

Poet and Historian

A Dialogue

By Walter Raleigh

Scene—An Academic Grove

Poet (who has been reading the "Midsummer Night's Dream").
Ill met by moonlight, proud Historian!

Historian. I admit that in venturing out in the moonshine I am poaching on your preserves—which you share, by the way, with the lover and the lunatic. But *I* am not of imagination all compact; I have lungs, and I came out to take the air. My *History of Israel* flags.

Poet. No wonder; the history of Israel is thoroughly tired of being written. I believe the first man who learned to scratch on wax with a bamboo style began to write a history of Israel. Suppose you were to vary the monotony by writing a Psalm of David. I do not understand what you are driving at. Do you hope to supersede the Bible?

Hist. Your ignorance appals me. As a collection of authorities and material the Bible cannot be superseded. As a connected and philosophical history its pretensions are slender indeed. The nature and meaning of events, the characters of men and women, are very imperfectly appreciated by contemporaries. I have
rehabilitated

rehabilitated Esau, Jezebel, and Mephibosheth, among others, in the estimation of the world. If I had occasion to go further back, I could show that the first few chapters of *Genesis* are written in a party spirit very favourable to Abel.

Poet. O Buckle, father of History, what a son hast thou! But I hope you *will* go further back. "Universal History," to use the pretentious misnomer, is narrow enough at best, you are "confined and pestered in this pinfold" of some poor six thousand years, and nobody grudges you the exercise you take in it, for the most part upon crutches. The fact is that by the time a people begins to keep a diary, and to jot down its expenses and the events of the day, it has become respectable, the period of its experiments and escapades is over. It has lost its zest in life and in the gifts of life, and has sunk into office-work—a dull and formal precision.

Hist. Were the Greeks dull and formal?

Poet. They were amazingly like us. The chief difference, so far as I can make out, between them and us lies in this, that they did the same things better. I forgot—it is true that if you tickled them they did not laugh, or at any rate they were very difficult to tickle. But no nation, it seems, can have both pomp and humour highly developed. They had pomp. What have we? Still, if I had my choice at this moment, I would be allowed to look at yonder moon for five minutes through the eyes of a cave-man rather than through the eyes of a Socrates.

Hist. And doubtless a monkey-house throws for you more light on society and institutions than, say, the Pan-Hellenic festivals?

Poet. It does, and for a simple reason. I have been a Greek, have sulked with Achilles in the tents, and with Ajax have taken my last farewell of the sun. But I have never been a monkey.

Hist. Courage, my friend! A man who despises human institutions

tutions and scorns the history of their development surely need not despair.

Poet. The greatest of human institutions is the human heart.

“*Humani generis mores tibi nosse volenti
Sufficit una domus.*”

What if Juvenal be right? The heart remains triangular and the world spherical—to use the language of the older physiologists. If these two be constant in differing, what does your parade of development amount to? Human affairs run not, says Sir Thomas Browne, upon an helix that continually enlargeth, but upon an even circle. You spend you life in travelling laboriously over a small arc of the circumference; I strike for the centre, where Shakespeare and Æschylus sit throned and immovable. And that, I take it, is the difference between us.

Hist. It is the difference between life and death. You remind me of the delusions of the early seekers for the North Pole. When you reach the centre you may learn too late that Shakespeare was an Elizabethan and that Æschylus fought at Marathon. There is neither vegetation nor life in the realm of frozen vapour that you seek. Long ago I noticed with regret that there are no facts in the books you write.

Poet. Nor are there any fossil plants in my garden. When emotions, thoughts, desires, aspirations, regrets, reflections, lose their vitality and are petrified in the stream of History they become facts. I shall be a fact myself one day, and your grandsons, or, at the furthest, your great-grandsons, will have to learn me. They will get prizes for knowing all about me, including the date and place of my birth, which I do not myself remember. It is not live men you care for; your histories remind me of the Morgue, and all you supply is the squirt of cold water.

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Hist.

Hist. You deceive yourself if you think that you deal only with live things. The very feelings that you pickle in your poems must die first. "Emotion recollected in tranquillity"—if that be poetry, history is action seen from a distance, in fair perspective, by a cool and unmoved observer. And I marvel how any one can hope to see the thing truly save at a distance. The sole use of newspapers, to my mind, is to store them in the British Museum, that they may be used hereafter by historians. The huddle and clash of near events bewilders. It is only by the wand of the historian that they are reduced to order, and so the procession of the ages, moving past in solemn review, becomes the most imposing of human spectacles.

