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Lecture XXXVI. Historical Writing

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LECTURE XXXVI.

HISTORICAL WRITING.

AFTER making some observations on the controversy which has been often carried on concerning the comparative merit of the Ancients and the Moderns, I entered, in the last Lecture, on the consideration of Historical Writing. The general idea of History is, a record of truth for the instruction of mankind. Hence arise the primary qualities required in a good Historian, impartiality, fidelity, gravity, and dignity. What I principally considered, was the unity which belongs to this sort of Composition; the nature of which I have endeavoured to explain.

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I PROCEED next to observe, that in order to fulfil the end of History, the Author must study to trace to their springs the actions and events which he records. Two things are especially necessary for his doing this successfully; a thorough acquaintance with human nature, and political knowledge, or acquaintance with government. The former is necessary to account for the conduct of individuals, and to give just views

LECT. of their character; the latter, to account for the
 XXXVI. revolutions of government, and the operation of
 political causes on public affairs. Both must
 concur, in order to form a completely instructive
 Historian.

WITH regard to the latter article, Political
 Knowledge, the Ancient Writers wanted some
 advantages which the Moderns enjoy; from
 whom, upon that account, we have a title to
 expect more accurate and precise information.
 The world, as I formerly hinted, was more
 shut up in ancient times, than it is now; there
 was then less communication among neighbouring
 states, and by consequence less knowledge, of
 one another's affairs; no intercourse by established
 posts, or by Ambassadors resident at distant courts.
 The knowledge, and materials of the Ancient
 Historians, were thereby more limited and circum-
 scribed; and it is to be observed too, that they
 wrote for their own countrymen only; they had
 no idea of writing for the instruction of foreign-
 ers, whom they despised, or of the world in
 general; and hence, they are less attentive to
 convey all that knowledge with regard to do-
 mestic policy, which we, in distant times, would
 desire to have learned from them. Perhaps also,
 though in ancient ages men were abundantly
 animated with the love of liberty, yet the full
 extent of the influence of government, and of
 political causes, was not then so thoroughly
 scrutinized, as it has been in modern times; when
 a longer experience of all the different modes of
 government

government has rendered men more enlightened and intelligent, with respect to public affairs. L E C T. XXXVI.

To these reasons it is owing, that though the Ancient Historians set before us the particular facts which they relate, in a very distinct and beautiful manner, yet sometimes they do not give us a clear view of all the political causes, which affected the situation of affairs of which they treat. From the Greek Historians, we are able to form but an imperfect notion, of the strength, the wealth, and the revenues of the different Grecian states; of the causes of several of those revolutions that happened in their government; or of their separate connections and interfering interests. In writing the History of the Romans, Livy had surely the most ample field for displaying political knowledge, concerning the rise of their greatness, and the advantages or defects of their government. Yet the instruction in these important articles, which he affords, is not considerable. An elegant Writer he is, and a beautiful relater of facts, if ever there was one; but by no means distinguished for profoundness or penetration. Sallust, when writing the history of a conspiracy against the government, which ought to have been altogether a Political History, has evidently attended more to the elegance of narration, and the painting of characters, than to the unfolding of secret causes and springs. Instead of that complete information, which we would naturally have expected from him of the state of parties in Rome, and of that particular conjuncture of

LECT. XXXVI. affairs, which enabled so desperate a profligate as Catiline to become so formidable to government, he has given us little more than a general declamatory account of the luxury and corruption of manners in that age, compared with the simplicity of former times.

I BY no means, however, mean to censure all the Ancient Historians as defective in political information. No Historians can be more instructive than Thucydides, Polybius, and Tacitus. Thucydides is grave, intelligent, and judicious; always attentive to give very exact information concerning every operation which he relates; and to show the advantages or disadvantages of every plan that was proposed, and every measure that was pursued. Polybius excels in comprehensive political views, in penetration into great systems, and in his profound and distinct knowledge of all military affairs. Tacitus is eminent for his knowledge of the human heart; is sentimental and refined in a high degree; conveys much instruction with respect to political matters, but more with respect to human nature.

