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Letters On The Study And Use Of History

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Letter IV. 1. That there is in history sufficient authenticity to render it useful, notwithstanding all objections to the contrary. 2. Of the method and due restrictions to be observed in the study ...

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OF THE
STUDY of HISTORY.

LETTER IV.

- I. That there is in history sufficient authenticity to render it useful, notwithstanding all objections to the contrary.
- II. Of the method and due restrictions to be observed in the study of it.

WHETHER the letter I now begin to write will be long or short, I know not: but I find my memory is refreshed, my imagination warmed, and matter flows in so fast upon me, that I have not time to press it close. Since therefore you have provoked me to write, you must be content to take what follows.

I HAVE observed already that we are apt naturally to apply to our selves what has

happened to other men, and that examples take their force from hence; as well those which history, as those which experience, offers to our reflexion. What we do not believe to have happened therefore, we shall not thus apply; and for want of the same application, such examples will not have the same effect. Antient history, such antient history as I have described, is quite unfit therefore in this respect to answer the ends that every reasonable man should propose to himself in this study; because such antient history will never gain sufficient credit with any reasonable man. A tale well told, or a comedy or a tragedy well wrought up, may have a momentary effect upon the mind, by heating the imagination, surprizing the judgment, and affecting strongly the passions. The Athenians are said to have been transported into a kind of martial phrenzy by the representation of a tragedy of AESCHYLUS, and to have marched under this influence from the theatre to the plains of MARATHON. These momentary impressions might be managed

managed, for aught I know, in such manner as to contribute a little, by frequent repetitions of them, towards maintaining a kind of habitual contempt of folly, detestation of vice, and admiration of virtue in well-policed common-wealths. But then these impressions cannot be made, nor this little effect be wrought, unless the fables bear an appearance of truth. When they bear this appearance, reason connives at the innocent fraud of imagination; reason dispenses, in favour of probability, with those strict rules of criticism that she has established to try the truth of fact: but after all, she receives these fables as fables; and as such only she permits imagination to make the most of them. If they pretended to be history, they would be soon subjected to another and more severe examination. What may have happened, is the matter of an ingenious fable: what has happened, is that of an authentic history: the impressions which one or the other makes are in proportion. When imagination grows lawless and wild, ram-

bles out of the precincts of nature, and tells of heroes and giants, fairies and enchanters, of events and of phaenomena repugnant to universal experience, to our clearest and most distinct ideas, and to all the known laws of nature, reason does not connive a moment; but far from receiving such narrations as historical, she rejects them as unworthy to be placed even among the fabulous. Such narrations therefore cannot make the slightest momentary impressions, on a mind fraught with knowledge, and void of superstition. Imposed by authority, and assisted by artifice, the delusion hardly prevails over common sense; blind ignorance almost sees, and rash superstition hesitates: nothing less than enthusiasm and phrenzy can give credit to such histories, or apply such examples. Don QUIXOTE believed; but even SANCHO doubted,

WHAT I have said will not be much controverted by any man who has read AMADIS of Gaul, or has examined our antient tradi-

traditions without prepossession. The truth is, the principal difference between them seems to be this. In *AMADIS* of Gaul, we have a thread of absurdities that are invented without any regard to probability, and that lay no claim to belief: antient traditions are an heap of fables, under which some particular truths, inscrutable, and therefore useless to mankind, may lie concealed; which have a just pretence to nothing more, and yet impose themselves upon us, and become under the venerable name of antient history the foundations of modern fables; the materials with which so many systems of fancy have been erected.

BUT now, as men are apt to carry their judgments into extremes, there are some that will be ready to insist that all history is fabulous, and that the very best is nothing better than a probable tale, artfully contrived, and plausibly told, wherein truth and falsehood are indistinguishably blended together. All the instances, and
all

all the common-place arguments, that BAYLE and others have employed to establish this sort of Pyrrhonism, will be quoted: and from thence it will be concluded, that if the pretended histories of the first ages, and of the originals of nations, be too improbable and too ill vouched to procure any degree of belief, those histories that have been writ later, that carry a greater air of probability and that boast even contemporary authority, are at least insufficient to gain that degree of firm belief, which is necessary to render the study of them useful to mankind. But here that happens which often happens: the premises are true, and the conclusion is false; because a general axiom is established precariously on a certain number of partial observations. This matter is of consequence; for it tends to ascertain the degrees of assent that we may give to history.

