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THE WAY TO WRITE HISTORY

MY DEAR PHILO,

There is a story of a curious epidemic at Abdera, just after the accession of King Lysimachus. It began with the whole population's exhibiting feverish symptoms, strongly marked and unintermittent from the very first attack. About the seventh day, the fever was relieved, in some cases by a violent flow of blood from the nose, in others by perspiration not less violent. The mental effects, however, were most ridiculous; they were all stage-struck, mouthing blank verse and ranting at the top of their voices. Their favourite recitation was the *_Andromeda_* of Euripides; one after another would go through the great speech of Perseus; the whole place was full of pale ghosts, who were our seventh-day tragedians vociferating,

O Love, who lord'st it over Gods and men,

and the rest of it. This continued for some time, till the coming of winter put an end to their madness with a sharp frost. I find the explanation of the form it took in this fact: Archelaus was then the great tragic actor, and in the middle of the summer, during some very hot weather, he had played the *_Andromeda_* there; most of them took the fever in the theatre, and convalescence was followed by a relapse--into tragedy, the *_Andromeda_* haunting their memories, and Perseus hovering, Gorgon's head in hand, before the mind's eye.

Well, to compare like with like, the majority of our educated class is now suffering from an Abderite epidemic. They are not stage-struck, indeed; that would have been a minor infatuation--to be possessed with other people's verses, not bad ones either; no; but from the beginning of



the present excitements--the barbarian war, the Armenian disaster, the succession of victories--you cannot find a man but is writing history; nay, every one you meet is a Thucydides, a Herodotus, a Xenophon. The old saying must be true, and war be the father of all things [Footnote: See note on *Icaromenippus*, 8.], seeing what a litter of historians it has now teemed forth at a birth.

Such sights and sounds, my Philo, brought into my head that old anecdote about the Sinopean. A report that Philip was marching on the town had thrown all Corinth into a bustle; one was furbishing his arms, another wheeling stones, a third patching the wall, a fourth strengthening a battlement, every one making himself useful somehow or other. Diogenes having nothing to do--of course no one thought of giving *him* a job--was moved by the sight to gird up his philosopher's cloak and begin rolling his tub-dwelling energetically up and down the Craneum; an acquaintance asked, and got, the explanation: 'I do not want to be thought the only idler in such a busy multitude; I am rolling my tub to be like the rest.'

I too am reluctant to be the only dumb man at so vociferous a season; I do not like walking across the stage, like a 'super', in gaping silence; so I decided to roll *my* cask as best I could. I do not intend to write a history, or attempt actual narrative; I am not courageous enough for that; have no apprehensions on my account; I realize the danger of rolling the thing over the rocks, especially if it is only a poor little jar of brittle earthenware like mine; I should very soon knock against some pebble and find myself picking up the pieces. Come, I will tell you my idea for campaigning in safety, and keeping well out of range.

Give a wide berth to all that foam and spray, and to the anxieties which vex the historian--that I shall be wise enough to do; but I propose to give a little advice, and lay down a few principles for the benefit of those who do venture. I shall have a share in their building, if not in the dedicatory inscription; my finger-tips will at least have touched their wet mortar.

However, most of them see no need for advice here: *there* might as well be an art of talking, seeing, or eating; history-writing is perfectly

easy, comes natural, is a universal gift; all that is necessary is the faculty of translating your thoughts into words. But the truth is--you know it without my telling, old friend--it is *not* a task to be lightly undertaken, or carried through without effort; no, it needs as much care as any sort of composition whatever, if one means to create 'a possession for ever,' as Thucydides calls it. Well, I know I shall not get a hearing from many of them, and some will be seriously offended--especially any who have finished and produced their work; in cases where its first reception was favourable, it would be folly to expect the authors to recast or



correct; has it not the stamp of finality? is it not almost a State document? Yet even they may profit by my words; *_we_* are not likely to be attacked again; we have disposed of all our enemies; but there might be a Celto-Gothic or an Indo-Bactrian war; then our friends' composition might be improved by the application of my measuring-rod--always supposing that they recognize its correctness; failing that, let them do their own mensuration with the old foot-rule; the doctor will not particularly mind, though all Abdera insists on spouting the *_Andromeda_*.

Advice has two provinces--one of choice, the other of avoidance; let us first decide what the historian is to avoid--of what faults he must purge himself--, and then proceed to the measures he must take for putting himself on the straight high road. This will include the manner of his beginning, the order in which he should marshal his facts, the questions of proportion, of discreet silence, of full or cursory narration, of comment and connexion. Of all that, however, later on; for the present we deal with the vices to which bad writers are liable. As to those faults of diction, construction, meaning, and general amateurishness, which are common to every kind of composition, to discuss them is neither compatible with my space nor relevant to my purpose.

But there are mistakes peculiar to history; your own observation will show you just those which a constant attendance at authors' readings [Footnote: These were very common in Roman Imperial times, for purposes of advertisement, of eliciting criticism, &c. 'The audience at recitations may be compared with the modern literary reviews, discharging the functions of a preventive and emendatory, not merely of a correctional tribunal. Before publication a work might thus be known to more hearers than it would now find readers' Mayor, *_Juvenal_*, iii. 9.] has impressed on me; you have only to keep your ears open at every opportunity. It will be convenient, however, to refer by the way to a few illustrations in recent histories. Here is a serious fault to begin with. It is the fashion to neglect the examination of facts, and give the space gained to eulogies of generals and commanders; those of their own side they exalt to the skies, the other side they disparage intemperately. They forget that between history and panegyric there is a great gulf fixed, barring communication; in musical phrase, the two things are a couple of octaves apart. The panegyrist has only one concern--to commend and gratify his living theme some way or other; if misrepresentation will serve his purpose, he has no objection to that. History, on the other hand, abhors the intrusion of any least scruple of falsehood; it is like the windpipe, which the doctors tell us will not tolerate a morsel of stray food.

