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"The Past"

by

Henry Aug. Muhlenberg

Reading  
Pa.

June/1840.

Man is & ever has been a rational being. Year after year has rolled by - century has been added to century - yet despite of his almost Godlike powers he has made but small advance in happiness. The Creator has bestowed upon him his Reason magnificent in sway o'er all the Earth - his judgment granted for the wisest purposes - his memory, the best gift of the Omnipotent, that which brings him into communion with the sages & master minds of the buried Past & gives him wherewith to rule the spirits of his fellow men, yet with all these aids he has failed in the object of his search. From whence doth this arise? How can it be remedied? These are grave and momentous questions.

The Past, the Present & the Future - in these three words all human history & human hopes are embraced. To a creature constituted like man, the admonitions of the one, the energies of the other & the dreams & aspirations of the third cannot be without interest. Yet how different are they in themselves - how distinct the mental powers which the sphere of each required. To a poetic temperament - one which loves to dwell amid the flowery bowers of the Past or revel uncontrolled in wild delight amid the glorious anticipations & vivid dreams of the never-fading future - to such a one the dull, the actual Present is as clay to the soul. The cold Present where all of woe that falls to mortal lot is prominent - where evil that in the distance seemed as naught assume their true proportions & swell to mountains in the Traveller's path to fame - more than our all man's

lot would indeed be misery. Its griefs are so fresh & poignant that the haughty spirit bends beneath the storm like a bruised & broken reed. The bickerings, the strife, the callousness of man's heart to all the gentler emotions of his bosom, implanted by his Creator to soften his rugged nature, are exposed to view. The primal curse is heavy upon all things around, & Poverty & dark Distress are there with all their demon attributes. Heavy indeed would be the burthen, hopeless the thrall.

"But Heaven that spreadeth over all its blue cope  
Hath given us memory, hath given us hope"  
the gems of existence.

The future - the never-fading future! with all the glorious dreams & ardent aspirations of joyous youth - 'tis a scene in which Imagination holds sway supreme - as when the young Eaglet spurning the dull earth, rises aloft on buoyant wing, & sailing majestically amid the floating clouds that deck the azure blue of Heaven, wings his upward course to the centre of life & light itself, so the delighted spirit leaving the cold heartless present, passes into the bright future & there abides revelling in bliss that naught can equal or alloy. In the words of the Bard:-

"The Future! ah there hath the spirit its home  
In its distance is written the glorious "to come":  
The Great ones of Earth lived but half for their day  
The grave was their altar - the pen of their way."

But how soever delightful the untrodden paths & maze windings of the glorious "to come" may be, the reasoning faculties of man have more intimate connexion with the Past. From thence Experience assumes a nobler bearing, &

her sad lessons come to the unstructed listener, pregnant with instruction. Nor are the finer feelings of man's nature removed from the influence of the Past.

'Twas said of old "His distance lends enchantment to the view" & in whatever aspect we view man's intellectual powers the truth of this position cannot be shaken. From whence arises that strange feeling which flings over the sorrows & even the wrongs of the Past, a hallowed mantle, which imparts a tender soothing calm to all embraced beneath its ample folds? From whence this continual longing after the now seeming tranquil hours of the Past? The youth speaks of with regret of childhood's years - he of maturer age sighs after the pleasant hours of the springtime of life - & again the grey-haired grand sire mourns his lot & wishes again & again for the years that are past never to return. No feeling is implanted in our bosom without some object nor is this an exception. Again there are many heart-rending griefs which fall to the lot of man, so poignant that at the time nature's powers are taxed to their uttermost to bear up under the accumulated burthen. But time passes - the grief is partially abridged & when in after times we survey the vast wreck, the lapse of years has mellowed the whole scene - the gigantic ruin is still there, but its most painful features are hidden from view by the fresh green verdure of the beautiful ivy. Who would bathe in the fountains of Lethe? In the language of the Bard:

"Heaven's own sweetest mercy is not to forget."

Life may have been full of woe - grief may have followed grief - as a whole life may have been a scene of the darkest gloom, yet who would bury the whole Past in

the fountain of oblivion? none! dark as life may have been, ever  
& anon gleams of bright ethereal light flash through the sky  
illuminating the whole track. There are recollections in every one's  
bosom which are ineffaceable - the memory of which serve as  
ample compensation for all of woe which man can here endure.