I AGREE then that history has been purposely and systematically falsified in all ages, and that partiality and prejudice have occasioned

occasioned both voluntary and involuntary errors even in the best. Let me say without offence, my lord, since I may say it with truth and am able to prove it, that ecclesiastical authority has led the way to this corruption in all ages, and all religions. How monstrous were the absurdities that the priesthood imposed on the ignorance and superstition of mankind in the Pagan world, concerning the originals of religions and governments, their institutions and rites, their laws and customs? What opportunities had they for such impositions, whilst the keeping the records and collecting the traditions, was in so many nations the peculiar office of this order of men? A custom highly extolled by JOSEPHUS, but plainly liable to the grossest frauds, and even a temptation to them. If the foundations of Judaism and Christianity have been laid in truth, yet what numberless fables have been invented to raise, to embellish and to support these structures, according to the interest and taste of the several architects? That the
Jews

Jews have been guilty of this will be allowed: and to the shame of Christians, if not of Christianity, the fathers of one church have no right to throw the first stone at the fathers of the other. Deliberate systematical lying has been practised and encouraged from age to age; and among all the pious frauds that have been employed to maintain a reverence and zeal for their Religion in the minds of men, this abuse of history has been one of the principal and most successful: an evident and experimental proof, by the way, of what I have insisted upon so much, the aptitude and natural tendency of history to form our opinions, and to settle our habits. This righteous expedient was in so much use and repute in the Greek church, that one METAPHRASTUS wrote a treatise on the art of composing holy romances: the fact, if I remember right, is cited by BAILLET in his book of the lives of the saints. He, and other learned men of the Roman Church, have thought it of service to their cause, since the resurrection of letters, to detect

detect some impostures, and to depose, or to un-niche according to the French expression, now and then a reputed saint; but they seem in doing this to mean no more than a sort of composition: they give up some fables that they may defend others with greater advantage, and they make truth serve as a stalking-horse to error. The same spirit, that prevailed in the Eastern church, prevailed in the Western, and prevails still. A strong proof of it appeared lately in the country where I am. A sudden fury of devotion seized the people of Paris for a little priest*, undistinguished during his life, and dubbed a saint by the Jansenists after his death. Had the first Minister been a Jansenist, the saint had been a saint still. All France had kept his festival: and, since there are thousands of eye-witnesses ready to attest the truth of all the miracles supposed to have been wrought at his tomb, notwithstanding the discouragement which these zealots have met with

* The abbé Paris.

from

from the government; we may assure ourselves, that these silly impostures would have been transmitted in all the solemn pomp of history, from the knaves of this age to the fools of the next.

THIS lying spirit has gone forth from ecclesiastical to other historians: and I might fill many pages with instances of extravagant fables that have been invented in several nations, to celebrate their antiquity, to ennoble their originals, and to make them appear illustrious in the arts of peace and the triumphs of war. When the brain is well heated, and devotion or vanity, the semblance of virtue or real vice, and, above all, disputes and contests, have inspired that complication of passions we term zeal, the effects are much the same, and history becomes very often a lying panegyric or a lying satire; for different nations, or different parties in the same nation, belie one another without any respect for truth, as they murder one another without any regard to right or sense of humanity.

humanity. Religious zeal may boast this horrid advantage over civil zeal, that the effects of it have been more sanguinary, and the malice more unrelenting. In another respect they are more alike, and keep a nearer proportion: different religions have not been quite so barbarous to one another as sects of the same religion; and in like manner nation has had better quarter from nation, than party from party. But, in all these controversies, men have pushed their rage beyond their own and their adversaries lives: they have endeavoured to interest posterity in their quarrels, and by rendering history subservient to this wicked purpose, they have done their utmost to perpetuate scandal, and to immortalize their animosity. The Heathen taxed the Jews even with idolatry; the Jews joined with the Heathen to render Christianity odious: but the church, who beat them at their own weapons during these contests, has had this further triumph over them, as well as over the several sects that have arisen within her own pale; the

works

works of those who have writ against her have been destroyed; and whatever she advanced, to justify her self and to defame her adversaries, is preserved in her annals, and the writings of her doctors.