Another thing these gentlemen seem not to know is that poetry and history offer different wares, and have their separate rules. Poetry enjoys unrestricted freedom; it has but one law--the poet's fancy. He is inspired and possessed by the Muses; if he chooses to horse his car with



winged steeds, or set others a-galloping over the sea, or standing corn, none challenges his right; his Zeus, with a single cord, may haul up earth and sea, and hold them dangling together--there is no fear the cord may break, the load come tumbling down and be smashed to atoms. In a complimentary picture of Agamemnon, there is nothing against his having Zeus's head and eyes, his brother Posidon's chest, Ares's belt--in fact, the son of Atreus and Aerope will naturally be an epitome of all Divinity; Zeus or Posidon or Ares could not singly or severally provide the requisite perfections. But, if history adopts such servile arts, it is nothing but poetry without the wings; the exalted tones are missing; and imposition of other kinds without the assistance of metre is only the more easily detected. It is surely a great, a superlative weakness, this inability to distinguish history from poetry; what, bedizen history, like her sister, with tale and eulogy and their attendant exaggerations? as well take some mighty athlete with muscles of steel, rig him up with purple drapery and meretricious ornament, rouge and powder his cheeks; faugh, what an object would one make of him with such defilements!

I would not be understood to exclude eulogy from history altogether; it is to be kept to its place and used with moderation, is not to tax the reader's patience; I shall presently show, indeed, that in all such matters an eye is to be had to posterity. It is true, there is a school which makes a pretty division of history into the agreeable and the useful, and defends the introduction of panegyric on the ground that it is agreeable, and pleases the general reader. But nothing could be further from the truth. In the first place the division is quite a false one; history has only one concern and aim, and that is the useful; which again has one single source, and that is truth. The agreeable is no doubt an addition, if it is present; so is beauty to an athlete; but a Nicostratus, who is a fine fellow and proves himself a better man than either of his opponents, gets his recognition as a Heracles, however ugly his face may be; and if one opponent is the handsome Alcaeus himself--handsome enough to make Nicostratus in love with him, says the story--, that does not affect the issue. History too, if it can deal incidentally in the agreeable, will attract a multitude of lovers; but so long as it does its proper business efficiently--and that is the establishment of truth--, it may be indifferent to beauty.

It is further to be remarked, that in history sheer extravagance has not even the merit of being agreeable; and the extravagance of eulogy is doubly repulsive, as extravagance, and as eulogy; at least it is only welcome to the vulgar majority, not to that critical, that perhaps hypercritical audience, whom no slip can escape, who are all eyes like Argus, but keener than he, who test every word as a moneychanger might his coins, rejecting the false on the spot, but accepting the good and heavy and true; it is they that we should have in mind as we write history, and never heed the others, though they applaud till they crack their voices. If you neglect the critics, and indulge in the cloying



sweetness of tales and eulogies and such baits, you will soon find your history a 'Heracles in Lydia.' No doubt you have seen some picture of him: he is Omphale's slave, dressed up in an absurd costume, his lion-skin and club transferred to her, as though she were the true Heracles, while he, in saffron robe and purple jacket, is combing wool and wincing under Omphale's slipper. A degrading spectacle it is--the dress loose and flapping open, and all that was man in him turned to woman.

The vulgar may very likely extend their favour to this; but the select (whose judgement you disregard) will get a good deal of entertainment out of your heterogeneous, disjointed, fragmentary stuff. There is nothing which has not a beauty of its own; but take it out of its proper sphere, and the misuse turns its beauty to ugliness. Eulogy, I need hardly say, may possibly please one person, the eulogized, but will disgust every one else; this is particularly so with the monstrous exaggerations which are in fashion; the authors are so intent on the patron-hunt that they cannot relinquish it without a full exhibition of servility; they have no idea of finesse, never mask their flattery, but blurt out their unconvincing bald tale anyhow.

The consequence is, they miss even their immediate end; the objects of their praise are more inclined (and quite right too) to dislike and discard them for toadies--if they are men of spirit, at any rate. Aristobulus inserted in his history an account of a single combat between Alexander and Porus, and selected this passage to read aloud to the former; he reckoned that his best chance of pleasing was to invent heroic deeds for the king, and heighten his achievements. Well, they were on board ship in the Hydaspes; Alexander took hold of the book, and tossed it overboard; 'the author should have been treated the same way, by rights,' he added, 'for presuming to fight duels for me like that, and shoot down elephants single-handed.' A very natural indignation in Alexander, of a piece with his treatment of the intrusive architect; this person offered to convert the whole of Mount Athos into a colossal statue of the king--who however decided that he was a toady, and actually gave him less employment in ordinary than before.