BUT when we demand from the Historian profound and instructive views of his subject, it is not meant that he should be frequently interrupting the course of his History, with his own reflections and speculations. He should give us all the information that is necessary for our fully understanding the affairs which he records. He should make us acquainted with the political constitution, the force, the revenues, the internal state of the

country of which he writes; and with its interests and connections in respect of neighbouring countries. He should place us, as on an elevated station, whence we may have an extensive prospect of all the causes that cooperate in bringing forward the events which are related. But having put into our hands all the proper materials for judgment, he should not be too prodigal of his own opinions and reasonings. When an Historian is much given to dissertation, and is ready to philosophise and speculate on all that he records, a suspicion naturally arises, that he will be in hazard of adapting his narrative of facts to favour some system which he has formed to himself. It is rather by fair and judicious narration that history should instruct us, than by delivering instruction in an avowed and direct manner. On some occasions, when doubtful points require to be scrutinized, or when some great event is in agitation, concerning the causes or circumstances of which mankind have been much divided, the narrative may be allowed to stand still for a little; the Historian may appear, and may with propriety enter into some weighty discussion. But he must take care not to cloy his Readers with such discussions, by repeating them too often.

WHEN observations are to be made concerning human nature in general, or the peculiarities of certain characters, if the Historian can artfully incorporate such observations with his narrative, they will have a better effect than when they are delivered as formal detached reflections. For

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instance; in the life of Agricola, Tacitus, speaking of Domitian's treatment of Agricola, makes this observation: "*Proprium humani ingenii est, odisse quem læseris **." The observation is just and well applied; but the form in which it stands, is abstract and philosophical. A thought of the same kind has a finer effect elsewhere in the same Historian, when speaking of the jealousies which Germanicus knew to be entertained against him by Livia and Tiberius: "*Anxius,*" said he, "*occultis in se patrum aviarumque odiis, quorum causæ acriores quia iniquæ †.*" Here a profound moral observation is made; but it is made, without appearing to make it in form; it is introduced as a part of the narration, in assigning a reason for the anxiety of Germanicus. We have another instance of the same kind, in the account which he gives of a mutiny raised against Rufus, who was a "*Præfectus Castrorum,*" on account of the severe labour which he imposed on the soldiers. "*Quippe Rufus, diu manipularis, dein centurio, mox castris præfectus, antiquam duramque militiam revocabat, vetus operis & laboris, et eo immitior quia toleraverat **.*" There was room

* "*It belongs to human nature, to hate the man whom you have injured.*"

† "*Uneasy in his mind, on account of the concealed hatred entertained against him by his uncle and grandmother, which was the more bitter, because the cause of it was unjust.*"

** "*For Rufus, who had long been a common soldier, afterwards a Centurion, and at length a general officer,*

for turning this into a general observation, that they who have been educated and hardened in toils, are commonly found to be the most severe in requiring the like toils from others. But the manner in which Tacitus introduces this sentiment, as a stroke in the character of Rufus, gives it much more life and spirit. This Historian has a particular talent of intermixing after this manner with the course of his narrative, many striking sentiments and useful observations.

LET us next proceed to consider the proper qualities of Historical Narration. It is obvious, that on the manner of narration much must depend, as the first notion of History is the recital of past facts; and how much one mode of recital may be preferable to another we shall soon be convinced, by thinking of the different effects, which the same story, when told by two different persons, is found to produce.

THE first virtue of Historical Narration, is Clearness, Order, and due Connection. To attain this, the Historian must be completely master of his subject; he must see the whole as at one view; and comprehend the chain and dependence of all its parts, that he may introduce every thing in its proper place; that he may lead us smoothly along the track of affairs which are recorded, and may always give us the satisfaction of seeing

“restored the severe military discipline of ancient times.
 “Grown old amidst toils and labours, he was the more
 “rigid in imposing them, because he had been accustomed
 “to bear them.”

