There is scarcely a single stanza in this long work to which the imagination seems to have contributed anything. It is produced, not by creation, but by construction. It is made up, not of pictures, but of inferences. We will give a single instance, and certainly a favourable instance,—a quatrain which Johnson has praised. Dryden is describing the sea-fight with the Dutch:—

“ Amidst whole heaps of spices lights a ball;
And now their odours armed against them fly.
Some precious by shattered porcelain fall,
And some by aromatic splinters die.”

The poet should place his readers, as nearly as possible in the situation of the sufferers or the spectators. His narration ought to produce feelings similar to those which would be excited by the event itself. Is this the case here? Who, in a sea-fight, ever thought of the price of the china which beats out the brains of a sailor; or of the odour of the splinter which shatters his leg? It is not by an act of the imagination, at once calling up the scene before the interior eye, but by painful meditation,—by turning the subject round and round,—by tracing out

The *Annus
Mirabilis.*

facts into remote consequences, that these incongruous topics are introduced into the description. Homer, it is true, perpetually uses epithets which are not peculiarly appropriate. Achilles is the swift-footed, when he is sitting still. Ulysses is the much-enduring, when he has nothing to endure. Every spear casts a long shadow; every ox has crooked horns; and every woman a high bosom, though these particulars may be quite beside the purpose. In our old ballads a similar practice prevails. The gold is always red, and the ladies always gay, though nothing whatever may depend on the hue of the gold, or the temper of the ladies. But these adjectives are mere customary additions. They merge in the substantives to which they are attached. If they at all colour the idea, it is with a tinge so slight as in no respect to alter the general effect. In the passage which we have quoted from Dryden the case is very different. *Preciously* and *aromatic* divert our whole attention to themselves, and dissolve the image of the battle in a moment. The whole poem reminds us of Lucan, and of the worst parts of Lucan,—the sea-fight in the Bay of Marseilles, for example. The description of the two fleets during the night is perhaps the only passage which ought to be exempted from this censure. If it was from the *Annus Mirabilis* that Milton formed his opinion, when he pronounced Dryden a good rhymers, but no poet, he certainly judged correctly. But Dryden was, as we have said, one of those writers, in whom the period of imagination does not precede, but follow, the period of observation and reflection.

His plays, his rhyming plays in particular, are admirable subjects for those who wish to study the morbid anatomy of the drama. He was utterly destitute of the power of exhibiting real human beings. Even in the far inferior talent of composing characters out of

Dryden's characters.

these elements into which the imperfect process of our reason can resolve them, he was very deficient. His men are not even good personifications: they are not well-assorted assemblages of qualities. Now and then, indeed, he seizes a very coarse and marked distinction; and gives us, not a likeness, but a strong caricature, in which a single peculiarity is protruded, and everything else neglected; like the Marquis of Granby at an inn-door, whom we know by nothing but his baldness:

or Wilkes, who is Wilkes only in his squint. These are the best specimens of his skill. For most of his pictures seem, like Turkey carpets, to have been expressly designed not to resemble anything in the heavens above, in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth.

The latter manner he practises most frequently in his tragedies, the former in his comedies. The comic characters are without mixture, loathsome and despicable. The men of *Etherege* and *Vanbrugh* are bad enough. Those of *Smollett* are perhaps worse. But they do not approach to the *Celadons*, the *Wildbloods*, the *Woodalls*, and the *Rhodophils* of Dryden. The vices of these last are set off by a certain fierce hard impudence, to which we know nothing comparable. Their love is the appetite of beasts; their friendship the confederacy of knaves. The ladies seem to have been expressly created to form helpmeets for such gentlemen. In deceiving and insulting their old fathers, they do not perhaps exceed the license which, by immemorial prescription, has been allowed to heroines. But they also cheat at cards, rob stong boxes, put up their favours to auction, betray their friends, abuse their rivals in the style of *Billingsgate*, and invite their lovers in the language of the *Piazza*. These, it must be remembered, are not the valets and waiting-women, the *Mascarilles* and *Nerines*, but the recognized heroes and heroines, who appear as the representatives of good society, and who, at the end of the fifth act, marry and live very happily ever after. The sensuality, baseness, and malice of their natures is unredeemed by any quality of a different description,—by any touch of kindness,—or even by any honest burst of hearty hatred and revenge. We are in a world where there is no humanity, no veracity, no sense of shame,—a world for which any good-natured man would gladly take in exchange the society of Milton's devils. But as soon as we enter the regions of Tragedy, we find a great change. There is no lack of fine sentiment there. **Tragedies.**

Metastasio is surpassed in his own department. *Scudery* is out-scudered. We are introduced to people whose proceedings we can trace to no motive,—of whose feelings we can form no more idea than of a sixth sense. We have left a race of creatures, whose love is as delicate and affectionate as the passion which an alderman feels for a turtle. We find our-

selves among beings, whose love is a purely disinterested emotion,—a loyalty extending to passive obedience,—a religion, like that of the Quietists, unsupported by any sanction of hope or fear. We see nothing but despotism without power, and sacrifices without compensation.

We will give a few instances:—In Aurengzebe, Arimant, governor of Agra, falls in love with his prisoner Indamora. She rejects his suit with scorn; but assures him that she shall make great use of her power over him. He threatens to be angry. She answers, very coolly:—

“Do not: your anger, like your love, is vain:
Whene'er I please, you must be pleased again.
Knowing what power I have your will to bend,
I'll use it; for I need just such a friend.”

This is no idle menace. She soon brings a letter addressed to his rival,—orders him to read it,—asks him whether he thinks it sufficiently tender, and finally commands him to carry it himself. Such tyranny as this, it may be thought, would justify resistance. Arimant does indeed venture to remonstrate:—

“This fatal paper rather let me tear,
Than, like Bellerophon, my sentence bear.”

The answer of the lady is incomparable:—

“You may; but 'twill not be your best advice;
'Twill only give me pain of writing twice.
You know you must obey me, soon or late,
Why should you vainly struggle with your
fate?”

Poor Arimant seems to be of the same opinion. He mutters something about fate and free-will, and walks off with the billet-doux.

In the Indian Emperor, Montezuma presents Almeria with a garland as a token of his love, and offers to make her his queen. She replies:—

“I take this garland, not as given by you;
But as my merit's and my beauty's due.
As for the crown, which you, my slave, possess,
To share it with you would but make me less.”

In return for such proofs of tenderness as these, her admirer consents to murder his two sons, and a benefactor, to whom he feels the warmest gratitude. Lyndaraxa, in the Conquest of Granada, assumes the same lofty tone with Abdelmelech. He complains that she smiles upon his rival.

“Lynd. And when did I my power so far resign,
That you should regulate each look of
mine?”

Abdel. Then, when you gave your love, you
gave that power.

Lynd. 'Twas during pleasure—'tis revoked this
hour.

Abdel. I'll hate you, and this visit is my last.

Lynd. Do, if you can: you know I hold you
fast.”

That these passages violate all historical propriety; that sentiments, to which nothing similar was ever even affected except by the cavaliers of Europe, are transferred to Mexico and Agra, is a light accusation. We have no objection to a conventional world, an Illyrian puritan, or a Bohemian sea-port. While the faces are good, we care little about the background. Sir Joshua Reynolds says, that the curtains and hangings in a historical painting ought to be, not velvet or cotton, but merely drapery. The same principle should be applied to poetry and romance. The truth of character is the first object; the truth of place and time is to be considered only in the second place. Puff himself could tell the actor to turn out his toes, and remind him that Keeper Hatton was a great dancer. We wish that, in our own time, a writer of a very different order from Puff had not too often forgotten human nature in the niceties of upholstery, millinery, and cookery.

We blame Dryden, not because the persons of his dramas are not Moors or Americans, but because they are not men and women;—not because love, such as he represents it, could not exist in a harem or in a wigwam, but because it could not exist anywhere. As is the love of his heroes, such are all their other emotions. All their qualities, their courage, their generosity, their pride, are on the same colossal scale. Justice and prudence are virtues which can exist only in a moderate degree, and which change their nature and their name if pushed to excess. Of justice and prudence, therefore, Dryden leaves his favourites destitute. He did not care to give them what he could not give without measure. The tyrants and ruffians are merely the heroes altered by a few touches, similar to those which transformed the honest face of Sir Roger de Coverley into the Saracen's head. Through the grin and frown the original features are still perceptible.

It is in the tragi-comedies that these absurdities strike us most. The two races of men, or rather the angels and the baboons, are there presented to us

Principles in
painting and
poetry.

Sameness of
qualities.

together. We meet in one scene with nothing but gross, selfish, unblushing, lying libertines of both sexes, who, as a punishment, we suppose, for their depravity, are condemned to talk nothing but prose. But as soon as we meet with people who speak in verse, we know that we are in society which would have enraptured the Cathos and Madelon of Molière, in society for which Oroondates would have too little of the lover, and Clelia too much of the coquette.

Tragi-comedies.

As Dryden was unable to render his plays interesting by means of that which is the peculiar and appropriate excellence of the drama, it was necessary that he should find some substitute for it. In his comedies he supplied its place, sometimes by wit, but more frequently by intrigue, by disguises, mistakes of persons, dialogues at cross purposes, hairbreadth escapes, perplexing concealments and surprising disclosures. He thus succeeded at least in making these pieces very amusing.

In his tragedies he trusted, and not altogether without reason, to his diction and his versification. It was on this account, in all probability, that he so

eagerly adopted, and so reluctantly abandoned, the practice of rhyming in his plays. What is unnatural appears less unnatural in that species of verse, than in lines which approach more nearly to common conversation; and in the management of the heroic couplet, Dryden has never been equalled. It is unnecessary to urge any arguments against a fashion now universally condemned. But it is worthy of observation, that though Dryden was deficient in that talent which blank verse exhibits to the greatest advantage, and was certainly the best writer of heroic rhyme in our language, yet the plays which have, from the time of their first appearance, been considered as his best, are in blank verse. No experiment can be more decisive.