The fact is, there is nothing agreeable in these things, except to any one who is fool enough to enjoy commendations which the slightest inquiry will prove to be unfounded; of course there are ugly persons--women more especially--who ask artists to paint them as beautiful as they can; they think they will be really better-looking if the painter heightens the rose a little and distributes a good deal of the lily. There you have the origin of the present crowd of historians, intent only upon the passing day, the selfish interest, the profit which they reckon to make out of their work; execration is their desert--in the present for their undisguised clumsy flattery, in the future for the stigma which their exaggerations bring upon history in general. If any one takes some admixture of the agreeable to be an absolute necessity, let him be



content with the independent beauties of style; these are agreeable without being false; but they are usually neglected now, for the better foisting upon us of irrelevant substitutes.

Passing from that point, I wish to put on record some fresh recollections of Ionian histories--supported, now I think of it, by Greek analogies also of recent date--both concerned with the war already alluded to. You may trust my report, the Graces be my witness; I would take oath to its truth, if it were polite to swear on paper. One writer started with invoking the Muses to lend a hand. What a tasteful exordium! How suited to the historic spirit! How appropriate to the style! When he had got a little way on, he compared our ruler to Achilles, and the Parthian king to Thersites; he forgot that Achilles would have done better if he had had Hector instead of Thersites to beat, if there had been a man of might fleeing in front,

But at his heels a mightier far than he.

He next proceeded to say something handsome about himself, as a fit chronicler of such brilliant deeds. As he got near his point of departure, he threw in a word for his native town of Miletus, adding that he was thus improving on Homer, who never so much as mentioned his birthplace. And he concluded his preface with a plain express promise to advance our cause and personally wage war against the barbarians, to the best of his ability. The actual history, and recital of the causes of hostilities, began with these words:--'The detestable Vologesus (whom Heaven confound!) commenced war on the following pretext.'

Enough of him. Another is a keen emulator of Thucydides, and by way of close approximation to his model starts with his own name--most graceful of beginnings, redolent of Attic thyme! Look at it: 'Crepereius Calpurnianus of Pompeiopolis wrote the history of the war between Parthia and Rome, how they warred one upon the other, beginning with the commencement of the war.' After that exordium, what need to describe the rest--what harangues he delivers in Armenia, resuscitating our old friend the Corcyrean envoy--what a plague he inflicts on Nisibis (which would not espouse the Roman cause), lifting the whole thing bodily from Thucydides--except the Pelasgicum and the Long Walls, where the victims of the earlier plague found shelter; there the difference ends; like the other, 'it began in Ethiopia, whence it descended to Egypt,' and to most of the Parthian empire, where it very discreetly remained. I left him engaged in burying the poor Athenians in Nisibis, and knew quite well how he would continue after my exit. Indeed it is a pretty common belief at present that you are writing like Thucydides, if you just use his actual words, *_mutatis mutandis_*. [Footnote: Omitting, with Dindorf, the words which appear in the Teubner text, after emendation, as: *mikra rakia, opos kai autos au phaias, on di autas.*] Ah, and I almost forgot to mention one thing: this same writer gives many names of weapons and military



engines in Latin--_phossa_ for trench, _pons_ for bridge, and so forth. Just think of the dignity of history, and the Thucydidean style--the Attic embroidered with these Latin words, like a toga relieved and picked out with the purple stripe--so harmonious!

Another puts down a bald list of events, as prosy and commonplace as a private's or a carpenter's or a sutler's diary. However, there is more sense in this poor man's performance; he flies his true colours from the first; he has cleared the ground for some educated person who knows how to deal with history. The only fault I have to find with him is that he inscribes his volumes with a solemnity rather disproportioned to the rank of their contents--'Parthian History, by Callimorphus, Surgeon of the 6th Pikemen, volume so-and-so.' Ah, yes, and there is a lamentable preface, which closes with the remark that, since Asclepius is the son of Apollo, and Apollo director of the Muses and patron of all culture, it is very proper for a doctor to write history. Also, he starts in Ionic, but very soon, for no apparent reason, abandons it for every-day Greek, still keeping the Ionic _es_ and _ks_ and _ous_, but otherwise writing like ordinary people--rather too ordinary, indeed.

Perhaps I should balance him with a philosophic historian; this gentleman's name I will conceal, and merely indicate his attitude, as revealed in a recent publication at Corinth. Much had been expected of him, but not enough; starting straight off with the first sentence of the preface, he subjects his readers to a dialectic catechism, his thesis being the highly philosophic one, that no one but a philosopher should write history. Very shortly there follows a second logical process, itself followed by a third; in fact the whole preface is one mass of dialectic figures. There is flattery, indeed, _ad nauseam_, eulogy vulgar to the point of farce; but never without the logical trimmings; always that dialectical catechism. I confess it strikes me as a vulgarity also, hardly worthy of a philosopher with so long and white a beard, when he gives it in his preface as our ruler's special good fortune that philosophers should consent to record his actions; he had better have left us to reach that conclusion for ourselves--if at all.

Again, it would be a sinful neglect to omit the man who begins like this:--'I devise to tell of Romans and Persians'; then a little later, 'For 'twas Heaven's decree that the Persians should suffer evils'; and again, 'One Osroes there was, whom Hellenes name Oxyroes'--and much more in that style. He corresponds, you see, to one of my previous examples; only he is a second Herodotus, and the other a second Thucydides.