LECT. how one event arises out of another. Without
 XXXVI. this, there can be neither pleasure nor instruction, in reading History. Much for this end will depend on the observance of that unity in the general plan and conduct, which, in the preceding Lecture, I recommended. Much too will depend on the proper management of transitions, which forms one of the chief ornaments of this kind of writing, and is one of the most difficult in execution. Nothing tries an Historian's abilities more, than so to lay his train beforehand, as to make us pass naturally and agreeably from one part of his subject to another; to employ no clumsy and awkward junctures; and to contrive ways and means of forming some union among transactions, which seem to be most widely separated from one another.

IN the next place, as History is a very dignified species of Composition, gravity must always be maintained in the narration. There must be no meanness nor vulgarity in the style; no quaint, nor colloquial phrases; no affectation of pertness, or of wit. The smart, or the sneering manner of telling a story, are inconsistent with the historical character. I do not say, that an Historian is never to let himself down. He may sometimes do it with propriety, in order to diversify the strain of his narration, which, if it be perfectly uniform, is apt to become tiresome. But he should be careful never to descend too far; and, on occasions where a light or ludicrous anecdote is proper to be recorded, it is generally better to

throw it into a note, than to hazard becoming too familiar, by introducing it into the body of the work. LECT. XXXVI.

BUT an Historian may possess these qualities of being perspicuous, distinct, and grave, and may notwithstanding be a dull Writer; in which case, we shall reap little benefit from his labours. We will read him without pleasure; or most probably, we shall soon give over to read him at all. He must therefore study to render his narration interesting; which is the quality that chiefly distinguishes a Writer of genius and eloquence.

Two things are especially conducive to this; the first is, a just medium in the conduct of narration, between a rapid or crowded recital of facts, and a prolix detail. The former embarrasses, and the latter tires us. An Historian that would interest us, must know when to be concise, and where he ought to enlarge; passing concisely over slight and unimportant events but, dwelling on such as are striking and considerable in their nature, or pregnant with consequences; preparing beforehand our attention to them, and bringing them forth into the most full and conspicuous light. The next thing he must attend to, is a proper selection of the circumstances belonging to those events, which he chuses to relate fully. General facts make a slight impression on the mind. It is by means of circumstances and particulars properly chosen, that a narration becomes interesting and affecting to the Reader. These give life, body, and colouring to the recital of

LECT. facts, and enable us to behold them as present,
 XXXVI. and passing before our eyes. It is this employment of circumstances, in Narration, that is properly termed Historical Painting.

IN all these virtues of Narration, particularly in this last, of picturesque descriptive Narration, several of the Ancient Historians eminently excel. Hence, the pleasure that is found in reading Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus. They are all conspicuous for the Art of Narration. Herodotus is, at all times, an agreeable Writer, and relates every thing with that *naïveté* and simplicity of manner, which never fails to interest the Reader. Though the manner of Thucydides be more dry and harsh, yet, on great occasions, as when he is giving an account of the Plague of Athens, the Siege of Plataea, the Sedition in Corcyra, the Defeat of the Athenians in Sicily, he displays a very strong and masterly power of description. Xenophon's *Cyropædia*, and his *Anabasis*, or retreat of the Ten Thousand, are extremely beautiful. The circumstances are finely selected, and the Narration is easy and engaging; but his *Hellenics*, or Continuation of the History of Thucydides, is a much inferior work. Sallust's Art of Historical Painting in his *Catilinarian*, but, more especially, in his *Jugurthine War*, is well known; though his Style is liable to censure, as too studied and affected.