It must be allowed, that the worst even of the rhyming tragedies, contains good description and magnificent rhetoric. But, even when we forget that they are plays, and, passing by their dramatic improprieties, consider them with reference to the language, we are perpetually disgusted by passages which it is difficult to conceive how any author could have

written, or any audience have tolerated, rants in which the raving violence of the manner forms a strange contrast with the abject tameness of the thought. The author laid the whole fault on the audience, and declared, that when he wrote them, he considered them bad enough to please. This defence is unworthy of a man of genius, and, after all, is no defence. Otway pleased without rant; and so might Dryden have done, if he had possessed the powers of Otway. The fact is, that he had a tendency to bombast, which, though subsequently corrected by time and thought, was never wholly removed, and which showed itself in performances not designed to please the rude mob of the theatre.

Manner and thought.

Some indulgent critics have represented this failing as an indication of genius, as the profusion of unlimited wealth, the wantonness of exuberant vigour. To us it seems to bear a nearer affinity to the tawdriness of poverty, or the spasms and convulsions of weakness. Dryden surely had not more imagination than Homer, Dante, or Milton, who never fall into this vice. The swelling diction of Æschylus and Isaiah resembles that of Almanzor and Maximin no more than the tumidity of a muscle resembles the tumidity of a boil. The former is symptomatic of health and strength, the latter of debility and disease. If ever Shakspeare rants, it is not when his imagination is hurrying him along, but when he is hurrying his imagination along,—when his mind is for a moment jaded,—when, as was said of Euripides, he resembles a lion, who excites his own fury by lashing himself with his tail. What happened to Shakspeare from the occasional suspension of his powers,

Dryden and Shakspeare.

happened to Dryden from constant impotence. He, like his confederate Lee, had judgment enough to appreciate the great poets of the preceding age, but not judgment enough to shun competition with them. He felt and admired their wild and daring sublimity. That it belonged to another age than that in which he lived, and required other talents than those which he possessed; that, in aspiring to emulate it, he was wasting, in a hopeless attempt, powers which might render him pre-eminent in a different career, was a lesson which he did not learn till late. As those knavish enthu-

siasts, the French prophets, courted inspiration, by mimicking the writhings, swoonings, and gaspings, which they considered as its symptoms, he attempted, by affected fits of poetical fury, to bring on a real paroxysm; and, like them, he got nothing but his distortions for his pains.

Horace very happily compares those who, in his time, imitated Pindar, to the youth who attempted to fly to heaven on waxen wings, and who experienced so fatal and ignominious a fall. His own admirable good sense preserved him from this error, and taught him to cultivate a style in which excellence was within his reach. Dryden had not the same self-knowledge. He saw that the greatest poets were never so successful as when they rushed beyond the ordinary bounds, and that some inexplicable good fortune preserved them from tripping even when they staggered on the brink of nonsense. He did not perceive that they were guided and sustained by a power denied to himself. They wrote from the dictation of the imagination, and they found a response in the imaginations of others. He, on the contrary, sat down to work himself, by reflection and argument, into a deliberate wildness, a rational frenzy.

In looking over the admirable designs which accompany the Faust, we have always been much struck by one which represents the wizard and the tempter riding at full speed. The demon sits on his furious horse as heedlessly as if he were reposing on a chair. That he should keep his saddle in such a posture, would seem impossible to any who did not know that he was secure in the privileges of a superhuman nature. The attitude of Faust, on the contrary, is the perfection

Faust and
Mephisto-
pheles.

of horsemanship. Poets of the first order might safely write as desperately as Mephistopheles rode.

But Dryden, though admitted to communion with higher spirits, though armed with a portion of their power, and entrusted with some of their secrets, was of another race. What they might securely venture to do, it was madness in him to attempt. It was necessary that taste and critical science should supply his deficiencies.

We will give a few examples. Nothing can be finer than the description of Hector at the Grecian wall:—

ὁ δ' ἄρ' ἔσθορε φαίδιμος Ἴκτωρ,
Νυκτὶ θοῇ ἀτάλαντος ὑπώπια· λάμπε δὲ χαλτῶ
Σμερδαλέω, τὸν ἔεστο περὶ χροῖ· δοιὰ δὲ χερσὶ
Δοῦρ' ἔχεν· οὐκ ἄν τις μιν ἐρυκάκοι ἀντιβολήσας,
Νόσφι θεῶν, ὅτ' ἐσάλτο πύλας· πυρὶ δ' ὅσσε
δεδήει.—

'Αντίκα δ' οἱ μὲν τεῖχος ὑπέρβασαν, οἱ δὲ πατ'
αὐτὰς

Ποιητὰς ἐσέχυντο πύλας· Δαναοὶ δ' ἐφόβηθεν
Νῆας ἀνὰ γλαφυράς· ὄμαδος δ' ἀλίαςτος ἐτύχθη

What daring expressions! Yet how significant! How picturesque! Hector seems to rise up in his strength and fury. The gloom of night in his frown,—the fire burning in his eyes,—the javelins and the blazing armour,—the mighty rush through the gates and down the battlements,—the trampling and the infinite roar of the multitude;—everything is with us, everything is real.

Description
of Hector.

Dryden has described a very similar event in Maximin; and has done his best to be sublime, as follows:—

"There with a forest of their darts he strove,
And stood like Capaneus defying Jove;
With his broad sword the boldest beating
down,
Till Fate grew pale, lest he should win the
town,
And turn'd the iron leaves of its dark book
To make new dooms, or mend what it mis-
took."

How exquisite is the imagery of the fairy-songs in the Tempest and the Midsummer Night's Dream; Ariel riding through the twilight on the bat, or sucking in the bells of flowers with the bee; or the little bower-women of Titania, driving the spiders from the couch of the Queen! Dryden truly said, that

"Shakspeare's magic could not copied be;
Within that circle none durst walk but he."

It would have been well if he had not himself dared to step within the enchanted line, and drawn on himself a fate similar to that which, according to the old superstition, punished such presumptuous interference. The following lines are parts of the song of his fairies:—

"Merry, merry, merry, we sail from the East,
Half-tiptled at a rainbow feast.
In the bright moonshine, while winds whistle
loud,
Tivy, tivy, tivy, we mount and we fly,
All racking along in a downy white cloud;
And lest our leap from the sky prove too far,
We slide on the back of a new falling star,
And drop from above
In a jelly of love."

These are very favourable instances.

Those who wish for a bad one may read the dying speeches of Maximin, and may compare them with the last scenes of Othello and Lear.

If Dryden had died before the expiration of the first of the periods into which we have divided his literary life, he would have left a reputation, at best, little higher than that of Lee or Davenant. He would have been known only to men of letters; and by them he would have been mentioned as a writer who threw away, on subjects which he was incompetent to treat, powers which, judiciously employed, might have raised him to eminence, whose diction and whose numbers had sometimes very high merit, but all whose works were blemished by a false taste, and by errors of gross negligence. A few of his prologues and epilogues might perhaps still have been remembered and quoted. In these little pieces, he early showed all the powers

Early power
of satire.

which afterwards rendered him the greatest of modern satirists. But during the latter part of his life he gradually abandoned the drama. His plays appeared at longer intervals. He renounced rhyme in tragedy. His language became less turgid—his characters less exaggerated. He did not indeed produce correct representations of human nature; but he ceased to daub such monstrous chimeras as those which abound in his earlier pieces. Here and there passages occur worthy of the best ages of the British stage. The style which the drama requires, changes with every change of character and situation. He who can vary his manner to suit the variation is the great dramatist; but he who excels in one manner only will, when that manner happens to be appropriate, appear to be a great dramatist; as the hands of a watch, which does not go, point right once in the twelve hours. Sometimes there is a scene of solemn debate. This a mere rhetorician may write as well as the greatest tragedian that ever lived. We confess that to us the speech of Sempronius in Cato seems very nearly as good as Shakspeare could have made it. But when the Senate breaks up, and we find that the lovers and their mistresses, the hero, the villain, and the deputy-villain, all continue to harangue in the same style, we perceive the difference between a man who can write a play and a man who can write a speech. In the same manner, wit, a

talent for description, or a talent for narration, may, for a time, pass for dramatic genius. Dryden was an incomparable reasoner in verse. He was conscious of his power; he was proud of it; and the authors of the *Rehearsal* justly charged him with abusing it. His warriors and princesses are fond of discussing points of amorous casuistry, such as would have delighted a Parliament of Love. They frequently go still deeper, and speculate on philosophical necessity and the origin of evil.

There were, however, some occasions which absolutely required this peculiar talent. Then Dryden was indeed at home. All his best scenes are of this description. They are all between men; for the heroes of Dryden, like many other gentlemen, can never talk sense when ladies are in company. They are all intended to exhibit the empire of reason over violent passion. We have two interlocutors, the one eager and impassioned, the other high, cool, and judicious. The composed and rational character gradually acquires the ascendancy. His fierce companion is first inflamed to rage by his reproaches, then overawed by his equanimity, convinced by his arguments, and soothed by his persuasions. This is the case in the scene between Hector and Troilus, in that between Antony and Ventidius, and in that between Sebastian and Dorax. Nothing of the same kind in Shakspeare is equal to them, except the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius, which is worth them all three.

Some years before his death, Dryden altogether ceased to write for the stage. He had turned his powers in a new direction, with success the most splendid and decisive. His taste had gradually awakened his creative faculties. The first rank in poetry was beyond his reach, but he challenged and secured the most honourable place in the second. His imagination resembled the wings of an ostrich. It enabled him to run, though not to soar. When he attempted the highest flights, he became ridiculous; but while he remained in a lower region, he outstripped all competitors.

All his natural, and all his acquired powers, fitted him to found a good critical school of poetry. Indeed he carried his reforms too far for his age. After his

An incomparable reasoner.

Dryden's best scenes.