There is another distinguished artist in words--again rather more Thucydidean than Thucydides--, who gives, according to his own idea, the clearest, most convincing descriptions of every town, mountain, plain, or river. I wish my bitterest foe no worse fate than the reading of them. Frigid? Caspian snows, Celtic ice, are warm in comparison. A whole book



hardly suffices him for the Emperor's shield--the Gorgon on its boss, with eyes of blue and white and black, rainbow girdle, and snakes twined and knotted. Why, Vologesus's breeches or his bridle, God bless me, they take up several thousand lines apiece; the same for the look of Osroes's hair as he swims the Tigris--or what the cave was like that sheltered him, ivy and myrtle and bay clustered all together to shut out every ray of light. You observe how indispensable it all is to the history; without the scene, how could we have comprehended the action?

It is helplessness about the real essentials, or ignorance of what should be given, that makes them take refuge in word-painting--landscapes, caves, and the like; and when they do come upon a series of important matters, they are just like a slave whose master has left him his money and made him a rich man; he does not know how to put on his clothes or take his food properly; partridges or sweetbreads or hare are served; but he rushes in, and fills himself up with pea soup or salt fish, till he is fit to burst. Well, the man I spoke of gives the most unconvincing wounds and singular deaths: some one has his big toe injured, and dies on the spot; the general Priscus calls out, and seven-and-twenty of the enemy fall dead at the sound. As to the numbers killed, he actually falsifies dispatches; at Europus he slaughters 70,236 of the enemy, while the Romans lose two, and have seven wounded! How any man of sense can tolerate such stuff, I do not know.

Here is another point quite worth mention. This writer has such a passion for unadulterated Attic, and for refining speech to the last degree of purity, that he metamorphoses the Latin names and translates them into Greek; Saturninus figures as Cronius, Fronto must be Phrontis, Titianus Titanius, with queerer transmutations yet. Further, on the subject of Severian's death, he accuses all other writers of a blunder in putting him to the sword; he is really to have starved himself to death, as the most painless method; the fact, however, is that it was all over in three days, whereas seven days is the regular time for starvation; are we perhaps to conceive an Osroes waiting about for Severian to complete the process, and putting off his assault till after the seventh day?

Then, Philo, how shall we class the historians who indulge in poetical phraseology? 'The catapult rocked responsive,' they say; 'Loud thundered the breach'; or, somewhere else in this delectable history, 'Thus Edessa was girdled with clash of arms, and all was din and turmoil,' or, 'The general pondered in his heart how to attack the wall.' Only he fills up the interstices with such wretched common lower-class phrases as 'The military prefect wrote His Majesty,' 'The troops were procuring the needful,' 'They got a wash [Footnote: It was suggested in the Introduction that Lucian's criticism is for practical purposes out of date; but Prescott writes: 'He was surrounded by a party of friends, who had _dropped in_, it seems, after mass, to inquire after the state of his health, some of whom had remained to partake of his repast.'] and put in



an appearance,' and so on. It is like an actor with one foot raised on a high buskin, and the other in a slipper.

You will find others writing brilliant high-sounding prefaces of outrageous length, raising great expectations of the wonders to follow-- and then comes a poor little appendix of a--history; it is like nothing in the world but a child--say the Eros you must have seen in a picture playing in an enormous mask of Heracles or a Titan; *'parturiunt montes'*, cries the audience, very naturally. That is not the way to do things; the whole should be homogeneous and uniform, and the body in proportion to the head--not a helmet of gold, a ridiculous breastplate patched up out of rags or rotten leather, shield of wicker, and pig-skin greaves. You will find plenty of historians prepared to set the Rhodian Colossus's head on the body of a dwarf; others on the contrary show us headless bodies, and plunge into the facts without exordium. These plead the example of Xenophon, who starts with 'Darius and Parysatis had two children'; if they only knew it, there is such a thing as a *'virtual'* exordium, not realized as such by everybody; but of that hereafter.

However, any mistake in mere expression or arrangement is excusable; but when you come to fancy geography, differing from the other not by miles or leagues, but by whole days' journeys, where is the classical model for that? One writer has taken so little trouble with his facts--never met a Syrian, I suppose, nor listened to the stray information you may pick up at the barber's-- that he thus locates Europus:--'Europus lies in Mesopotamia, two days' journey from the Euphrates, and is a colony from Edessa.' Not content with that, this enterprising person has in the same book taken up my native Samosata and shifted it, citadel, walls, and all, into Mesopotamia, giving it the two rivers for boundaries, and making them shave past it, all but touching the walls on either side. I suspect you would laugh at me, Philo, if I were to set about convincing you that I am neither Parthian nor Mesopotamian, as this whimsical colony-planter makes me.

By the way, he has also a very attractive tale of Severian, learnt, he assures us on oath, from one of the actual fugitives. According to this, he would not die by the sword, the rope, or poison, but contrived a death which should be tragic and impressive. He was the owner of some large goblets of the most precious glass; having made up his mind to die, he broke the largest of these, and used a splinter of it for the purpose, cutting his throat with the glass. A dagger or a lancet, good enough instruments for a manly and heroic death, he could not come at, forsooth!