THE charge of corrupting history, in the cause of religion, has been always committed to the most famous champions, and greatest saints of each church; and if I was not more afraid of tiring, than of scandalizing your lordship, I could quote to you examples of modern churchmen who have endeavoured to justify foul language by the new testament, and cruelty by the old: nay, what is execrable beyond imagination, and what strikes horror into every mind that entertains due sentiments of the Supreme Being, GOD himself has been cited for rallying and insulting ADAM after his fall. In other cases, this charge belongs to the pedants of every nation, and the tools of every party. What accusations of idolatry and superstition have not been brought, and aggravated against the

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Mahometans?

Mahometans? Those wretched Christians who returned from those wars, so improperly called the holy wars, rumoured these stories about the west: and you may find, in some of the old chroniclers and romance writers, as well as Poets, the Saracens called Paynims; tho surely they were much further off from any suspicion of polytheism, than those who called them by that name. When MAHOMET the second took Constantinople in the fifteenth century, the Mahometans began to be a little better, and but a little better known, than they had been before, to these parts of the world. But their religion, as well as their customs and manners, was strangely misrepresented by the Greek refugees that fled from the Turks: and the terror and hatred which this people had inspired by the rapidity of their conquests, and by their ferocity, made all these misrepresentations universally pass for truths. Many such instances may be collected from MORACIO's refutation of the koran, and RE-LANDUS has published a very valuable treatise

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tise

tise on purpose to refute these calumnies, and to justify the Mahometans. Does not this example incline your lordship to think, that the Heathens, and the Arians and other heretics, would not appear quite so absurd in their opinions, nor so abominable in their practice, as the orthodox Christians have represented them; if some RELANDUS could arise, with the materials, necessary to their justification, in his hands? He who reflects on the circumstances that attended letters, from the time when CONSTANTINE, instead of uniting the characters of emperor and sovereign pontiff in himself when he became Christian, as they were united in him and all the other emperors in the Pagan system of government, gave so much independent wealth and power to the clergy, and the means of acquiring so much more: he who carries these reflections on through all the latter empire, and through those ages of ignorance and superstition, wherein it was hard to say which was greatest, the tyranny of the clergy, or the ferocity of the laity: he who considers the
extreme

extreme severity, for instance, of the laws made by THEODOSIUS in order to stifle every writing that the orthodox clergy, that is the clergy then in fashion, disliked; or the character and influence of such a priest as GREGORY called the great, who proclaimed war to all heathen learning in order to promote Christian verity; and flattered BRUNEHULT, and abetted PHOCAS: he who considers all these things, I say, will not be at a loss to find the reasons, why history, both that which was writ before, and a great part of that which has been writ since the Christian aera, is come to us so imperfect and so corrupt.

WHEN the imperfection is due to a total want of memorials, either because none were originally written, or because they have been lost by devastations of countries, extirpations of people, and other accidents in a long course of time; or because zeal, malice, and policy have joined their endeavours to destroy them purposely; we must be content to remain in

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our

our ignorance, and there is no great harm in that. Secure from being deceived, I can submit to be uninformed. But when there is not a total want of memorials, when some have been lost or destroyed, and others have been preserved and propagated, then we are in danger of being deceived: and therefore he must be very implicit indeed who receives for true the history of any religion or nation, and much more that of any sect or party, without having the means of confronting it with some other history. A reasonable man will not be thus implicit. He will not establish the truth of history on single, but on concurrent testimony. If there be none such, he will doubt absolutely: if there be a little such, he will proportion his assent or dissent accordingly. A small gleam of light, borrowed from foreign anecdotes, serves often to discover a whole system of falsehood: and even they, who corrupt history, frequently betray themselves by their ignorance or inadvertency. Examples whereof I could easily produce. Upon the whole

whole matter, in all these cases, we cannot be deceived essentially, unless we please: and therefore there is no reason to establish Pyrrhonism, that we may avoid the ridicule of credulity.

IN all other cases, there is less reason still to do so; for when histories and historical memorials abound, even those that are false serve to the discovery of the truth. Inspired by different passions, and contrived for opposite purposes, they contradict; and, contradicting, they convict one another. Criticism separates the ore from the dross, and extracts from various authors a series of true history, which could not have been found entire in any one of them, and will command our assent, when it is formed with judgment, and represented with candor. If this may be done, as it has been done sometimes, with the help of authors who writ on purpose to deceive; how much more easily, and more effectually, may it be done with the help of those who paid a greater regard to truth? In a multitude of

writers there will be always some, either incapable of gross prevarication from the fear of being discovered, and of acquiring infamy whilst they seek for fame; or else attached to truth upon a nobler and surer principle. It is certain that these, even the last of them, are fallible. Bribed by some passion or other, the former may venture now and then to propagate a falsehood, or to disguise a truth; like the painter that drew in profile, as LUCIAN says, the picture of a prince that had but one eye. MONTAGNE objects to the memorials of DU BELLAY, that tho the gross of the facts be truly related, yet these authors turned every thing they mentioned to the advantage of their master, and mentioned nothing which could not be so turned. The old fellow's words are worth quoting.-----