His imagination.

death, our literature retrograded; and a century was necessary to bring it back to the point at which he left it. The general soundness and healthfulness of his mental constitution, his information of vast superficies, though of small volume, his wit scarcely inferior to that of the most distinguished followers of

**Retrogradation
in literature.**

Donne, his eloquence, grave, deliberate, and commanding, could not

save him from disgraceful failure as a rival of Shakspeare, but raised him far above the level of Boileau. His command of language was immense. With him died the secret of the old poetical diction of England,—the art of producing rich effects by familiar words. In the following century, it was as completely lost as the Gothic method of painting glass, and was but poorly supplied by the laborious and tessellated imitations of Mason and Gray. On the other hand, he was the first writer under whose skilful management the scientific vocabulary fell into natural and pleasing verse. In this department, he succeeded as completely as his contemporary Gibbons succeeded in the similar enterprize of carving the most delicate flowers from heart of oak. The toughest and most knotty parts of language became ductile at his touch. His versification in the same manner, while it gave the first model of that neatness and precision which the following generation esteemed so highly, exhibited, at the same time, the last examples of nobleness, freedom, variety of pause and cadence. His tragedies in rhyme, however worthless in themselves, had at least served the purpose of nonsense-verses: they had taught him all the arts of melody which the heroic couplet admits. For bombast, his prevailing vice, his new subjects gave little opportunity; his better taste gradually discarded it.

He possessed, as we have said, in a pre-eminent degree, the power of reasoning in verse; and this

**Power of
reasoning.**

power was now peculiarly useful to him. His logic

is by no means uniformly sound. On points of criticism, he always reasons ingeniously; and, when he is disposed to be honest, correctly. But the theological and political questions which he undertook to treat in verse were precisely those which he understood least. His arguments, therefore, are often worthless. But the manner in which they are stated

is beyond all praise. The style is transparent. The topics follow each other in the happiest order. The objections are drawn up in such a manner, that the whole fire of the reply may be brought to bear on them. The circumlocutions which are substituted for technical phrases, are clear, neat, and exact. The illustrations at once adorn and elucidate the reasoning. The sparkling epigrams of Cowley, and the simple garrulity of the burlesque poets of Italy, are alternately employed, in the happiest manner, to give effect to what is obvious, or clearness to what is obscure.

His literary creed was catholic, even to latitudinarianism; not from any want of acuteness, but from a disposition to be easily satisfied. He was quick to discern the smallest glimpse of merit; he was indulgent even to gross improprieties, when accompanied by any redeeming talent. When he said a severe thing, it was to serve a temporary purpose,—to support an argument, or to tease a rival. Never was so able a critic so free from fastidiousness. He loved the old poets, especially Shakspeare. He admired the ingenuity which Donne and Cowley had so wildly abused. He did justice, amidst the general silence, to the memory of Milton. He praised to the skies the schoolboy lines of Addison. Always looking on the fair side of every object, he admired extravagance, on account of the invention which he supposed it to indicate; he excused affectation in favour of wit; he tolerated even tameness, for the sake of the correctness which was its concomitant.

It was probably to this turn of mind, rather than to the more disgraceful causes which Johnson has assigned, that we are to attribute the exaggeration which disfigures the panegyrics of Dryden. No writer, it must be owned, has carried the flattery of dedication to a greater length. But this was not, we suspect, merely interested servility: it was the overflowing of a mind singularly disposed to admiration,—of a mind which diminished vices, and magnified virtues and obligations. The most adulatory of his addresses is that in which he dedicates the State of Innocence to Mary of Modena. Johnson thinks it strange that any man should use such language, without self-detestation. But he has not remarked, that to the very same work is prefixed an eulogium on Milton, which certainly could not have

**Flattery of
dedication.**

been acceptable at the court of Charles the Second. Many years later, when Whig principles were in a great measure triumphant, Spratt refused to admit a monument of John Philips into Westminster Abbey—because, in the Epitaph, the name of Milton incidentally occurred. The walls of his church, he declared, should not be polluted by the name of a republican! Dryden was attached, both by principle and interest, to the Court. But nothing could deaden his sensibility to excellence. We are unwilling to accuse him severely, because the same disposition, which prompted him to pay so generous a tribute to the memory of a poet whom his patrons detested, hurried him into extravagance when he described a princess, distinguished by the splendour of her beauty, and the graciousness of her manners.

This is an amiable temper; but it is not the temper of great men. Where there is elevation of character, there will be fastidiousness. It is only in novels and on tombstones that we meet with people who are indulgent to the faults of others, and unmerciful to their own; and Dryden, at all events, was not one of these paragons. His charity was extended most liberally to others, but it certainly began at home. In taste he was by no means deficient. His critical works are, beyond all comparison, superior

to any which had, till then, appeared in England. They were generally intended as apologies for his own poems, rather than as expositions of general principles; he, therefore, often attempts to deceive the reader by sophistry, which could scarcely have deceived himself. His dicta are the dicta not of a judge, but of an advocate;—often of an advocate in an unsound cause. Yet, in the very act of misrepresenting the laws of composition, he shows how well he understands them. But he was perpetually acting against his better knowledge. His sins were sins against light. He trusted that what was bad would be pardoned for the sake of what was good. What was good, he took no pains to make better. He was not, like most persons who rise to eminence, dissatisfied even with his best productions. He had set up no unattainable standard of perfection, the contemplation of which might at once improve and mortify him. His path was not attended by an unapproachable mirage of excellence, for ever receding, and for ever pursued. He was not disgusted by

the negligence of others, and he extended the same toleration to himself. His mind was of a slovenly character,—fond of splendour, but indifferent to neatness. Hence most of his writings exhibit the sluttish magnificence of a Russian noble, all vermin and diamonds, dirty linen and inestimable sables. Those faults which spring from affectation, time and thought in a great measure removed from his poems. But his carelessness he retained to the last. If towards the close of his life he less frequently went wrong from negligence, it was only because long habits of composition rendered it more easy to go right. In his best pieces, we find false rhymes,—triplets, in which the third line appears to be a mere intruder, and, while it breaks the music, adds nothing to the meaning,—gigantic Alexandrines of fourteen and sixteen syllables, and truncated verses for which he never troubled himself to find a termination or a partner.

Such are the beauties and the faults which may be found in profusion throughout the later works of Dryden. A more just and complete estimate of his natural and acquired powers,—of the merits of his style and of its blemishes, may be formed from the *Hind and Panther*, than from any of his other writings. As a didactic poem, it is far superior to the *Religio Laici*. The satirical parts, particularly the character of Burnet, are scarcely inferior to the best passages in *Absalom* and *Achitophel*. There are, moreover, occasional touches of a tenderness which affects us more, because it is decent, rational, and manly, and reminds us of the best scenes in his tragedies. His versification sinks and swells in happy unison with the subject; and his wealth of language seems to be unlimited. Yet, the carelessness with which he has constructed his plot, and the innumerable inconsistencies into which he is every moment falling, detract much from the pleasure which such various excellence affords.

In *Absalom* and *Achitophel* he hit upon a new and rich vein, which he worked with signal success. The ancient satirists were the subjects of a despotic government. They were compelled to abstain from political topics, and to confine their attention to the frailties of private life. They might, indeed, sometimes venture to take liberties with public men,

“*Quorum Flaminia tegitur cinis atque Latina.*”

Thus Juvenal immortalized the obsequious senators who met to decide the fate of the memorable turbot. His fourth satire frequently reminds us of the great political poem of Dryden; but it was not

Ancient satirists.

written till Domitian had fallen, and it wants something of the peculiar flavour, which belongs to contemporary invective alone. His anger has stood so long, that, though the body is not impaired, the effervescence, the first cream is gone. Boileau lay under similar restraints; and if he had been free from all restraint, would have been no match for our countryman.

The advantages which Dryden derived from the nature of his subject he improved to the very utmost. His manner is almost perfect. The style of Horace and Boileau is fit only for light subjects. The Frenchman did indeed attempt to turn the theological reasonings of the Provincial Letters into verse, but with very indifferent success. The glitter of Pope is cold. The ardour of Persius is without brilliancy. Magnificent versification and ingenious combinations rarely harmonize with the expression of deep feeling. In Juvenal and

Style of Juvenal and Dryden.

Dryden alone we have the sparkle and the heat together. Those great satirists succeeded in communicating the fervour of their feelings to materials the most incombustible, and kindled the whole mass into a blaze, at once dazzling and destructive. We cannot indeed, think, without regret, of the part which so eminent a writer as Dryden took in the disputes of that period. There was, no doubt, madness and wickedness on both sides. But there was liberty on the one, and despotism on the other. On this point, however, we will not dwell. At Talavera the English and French troops for a moment suspended their conflict, to drink of a stream which flowed between them. The shells were passed across from enemy to enemy without apprehension or molestation. We, in the same manner, would rather assist our political adversaries to drink with us of that fountain of intellectual pleasure, which should be the common refreshment of both parties, than disturb and pollute it with the havoc of unseasonable hostilities.

Macflecnoe is inferior to Absalom and Achitophel only in the subject. In the execution it is even superior. But the

greatest work of Dryden was the last, the Ode on Saint Cecilia's Day. It is the masterpiece of the second class of poetry, and ranks but just below the great models of the first. It reminds us of the Pegasus of Achilles—

ὄς, καὶ θνητὸς ἔων ἔπεθ' ἵπποις ἀθανάτοισι.

By comparing it with the impotent ravings of the heroic tragedies, we may measure the progress which the mind of Dryden had made. He had learned

Ode on St. Cecilia's Day.

to avoid a too audacious competition with higher natures, to keep at a distance from the verge of bombast or nonsense, to venture on no expression which did not convey a distinct idea to his own mind. There is none of that "darkness visible" of style which he had formerly affected, and in which the greatest poets only can succeed. Everything is definite, significant, and picturesque. His early writings resembled the gigantic works of those Chinese gardeners who attempt to rival nature herself, to form cataracts of terrific height and sound, to raise precipitous ridges of mountains, and to imitate in artificial plantations the vastness and the gloom of some primeval forest. This manner he abandoned; nor did he ever adopt the Dutch taste which Pope affected, the trim parterres, and the rectangular walks. He rather resembled our Kents and Browns, who, imitating the great features of landscape without emulating them, consulting the genius of the place, assisting nature and carefully disguising their art, produced, not a Chamouni or a Niagara, but a Stowe, or a Hagley.