LIVY is more unexceptionable in his manner, and is excelled by no Historian whatever in the

Art of Narration several remarkable examples L E C T. XXXVI.
 might be given from him. His account, for instance, of the famous defeat of the Roman army by the Samnites, at the Furcæ Caudinæ, in the beginning of the ninth book, affords one of the most beautiful exemplifications of Historical Painting, that is any where to be met with. We have first, an exact description of the narrow pass between two mountains, into which the enemy had decoyed the Romans. When they find themselves caught, and no hope of escape left, we are made to see, first, their astonishment, next, their indignation, and then, their dejection, painted in the most lively manner, by such circumstances and actions as were natural to persons in their situation. The restless and unquiet manner in which they pass the night; the consultations of the Samnites; the various measures proposed to be taken; the messages between the two armies, all heighten the scene. At length, in the morning, the Consuls return to the camp, and inform them that they could receive no other terms but that of surrendering their arms, and passing under the yoke, which was considered as the last mark of ignominy for a conquered army. Part of what then follows, I shall give in the Author's own words. "Redintegravit luctum in
 "castris consulum adventus; ut vix ab iis abstin-
 "nerent manus, quorum temeritate in eum locum
 "deducti essent. Alii alios intueri, contemplari
 "arma mox tradenda, & inermes futuras dexteras;
 "proponere sibi ipse ante oculos, jugum

LECT. " hostile, & ludibria victoris, & vultus superbos,
 XXXVI. " & per armatos inermium iter. Inde sædi agminis
 " miserabilem viam; per fociorum urbes reditum
 " in patriam ac parentes quo sæpe ipsi triumphan-
 " tes venissent. Se solos sine vulnere, sine ferro,
 " sine acie victos; sibi non stringere licuisse gla-
 " dios, non manum cum hoste conferere; sibi
 " nequicquam arma, nequicquam vires, nequic-
 " quam animos datos. Hæc frementibus, hora
 " fatalis ignominia advenit. Jamprimum, cum
 " singulis vestimentis, inermes extra vallum abire
 " jussi. Tum a consulibus abire lictores jussi,
 " paludamenta que detracta. Tantam hoc inter
 " ipsos, qui paulo ante eos dedendos, lacerandos-
 " que censuerant, miserationem fecit, ut suæ quis-
 " que conditionis oblitus, ab illa deformatione
 " tantæ majestatis, velut ab nefando spectaculo,
 " averteret oculos. Primi consules, prope semi-
 " nudi, sub jugum missi *, " &c. The rest of the

* " The arrival of the Consuls in the camp, wrought up
 " their passions to such a degree, that they could scarcely
 " abstain from laying violent hands on them, as by their
 " rashness they had been brought into this situation. They
 " began to look on one another; to cast a melancholy eye
 " on their arms, which were now to be surrendered, and
 " on their right hands, which were to become defence-
 " less. The yoke under which they were to pass; the
 " scoffs of the conquerors; and their haughty looks, when,
 " disarmed and stripped, they should be led through the
 " hostile lines; all rose before their eyes. They then looked
 " forward to the sad journey which awaited them, when
 " they were to pass as a vanquished and disgraced army
 " through the territories of their allies, by whom they had
 " often been beheld returning in triumph to their families

story which it would be too long to insert, is LECT.
 carried on with the same beauty, and full of XXXVI.
 picturesque circumstances *.

“ and native land. They alone, they muttered to one
 “ another, without an engagement, without a single blow
 “ had been conquered. To their hard fate it fell, never
 “ to have had it in their power to draw a sword, or to
 “ look an enemy in the face ; to them only, arms,
 “ strength, and courage, had been given in vain. While
 “ they were thus giving vent to their indignation, the fatal
 “ moment of their ignominy arrived. First, they were all com-
 “ manded to come forth from the camp, without armour
 “ and in a single garment. Next, orders were given, that
 “ the Consuls should be left without their Lictors, and
 “ that they should be stripped of their robes. Such com-
 “ miseration did this affront excite among them, who,
 “ but a little before, had been for delivering up those very
 “ Consuls to the enemy, and for putting them to death,
 “ that every one forgot his own condition, and turned his
 “ eyes aside from this infamous disgrace, suffered by the
 “ consular dignity, as from a spectacle which was too
 “ detestable to be beheld. The Consuls, almost half naked
 “ were first made to pass under the yoke,” &c.