“ De contourner le jugement des evenemens
 “ souvent contre raison à notre avantage, &
 “ d'obmettre tout ce qu'il y a de chatou-
 “ illeux en la vie de leur maitre, ils en
 “ font mestier.” These, and such as these, deviate occasionally and voluntarily from truth;

truth; but even they, who are attached to it the most religiously, may slide sometimes into involuntary error. In matters of history we prefer very justly cotemporary authority; and yet cotemporary authors are the most liable to be warped from the strait rule of truth, in writing on subjects which have affected them strongly, “ & “ quorum pars magna fuerunt.” I am so persuaded of this, from what I have felt in my self, and observed in others, that if life and health enough fall to my share, and I am able to finish what I meditate, a kind of history, from the late queen’s accession to the throne, to the peace of Utrecht, there will be no materials that I shall examine more scrupulously and severely, than those of the time when the events to be spoken of were in transaction. But tho the writers of these two sorts, both of whom pay as much regard to truth as the various infirmities of our nature admit, are fallible; yet this fallibility will not be sufficient to give color to Pyrrhonism. Where their sincerity as to fact is doubtful, we strike out truth by the confrontation

of different accounts: as we strike out sparks of fire by the collision of flints and steel. Where their judgments are suspicious of partiality, we may judge for our selves; or adopt their judgments, after weighing them with certain grains of allowance. A little natural sagacity will proportion these grains, according to the particular circumstances of the authors, or their general characters; for even these influence. Thus MONTAGNE pretends, but he exaggerates a little, that GUICCIARDINO where ascribes any one action to a virtuous, but every one to a vicious principle. Something like this has been reproached to TACITUS: and notwithstanding all the sprightly loose observations of MONTAGNE in one of his essays where he labours to prove the contrary, read PLUTARCH's comparisons in what language you please, I am of BODIN's mind, you will perceive that they were made by a Greek. In short, my lord, the favourable opportunities of corrupting history have been often interrupted, and are now over in so many countries, that truth penetrates

netrates even into those where lying continues still to be part of the policy ecclesiastical and civil; or where, to say the best we can say, truth is never suffered to appear, till she has passed through hands, out of which she seldom returns entire and undefiled.

BUT it is time I should conclude this head, under which I have touched some of those reasons that shew the folly of endeavouring to establish universal Pyrrhonism in matters of history, because there are few histories without some lies, and none without some mistakes; and that prove the body of history which we possess, since ancient memorials have been so critically examined, and modern memorials have been so multiplied, to contain in it such a probable series of events, easily distinguishable from the improbable, as force the assent of every man who is in his senses, and are therefore sufficient to answer all the purposes of the study of history. I might have appealed perhaps, without entering into the

the argument at all, to any man of candor, whether his doubts concerning the truth of history have hindered him from applying the examples he has met with in it, and from judging of the present, and sometimes of the future by the past? whether he has not been touched with reverence and admiration, at the virtue and wisdom of some men, and of some ages; and whether he has not felt indignation and contempt for others? whether EPAMINONDAS, or PHOCION, for instance, the DECII, or the SCIPIOS, have not raised in his mind a flame of public spirit, and private virtue? and whether he has not shuddered with horror at the proscriptions of MARIUS and SYLLA, at the treachery of THEODOTUS and ACHILLAS, and at the consummate cruelty of an infant king? “Quis non contra
 “MARIARMA, & contra SYLLAE proscrip-
 “tionem concitatur? Quis non THEODO-
 “TO, & ACHILLAE, & ipsi puero, non
 “puerile auso facinus, infestus est?” If all this be a digression therefore, your lordship will be so good as to excuse it.