We are, on the whole, inclined to regret that Dryden did not accomplish his purpose of writing an epic poem. It certainly would not have been a work of the highest rank. It would not have rivalled the Iliad, the Odyssey, or the Paradise Lost; but it would have been superior to the productions of Apollonius Lucan, or Statius, and not inferior to the Jerusalem Delivered. It would probably have been a vigorous narrative, animated with something of the spirit of the old romances, enriched with much splendid description, and interspersed with fine declamations and disquisitions. The danger of Dryden would have been from aiming too high; from dwelling too much, for example, on his angels of kingdoms, and attempting a competition with that great writer, who in his own time had

so incomparably succeeded in representing to us the sights and sounds of another world. To Milton, and to Milton alone, belonged the secrets of the great deep, the beach of sulphur, the ocean of fire, the palaces of the fallen dominations, glimmering through the everlasting shade, the silent wilderness of verdure and fragrance where armed angels kept watch over the sleep of the first lovers, the portico of diamond, the sea of jasper, the sapphire pavement em-purpled with celestial roses, and the infinite ranks of the Cherubim, blazing with adamant and gold. The council, the tournament, the procession, the crowded cathedral, the camp, the guardroom, the chase, were the proper scenes for Dryden.

Milton and
Dryden.

But we have not space to pass in review all the works which Dryden wrote. We, therefore, will not speculate longer on those which he might possibly have written. He may, on the whole, be pronounced to have been a man possessed of splendid talents, which he often abused, and of a sound judgment, the admonitions of which he often neglected; a man who succeeded only in an inferior department of his art, but who, in that department, succeeded pre-eminently; and who, with a more independent spirit, a more anxious desire of excellence, and more respect for himself, would, in his own walk, have attained to absolute perfection.

Talents and
judgment.

HISTORY.

(EDINBURGH REVIEW, MAY, 1828.)

The Romance of History. England. By HENRY NEELE.
London, 1828.

To write History respectably—that is, to abbreviate dispatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and vices they united, and abounding in *withs* and *withouts*; all this is very easy.

But to be a really great historian is perhaps the rarest of intellectual distinctions. Many scientific works are, in their kind, absolutely perfect. There are poems which we should be inclined to designate as faultless, or as disfigured only by blemishes which pass unnoticed in the general blaze of excellence. There are speeches, some speeches of Demosthenes particularly, in which it would be impossible to alter a word without altering it for the worse. But we are acquainted with no History which approaches to our notion of what a history

ought to be—with no history which does not widely depart, either on the right hand or on the left, from the exact line.

The cause may easily be assigned. This province of literature is a debatable land. It lies on the confines of two distinct territories. It is under the jurisdiction of two hostile powers; and, like other districts similarly situated, it is ill-defined, ill-cultivated, and ill-regulated. Instead of being equally shared between its two rulers, the Reason and the Imagination, it falls alternately under the sole and absolute dominion of each. It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes

theory. History, it has been said, is philosophy teaching by examples. Unhappily what the philosophy gains in soundness and depth, the examples generally lose in

vividness. A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. A historian's qualifications.

Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials which he finds, and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by additions of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis. Those who can justly estimate these almost insuperable difficulties will not think it strange that every writer should have failed, either in the narrative or in the speculative department of history.

It may be laid down as a general rule, though subject to considerable qualifications and exceptions, that history begins in Novel and ends in Essay. Of the romantic historians Herodotus is the earliest and

the best. His animation, his simple-hearted tenderness, his wonderful talent for description and dialogue, and the pure sweet flow of his language, place him at the head of the narrators. He reminds us of a delightful child. There is a grace beyond the reach of affectation in his awkwardness, a malice in his innocence, an intelligence in his nonsense, an insinuating eloquence in his lisp. We know of no writer who makes such interest for himself and his book in the heart of the reader. At the distance of three-and-twenty centuries, we feel for him the same sort of pitying fondness which Fontaine and Gay are said to have inspired in society. He has written an incomparable book. He has written something better perhaps than the best history; but he has not written a good history; he is, from the first to the last

chapter, an inventor. We do not here refer merely to those gross fictions with which he has been reproached by the critics of later times. We speak of that colouring which is equally diffused over his whole narrative, and which perpetually leaves the most sagacious reader in doubt what to reject and what to receive. The most authentic parts of his work bear the same relation to his wildest legends, which Henry the Fifth bears to the *Tempest*. There was an expedition undertaken by Xerxes against Greece; and there was an invasion of France. There was a battle at Platea; and there was a battle at Agincourt. Cambridge and Exeter, the Constable and the Dauphin, were persons as real as Demaratus and Pausanias. The harangue of the Archbishop on the Salic Law and the Book of Numbers differs much less from the orations which have in all ages proceeded from the Right Reverend bench, than the speeches of Mardonius and Artabanus from those which were delivered at the Council-board of Susa. Shakspeare gives us enumerations of armies, and returns of killed and wounded, which are not, we suspect, much less accurate than those of Herodotus. There are passages in Herodotus nearly as long as acts of Shakspeare, in which everything is told dramatically, and in which the narrative serves only the purpose of stage-directions. It is possible, no doubt, that the substance of some real conversations may have been reported to the historian. But events which, if they ever happened, happened in ages and nations so remote that the particulars could never have been known to him, are related with the greatest minuteness of detail. We have all that Candaules said to Gyges, and all that passed between Astyages and Harpagus. We are, therefore, unable to judge whether, in the account which he gives of transactions respecting which he might possibly have been well informed, we can trust to anything beyond the naked outline; whether, for example, the answer of Gelon to the ambassadors of the Grecian confederacy, or the expressions which passed between Aristides and Themistocles at their famous interview, has been correctly transmitted to us. The great events are, no doubt, faithfully related. So, probably, are many of the slighter circumstances; but which of them it is impossible to ascertain. The fictions are so much like the facts, and the facts

so much like the fictions, that, with respect to many most interesting particulars, our belief is neither given nor withheld, but remains in an uneasy and interminable state of abeyance. We know that there is truth, but we cannot exactly decide where it lies.

The faults of Herodotus are the faults of a simple and imaginative mind. Children and servants are remarkably Herodotean in their style of narration. They tell everything dramatically. Their *says hes* and *says shes* are proverbial.

Dramatic
narration

Every person who has had to settle their disputes knows that, even when they have no intention to deceive, their reports of conversation always require to be carefully sifted. If an educated man were giving an account of the late change of administration, he would say—"Lord Goderich resigned; and the King, in consequence, sent for the Duke of Wellington." A porter tells the story as if he had been hid behind the curtains of the royal bed at Windsor: "So Lord Goderich says, 'I cannot manage this business; I must go out.' So the King says,—says he, 'Well, then, I must send for the Duke of Wellington—that's all.'" This is in the very manner of the father of history.

Herodotus wrote as it was natural that he should write. He wrote for a nation susceptible, curious, lively, insatiably desirous of novelty and excitement; for a nation in which the fine arts had attained their highest excellence, but in which philosophy was still in its infancy. His countrymen had but recently begun to cultivate prose composition. Public transactions had generally been recorded in verse. The first historians might, therefore, indulge without fear of censure, in the licence allowed to their predecessors the bards. Books were few. The events of former times were learned from tradition and from popular ballads; the manners of foreign countries from the reports of travellers. It is well known that the mystery which overhangs what is distant, either in space or time, frequently prevents us from censuring as unnatural what we perceive to be impossible. We stare at a dragoon, who has killed three French cuirassiers, as a prodigy; yet we read, without the least disgust, how Godfrey slew his thousands, and Rinaldo his ten thousands. Within the last hundred years, stories about

Tradition and
ballads.

China and Bantam, which ought not to have imposed on an old nurse, were gravely laid down as foundations of political theories by eminent philosophers. What the time of the Crusades is to us, the generation of Cræsus and Solon was to the Greeks of the time of Herodotus. Babylon was to them what Pekin was to the French Academicians of the last century.

For such a people was the book of Herodotus composed; and, if we may trust to a report, not sanctioned indeed by writers of high authority, but in itself not improbable, it was composed not to be read, but to be heard. It was not to the slow circulation of a few copies, which the rich only could possess, that the aspiring author looked for his reward. The great Olympian festival,—the solemnity which collected multitudes, proud of the Grecian name, from the wildest mountains of Doris, and the remotest colonies of Italy and Libya,—was to witness his triumph. The interest of the narrative, and the beauty of the style,

Effect of recitation.

were aided by the imposing effect of recitation, —by the splendour of the spectacle,—by the powerful influence of sympathy. A critic, who could have asked for authorities in the midst of such a scene, must have been of a cold and sceptical nature; and few such critics were there. As was the historian, such were the auditors,—inquisitive, credulous, easily moved by religious awe or patriotic enthusiasm. They were the very men to hear with delight of strange beasts, and birds, and trees,—of dwarfs, and giants, and cannibals—of gods, whose very names it was impiety to utter,—of ancient dynasties, which had left behind them monuments surpassing all the works of later times,—of towns like provinces,—of rivers like seas,—of stupendous walls, and temples, and pyramids,—of the rites which the Magi performed at day-break on the tops of the mountains,—of the secrets inscribed on the eternal obelisks of Memphis. With equal delight they would have listened to the graceful romances of their own country. They now heard of the exact accomplishment of obscure predictions, of the punishment of crimes over which the justice of heaven had seemed to slumber,—of dreams, omens, warnings from the dead,—of princesses, for whom noble suitors contended in every generous exercise of strength and skill,—of infants, strangely

preserved from the dagger of the assassin, to fulfil high destinies.

As the narrative approached their own times, the interest became still more absorbing. The chronicler had now to tell the story of that great conflict, from which Europe dates its intellectual and political supremacy,—a story which, even at this distance of time, is the most marvellous and the most touching in the annals of the human race,—a story abounding with all that is wild and wonderful, with all that is pathetic and animating; with the gigantic caprices of infinite wealth and despotic power,—with the mightier miracles of wisdom, of virtue, and of courage. He told them of rivers dried up in a day,—of provinces famished for a meal,—of a passage for ships hewn through the mountains,—of a road for armies spread upon the waves,—of monarchies and commonwealths swept away,—of anxiety, of terror, of confusion, of despair!—and then of proud and stubborn hearts tried in that extremity of evil, and not found wanting,—of resistance long maintained against desperate odds,—of lives dearly sold, when resistance could be maintained no more,—of signal deliverance, and of unsparing revenge. Whatever gave a stronger air of reality to a narrative so well calculated to inflame the passions, and to flatter national pride, was certain to be favourably received.