But there is another view of this subject, worthy of  
notice. The lessons of Experience by which to guide our steps  
in the mazy future, are to be derived alone from the Past.  
'Twas said by one of the master minds of Earth "The Past is  
the true mirror of the Future". Naught else can lead us  
aright. The Statesman, the Philosopher, the Philanthropist - all  
would they trace the secret openings of man's actions must  
consult the records of the buried Past.

The works of the Sages - the deeds of the heroes of Earth  
afford material which no rational mind can contemplate  
without interest. He of Macedon - the son of the thunder dashing  
down - like a fiery meteor dashed from its celestial sphere  
its fragments scattering ruin & desolation around appeared  
upon Earth & the whole universe trembled. Nations saw & in  
amazement deemed the son of Ammon in truth had  
come. The hardy Grecian submitted to his sway - his  
fiere brazen clad legions rolled like a river of blood upon  
the Asiatic plains overwhelming all that sought to stay  
their fearful course. The luxurious Persian, abrightened at  
the dreadful torrent crouched suppliant to the conqueror  
as he passed. The hardy Scythian, dwelling in the re-  
motest confines of Earth, whose vast deserts trackless  
as the Ocean wave had thus far defied the supremacy  
of man fought boldly for his freedom - that peerless  
gen which nought on Earth can equal - but the decree had

gone forth & he too beheld the conqueror's haughty banner float  
in triumph over the land. But did that conqueror, whose deeds  
had ranked him 'among the Gods rather than men, enjoy  
the best gift of the omnipotent, happiness? When he beheld  
the joyous waves of Ocean dash gently on the beach, & then  
in uncheck'd freedom return to the bosom of the deep,  
he wept that there were no more worlds to conquer!  
✓ 'He lived - he triumphed & he died in misery!' Yet such  
is the lot of all on Earth. The mighty perish yet the  
grass springs up, the trees blossom & the flowers of the  
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The immortal works of the sages of antiquity  
are incontrovertible proofs of the position that in the  
Past is the true mirror of the future. The most exal-  
ted principles are there brought forward & sustained  
with the eloquence which a Demosthenes or Plato alone  
possessed - principles which none but a mind endowed  
by its creator with all the powers of mind could have  
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ledge of human nature which is the foundation of all  
knowledge, is there present, from which principles are deduced  
which if man had more strictly obeyed, he would have  
made far greater advances to happiness - the grand object  
of existence - than he has done.

Again in elucidation of the same principle behold the  
Eternal City:

— "That sat upon her seven hills

And from her throne of beauty ruled the world"

Her fate were the philosophy of history correctly understood  
should be a warning to all nations. She rose - she triumphed.

All nations, from the isles of Ocean, even unto the ends of the Earth  
did homage unto her. The wind blew not that had not fanned  
in triumph her Eagle - banner. Her iron legions every where as-  
serted her supremacy - bartrage crossed her path & where is  
she now? "Delenda est Carthago" went forth & now, her towers  
which <sup>in their pride</sup> mocked the lofty arch of heaven, are levelled in the  
dust - the wild beast of the desert makes his lair upon her  
desolated hearths & the solitary bittern hoots mournfully from  
the altars of her Gods. But pride luxury & dissuade crept into  
her councils & civil war with all its train of evils followed  
Then the gigantic empire rocked to its down fall. The Bar-  
barians were gathering on her frontiers & the mild Goddess  
of concord forsook her councils & urged her flight  
to heaven. Then came the "Penguin of God" who said  
that where his warrior stood had set his hoof, no blade of living  
grass ever grew, & the plains of Italy were ravaged with fire & sword.  
Attila then appeared & Rome fell - fell more from her own weakness  
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"The noble of nations! there she stands

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Is there no lesson in this? Was it the mere course of nature? Or did it  
arise from events which are indissolubly connected with the progress of every  
state? If so, it behoves man to inquire not these causes & propitiate by  
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June. 1860.

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Reading. Pa.



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Commencement Oration of Henry Augustus Muhlenberg, Class of 1840  
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008  
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

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June 1840

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