II. WHAT

II. WHAT has been said concerning the multiplicity of histories, and of historical memorials, wherewith our libraries abound since the resurrection of letters happened, and the art of printing began, puts me in mind of another general rule, that ought to be observed by every man who intends to make a real improvement, and to become wiser as well as better, by the study of history. I hinted at this rule in a former letter, where I said that we should neither grope in the dark nor wander in the light. History must have a certain degree of probability and authenticity, or the examples we find in it will not carry a force sufficient to make due impressions on our minds, nor to illustrate nor to strengthen the precepts of philosophy and the rules of good policy. But besides, when histories have this necessary authenticity and probability, there is much discernment to be employed in the choice and the use we make of them. Some are to be read, some are to be studied; and some may be neglected entirely, not only without detriment, but

but with advantage. Some are the proper objects of one man's curiosity, some of others, and some of all men's; but all history is not an object of curiosity for any man. He who improperly, wantonly, and absurdly makes it so, indulges a sort of canine appetite: the curiosity of one, like the hunger of the other, devours ravenously and without distinction whatever falls in its way: but neither of them digests. They heap crudity upon crudity, and nourish and improve nothing but their distemper. Some such characters I have known, tho it is not the most common extreme into which men are apt to fall. One of them I knew in this country. He joined, to a more than athletic strength of body, a prodigious memory; and to both a prodigious industry. He had read almost constantly twelve or fourteen hours a day, for five and twenty or thirty years; and had heaped together as much learning as could be crowded into an head. In the course of my acquaintance with him, I consulted him once or twice, not oftener; for I found this mass
of

of learning of as little use to me as to the owner. The man was communicative enough, but nothing was distinct in his mind. How could it be otherwise? he had never spared time to think, all was employed in reading. His reason had not the merit of common mechanism. When you press a watch or pull a clock, they answer your question with precision; for they repeat exactly the hour of the day, and tell you neither more nor less than you desire to know. But when you asked this man a question, he overwhelmed you by pouring forth all that the several terms or words of your question recalled to his memory: and if he omitted any thing, it was that very thing to which the sense of the whole question should have led him and confined him. To ask him a question, was to wind up a spring in his memory, that rattled on with vast rapidity, and confused noise, till the force of it was spent: and you went away with all the noise in your ears, stunned and un-inform'd. I never left him that I was not ready to say to him,

*

“ Dieu

“Dieu vous fasse la grace de devenir moins
“scavant!” a wish that LA MOTHE LE
VAYER mentions upon some occasion or
other, and that he would have done well
to have applied to himself upon many.

HE who reads with discernment and
choice, will acquire less learning, but more
knowledge: and as this knowledge is col-
lected with design, and cultivated with art
and method, it will be at all times of im-
mediate and ready use to himself and others.

Thus useful arms in magazines we place,
All rang'd in order; and dispos'd with grace:
Nor thus alone the curious eye to please;
But to be found, when need requires, with ease.

You remember the verses, my lord, in
our friend's essay on criticism, which was
the work of his childhood almost; but
is such a monument of good sense and po-
etry as no other that I know has raised in
his riper years.

HE who reads without this discernment
and choice, and, like BODIN's pupil, resolves

to read all, will not have time, no nor capacity neither, to do any thing else. He will not be able to think, without which it is impertinent to read; nor to act, without which it is impertinent to think. He will assemble materials with much pains, and purchase them at much expence, and have neither leisure nor skill to frame them into proper scantlings, or to prepare them for use. To what purpose should he husband his time, or learn architecture? he has no design to build. But then to what purpose all these quarries of stone, all these mountains of sand and lime, all these forests of oak and deal? “ Magno impendio temporum, magna alienarum aurium molestia, laudatio haec constat, O hominem litteratum! Simus hoc titulo rusticiore contenti, O virum bonum!” We may add, and SENECA might have added in his own stile, and according to the manners and characters of his own age, another title as rustic, and as little in fashion, “ O virum sapientia sua simplicem, & simplicitate sua sapientem! O virum utilem sibi,

“fibi, suis, reipublicae, & humano generi!” I have said perhaps already, but no matter, it cannot be repeated too often, that the drift of all philosophy, and of all political speculations, ought to be the making us better men, and better citizens. Those studies, which have no intention towards improving our moral characters, have no pretence to be stiled philosophical. “*Quis est enim,*” says TULLY in his offices, “*qui nullis officii praeceptis tradendis, philosophum se audeat dicere?*” Whatever political speculation, instead of preparing us to be useful to society and to promote the happiness of mankind, are only systems for gratifying private ambition, and promoting private interests at the public expence; all such, I say, deserve to be burnt, and the authors of them to starve, like MACHIAVEL, in a jail.

LETTER