Poet. I agree with you in finding no present interest in newspapers—my feeling for "reviews," by the way, is hardly warmer. But who will ever want them? The age that we inhabit and inform is erecting for itself a paper monument at the rate of a vanload per week of filed journals and newspapers, which are stored and arranged in the British Museum. It was once my fortune to meet one of these cars of Juggernaut, and I could barely resist the temptation to fling myself under the wheels, that so the triumph of History over Literature might be excellently typified. A library is now regarded, not as a treasury of wisdom and beauty, but as a "dumping-ground" for offal, a repository of human frivolity, inanity and folly. Newspapers, forsooth—why not collect and store the other things that wise men throw away, cigar-ends and orange-peelings? Some future historian of the gutter might like to see them. No, I would give to all these offscourings and clippings the same doom—"the unlamented burial of an ass." History would profit, for she has gone after a crowd of strange gods and neglected her best friend.

Hist.

Hist. Do you know how History is written? For the process of discrimination to have value it is essential to let the tangle of wheat and tares grow up together. For the exhibition of the sequence of cause and effect it is essential to destroy no link in the chain which, however base its material, no doubt leads somewhere. Absolute stagnation of mind would reward your well-meant efforts; you would fain gaze at your own reflection in a duck-pond thick with borrowed fancies, because you cannot make a hand-glass of the sea. But Time unrolls itself, and some day we shall understand the script, if we are careful to save the disclosed part.

Poet. Time will wear out and drop off in rags, or be blown away like a morning mist, and Space will be shrivelled up like burnt paper before you understand three words of the script. You try to read the world precisely as Mr. Ignatius Donnelly tries to read Shakespeare. There is the beauty and wonder of the thing plain before your eyes, and you insist on a hidden and portentously trivial meaning. I suppose it is "progress" you are looking for. Progress is economic, mechanical, a matter of bells and buttons and hooks, of methods of election and painless executions; it has nothing to do with the eternal subject-matter of the artist, and you, if you are not an artist, are nothing. I believe, nevertheless, that there are persons who can stand on a mountain-top and talk of progress. In fact, I have met them. They understood diet, which made me think that when a man says "progress," it is the stomach speaks. Your case, of course, is different.

Hist. Pray diagnose my case.

Poet. You are tied to Time and you have to explain it. Time seems to me a kind of monstrous mastodon who ravages the jungle devouring all he sees. Now you have constituted yourself
his

his keeper—a thankless office! So when people get nervous at the appalling devastations the beast makes, they come to you for re-assurance. “Be easy, dear Sir and dear Madam,” say you, “he is rapidly being trained, and will soon be quite tame. His last meal was seventeen thousand men, twenty-three fewer, you will observe, than the day before. There is no doubt at all that we shall soon be able to get him into harness, and make him fetch and carry to market.” And what you say is grimly true: he took the Roman Empire to market, and it was cheapened and squabbled over by every brown-skinned huckster; he took the Greek mythology to market, and it was torn up and made into frills and cuffs for eighteenth-century poets; he took the Egyptian dynasties to market, and sold them for a little sand. He will take you and your History of Israel to market, I fear, and do you know what you will go for? Literally for an old song. As Gautier says:

“The gods die in their fanes
But shall Poetry pass?
It remains,
And outlives graven brass.”

Now and again, I admit, the beast shows good taste. It was only the other day he took the book of Genesis to market. An enterprising man of Science offered him a rare monkey for it. He took the monkey, and kept the book—a far-seeing transaction. The monkey seems healthy at present, but no doubt it will die. Let us talk of real things—sun, moon, stars, or the plays of Shakespeare, according to the list of realities drawn up by Keats. I am cloyed with perishables.

Hist. By all means. Perhaps you will allow me to say that first among realities I place History, sometimes it seems to me the

the only reality. "True it is," says my historian of the world, "that among many other benefits for which it hath been honoured, in this one it triumpheth over all human knowledge, that it hath given us life in our understanding, since the world itself had life and beginning even to this day; yea, it hath triumphed over time, which besides it nothing but eternity hath triumphed over." You poets and philosophers are often like alchemists: you seek for the absolute, and believe that you can get a poem, or a philosophy, or some other chemic stuff, to hold the immortality about which you keep such a clutter. But in the end all goes into the crucible of History, and the residue, after refining, is pure historical value. A poet is popular to-day; the popularity is stripped off him to-morrow, and what is left? Nothing but his historical value. A religion perishes, or rather it does not perish, it sheds its followers, and leads a new and more assured existence in the pages of History. What a granite-like calm stability it has then compared with its fume and fret while it believed itself the absolute! Listen to the noisy declamations of a latter-day Protestant against the Romishness of Rome and the Papistry of the Pope, and then read the tremendous history of the Papacy. Which is the greater reality? Believe me, there is nothing but History in the world. A knowledge of History is the panacea for ignorance and prejudice; it checks the utterance of a thousand foolishnesses, and paralyses hundreds of idle tongues. Even our conversation, I venture to think, might have been some sentences shorter if you had studied History. But like it or not, to this favour you must come. It is the history of Poetry that will interest the men of the future. They will have tunes of their own to tinkle in their idle hours.