* The description which Cæsar gives of the consterna-
 tion occasioned in his camp, by the accounts which were
 spread among his troops, of the ferocity, the size, and
 the courage of the Germans, affords an instance of Histo-
 rical Painting, executed in a simple manner; and, at the
 same time, exhibiting a natural and lively scene: “Dum
 “ paucos dies ad Vefontionem moratur, ex percunctatione
 “ nostrorum, vocibusque Gallorum ac Mercatorum, qui
 “ ingenti magnitudine corporum Germanos, incredibili
 “ virtute, atque exercitatione in armis esse prædicabant;
 “ sæpe numero sese cum iis congressos, ne vultum qui-
 “ dem, atque aciem oculorum ferre potuisse; tantus subito
 “ terror omnem exercitum occupavit, ut non mediocriter

LECT. TACITUS is another Author eminent for Historical Painting, though in a manner altogether different from that of Livy. Livy's descriptions are more full, more plain, and natural; those of Tacitus consist in a few bold strokes. He selects one or two remarkable circumstances, and sets them before us in a strong, and, generally, in a new and uncommon light. Such is the following picture of the situation of Rome, and of the Emperor Galba, when Otho was advancing against him: "Agebatur huc illuc Galba, vario turbæ fluctuantis impulsu, completis undique basilicis & templis, lugubri prospectu. Neque populi aut plebis ulla vox; sed attoniti vultus, et conversæ ad omnia aures. Non tumultus, non quies; sed quale magni metus, et magnæ iræ, silentium est *". No

"omnium mentes animosque perturbaret. Hic primum ortus est a tribunis militum, ac præfectis, reliquisque qui ex urbe, amicitiae causâ, Cæsarem secuti, suum periculum miserabantur, quod non magnum in re militari usum habebant: quorum alius, aliâ causâ illatâ quam sibi ad proficiscendum necessariam esse diceret, petebat ut ejus voluntate discedere liceret. Nonnulli pudore adducti, ut timoris suspicionem vitarent, remanebant. Hi neque vultum fingere, neque interdum lacrymas tenere poterant. Abditi in tabernaculis, aut suum fatum querebantur, aut cum familiaribus suis, commune periculum miserabantur. Vulgo, totis castris testamenta obsignabantur."

DE BELL. GALL. L. I.

* "Galba was driven to and fro by the tide of the multitude, shoving him from place to place. The temples and public buildings were filled with crowds, of a dismal appearance. No clamours were heard, either from the citizens, or from the rabble. Their countenances

image, in any Poet, is more strong and expressive than this last stroke of the description: "Non tumultus, non quies, sed quale," &c. This is a conception of the sublime kind, and, discovers high genius. Indeed, throughout all his work, Tacitus shows the hand of a master. As he is profound in reflection, so he is striking in description, and pathetic in sentiment. The Philosopher, the Poet, and the Historian, all meet in him. Though the period of which he writes may be reckoned unfortunate for a Historian, he has made it afford us many interesting exhibitions of human nature. The relations which he gives of the deaths of several eminent personages, are as affecting as the deepest tragedies. He paints with a glowing pencil; and possesses, beyond all Writers, the talent of painting, not to the imagination merely, but to the heart. With many of the most distinguished beauties, he is, at the same time, not a perfect model for History, and such as have formed themselves upon him, have seldom been successful. He is to be admired, rather than imitated. In his reflections, he is too refined, in his style, too concise, sometimes quaint and affected, often abrupt and obscure. History seems to require a more natural, flowing, and popular manner.

THE Ancients employed one embellishment of History which the Moderns have laid aside, I

"were filled with consternation; their ears were employed in listening with anxiety. It was not a tumult; it was not quietness; it was the silence of terror, and of wrath."