Then, as Thucydides composed a funeral oration over the first victims of that old war, our author feels it incumbent on him to do the same for Severian; they all challenge Thucydides, you see, little as he can be held responsible for the Armenian troubles. So he buries Severian, and then solemnly ushers up to the grave, as Pericles's rival, one Afranius



Silo, a centurion; the flood of rhetoric which follows is so copious and remarkable that it drew tears from me--ye Graces!--tears of laughter; most of all where the eloquent Afranius, drawing to a close, makes mention, with weeping and distressful moans, of all those costly dinners and toasts. But he is a very Ajax in his conclusion. He draws his sword, gallantly as an Afranius should, and in sight of all cuts his throat over the grave--and God knows it was high time for an execution, if oratory can be felony. The historian states that all the spectators admired and lauded Afranius; as for me, I was inclined to condemn him on general grounds--he had all but given a catalogue of sauces and dishes, and shed tears over the memory of departed cakes--, but his capital offence was that he had not cut the historian-tragedian's throat before he left this life himself.

I assure you, my friend, I could largely increase my list of such offenders; but one or two more will suffice, before proceeding to the second part of my undertaking, the suggestions for improvement. There are some, then, who leave alone, or deal very cursorily with, all that is great and memorable; amateurs and not artists, they have no selective faculty, and loiter over copious laboured descriptions of the veriest trifles; it is as if a visitor to Olympia, instead of examining, commending or describing to his stay-at-home friends the general greatness and beauty of the Zeus, were to be struck with the exact symmetry and polish of its footstool, or the proportions of its shoe, and give all his attention to these minor points.

For instance, I have known a man get through the battle of Europus in less than seven whole lines, and then spend twenty mortal hours on a dull and perfectly irrelevant tale about a Moorish trooper. The trooper's name was Mausacas; he wandered up the hills in search of water, and came upon some Syrian yokels getting their lunch; at first they were afraid of him, but when they found he was on the right side, they invited him to share the meal; for one of them had travelled in the Moorish country, having a brother serving in the army. Then come long stories and descriptions of how he hunted there, and saw a great herd of elephants at pasture, and was nearly eaten up by a lion, and what huge fish he had bought at Caesarea. So this quaint historian leaves the terrible carnage to go on at Europus, and lets the pursuit, the forced armistice, the settling of outposts, shift for themselves, while he lingers far into the evening watching Malchion the Syrian cheapen big mackarel at Caesarea; if night had not come all too soon, I dare say he would have dined with him when the fish was cooked. If all this had not been accurately set down in the history, what sad ignorance we should have been left in! The loss to the Romans would have been irreparable, if Mausacas the Moor had got nothing to quench his thirst, and come back fasting to camp. Yet I am wilfully omitting innumerable details of yet greater importance--the arrival of a flute-girl from the next village, the exchange of gifts (Mausacas's was a spear, Malchion's a brooch), and other incidents most essential to the



battle of Europus. It is no exaggeration to say that such writers never give the rose a glance, but devote all their curiosity to the thorns on its stem.

Another entertaining person, who has never set foot outside Corinth, nor travelled as far as its harbour--not to mention seeing Syria or Armenia --, starts with words which impressed themselves on my memory:--'Seeing is believing: I therefore write what I have seen, not what I have been told.' His personal observation has been so close that he describes the Parthian 'Dragons' (they use this ensign as a numerical formula--a thousand men to the Dragon, I believe): they are huge live dragons, he says, breeding in Persian territory beyond Iberia; these are first fastened to great poles and hoisted up aloft, striking terror at a distance while the advance is going on; then, when the battle begins, they are released and set on the enemy; numbers of our men, it seems, were actually swallowed by them, and others strangled or crushed in their coils; of all this he was an eye-witness, taking his observations, however, from a safe perch up a tree. Thank goodness he did not come to close quarters with the brutes! we should have lost a very remarkable historian, and one who did doughty deeds in this war with his own right hand; for he had many adventures, and was wounded at Sura (in the course of a stroll from the Craneum to Lerna, apparently). All this he used to read to a Corinthian audience, which was perfectly aware that he had never so much as seen a battle-picture. Why, he did not know one weapon or engine from another; the names of manoeuvres and formations had no meaning for him; flank or front, line or column, it was all one.

Then there is a splendid fellow, who has boiled down into the compass of five hundred lines (or less, to be accurate) the whole business from beginning to end--campaigns in Armenia, in Syria, in Mesopotamia, on the Tigris, and in Media; and having done it, he calls it a history. His title very narrowly misses being longer than his book: 'An account of the late campaigns of the Romans in Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Media, by Antiochianus, victor at the festival of Apollo'; he had probably won some junior flat race.

I have known one writer compile a history of the future, including the capture of Vologesus, the execution of Osroes (he is to be thrown to the lions), and, crowning all, our long-deferred triumph. In this prophetic vein, he sweeps hastily on to the end of his work; yet he finds time for the foundation in Mesopotamia of a city, greatest of the great, and fairest of the fair; he is still debating, however, whether the most appropriate name will be Victoria, Concord, or Peacetown; that is yet unsettled; we must leave the fair city unnamed for the present; but it is already thickly populated--with empty dreams and literary drivellings. He has also pledged himself to an account of coming events in India, and a circumnavigation of the Atlantic; nay, the pledge is half redeemed; the preface to the India is complete; the third legion, the Celtic



contingent, and a small Moorish division, have crossed the Indus in full force under Cassius; our most original historian will soon be posting us up in their doings--their method of 'receiving elephants,' for instance--in letters dated Muziris or Oxydracae.

