

NOTES FROM THE JOURNAL OF A SCHOLAR.

Nunc non e manibus illis,
Nunc non e tumulo, fortunataque favilla
Nascuntur violæ ?

PERSIUS.

HOMER.

HOMER I read with continually new pleasure. Criticism of Homer is like criticism upon natural scenery. You may say what is, and what is wanting, but you do not pretend to find fault. The Iliad is before us as a pile of mountains, — so blue and distant, so simple and real, — even so much an image of majesty and power.

He is as prolific as the earth, and produces his changing scenery with the ease and the finish and the inexhaustible variety of nature. Homer never mistakes. You might as well say, there was untruth in the song of the wind.

I notice Homer's mention of an interview with a great man.

It is with him always among the memorabilia to have seen a great man. An embassy of Ulysses, a breakfast with Tydeus, any meeting with any heroic person, which barely gave time to note him, is text for memory and comparison.

Homer is pious.

Homer, says Goethe, describes that which exists, not its effect on the beholder. He paints agreeable things, not their agreeableness.

Homer writes from no theory as a point of vision. He tells us what he sees, not what he thinks.

Homer is an achromatic glass. He is even less humorous than Shakspeare.

Two or three disinterested witnesses have been in the world, who have stated the facts as they are, and whose testimony stands unimpeached from age to age. Such was Homer, Socrates, Chaucer, Shakspeare; perhaps Goethe.

A larger class states things as they believe them to be; Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, Luther, Montaigne, George Fox.

A still larger class take a side, and defend it the best they can; Aristotle, Lucretius, Milton, Burke.

SHAKSPEARE.

O my friend! shall thou and I always be two persons? Any strong emotion makes the surrounding parts of life fall away as if struck with death. One sometimes questions his own reality,—it so blanches and shrivels in the flame of a thought, a relation, that swallows him up. If that lives, he lives. “There either he must live or have no life.”

This afternoon we read Shakspeare. The verse so sunk into me, that as I toiled my way home under the cloud of night, with the gusty music of the storm around and overhead, I doubted that it was all a remembered scene; that Humanity was indeed one, a spirit continually reproduced, accomplishing a vast orbit, whilst individual men are but the points through which it passes.

We each of us furnish to the angel who stands in the sun a single observation. The reason, why Homer is to me like dewy morning, is because I too lived while Troy was, and sailed in the hollow ships of the Grecians to sack the devoted town. The rosy-fingered dawn as it crimsoned the top of Ida, the broad sea shore dotted with tents, the Trojan hosts in their painted armor, and the rushing chariots of Diomed and Idomeneus,—all these I too saw; my ghost animated the frame of some nameless Argive. And Shakspeare in King John does but recall to me myself in the dress of another age, the sport of new accidents. I, who am Charles, was sometime Romeo. In Hamlet, I pondered and doubted. We forget what we have been, drugged with the sleepy bowl of the Present. But when a lively chord in the soul is struck, when the windows for a moment are unbarred, the long and varied past is recovered. We recognise it all. We are no more brief, ignoble creatures; we seize our immortality, and bind together the related parts of our secular being.

Shakspeare was a proper Pagan. He understood the height and depth of humanity in all its tossings on the sea of circumstance,—now breasting the waves, mounting even to heaven on their steep sides, and now drifting before the wrath of the tempest. In himself he embraced this whole sphere, the whole of man struggling with the

whole of fortune. But of religion, as it appears in the new dispensation of Christianity, as an element in the soul controlling all the rest, and exhibiting new phenomena of action and passion, he had no experience; almost I had said, he had no conception. The beauty of holiness, the magnanimity of faith, he never saw. Probably he was an unbeliever in the creed of his time, and looked on the New Testament as a code that hampered the freedom of the mind which was a law unto itself, and as intruding on the sublime mystery of our fate. Hence, he delighted to get out of the way of Christianity, and not to need to calculate any of its influences.

“What’s brave, what’s noble,
Let’s do it after the high Roman fashion.”

This was as he felt, and in Cleopatra it is just sentiment; but his men and women in the English plays often talk in the same ante-Christian style as Cæsar or Coriolanus. Now, our sign boards tell of Titian; and society everywhere attests in one mode or other the effects of Christianity. Certain fundamental truths sink and sow themselves in every soil, and the most irreligious man unconsciously supposes them in all his life and conversation.

Shakspeare had in its perfection the poetic inspiration, applied himself without effort to the whole world,—the sensible, the intelligent. Into all beauty, into all suffering, into all action, into all affection, he threw himself,—and yet not himself, for he seems never committed in his plays;—but his genius. His genius was thus omnific and all-sympathizing. He seems to have sat above this hundred-handed play of his imagination, pensive and conscious. He read the world off into sweetest verse as one reads a book. He in no way mixed himself the individual with the scenes he drew, and so his poetry was the very coinage of nature and life. The pregnant cloud disburdened itself and meaning became expression. In proportion as the prophet sees things from a personal point of view, and speaks under the influence of any temperament, interest, or prepossession, his eye is not clear, his voice is husky,—the oracle philippizes. The perfect inspiration is that which utters the beauty and truth, seen pure and unconfused as they lie in the lap of the Divine Order.

Shakspeare was the inspired tongue of humanity. He was priest at the altar not of the Celestials, but of Mortals. His kingdom was of this world, and the message he was sent to do he delivered unembarrassed, unimplicated. He gave voice to the finest, curiousest, boldest philosophical speculations; he chanted the eternal laws of morals; but it was as they were facts in the consciousness, and so a part of humanity. He gives no pledge, breathes no prayer,—and religion is mirrored no otherwise than debauchery. In his sonnets we behold him appropriating his gifts to his own use, but never in the plays. Hamlet and Othello,—as he counted them not his creatures, but self-subsistent, too highborn to be propertied,—so he tampers not with their individuality, nor obtrudes himself on us as their prompter. If they lived, he lived.

BURKE.

It is not true what Goldsmith says of Burke; he did not give up to party any more than Shakspeare gave up to conspiracy, madness, or lust. His was not the nature of the partisan, but of the poet, who is quite other than the partisan. With the faculty proper to genius, he threw himself into the cause he espoused; and the Reflections on the French Revolution and the Impeachment of Warren Hastings were his Othello and Julius Cæsar, wherein himself was lost and the truth of things only observed.

The poet, it is said, has in him all the arts and letters of his time. The Iliad is a panorama of Greek civilization in the Homeric age. So Burke in his speeches comprises his era. Hence he could no more be a Radical than a Courtier. The spirit by which he was wedded to what was venerable was one with the spirit in which he welcomed the new births of reformation and liberty. He was consistent with himself. He had no sympathy with those who, like George Fox, would clothe themselves in a suit of leather, and nakedly renounce the riches together with the restraints of social life. He did not chafe under the splendid harness of old institutions. Herein appeared not the servility but the greatness of the man; and his homage to the English Constitution was like the chivalrous courtesy which man pays to woman, as beautiful in him to yield, as in her to accept.