Between the time at which Herodotus is said to have composed his history, and the close of the Peloponnesian war, about forty years elapsed,—forty years, crowded with great military and political events. The circumstances of that period produced a great effect on the Grecian character; and nowhere was this effect so remarkable as in the illustrious democracy of Athens. An Athenian, indeed, even in the time of Herodotus, would scarcely have written a book so romantic and garrulous as that of Herodotus. As civilization advanced, the citizens of that famous republic became still less visionary, and still less simple-hearted. They aspired to know, where there ancestors had been content to doubt; they began to doubt, where their ancestors had thought it their duty to believe. Aristophanes is fond of alluding to this change in the temper of his countrymen. The father and son, in the *Clouds*, are evidently representatives

of the generations to which they respectively belonged. Nothing more clearly illustrates the nature of this moral revolution than the change which passed upon tragedy. The wild sublimity of Æschylus became the scoff of every young Phidippides. Lectures on abstruse points of philosophy, the fine distinctions of casuistry, and the dazzling fence of rhetoric, were substituted for poetry. The language lost something of that infantine sweetness which had characterized it. It became less like the ancient Tuscan, and more like modern French.

The fashionable logic of the Greeks was, indeed, far from strict. Logic never can be strict where books are scarce, and where information is conveyed orally. We are all aware how frequently fallacies, which, when set down on paper, are at once detected, pass for unanswerable arguments when dexterously and volubly urged in Parliament, at the bar, or in private conversation. The reason is evident. We cannot inspect them closely enough to perceive their inaccuracy. We cannot readily compare them with each other. We lose sight of one part of the subject before another, which ought to be received in connection with it, comes before us; and as there is no immutable record of what has been admitted, and of what has been denied, direct contradictions pass muster with little difficulty.

Education of a Greek. Almost all the education of a Greek consisted in talking and listening. His opinions on government were picked up in the debates of the assembly. If he wished to study metaphysics, instead of shutting himself up with a book, he walked down to the market-place to look for a sophist. So completely were men formed to these habits, that even writing acquired a conversational air. The philosophers adopted the form of dialogue, as the most natural mode of communicating knowledge. Their reasonings have the merits and the defects which belong to that species of composition; and are characterized rather by quickness and subtilty, than by depth and precision. Truth is exhibited in parts, and by glimpses. Innumerable clever hints are given; but no sound and durable system is erected. The *argumentum ad hominem*, a kind of argument most efficacious in debate, but utterly useless for the investigation of general principles, is among their favourite resources. Hence, though nothing can

be more admirable than the skill which Socrates displays in the conversation which Plato has reported or invented, his victories, for the most part, seem to us unprofitable. A trophy is set up; but no new province is added to the dominions of the human mind.

Still, where thousands of keen and ready intellects were constantly employed in speculating on the qualities of actions, and on the principles of government, it was impossible that history should retain its old character. It became less gossiping and less picturesque; but much more accurate, and somewhat more scientific.

The history of Thucydides differs from that of Herodotus as a portrait differs from the representation of an imaginary scene; as the Burke or Fox of Reynolds differs from his Ugolino or his Beaufort. In the former case, the archetype is given: in the latter, it is created. The faculties which are required for the latter purpose are of a higher and rarer order than those which suffice for the former, and indeed necessarily comprize them. He who is able to paint what he sees with the eye of the mind, will surely be able to paint what he sees with the eye of the body. He who can invent a story, and tell it well, will also be able to tell, in an interesting manner, a story which he has not invented. If, in practice, some of the best writers of fiction have been among the worst writers of history, it has been because one of their talents had merged in another so completely, that it could not be severed; because, having long been habituated to invent and narrate at the same time, they found it impossible to narrate without inventing.

Some capricious and discontented artists have affected to consider portrait-painting as unworthy of a man of genius. Some critics have spoken in the same contemptuous manner of history. Johnson puts the case thus: The historian tells either what is false or what is true. In the former case he is no historian. In the latter, he has no opportunity for displaying his abilities. For truth is one; and all who tell the truth must tell it alike.

It is not difficult to elude both the horns of this dilemma. We will recur to the analogous art of portrait-painting. Any man with eyes and hands may be taught to take a likeness. The process, up to a certain point, is merely mechanical.

Painting and writing.

Johnson on historians.

Portrait painting.

If this were all, a man of talents might justly despise the occupation. But we could mention portraits which are resemblances,—but not mere resemblances; faithful,—but much more than faithful; portraits which condense into one point of time, and exhibit, at a single glance, the whole history of turbid and eventful lives—in which the eye seems to scrutinize us, and the mouth to command us—in which the brow menaces, and the lip almost quivers with scorn—in which every wrinkle is a comment on some important transaction. The account which Thucydides has given of the retreat from Syracuse, is, among narratives, what Vandyke's Lord Strafford is among paintings.

Diversity, it is said, implies error: truth is one, and admits of no degrees. We answer, that this principle holds good only in abstract reasonings. When we talk of the truth of imitation in the fine arts, we mean an imperfect and a graduated truth. No picture is exactly like the original; nor is a picture good in propor-

Pictures and originals.

tion as it is like the original. When Sir Thomas Lawrence paints a handsome peeress he does not contemplate her through a powerful microscope, and transfer to the canvas the pores of the skin, the blood-vessels of the eye, and all the other beauties which Gulliver discovered in the Brobdingnagian maids of honour. If he were to do this, the effect would not merely be unpleasant, but unless the scale of the picture were proportionably enlarged, would be absolutely *false*. And, after all, a microscope of greater power than that which he had employed, would convict him of innumerable omissions. The same may be said of history. Perfectly and absolutely true it cannot be: for to be perfectly and absolutely true, it ought to record *all* the slightest particulars of the slightest transactions—all the things done, and all the words uttered, during the time of which it treats. The omission of any circumstance, however insignificant, would be a defect. If history were written thus, the Bodleian library would not contain the occurrences of a week. What is told in the fullest and most accurate annals bears an infinitely small proportion to what is suppressed. The difference between the copious work of Clarendon, and the account of the civil wars in the abridgment of Goldsmith, vanishes, when compared with the immense mass of facts, respecting which both are equally silent.

No picture, then, and no history, can present us with the whole truth: but those are the best pictures and the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effect of the whole. He who is deficient in the art of selection may, by showing nothing but the truth, produce all the effect of the grossest falsehood. It perpetually happens that one writer tells less truth than another, merely because he tells more truths. In the imitative arts we constantly see

Imitative arts.

this. There are lines in the human face, and objects in landscape, which stand in such relations to each other, that they ought either to be all introduced into a painting together, or all omitted together. A sketch into which none of them enters may be excellent; but if some are given and others left out, though there are more points of likeness, there is less likeness. An outline scrawled with a pen, which seizes the marked features of a countenance, will give a much stronger idea of it than a bad painting in oils. Yet the worst painting in oils that ever hung at Somerset House resembles the original in many more particulars. A bust of white marble may give an excellent idea of a blooming face. Colour the lips and cheeks of the bust, leaving the hair and eyes unaltered, and the similarity, instead of being more striking, will be less so.

History has its foreground and its background: and it is principally in the management of its perspective that one artist differs from another. Some events must be represented on a large scale; others diminished; the great majority will be lost in the dimness of the horizon; and a general idea of their joint effect will be given by a few slight touches.

In this respect, no writer has ever equalled Thucydides. He was a perfect master of the art of gradual diminution. His history is sometimes as concise as a chronological chart; yet it is always perspicuous. It is sometimes as minute as one of Lovelace's letters; yet it is never prolix. He never fails to contract and to expand it in the right place.

Thucydides.

Thucydides borrowed from Herodotus the practice of putting speeches of his own into the mouths of his characters. In Herodotus this usage is scarcely censurable. It is of a piece with his whole manner. But it is altogether incongruous in the work of his successor, and violates, not only the accuracy of history,

but the decencies of fiction. When once we enter into the spirit of Herodotus, we find no inconsistency. The conventional probability of his drama is preserved from the beginning to the end. The deliberate orations, and the familiar dialogues, are in strict keeping with each other. But the speeches of Thucydides are neither preceded nor followed by anything with which they harmonize. They give to the whole book something of the grotesque character of those Chinese pleasure-grounds, in which perpendicular rocks of granite start up in the midst of a soft green plain. Invention is shocking, where truth is in such close juxtaposition with it.

Thucydides honestly tells us that some of these discourses are purely fictitious. He may have reported the substance of others correctly. But it is clear from the internal evidence that he has preserved no more than the substance. His own peculiar habits of thought and expression are everywhere discernible. Individual and national peculiarities are seldom to be traced in the sentiments, and never in the diction. The oratory of the Corinthians and Thebans is not less Attic, either in matter or in manner, than that of the Athenians. The style of Cleon is as pure, as austere, as terse, and as significant, as that of Pericles.

In spite of this great fault, it must be allowed that Thucydides has surpassed all his rivals in the art of historical narration, in the art of producing an effect on the imagination, by skilful selection and disposition, without indulging in the license of invention. But narration, though an important part of the business of a historian, is not the whole. To append a moral to a work of fiction, is either useless or superfluous. A fiction may give a more impressive effect to what is already known, but it can teach nothing new. If it presents to us characters and trains of events to which our experience furnishes us with nothing similar, instead of deriving instruction from it, we pronounce it unnatural. We do not form our opinions from it: but we try it by our preconceived opinions. Fiction, therefore, is essentially imitative. Its merit consists in its resemblance to a model with which we are already familiar, or to which at least we can instantly refer. Hence it is that the anecdotes, which interest us most strongly in authentic narrative, are

offensive when introduced into novels; that what is called the romantic part of history, is in fact the least romantic. It is delightful as history, because it contradicts our previous notions of human nature, and of the connection of causes and effects. It is, on that very account, shocking and incongruous in fiction. In fiction, the principles are given to find the facts: in history, the facts are given to find the principles; and the writer who does not explain the phenomena as well as state them, performs only one half of his office. Facts are the mere dross of history. It is from the abstract truth which interpenetrates them, and lies latent among them, like gold in the ore, that the mass derives its whole value: and the precious particles are generally combined with the baser in such a manner that the separation is a task of the utmost difficulty.