Poet. See the avarice of knowledge. No single art ever says to another, "Stand aside, I can do your work." I do not stop the brass-beater with an offer to describe the shield he is making.

But

But the men of learning are never satisfied till they annex the world. Still, if you are willing to extend yet further your conception of History, and to give up your besetting sin of politics for a time, I think we may come to terms, for I agree with something of what you say. If all other branches of knowledge, all the arts and all the sciences, all the religions and all the philosophies, are chiefly important as food for history, do not exclude your own pursuit. Write a History of History. Then we shall see how much of your vaunted stability you really can claim. We shall see whether Herodotus, Josephus, Matthew of Paris, and Gibbon were really employed at the same work, or whether it would not be better for History to drop the pretence of being a branch of exact learning, and to speak frankly of a Livy or a Michelet just as the picture dealer speaks of a Correggio or a Greuze. As for the philosophies, I make you a present of them; and the sciences, although no doubt they are useful, have not been long enough admitted within the circle of polite learning to have worn off their insolence and dulness—they are sadly underbred. I quite agree with you that books upon the origin of species ought to be included in a public library, chiefly that the curious of future generations may ascertain, if they are so minded, what the nineteenth century thought upon that question. But what do you say to my proposal? Will you write a History of History?

Hist. I will do so on one condition only. Will you write a history of Metaphor?

Poet. Certainly not. Why?

Hist. The object of your proposal seems to be to compel me to take the sting out of my own pursuit, or, like the scorpion, to turn on myself with it and commit suicide. Am I right?

Poet. More or less. But *suicide* is the wrong word. I should be sorry—no one sorrier—to be the death of a species of writing that

that has given me so much pleasure. Every man must have relaxation ; often when wearied by the austerities of my mistress Poetry I take refuge in the amiable and charming companionship of my gossip History. No, I would not kill her. What I want rather is to put an end to the courtship of History by the more boastful of the Sciences, the hectoring kill-cow Biology, for instance, or the talkative and muddle-headed pedagogue Sociology. Let her come back to her father Herodotus and dutifully accept the mate he gave her—Literature. Love and a palace ; she will find nothing but bickerings and a hut with any of the Sciences. But why should I write a history of Metaphor ?

Hist. I will tell you in a minute. First, let me observe that no sane historian could accept your view. History is, no doubt, a composite of many things, but the views and renderings of individual writers are only superimposed on a basis of hard fact. Fate draws the outlines of the picture, the historian is left to do the colouring, no more.

Poet. "Hard fact !" And how has fact been hardened since the days of Sir Philip Sidney ? Will you allow him to introduce you to yourself ? "The Historian . . . loden with mouse-eaten records, authorising himself for the most part upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay, having much ado to accord differing writers, and to pick truth out of partiality, better acquainted with a thousand years ago than with the present age, and yet better knowing how this world goeth than how his own wit runneth ; curious for antiquities and inquisitive of novelties, a wonder to young folks, and a tyrant in table-talk, denieth in a great chafe that any man for teaching of vertuous actions is comparable to him."

Hist. We have long ago given up the pretension of teaching virtue ; so that shaft misses its aim. And no doubt it is hard to
establish

establish fact, and hard to preserve it. Nevertheless, the thing is done, and 'tis the dearest interest of knowledge.

Poet. Nay, but examine the process. Take the city hard by. Yesterday there happened in it many millions of events, great and small. To-day there appears a sheet recording a few hundred of these. Who made the selection, and why? Are the most important events recorded? They are generally not even known. You have spoken of newspapers as "material," but, long before you get a newspaper, Art and Selection have been at work. Plainly the events selected have not been chosen for their value to the historian, too often he may wander through wildernesses of newspapers in search of the particular facts that come to have a meaning for him. A certain rough principle of selection I suppose there must be, but it is hard to divine. A shop-window is broken, or a Mayor lunches, and straightway the world knows it. Could anything be more wantonly whimsical? So that my objection to your newspapers, after all, is not that they are history, but that they are art, and very bad art—the worst of things. But if selection and rendering count for so much in the history of a day and a single town, what must they not count for in the history of centuries and a whole people?