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LECT. mean Orations, which, on weighty occasions;
 XXXVI. they put into the mouths of some of their chief personages. By means of these, they diversified their history; they conveyed both moral and political instruction; and, by the opposite arguments which were employed, they gave us a view of the sentiments of different parties. Thucydides was the first who introduced this method. The Orations with which his history abounds, and those too of some other Greek and Latin Historians, are among the most valuable remains which we have of Ancient Eloquence. How beautiful soever they are, it may be much questioned, I think, whether they find a proper place in History. I rather incline to think, that they are unsuitable to it. For they form a mixture which is unnatural in History, of fiction with truth. We know, that these Orations are entirely of the Author's own composition, and that he has introduced some celebrated person haranguing in a public place, purely that he might have an opportunity of showing his own eloquence, or delivering his own sentiments, under the name of that person. This is a sort of poetical liberty which does not suit the gravity of History, throughout which, an air of the strictest truth should always reign. Orations may be an embellishment to History; such might also Poetical Compositions be, introduced under the name of some of the personages mentioned in the Narration, who were known to have possessed poetical talents. But neither the one, nor the other, find

a proper place in History. Instead of inserting formal Orations, the method adopted by later Writers, seems better and more natural; that of the Historian, on some great occasion, delivering, in his own person, the sentiments and reasonings of the opposite parties, or the substance of what was understood to be spoken in some Public Assembly; which he may do without the liberty of fiction.

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THE drawing of characters is one of the most splendid, and, at the same time, one of the most difficult ornaments of Historical Composition. For characters are generally considered, as professed exhibitions of fine writing; and an Historian, who seeks to shine in them, is frequently in danger of carrying refinement to excess, from a desire of appearing very profound and penetrating. He brings together so many contrasts, and subtle oppositions of qualities, that we are rather dazzled with sparkling expressions, than entertained with any clear conception of a human character. A Writer who would characterise in an instructive and masterly manner, should be simple in his style, and should avoid all quaintness and affectation; at the same time, not contenting himself with giving us general outlines only, but descending into those peculiarities which mark a character, in its most strong and distinctive features. The Greek Historians sometimes give elogiums, but rarely draw full and professed characters. The two Ancient Authors

LECT. who have laboured this part of Historical composition most, are Sallust and Tacitus.

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As History is a species of Writing designed for the instruction of mankind, sound morality should always reign in it. Both in describing characters, and in relating transactions, the Author should always show himself to be on the side of virtue. To deliver moral instruction in a formal manner, falls not within his province; but both as a good man, and as a good Writer, we expect, that he should discover sentiments of respect for virtue, and of indignation at flagrant vice. To appear neutral and indifferent with respect to good and bad characters, and to affect a crafty and political, rather than a moral turn of thought, will, besides other bad effects, derogate greatly from the weight of Historical Composition, and will render the strain of it much more cold and uninteresting. We are always most interested in the transactions which are going on, when our sympathy is awakened by the story, and when we become engaged in the fate of the actors. But this effect can never be produced by a Writer, who is deficient in sensibility and moral feeling.

As the observations which I have hitherto made, have mostly respected the Ancient Historians, it may naturally be expected, that I should also take some notice of the Moderns who have excelled in this kind of Writing.

THE country in Europe, where the Historical Genius has, in latter ages, shone forth with most lustre,

lustre, beyond doubt is Italy. The national LECT.
character of the Italians seems favourable to it. XXXVI.
They were always distinguished as an acute,
penetrating, reflecting people, remarkable for
political sagacity and wisdom, and who early ad-
dicted themselves to the arts of Writing. Accord-
ingly, soon after the restoration of letters,
Machiavel, Guicciardini, Davila, Bentivoglio,
Father Paul, became highly conspicuous for
historical merit. They all appear to have con-
ceived very just ideas of History; and are agree-
able, instructive, and interesting Writers. In their
manner of narration, they are much formed upon
the Ancients; some of them, as Bentivoglio and
Guicciardini, have, in imitation of them, intro-
duced Orations into their History. In the profound-
ness and distinctness of their political views, they
may, perhaps, be esteemed to have surpassed the
Ancients. Critics have, at the same time, observ-
ed some imperfections, in each of them. Ma-
chiavel, in his History of Florence, is not alto-
gether so interesting as one would expect an
Author of his abilities to be; either through
his own defect, or through some unhappiness in
his subject, which led him into a very minute
detail of the intrigues of one city. Guicciardini,
at all times sensible and profound, is taxed for
dwelling so long on the Tuscan affairs as to be
sometimes tedious; a defect which is also imputed,
occasionally, to the judicious Father Paul. Benti-
voglio, in his excellent History of the wars of
Flanders, is accused of approaching to the florid