These people's uneducated antics are infinite; they have no eyes for the noteworthy, nor, if they had eyes, any adequate faculty of expression; invention and fiction provide their matter, and belief in the first word that comes their style; they pride themselves on the number of books they run to, and yet more on their titles; for these again are quite absurd: --So-and-so's so many books of Parthian victories; The Parthis_, book I; _The Parthis_, book II--quite a rival to the _Atthis_, eh? Another does it (I have read the book) still more neatly--'_The Parthonicy of Demetrius of Sagalassus_.' I do not wish to ridicule or make a jest of these pretty histories; I write for a practical purpose: any one who avoids these and similar errors is already well on the road to historical success; nay, he is almost there, if the logical axiom is correct, that, with incompatibles, denial of the one amounts to affirmation of the other.

Well, I may be told, _you have now a clear field; the thorns and brambles have all been extirpated, the debris of others' buildings has been carted off, the rough places have been made smooth; come, do a little construction yourself, and show that you are not only good at destroying, but capable of yourself planning a model, in which criticism itself shall find nothing to criticize._

Well then, my perfect historian must start with two indispensable qualifications; the one is political insight, the other the faculty of expression; the first is a gift of nature, which can never be learnt; the second should have been acquired by long practice, unremitting toil, and loving study of the classics. There is nothing technical here, and no room for any advice of mine; this essay does not profess to bestow insight and acumen on those who are not endowed with them by nature; valuable, or invaluable rather, would it have been, if it could recast and modify like that, transmute lead into gold, tin into silver, magnify a Conon or Leotrophides into Titormus or Milo.

But what is the function of professional advice? not the creation of qualities which should be already there, but the indication of their proper use. No trainer, of course,--let him be Iccus, Herodicus, Theon, or who he may--will suggest that he can take a Perdiccas [Footnote: Omitting, with Dindorf, a note on Perdiccas which runs thus: 'if Perdiccas it was, and not rather Seleucus's son Antiochus, who was wasted to a shadow by his passion for his step-mother.'] and make an Olympic victor of him, fit to face Theagenes of Thasos or Polydamas of Scotussa; what he _will_ tell you is that, given a constitution that will stand training, his system will considerably improve it. So with us--we are not to have every failure cast in our teeth, if we claim to have



invented a system for so great and difficult a subject. We do not offer to take the first comer and make a historian of him--only to point out to any one who has natural insight and acquired literary skill certain straight roads (they may or may not be so in reality) which will bring him with less waste of time and effort to his goal.

I do not suppose you will object that the man with insight has no need of system and instruction upon the things he is ignorant of; in that case he might have played the harp or flute untaught, and in fact have been omniscient. But, as things are at present, he cannot perform in these ways untaught, though with some assistance he will learn very easily, and soon be able to get along by himself.

You now know what sort of a pupil I (like the trainer) insist upon. He must not be weak either at understanding or at making himself understood, but a man of penetration, a capable administrator--potentially, that is, --with a soldierly spirit (which does not however exclude the civil spirit), and some military experience; at the least he must have been in camp, seen troops drilled or manoeuvred, know a little about weapons and military engines, the differences between line and column, cavalry and infantry tactics (with the reasons for them), frontal and flank attacks; in a word, none of your armchair strategists relying wholly on hearsay.

But first and foremost, let him be a man of independent spirit, with nothing to fear or hope from anybody; else he will be a corrupt judge open to undue influences. If Philip's eye is knocked out at Olynthus by Aster the Amphipolite archer, it is not his business to exclaim, but just to show him as he is; he is not to think whether Alexander will be annoyed by a circumstantial account of the cruel murder of Clitus at table. If a Cleon has the ear of the assembly, and a monopoly of the tribune, he will not shrink on that account from describing him as a pestilent madman; all Athens will not stop him from dwelling on the Sicilian disaster, the capture of Demosthenes, the death of Nicias, the thirst, the foul water, and the shooting down of the drinkers. He will consider very rightly that no man of sense will blame him for recounting the effects of misfortune or folly in their entirety; he is not the author, but only the reporter of them. If a fleet is destroyed, it is not he who sinks it; if there is a rout, he is not in pursuit--unless perhaps he ought to have prayed for better things, and omitted to do so. Of course, if silence or contradiction would have put matters right, Thucydides might with a stroke of the pen have knocked down the counterwall on Epipolae, sent Hermocrates's trireme to the bottom, let daylight through the accursed Gylippus before he had done blocking the roads with wall and trench, and, finally, have cast the Syracusans into their own quarries and sent the Athenians cruising round Sicily and Italy with Alcibiades's first high hopes still on board. Alas, not Fate itself may undo the work of Fate.



The historian's one task is to tell the thing as it happened. This he cannot do, if he is Artaxerxes's physician [Footnote: See Ctesias in Notes] trembling before him, or hoping to get a purple cloak, a golden chain, a horse of the Nisaeon breed, in payment for his laudations. A fair historian, a Xenophon, a Thucydides, will not accept that position. He may nurse some private dislikes, but he will attach far more importance to the public good, and set the truth high above his hate; he may have his favourites, but he will not spare their errors. For history, I say again, has this and this only for its own; if a man will start upon it, he must sacrifice to no God but Truth; he must neglect all else; his sole rule and unerring guide is this--to think not of those who are listening to him now, but of the yet unborn who shall seek his converse.