Here Thucydides is deficient: the deficiency, indeed, is not discreditable to him. It was the inevitable effect of circumstances. It was in the nature of things necessary that, in some part of its progress through political science, the human mind should reach that point which it attained in his time. Knowledge advances by steps, and not by leaps. The axioms of an English debating club would have been startling and mysterious paradoxes to the most enlightened statesman of Athens. But it would be as absurd to speak contemptuously of the Athenian on this account, as to ridicule Strabo for not having given us an account of Chili, or to talk of Ptolemy as we talk of Sir Richard Phillips. Still, when we wish for solid geographical information, we must prefer the solemn coxcombry of Pinkerton to the noble work of Strabo. If we wanted instruction respecting the solar system, we should consult the silliest girl from a boarding-school, rather than Ptolemy.

Thucydides was undoubtedly a sagacious and reflecting man. This clearly appears from the ability with which he discusses practical questions. But the talent of deciding on the circumstances of a particular case, is often possessed in highest perfection by persons destitute of the power of generalization. Men skilled in the military tactics of civilized nations, have been amazed at the far-sightedness and penetration which a Mohawk displays in concerting his stratagems, or in discerning those of his

Advance of knowledge.

enemies. In England no class possesses so much of that peculiar ability which is required for constructing ingenious schemes, and for obviating remote difficulties, as the thieves and the thief-takers. Women have more of this dexterity than men. Lawyers have more of it than statesmen: statesmen have more of it than philosophers. Monk had more of it than Harrington and all his club. Walpole had more of it than Adam Smith or Beccaria. Indeed, the species of discipline by which this dexterity is acquired, tends to contract the mind, and to render it incapable of abstract reasoning.

The Grecian statesmen of the age of Thucydides were distinguished by their practical sagacity, their insight into motives, their skill in devising means for the attainment of their ends. A state of society in which the rich were constantly planning the oppression of the poor, and the poor the spoliation of the rich, in which the ties of party had superseded those of country, in which revolutions and counter-revolutions were events of daily occurrence, was naturally prolific in desperate and crafty political adventurers. This was the very school in which men were likely to acquire the dissimulation of Mazarin, the judicious temerity of Richelieu, the penetration, the exquisite tact, the almost instinctive presentiment of approaching events which gave so much authority to the counsel of Shaftesbury, that "it was as if a man had inquired of the oracle of God." In this

school Thucydides studied; and his wisdom is that which such a school would naturally afford. He judges better of circumstances than of principles. The more a question is narrowed, the better he reasons upon it. His work suggests many most important considerations respecting the first principles of government and morals, the growth of factions, the organization of armies, and the mutual relations of communities. Yet all his general observations on these subjects are very superficial. His most judicious remarks differ from the remarks of a really philosophical historian, as a sum correctly cast up by a book-keeper, from a general expression discovered by an algebraist. The former is useful only in a single transaction: the latter may be applied to an infinite number of cases.

This opinion will, we fear, be considered

as heterodox. For, not to speak of the illusion which the sight of a Greek type, or the sound of a Greek diphthong, often produces, there are some peculiarities in the manner of Thucydides, which in no small degree have tended to secure to him the reputation of profundity. His book is evidently the book of a man and a statesman; and in this respect presents a remarkable contrast to the delightful childishness of Herodotus. Throughout it there is an air of matured power, of grave and melancholy reflection, of impartiality and habitual self-command. His feelings are rarely indulged, and speedily repressed. Vulgar prejudices of every kind, and particularly vulgar superstitions, he treats with a cold and sober disdain peculiar to himself. His style is weighty, condensed, antithetical, and not unfrequently obscure. But when we look at his political philosophy, without regard to these circumstances, we find him to have been, what indeed it would have been a miracle if he had not been, simply an Athenian of the fifth century before Christ.

Xenophon is commonly placed, but we think without much reason, in the same rank with Herodotus and Thucydides. He resembles them, indeed, in the purity and sweetness of his style; but in spirit, he rather resembles that later school of historians, whose works seem to be fables, composed for a moral, and who, in their eagerness to give us warnings and example, forget to give us men and women. The Life of Cyrus, whether we look upon it as a history or a romance, seems to us a very wretched performance. The Expedition of the Ten Thousand, and the History of Grecian Affairs, are certainly pleasant reading; but they indicate no great power of mind. In truth, Xenophon, though his taste was elegant, his disposition amiable, and his intercourse with the world extensive, had, we suspect, rather a weak head. Such was evidently the opinion of that extraordinary man to whom he early attached himself, and for whose memory he entertained an idolatrous veneration. He came in only for the milk with which Socrates nourished his babes in philosophy. A few saws of morality, and a few of the simplest doctrines of natural religion, were enough for the good young man. The strong meat, the bold speculations on physical and metaphysical science, were reserved

for auditors of a different description. Even the lawless habits of a captain of mercenary troops could not change the tendency which the character of Xenophon early acquired. To the last he seems to have retained a sort of heathen Puritanism. The sentiments of piety and virtue which abound in his works are those of a well-meaning man, somewhat timid and narrow-minded, devout from constitution rather than from rational conviction. He was as superstitious as Herodotus, but in a way far more offensive. The very peculiarities which charm us in an infant—the toothless mumbling, the stammering, the tottering, the helplessness, the causeless tears and laughter—are disgusting in old age. In the same manner, the absurdity which precedes a period of general intelligence is often pleasing; that which follows it is contemptible. The nonsense of Herodotus is that of a baby. The nonsense of Xenophon is that of a dotard. His stories about dreams, omens, and prophecies, present a strange contrast to the passages in which the shrewd and incredulous Thucydides mentions the popular superstitions. It is not quite clear that Xenophon was honest in his credulity; his fanaticism was in some degree politic. He would have made an excellent member of the Apostolic Camarilla. An Alarmist by nature, an Aristocrat by party, he carried to an unreasonable excess his horror of popular turbulence. The quiet atrocity of Sparta did not shock him in the same manner; for he hated tumult more than crimes. He was desirous to find restraints which might curb the passions of the multitude; and he absurdly fancied that he had found them in a religion without evidences or sanction, precepts or example, in a frigid system of Theophilanthropy, supported by nursery tales.

Polybius and Arrian have given us authentic accounts of facts, and here their merit ends. They were not men of comprehensive minds; they had not the art of telling a story in an interesting manner. They have in consequence been thrown into the shade by writers, who, though less studious of truth than themselves, understood far better the art of producing effect, by Livy and Quintus Curtius.

Yet Polybius and Arrian deserve high praise, when compared with the writers of that school of which Plutarch may be considered as the head. For the histo-

rians of this class we must confess that we entertain a peculiar aversion. They seem to have been pedants, who, though destitute of those ^{Polybius and Arrian.} valuable qualities which are frequently found in conjunction with pedantry, thought themselves great philosophers and great politicians. They not only mislead their readers in every page, as to particular facts, but they appear to have altogether misconceived the whole character of the times of which they write. They were inhabitants of an empire bounded by the Atlantic Ocean and the Euphrates, by the ice of Scythia and the sands of Mauritania; composed of nations whose manners, whose languages, whose religion, whose countenance and complexions, were widely different, governed by one mighty despotism, which had risen on the ruins of a thousand commonwealths and kingdoms. Of liberty, such as it is in small democracies; of patriotism, such as it is in small independent communities of any kind, they had, and they could have, no experimental knowledge. But they had read of men who exerted themselves in the cause of their country, with an energy unknown in latter times, who had violated the dearest of domestic charities, or voluntarily devoted themselves to death for the public good; and they wondered at the degeneracy of their contemporaries. It never occurred to them that the feelings which they so greatly admired sprung from local and occasional causes; that they will always grow up spontaneously in small societies; and that, in large empires, though they may be forced into existence for a short time by peculiar circumstances, they cannot be general or permanent. It is impossible that any man should feel for a fortress on a remote frontier, as he feels for his own house; that he should grieve for a defeat in which ten thousand people whom he never saw have fallen, as he grieves for a defeat which has half unpeopled the street in which he lives; that he should leave his home for a military expedition, in order to preserve the balance of power, as cheerfully as he would leave it to repel invaders who had begun to burn all the cornfields in his neighbourhood.

The writers of whom we speak should have considered this. They should have considered that in patriotism, such as it existed amongst the Greeks, there was nothing essentially and eternally good;

that an exclusive attachment to a particular society, though a natural, and, under certain restrictions, a most useful sentiment, implies no extraordinary attainments in wisdom or virtue; that where it has existed in an intense degree, it has turned states into gangs of robbers, whom their mutual fidelity has rendered more dangerous, has given a character of peculiar atrocity to war, and has generated that worst of all political evils, the tyranny of nations over nations.

Enthusiastically attached to the name of liberty, these historians troubled them-

selves little about its definition. The Spartans, tormented by ten thousand absurd restraints, unable to please themselves in the choice of their wives, their suppers, or their company, compelled to assume a peculiar manner, and to talk in a peculiar style, gloried in their liberty. The aristocracy of Rome repeatedly made liberty a plea for cutting off the favourites of the people. In almost all the little commonwealths of antiquity, liberty was used as a pretext for measures directed against everything which makes liberty valuable, for measures which stifled discussion, corrupted the administration of justice, and discouraged the accumulation of property. The writers, whose works we are considering, confounded the sound with the substance, and the means with the end. Their imaginations were inflamed by mystery. They conceived of liberty as monks conceive of love, as Cockneys conceive of the happiness and innocence of rural life, as novel-reading sempstresses conceive of Almack's and Grosvenor Square, accomplished Marchesses and handsome Colonels of the Guards. In the relation of events, and the delineation of characters, they have paid little attention to facts, to the costume of the times of which they pretend to treat, or to the general principles of human nature. They have been faithful only to their own puerile and extravagant doctrines. Generals and statesmen are metamorphosed into magnanimous coxcombs, from whose fulsome virtues we turn away with disgust. The fine sayings and exploits of their heroes, remind us of the insufferable perfections of Sir Charles Grandison, and affect us with a nausea, similar to that which we feel when an actor, in one of Morton's or Kotzebue's plays, lays his hand on his

heart, advances to the ground-lights, and mouths a moral sentence for the edification of the gods.