LECT. and pompous manner: and Davila, though one
 XXXVI. of the most agreeable and entertaining Relaters, has manifestly this defect of spreading a sort of uniformity over all his characters, by representing them as guided too regularly by political interest. But, although some such objections may be made to these Authors, they deserve, upon the whole, to be placed in the first rank of Modern Historical Writers. The wars of Flanders, written in Latin by Famiæus Strada, is a book of some note; but is not entitled to the same reputation as the works of the other Historians I have named. Strada is too violently partial to the Spanish cause; and too open a Panegyrist of the Prince of Parma. He is florid, diffuse, and an affected imitator of the manner and style of Livy.

AMONG the French, as there has been much good Writing in many kinds, so also in the Historical. That ingenious nation, who have done so much honour to Modern Literature, possess, in an eminent degree, the talent of Narration. Many of their later Historical Writers are spirited, lively, and agreeable; and some of them not deficient in profoundness and penetration. They have not, however, produced any such capital Historians as the Italians, whom I mentioned above.

OUR Island, till within these few years, was not eminent for its historical productions. Early, indeed, Scotland made some figure by means of the celebrated Buchanan. He is an elegant Writer, classical in his Latinity, and agreeable both in narration and description. But one

cannot but suspect him to be more attentive to elegance than to accuracy. Accustomed to form his political notions wholly upon the plans of ancient governments, the feudal system seems never to have entered into his thoughts; and as this was the basis of the Scottish constitution, his political views are, of course, inaccurate and imperfect. When he comes to the transactions of his own time, there is such a change in his manner of writing, and such an asperity in his style, that, on what side soever the truth lies with regard to those dubious and long controverted facts which make the subject of that part of his work, it is impossible to clear him from being deeply tinged with the spirit of party.

AMONG the older English Historians, the most considerable is Lord Clarendon. Though he writes as the professed apologist of one side, yet there appears more impartiality in his relation of facts, than might at first be expected. A great spirit of virtue and probity runs through his work. He maintains all the dignity of a Historian. His sentences, indeed, are often too long, and his general manner is prolix; but his style, on the whole, is manly; and his merit, as a Historian, is much beyond mediocrity. Bishop Burnet is lively and perspicuous; but he has hardly any other historical merit. His style is too careless and familiar for History; his characters are, indeed, marked with a bold and strong hand; but they are generally light and satyrical; and he abounds so much in little stories concerning

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LECT. himself, that he resembles more a Writer of
 XXXVI. Memoirs than of History. During a long period, English Historical Authors were little more than dull Compilers; till of late the distinguished names of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, have raised the British character, in this species of Writing, to high reputation and dignity.

I OBSERVED, in the preceding Lecture, that Annals, Memoirs, and Lives, are the inferior kinds of Historical Composition. It will be proper, before dismissing this subject, to make a few observations upon them. Annals are commonly understood to signify a collection of facts, digested according to chronological order; rather serving for the materials of History, than aspiring to the name of History themselves. All that is required, therefore, in a Writer of such Annals, is to be faithful, distinct, and complete.

MEMOIRS denote a sort of Composition, in which an Author does not pretend to give full information of all the facts respecting the period of which he writes, but only to relate what he himself had access to know, or what he was concerned in, or what illustrates the conduct of some person, or the circumstances of some transaction, which he chuses for his subject. From a Writer of Memoirs, therefore, is not exacted the same profound research, or enlarged information, as from a Writer of History. He is not subject to the same laws of unvarying dignity and gravity. He may talk freely of himself; he may descend into the most

familiar anecdotes. What is chiefly required of him is, that he be sprightly and interesting; and especially, that he inform us of things that are useful and curious; that he convey to us some sort of knowledge worth the acquiring. This is a species of Writing very bewitching to such as love to write concerning themselves, and conceive every transaction, in which they had a share, to be of singular importance. There is no wonder, therefore, that a nation so sprightly as the French, should, for two centuries past, have been pouring forth a whole flood of Memoirs; the greatest part of which are little more than agreeable trifles.