Any one who is intent only upon the immediate effect may reasonably be classed among the flatterers; and History has long ago realized that flattery is as little congenial to her as the arts of personal adornment to an athlete's training. An anecdote of Alexander is to the point. 'Ah, Onesicritus,' said he, 'how I should like to come to life again for a little while, and see how your stuff strikes people by that time; at present they have good enough reason to praise and welcome it; that is their way of angling for a share of my favour.' On the same principle some people actually accept Homer's history of Achilles, full of exaggerations as it is; the one great guarantee which they recognize of his truth is the fact that his subject was not living; that leaves him no motive for lying.

There stands my model, then: fearless, incorruptible, independent, a believer in frankness and veracity; one that will call a spade a spade, make no concession to likes and dislikes, nor spare any man for pity or respect or propriety; an impartial judge, kind to all, but too kind to none; a literary cosmopolite with neither suzerain nor king, never heeding what this or that man may think, but setting down the thing that befell.

Thucydides is our noble legislator; he marked the admiration that met Herodotus and gave the Muses' names to his nine books; and thereupon he drew the line which parts a good historian from a bad: our work is to be a possession for ever, not a bid for present reputation; we are not to seize upon the sensational, but bequeath the truth to them that come after; he applies the test of use, and defines the end which a wise historian will set before himself: it is that, should history ever repeat itself, the records of the past may give present guidance.

Such are to be my historian's principles. As for diction and style, he is not to set about his work armed to the teeth from the rhetorician's arsenal of impetuosity and incisiveness, rolling periods, close-packed arguments, and the rest; for him a serener mood. His matter should be homogeneous and compact, his vocabulary fit to be understood of the



people, for the clearest possible setting forth of his subject.

For to those marks which we set up for the historic spirit--frankness and truth--corresponds one at which the historic style should first of all aim, namely, a lucidity which leaves nothing obscure, impartially avoiding abstruse out-of-the-way expressions, and the illiberal jargon of the market; we wish the vulgar to comprehend, the cultivated to commend us. Ornament should be unobtrusive, and never smack of elaboration, if it is not to remind us of over-seasoned dishes.

The historian's spirit should not be without a touch of the poetical; it needs, like poetry, to employ impressive and exalted tones, especially when it finds itself in the midst of battle array and conflicts by land or sea; it is then that the poetic gale must blow to speed the vessel on, and help her ride the waves in majesty. But the diction is to be content with *_terra firma_*, rising a little to assimilate itself to the beauty and grandeur of the subject, but never startling the hearer, nor forgetting a due restraint; there is great risk at such times of its running wild and falling into poetic frenzy; and then it is that writers should hold themselves in with bit and bridle; with them as with horses an uncontrollable temper means disaster. At these times it is best for the spirit to go a-horseback, and the expression to run beside on foot, holding on to the saddle so as not to be outstripped.

As to the marshalling of your words, a moderate compromise is desirable between the harshness which results from separating what belongs together, and the jingling concatenations--one may almost call them--which are so common; one extreme is a definite vice, and the other repellent.

Facts are not to be collected at haphazard, but with careful, laborious, repeated investigation; when possible, a man should have been present and seen for himself; failing that, he should prefer the disinterested account, selecting the informants least likely to diminish or magnify from partiality. And here comes the occasion for exercising the judgement in weighing probabilities.

The material once complete, or nearly so, an abstract should be made of it, and a rough draught of the whole work put down, not yet distributed into its parts; the detailed arrangement should then be introduced, after which adornment may be added, the diction receive its colour, the phrasing and rhythm be perfected.

The historian's position should now be precisely that of Zeus in Homer, surveying now the Mysians', now the Thracian horsemen's land. Even so *_he_* will survey now his own party (telling us what we looked like to him from his post of vantage), now the Persians, and yet again both at once, if they come to blows. And when they are face to face, his eyes are



not to be on one division, nor yet on one man, mounted or afoot--unless it be a Brasidas leading the forlorn hope, or a Demosthenes repelling it; his attention should be for the generals first of all; their exhortations should be recorded, the dispositions they make, and the motives and plans that prompted them. When the engagement has begun, he should give us a bird's-eye view of it, show the scales oscillating, and accompany pursuers and pursued alike.

All this, however, with moderation; a subject is not to be ridden to death; no neglect of proportion, no childish engrossment, but easy transitions. He should call a halt here, while he crosses over to another set of operations which demands attention; that settled up, he can return to the first set, now ripe for him; he must pass swiftly to each in turn, keeping his different lines of advance as nearly as possible level, fly from Armenia to Media, thence swoop straight upon Iberia, and then take wing for Italy, everywhere present at the nick of time.

He has to make of his brain a mirror, unclouded, bright, and true of surface; then he will reflect events as they presented themselves to him, neither distorted, discoloured, nor variable. Historians are not writing fancy school essays; what they have to say is before them, and will get itself said somehow, being solid fact; their task is to arrange and put it into words; they have not to consider what to say, but how to say it. The historian, we may say, should be like Phidias, Praxiteles, Alcamenes, or any great sculptor. They similarly did not create the gold, silver, ivory, or other material they used; it was ready to their hands, provided by Athens, Elis, or Argos; they only made the model, sawed, polished, cemented, proportioned the ivory, and plated it with gold; that was what their art consisted in--the right arrangement of their material. The historian's business is similar--to superinduce upon events the charm of order, and set them forth in the most lucid fashion he can manage. When subsequently a hearer feels as though he were looking at what is being told him, and expresses his approval, then our historical Phidias's work has reached perfection, and received its appropriate reward.