These writers, men who knew not what it was to have a country, men who have never enjoyed political rights, brought into fashion an offensive cant about patriotism and zeal for freedom. What the English Puritans did for the language of Christianity, what Scudery did for the language of love, they did for the language of public spirit. By habitual exaggeration they made it mean. By monotonous emphasis they made it feeble. They abused it till it became scarcely possible to use it with effect.

Their ordinary rules of morality are deduced from extreme cases. The common regimen which they prescribe for society, is made up of those desperate remedies which only its most desperate distempers require. They look with peculiar complacency on actions, which even those who approve them consider as exceptions to laws of almost universal application—which bear so close an affinity to the most atrocious crimes, that even where it may be unjust to censure them, it is unsafe to praise them. It is not strange, therefore, that some flagitious instances of perfidy and cruelty should have been passed unchallenged in such company, that grave moralists, with no personal interest at stake, should have extolled, in the highest terms, deeds of which the atrocity appalled even the infuriated factions in whose cause they were perpetrated. The part which Timoleon took in the assassination of his brother, shocked many of his own partisans. The recollection of it preyed long on his own mind. But it was reserved for historians who lived some centuries later to discover that his conduct was a glorious display of virtue, and to lament that, from the frailty of human nature, a man who could perform so great an exploit could repent of it.

The writings of these men, and of their modern imitators, have produced effects which deserve some notice. The English have been so long accustomed to political speculation, and have enjoyed so large a measure of practical liberty, that such works have produced little effect on their minds. We have classical associations and great names of our own, which we can confidently oppose to the most splendid of ancient times. Senate

has not to our ears a sound so venerable as Parliament. We respect the Great Charter more than the laws of Solon. The Capitol and the Forum impress us with less awe than our own Westminster Hall and Westminster Abbey, the place where the great men of twenty generations have contended, the place where they sleep together! The list of warriors and statesmen by whom our constitution was founded or preserved, from De Monfort down to Fox, may well stand a comparison with the Fasti of Rome. The dying thanksgiving of Sydney is as noble as the libation which Thræsea poured to Liberating Jove. And we think with far less pleasure of Cato tearing out his entrails, than of Russel saying, as he turned away from his wife, that the bitterness of death was past. Even those parts of our history, over which, on some accounts, we would gladly throw a veil, may be proudly opposed to those on which the moralists of antiquity loved most to dwell. The enemy of English

English
liberty.

liberty was not murdered by men whom he had pardoned and loaded with benefits. He was not stabbed in the back by those who smiled and cringed before his face. He was vanquished on fields of stricken battle; he was arraigned, sentenced, and executed in the face of heaven and earth. Our liberty is neither Greek nor Roman; but essentially English. It has a character of its own,—a character which has taken a tinge from the sentiments of the chivalrous ages, and which accords with the peculiarities of our manners and of our insular situation. It has a language, too, of its own, and a language singularly idiomatic, full of meaning to ourselves, scarcely intelligible to strangers.

Here, therefore, the effect of books such as those which we have been considering has been harmless. They have, indeed, given currency to many very erroneous opinions with respect to ancient history. They have heated the imaginations of boys. They have misled the judgment, and corrupted the taste, of some men of letters, such as Akenside and Sir William Jones. But on persons engaged in public affairs they have had very little influence. The foundations of our constitution were laid by men who knew nothing of the Greeks, but that they denied the orthodox procession, and cheated the Crusaders; and nothing of Rome, but that the Pope lived there. Those who followed con-

tented themselves with improving on the original plan. They found models at home; and therefore they did not look for them abroad. But when enlightened men on the Continent began to think about political reformation, having no patterns before their eyes in their domestic history, they naturally had recourse to those remains of antiquity, the study of which is considered throughout Europe as an important part of education. The historians of whom we have been speaking had been members of large communities, and subjects of absolute sovereigns. Hence it is, as we have already said, that they commit such gross errors in speaking of the little republics of antiquity. Their works were now read in the spirit in which they had been

Spirit in
which to read
history.

written. They were read by men placed in circumstances closely resembling their own, unacquainted with the real nature of liberty, but inclined to believe everything good which could be told respecting it. How powerfully these books impressed these speculative reformers, is well known to all who have paid any attention to the French literature of the last century. But, perhaps, the writer on whom they produced the greatest effect, was Vittoria Alfieri. In some of his plays, particularly in *Virginia*, *Timoleon*, and *Brutus the Younger*, he has even caricatured the extravagance of his masters.

It was not strange that the blind, thus led by the blind, should stumble. The transactions of the French Revolution, in some measure, took their character from these works. Without the assistance of these works, indeed, a revolution would have taken place,—a revolution productive of much good and much evil, tremendous, but shortlived evil, dearly purchased, but durable, good. But it would not have been exactly such a revolution. The style, the accessories, would have been in many respects different. There would have been less of bombast in language, less of affectation in manner, less of solemn trifling and ostentatious simplicity. The acts of legislative assemblies, and the correspondence of diplomatists, would not have been disgraced by rants worthy only of a college declamation. The government of a great and polished nation would not have rendered itself ridiculous, by attempting to revive the usages of a world which had long passed away, or rather of

a world which had never existed except in the description of a fantastic school of writers. These second-hand imitations resembled the originals about as much as the classical feast with which the Doctor in *Peregrine Pickle* turned the stomachs of all his guests, resembled one of the suppers of *Lucullus* in the Hall of *Apollo*.

These were mere follies. But the spirit excited by these writers produced more serious effects. The greater part of the crimes which disgraced the revolution, sprung indeed from the relaxation of law, from popular ignorance, from the remembrance of past oppression, from the fear of foreign conquest, from rapacity, from ambition, from party-spirit. But many atrocious proceedings must, doubtless, be ascribed to heated imagination, to perverted principle, to a distaste for what was vulgar in morals, and a passion for what was startling and dubious. Mr. *Burke* has touched on this subject with great felicity of expression: "The gra-

Burke on the republic.

dation of their republic," says he, "is laid in moral paradoxes. All those instances to be found in history, whether real or fabulous, of a doubtful public spirit, at which morality is perplexed, reason is staggered, and from which affrighted nature recoils, are their chosen and almost sole examples, for the instruction of their youth." This evil, we believe, is to be directly ascribed to the influence of the historians whom we have mentioned, and their modern imitators.

Livy had some faults in common with these writers. But on the whole he must be considered as forming a class by himself. No historian with whom we are

Livy.

acquainted has shown so complete an indifference to truth. He seems to have cared only about the picturesque effect of his book, and the honour of his country. On the other hand, we do not know, in the whole range of literature, an instance of a bad thing so well done. The painting of the narrative is beyond description vivid and graceful. The abundance of interesting sentiments and splendid imagery in the speeches is almost miraculous. His mind is a soil which is never overteemed, a fountain which never seems to trickle. It pours forth profusely; yet it gives no sign of exhaustion. It was probably to this exuberance of thought and language always fresh, always sweet, always pure, no sooner yielded than repaired, that the

critics applied that expression which has been so much discussed, *lactea ubertas*.

All the merits and all the defects of *Livy* take a colouring from the character of his nation. He was a writer peculiarly Roman; the proud citizen of a commonwealth which had indeed lost the reality of liberty, but which still sacredly preserved its forms—in fact, the subject of an arbitrary prince, but in his own estimation one of the masters of the world, with a hundred kings below him, and only the gods above him. He, therefore, looked back on former times with feelings far different from those which were naturally entertained by his Greek contemporaries, and which at a later period became general among men of letters throughout the Roman Empire. He contemplated the past with interest and delight, not because it furnished a contrast to the present, but because it had led to the present. He recurred to it, not to lose in proud recollections the sense of national degradation, but to trace the progress of national glory. It is true that his veneration for antiquity produced on him some of the effects which it produced on those who arrived at it by a very different road. He has something of their exaggeration, something of their cant, something of their fondness for anomalies and *lusus naturæ* in morality. Yet even here we perceive a difference. They talk rapturously of patriotism and liberty in the abstract. He does not seem to think any country but Rome deserving of love: nor is it for liberty as liberty, but for liberty as a part of the Roman institutions, that he is zealous.

Of the concise and elegant accounts of the campaigns of *Cæsar* little can be said. They are incomparable models for military dispatches. But histories they are not, and do not pretend to be.