SOME, however, must be excepted from this general character; two in particular: the Memoirs of the Cardinal de Retz, and those of the Duke of Sully. From Retz's Memoirs, besides the pleasure of agreeable and lively narration, we may derive also much instruction, and much knowledge of human nature. Though his politics be often too fine spun, yet the Memoirs of a professed factious leader, such as the Cardinal was, wherein he draws both his own character, and that of several great personages of his time so fully, cannot be read by any person of good sense without benefit. The Memoirs of the Duke of Sully, in the state in which they are now given to the Public, have great merit, and deserve to be mentioned with particular praise. No Memoirs approach more near to the usefulness, and the dignity of a full legitimate

LECT. History. They have this peculiar advantage, of
 XXXVI. giving us a beautiful display of two of the most
 illustrious characters which history presents: Sully
 himself, one of the ablest, and most incorrupt
 ministers, and Henry IV. one of the greatest and
 most amiable princes of modern times. I know
 few books more full of virtue; and of good
 sense, than Sully's Memoirs; few, therefore,
 more proper to form both the heads and the
 hearts of such as are designed for public business,
 and action in the world.

BIOGRAPHY, or the Writing of Lives, is a
 very useful kind of Composition; less formal and
 stately than History; but to the bulk of Readers,
 perhaps, no less instructive; as it affords them
 the opportunity of seeing the characters and
 tempers, the virtues and failings of eminent men
 fully displayed; and admits them into a more
 thorough and intimate acquaintance with such
 persons, than History generally allows. For a
 Writer of Lives may descend, with propriety,
 to minute circumstances, and familiar incidents.
 It is expected of him, that he is to give the
 private, as well as the public life, of the person
 whose actions he records; nay, it is from private
 life, from familiar, domestic, and seemingly
 trivial occurrences, that we often receive most
 light into the real character. In this species of
 Writing, Plutarch has no small merit; and to
 him we stand indebted for much of the know-
 ledge that we possess, concerning several of the
 most eminent personages of antiquity. His matter
 is, indeed, better than his manner; as he cannot

lay claim to any peculiar beauty or elegance. His judgment too, and his accuracy, have sometimes been taxed; but whatever defects of this kind he may be liable to, his *Lives of Eminent Men* will always be considered as a valuable treasure of instruction. He is remarkable for being one of the most humane Writers of all antiquity; less dazzled than many of them are, with the exploits of valour and ambition; and fond of displaying his great men to us, in the more gentle lights of retirement and private life.

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I CANNOT conclude the subject of History, without taking notice of a very great improvement which has, of late years, begun to be introduced into Historical Composition; I mean, a more particular attention than was formerly given to laws, customs, commerce, religion, literature, and every other thing that tends to show the spirit and Genius of nations. It is now understood to be the business of an able Historian to exhibit manners, as well as facts and events; and assuredly, whatever displays the state and life of mankind, in different periods, and illustrates the progress of the human mind, is more useful and interesting than the detail of sieges and battles. The person, to whom we are most indebted for the introduction of this improvement into History, is the celebrated M. Voltaire, whose Genius has shone with such surprising lustre, in so many different parts of literature. His *Age of Louis XIV.* was one of the first great productions in this taste; and soon drew, throughout all Europe,

LECT. that general attention, and received that high
XXXVI. approbation, which so ingenious and eloquent a
production merited. His Essay on the general
History of Europe, since the days of Charlemagne,
is not to be considered either as a History, or
the proper Plan of an Historical Work; but only
as a series of observations on the chief events that
have happened throughout several centuries, and
on the changes that successively took place in the
spirit and manners of different nations. Though,
in some dates and facts it may, perhaps, be
inaccurate, and is tinged with those particulari-
ties which unhappily distinguished Voltaire's
manner of thinking on religious subjects, yet it
contains so many enlarged and instructive views,
as justly to merit the attention of all who either
read or write the history of those ages.