When all is ready, a writer will sometimes start without formal preface, if there is no pressing occasion to clear away preliminaries by that means, though even then his explanation of what he is to say constitutes a virtual preface.

When a formal preface is used, one of the three objects to which a public speaker devotes his exordium may be neglected; the historian, that is, has not to bespeak goodwill--only attention and an open mind. The way to secure the reader's attention is to show that the affairs to be narrated are great in themselves, throw light on Destiny, or come home to his business and bosom; and as to the open mind, the lucidity in the body of the work, which is to secure that, will be facilitated by a preliminary view of the causes in operation and a precise summary of events.



Prefaces of this character have been employed by the best historians--by Herodotus, 'to the end that what befell may not grow dim by lapse of time, seeing that it was great and wondrous, and showed forth withal Greeks vanquishing and barbarians vanquished'; and by Thucydides, 'believing that that war would be great and memorable beyond any previous one; for indeed great calamities took place during its course.'

After the preface, long or short in proportion to the subject, should come an easy natural transition to the narrative; for the body of the history which remains is nothing from beginning to end but a long narrative; it must therefore be graced with the narrative virtues--smooth, level, and consistent progress, neither soaring nor crawling, and the charm of lucidity--which is attained, as I remarked above, partly by the diction, and partly by the treatment of connected events. For, though all parts must be independently perfected, when the first is complete the second will be brought into essential connexion with it, and attached like one link of a chain to another; there must be no possibility of separating them; no mere bundle of parallel threads; the first is not simply to be next to the second, but part of it, their extremities intermingling.

Brevity is always desirable, and especially where matter is abundant; and the problem is less a grammatical than a substantial one; the solution, I mean, is to deal summarily with all immaterial details, and give adequate treatment to the principal events; much, indeed, is better omitted altogether. Suppose yourself giving a dinner, and extremely well provided; there is pastry, game, kickshaws without end, wild boar, hare, sweetbreads; well, you will not produce among these a pike, or a bowl of peasoup, just because they are there in the kitchen; you will dispense with such common things.

Restraint in descriptions of mountains, walls, rivers, and the like, is very important; you must not give the impression that you are making a tasteless display of word-painting, and expatiating independently while the history takes care of itself. Just a light touch--no more than meets the need of clearness--, and you should pass on, evading the snare, and denying yourself all such indulgences. You have the mighty Homer's example in such a case; poet as he is, he yet hurries past Tantalus and Ixion, Tityus and the rest of them. If Parthenius, Euphorion, or Callimachus had been in his place, how many lines do you suppose it would have taken to get the water to Tantalus's lip; how many more to set Ixion spinning? Better still, mark how Thucydides--a very sparing dealer in description--leaves the subject at once, as soon as he has given an idea (very necessary and useful, too) of an engine or a siege-operation, of the conformation of Epipolae, or the Syracusan harbour. It may occur to you that his account of the plague is long; but you must allow for the subject; then you will appreciate his brevity; he is hastening on;



it is only that the weight of matter holds him back in spite of himself.

When it comes in your way to introduce a speech, the first requirement is that it should suit the character both of the speaker and of the occasion; the second is (once more) lucidity; but in these cases you have the counsel's right of showing your eloquence.

Not so with praise or censure; these should be sparing, cautious, avoiding hypercriticism and producing proofs, always brief, and never intrusive; historical characters are not prisoners on trial. Without these precautions you will share the ill name of Theopompus, who delights in flinging accusations broadcast, makes a business of the thing in fact, and of himself rather a public prosecutor than a historian.

It may occasionally happen that some extraordinary story has to be introduced; it should be simply narrated, without guarantee of its truth, thrown down for any one to make what he can of it; the writer takes no risks and shows no preference.

But the general principle I would have remembered--it will ever be on my lips--is this: do not write merely with an eye to the present, that those now living may commend and honour you; aim at eternity, compose for posterity, and from it ask your reward; and that reward?--that it be said of you, 'This was a man indeed, free and free-spoken; flattery and servility were not in him; he was truth all through.' It is a name which a man of judgement might well prefer to all the fleeting hopes of the present.

Do you know the story of the great Cnidian architect? He was the builder of that incomparable work, whether for size or beauty, the Pharos tower. Its light was to warn ships far out at sea, and save them from running on the Paraetonia, a spot so fatal to all who get among its reefs that escape is said to be hopeless. When the building was done, he inscribed on the actual masonry his own name, but covered this up with plaster, on which he then added the name of the reigning king. He knew that, as happened later, letters and plaster would fall off together, and reveal the words:

SOSTRATUS SON OF DEXIPHANES OF CNIDUS ON BEHALF OF ALL
MARINERS TO THE
SAVIOUR GODS

He looked not, it appears, to that time, nor to the space of his own little life, but to this time, and to all time, as long as his tower shall stand and his art abide.

So too should the historian write, consorting with Truth and not with flattery, looking to the future hope, not to the gratification of the



flattered.

There is your measuring-line for just history. If any one be found to use
it, well; I have not written in vain: if none, yet have I rolled my tub
on the Craneum.