The ancient critics placed *Sallust* in the same rank with *Livy*; and unquestionably the small portion of his works which has come down to us is calculated to give a high opinion of his talents. But his style is not very pleasant: and his most powerful work, the account of the Conspiracy of *Catiline*, has rather the air of a clever party pamphlet than that of a history. It abounds with strange inconsistencies, which, unexplained as they are, necessarily excite doubts as to the fairness of the narrative. It is true, that many circumstances now forgotten may have

Sallust.

been familiar to his contemporaries, and may have rendered passages clear to them which to us appear dubious and perplexing. But a great historian should remember that he writes for distant generations, for men who will preserve the apparent contradictions, and will possess no means of reconciling them. We can only vindicate the fidelity of Sallust at the expense of his skill. But in fact all the information which we have from contemporaries respecting this famous plot is liable to the same objection, and is read by discerning men with the same incredulity. It is all on one side. No answer has reached our times. Yet, on the showing of the accusers, the accused

Conspiracy of
Catiline. seem entitled to acquittal. Catiline, we are told, intrigued with a Vestal virgin, and murdered his own son. His house was a den of gamblers and debauchees. No young man could cross his threshold without danger to his fortune and reputation. Yet this is the man with whom Cicero was willing to coalesce in a contest for the first magistracy of the republic; and whom he described, long after the fatal termination of the conspiracy, as an accomplished hypocrite, by whom he had himself been deceived, and who had acted with consummate skill the character of a good citizen and a good friend. We are told that the plot was the most wicked and desperate ever known, and almost in the same breath, that the great body of the people, and many of the nobles favoured it; that the richest citizens of Rome were eager for the spoliation of all property, and its highest functionaries for the destruction of all order; that Crassus, Cæsar, the Prætor Lentulus, one of the consuls of the year, one of the consuls elect, were proved or suspected to be engaged in a scheme for subverting institutions to which they owed the highest honours, and introducing universal anarchy. We are told, that a government which knew all this suffered the conspirator, whose rank, talents, and courage, rendered him most dangerous, to quit Rome without molestation. We are told, that bondmen and gladiators were to be armed against the citizens. Yet we find that Catiline rejected the slaves who crowded to enlist in his army, lest, as Sallust himself expresses it, "he should seem to identify their cause with that of the citizens." Finally, we are told that the magistrate, who was universally allowed to have saved all classes of his country-

men from conflagration and massacre, rendered himself so unpopular by his conduct, that a marked insult was offered to him at the expiration of his office, and a severe punishment inflicted on him shortly after.

Sallust tells us what, indeed, the letters and speeches of Cicero sufficiently prove, that some persons considered the shocking and atrocious parts of the plot as mere inventions of the government, designed to excuse its unconstitutional measures. We must confess ourselves to be of that opinion. There was undoubtedly a strong party desirous to change the administration. While Pompey held the command of an army, they could not effect their purpose without preparing means for repelling force, if necessary, by force. In all this there is nothing different from the ordinary practice of Roman factions. The other charges brought against the conspirators are so inconsistent and improbable, that we give no credit whatever to them. **Inconsistent charges.** If our readers think this scepticism unreasonable, let them turn to the contemporary accounts of the Popish plot. Let them look over the votes of Parliament, and the speeches of the King; the charges of Scroggs, and the harangues of the managers employed against Strafford. A person who should form his judgment from these pieces alone, would believe that London was set on fire by the Papists, and that Sir Edmond-bury Godfrey was murdered for his religion. Yet these stories are now altogether exploded. They have been abandoned by statesmen to aldermen, by aldermen to clergymen, by clergymen to old women, and by old women to Sir Harcourt Lees.

Of the Latin historians, Tacitus was certainly the greatest. His style indeed is not only faulty in itself, but is, in some respects, peculiarly unfit for historical composition. He carries his love of effect far beyond the limits of moderation. He tells a fine story finely: but he cannot tell a plain story plainly. He stimulates till stimulants lose their power. Thucydides, as we have already observed, relates ordinary transactions with the unpretending clearness and succinctness of a gazette. His great powers of painting he reserves for events, of which the slightest details are interesting. **Tacitus.** The simplicity of the setting gives additional lustre to the brilliants. There are passages in

the narrative of Tacitus superior to the best which can be quoted from Thucydides. But they are not enchased and relieved with the same skill. They are far more striking when extracted from the body of the work to which they belong, than when they occur in their place, and are read in connection with what precedes and follows.

In the delineation of character, Tacitus is unrivalled among historians, and has very few superiors among dramatists and

novelists. By the delineation of character, we do not mean the practice of

A delineator of character. drawing up epigrammatic catalogues of good and bad qualities, and appending them to the names of eminent men. No writer, indeed, has done this more skillfully than Tacitus: but this is not his peculiar glory. All the persons who occupy a large space in his works have an individuality of character which seem to pervade all their words and actions. We know them as if we had lived with them. Claudius, Nero, Otho, both the Agrippinas, are masterpieces. But Tiberius is a still higher miracle of art. The historian undertook to make us intimately acquainted with a man singularly dark and inscrutable,—with a man whose real disposition long remained swathed up in intricate folds of factitious virtues; and over whose actions the hypocrisy of his youth, and the seclusion of his old age, threw a singular mystery. He was to exhibit the specious qualities of the tyrant in a light which might render them transparent, and enable us at once to perceive the covering and the vices which it concealed. He was to trace the gradations by which the first magistrate of a republic, a senator mingling freely in debate, a noble associating with his brother nobles, was transformed into an Asiatic sultan; he was to exhibit a character distinguished by courage, self-command, and profound policy, yet defiled by all

“th’ extravagancy,
And crazy ribaldry of fancy.”

He was to mark the gradual effect of advancing age and approaching death on this strange compound of strength and weakness; to exhibit the old sovereign of the world sinking into a dotage which, though it rendered his appetites eccentric and his temper savage, never impaired the powers of his stern and penetrating mind—conscious of failing strength,

raging with capricious sensuality, yet to the last the keenest of observers, the most artful of dissemblers, and the most terrible of masters. The task was one of extreme difficulty. The execution is almost perfect.

The talent which is required to write history thus, bears a considerable affinity to the talent of a great dramatist. There is one obvious distinction. The dramatist creates, the historian only disposes. The difference is not in the mode of execution, but in the mode of conception. Shakspeare is guided by a model which exists in his imagination; Tacitus, by a model furnished from without. Hamlet is to Tiberius what the Laocoon is to the Newton of Roubilliac.

In this part of his art Tacitus certainly had neither equal nor second among the ancient historians. Herodotus, though he wrote in a dramatic form, had little of dramatic genius. The frequent dialogues which he introduces give vivacity and movement to the narrative; but are not strikingly characteristic. Xenophon is fond of telling his readers, at considerable length, what he thought of the persons whose adventures he relates. But he does not show them the men, and enable them to judge for themselves. The heroes of Livy are the most insipid of all beings, real or imaginary, the heroes of Plutarch always excepted. Indeed, the manner of Plutarch in this respect reminds us of the cookery of those continental inns, the horror of English travellers, in which a certain nondescript broth is kept constantly boiling, and copiously poured, without distinction, over every dish as it comes up to table. Thucydides, though at a wide interval, comes next to Tacitus. His Pericles, his Nicias, his Cleon, his Brasidas, are happily discriminated. The lines are few, the colouring faint; but the general air and expression is caught.

We begin, like the priest in Don Quixote’s library, to be tired with taking down books one after another for separate judgment, and feel inclined to pass sentence on them in masses. We shall, therefore, instead of pointing out the defects and merits of the different modern historians, state generally in what particulars they have surpassed their predecessors, and in what we conceive them to have failed.

Historians and dramatists.

Dramatic art of Tacitus.

Modern historians.

They have certainly been, in one sense, far more strict in their adherence to truth than most of the Greek and Roman writers. Stricter adherence to truth. They do not think themselves entitled to render their narrative interesting by introducing descriptions, conversations, and harangues, which have no existence but in their own imagination. This improvement was gradually introduced. History commenced among the modern nations of Europe, as it had commenced among the Greeks, in romance. Froissart was our Herodotus. Italy was to Europe what Athens was to Greece. In Italy, therefore, a more accurate and manly mode of narration was early introduced. Machiavelli and Guicciardini, in imitation of Livy and Thucydides, composed speeches for their historical personages. But as the classical enthusiasm which distinguished the age of Lorenzo and Leo gradually subsided, this absurd practice was abandoned. In France, we fear, it still, in some degree, keeps its ground. In our own country, a writer who should venture on it would be laughed to scorn. Whether the historians of the last two centuries tell more truth than those of antiquity may perhaps be doubted. But it is quite certain that they tell fewer falsehoods.

In the philosophy of history, the moderns have very far surpassed the ancients. It is not, indeed, strange that the Greeks and Romans should not have carried the science of government, or any other experimental science, so far as it has been carried in our time; for the experimental sciences are generally in a state of progression. They were better understood in the seventeenth century than in the sixteenth, and in the eighteenth century than in the seventeenth. But this constant improvement, this natural growth of knowledge, will not altogether account for the immense superiority of the modern writers. The difference is a difference not in degree but of kind. It is not merely that new principles have been discovered, but that new faculties seem to be exerted. It is not that at one time the human intellect should have made but small progress, and at another time have advanced far; but that at one time it should have been stationary, and at another time constantly proceeding. In taste and imagination, in the graces of style, in the arts of persuasion, in the magnificence of public

works, the ancients were at our least equals. They reasoned as justly as ourselves on subjects which required pure demonstration. But in the moral sciences they made scarcely any advance. During the long period which elapsed between the fifth century before the Christian era, and the fifth century after it, little perceptible progress was made. All the metaphysical discoveries of all the philosophers, from the time of Socrates to the northern invasion, are not to be compared in importance with those which have been made in England every fifty years since the time of Elizabeth. There is not the least reason to believe that the principles of government, legislation, and political economy, were better understood in the time of Augustus Cæsar, than in the time of Pericles. In our own country, the sound doctrines of trade and jurisprudence have been, within the lifetime of a single generation, dimly hinted, boldly propounded, defended, systematized, adopted by all reflecting men of all parties, quoted in legislative assemblies, incorporated into laws and treaties.

To what is this change to be attributed? Partly, no doubt, to the discovery of printing, a discovery which has not only diffused knowledge widely, but, as we have already observed, has also introduced into reasoning a precision unknown in those ancient communities, in which information was for the most part conveyed orally. There was, we suspect, another cause, less obvious, but still more powerful.

The spirit of the two most famous nations of antiquity was remarkably exclusive. In the time of Homer, the Greeks had not begun to consider themselves as a distinct race. They still looked with something of childish wonder and awe on the riches and wisdom of Sidon and Egypt. From what causes, and by what gradations, their feelings underwent a change, it is not easy to determine. Their history, from the Trojan to the Persian war, is covered with an obscurity broken only by dim and scattered gleams of truth. But it is certain that a great alteration took place. They regarded themselves as a separate people. They had common religious rites, and common principles of public law, in which foreigners had no part. In all their political systems, monarchical, aristocratical, and democratical,

n.B.