Hist. The affair is not so hopeless as you make out. Thrones help, no doubt, and wars, and parliaments. Who is it that says, "Every beggarly corporation affords the State a mayor or two bailiffs yearly, a king or a poet is not born every year?" And I am willing to confess that great men often owe more than a little of their greatness to the laziness of historians, who are glad to simplify their task or recreate themselves with rhetoric. But the predilection for politics, which you deride, furnishes a guiding clue through the facts. Without some such clue history of course would be vain. That is why a
great

great many histories must be written—and among them your History of Metaphor.

Poet. Why?

Hist. As an antidote to the bad effects of poetry. You accuse me of pretending to feed people on solid fact, while in reality I give them husks and chaff. But your deceits are more dangerous. You pretend to pour out the sparkling water of truth while in reality you give them the intoxicating heady wine of metaphor. I have seen men on the streets drunk with a single metaphor.

Poet. Then my history would be a dangerous thing, for plainly it would contain many metaphors.

Hist. Yes, but deprived of their power to work evil. Nothing comes under the calm light of history without being purified. You would record the first known occurrence of a metaphor, do all needful honour to its inventor, criticise its later employments, and thus diminish the danger of its being taken by the ignorant for an argument, or, still worse, for a fact. As it is, intoxication abounds.

Poet. That is the fault of the victims. Good wine is a good thing, though it be occasionally misused.

Hist. But its misuse is not so disastrous as the misuse of metaphor. Take the metaphor of an army. How many miserable beings, suffocating in the atmosphere of party quarrels, derive a momentary elation from its misuse. "The Liberals have won the battle all along the line;" or, "The fighting has been severe, but the Conservatives have rallied round the ancient standard and carried the day nobly." Here, it is plain, the essence of the comparison is lacking. If opposing armies had been wont to count heads and announce that the victory lay with the larger, no heroic associations would have gathered around war. More than that, you must suppose that the counting of heads is secret, that any soldier

soldier may return himself as on either side, and that it is a crime for one of his fellows to reveal his decision. That is one way of settling a dispute, but where is the possibility of heroism? It is not heroic to try to make other men think as you do, every one does that as a measure of self-preservation and self-support. No, the ass is in the lion's skin, the wire-puller has stolen the soldier's coat, and conceals his theft in a metaphor. I do not know if you are acquainted with that other misappropriation of the same figure by a nomad sect of fanatics who make senseless catchwords of the boldest and most beautiful of New Testament metaphors?

Poet. Do not nauseate me; I know.

Hist. They are commonly said to rescue from drunkenness; the drunkenness they induce and encourage seems to me infinitely worse. But the English people have always thought highly of physical health, and are willing cynically to condone mental intoxication for the sake of bodily sobriety. That is what I cannot understand. Robert Burns, now, was not notoriously abstemious, and yet—but I am digressing, you must surely be convinced by this time that the world is waiting for your History of Metaphor.

Poet. I am not at all sure that you would like it when it came. For although I agree with you that a metaphor is neither an argument nor a fact, I do not see how that diminishes its importance in thought. No doubt the mixing of metaphors, like the mixing of wines, is a bad thing; no doubt, when incarnate stupidity gets hold of the metaphors of incarnate genius it will put them to very odd uses. I knew a case myself of one who taught biology on week-days and Calvinism on Sundays. Whether the boastfulness of biology imposed on him, by impressing on him that it was the science of living things, and therefore of life, and therefore of thought, or whether he simply got muddled from inability to cope with

with two subjects, I do not know. But he mixed his Calvinism and his biology, and began talking of shells and crystals and function and structure and protective mimicry on Sundays, to the equal horror of sound theologians and sound biologists. Yet, in spite of these admissions and experiences, you may be surprised when I tell you that I think metaphor, well and fitly employed, the nearest approach to absolute truth of which the human mind is capable. Now do you think I had better write your history?

Hist. You certainly amaze me. I did not think that a poet or an artist could be so easily gulled by the mere tools of his craft. Of course I know that men of science who stray into the realm of poetic imagination are the dupes of many a fine figure and specious similitude. But for a poet, who works the marionettes, to believe that they are alive! It is incredible—much as if a painter should expect the fortune of Pygmalion.

Poet. A man of science who wanders into poetry is usually looking for arguments or facts, and these, as I have admitted, he will not find. Sooner a leg of mutton in a gin-shop, as Shelley remarked. But for the poet himself poetry, and especially metaphor, is the nearest approach to truth. Have you never heard a painter maintain that a good portrait is better than the sitter?

Hist. A passable after-dinner remark. Some one must start the hare; that hare would soon be run down. This much is clear to me, Poetry is truth clothed in the vesture of beauty. You must first find your truth, and then choose the best possible way of dressing it.

Poet. That is the way in which Hume or Buckle would try to write poetry. In something the same way George Eliot actually did write verse. She was a clever woman, and the imitation deceived good judges. But poetry has never been written in that way, and it never will. For to a poet the thought and the figure
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in which it is clad—nay, the very words in which it is conveyed—are really inseparable. Body and soul, form and substance, thought and expression, sacred and profane, fun and earnest—these and many others are familiar antitheses, indispensable in certain connections, but conventional and scholastic with no deep foundation in reality. Did a painter ever exalt the soul at the expense of the body, or a poet ever say that thought is everything and expression nothing, or a saint ever find the necessary business of life profane, or a great humourist ever assure you that he was only joking? A poet proceeds not by argument, but by vision. He does not clothe a soul with flesh, but informs a body with life. A body that has thus had a soul breathed into it is sometimes called a metaphor. Before that, it was probably a mere fact. Or it may have been a falsehood. It will live on if it find a soul. Witness our old friends the phoenix and upas-tree.

Hist. If you prove anything, which I am far from asserting, you prove that History and Literature can never join hands.

Poet. History can never be written in metaphor. It is so densely populated with facts, moreover, that it would be the height of unreason to suppose that they all have, or ever can have, souls. But whether they have souls or not, they can at least be attired in wedding garments. They are too often a ragged regiment, dissipated and lame, impressing only by their multitude and their idle clamour.

Hist. Truly we are little likely to agree. The improvements I have made in the History of Israel are pointed in precisely the opposite direction. I have been anxious that the bare facts should not be falsified by the impress of style, and that no emotional excitement should blur the impartiality of my readers.

Poet. A philosophical history, I suppose. But would you ever have set about it if there had been no Jewish religion? History may

may discard figure, religion never can; if it does, it is rapidly becoming philosophy, it will no longer move men. And a very comic figure it cuts during the transition. One shoe off and one shoe on, like my son John of the legend. It is as great an offence in these cases to take off the second shoe as it is not to take off the first. But in the end you must go one way or the other, you must either think or see.

Hist. I prefer to think. You will allow me, I hope, a certain low place in the rank of writers?

Poet. Have you read the pseudo-Dionysius on the Celestial Hierarchy? There are nine orders of angels; with the highest, the Seraphim, knowledge springs from love; with the second order, the Cherubim, love springs from knowledge. If writers were arranged in like manner, I am afraid you would have to be content with being a cherub. But be easy, there are seven orders below you.

Hist. And who is above me?

Poet. Accept my apologies, I am.

Hist. Because you do not speak without a parable?

Poet. Because everything I say has a meaning; I do not catalogue the non-existent. Nothing in the world is of import save as it is interpreted and new-created by passion and thought, and lofty thought and intense feeling will see more in the facts than the facts themselves. So Plato saw in a shadow on the wall an explanation of the appearances of life. So Shakespeare saw in the spring and the autumn the symbols of the beauty and the bounty of his friend. Astrology, they tell me, is dead, but in the song of Deborah the stars in their courses still fight against Sisera. Wherever profound truth is to be expressed you must have recourse to figure. You men of fact assail the truth too bluntly, she is not to be won so; when you can say all that you mean directly, be assured it is perfectly trivial.

Hist.

Hist. You ought to have been a teacher of heraldry to decayed noblemen's sons in a mediæval university. I do not want to startle you when I say that the Renaissance came four hundred years ago and brought in the reign of positive knowledge. Since that time the very artists have given up symbolism except as a game. Listen to a contemporary critic upon Michel Angelo: "Darkness and imperfection are infinite, indeterminate, confused, unknown, and can never be understood; light and perfection are finite, determinate, distinct, easily known and seized upon by the intelligence of man." In your anxiety to avoid the clearness of the perfect you would plunge back into a morass of superstition and mysticism; you care for no picture but a hieroglyph, and value a bunch of spring flowers only as a lexicon whence you may compose your vague messages of sentimental inanity. Queen Anne, they say, is dead. Everything in due time, I have the happiness to inform you that she was born.

Poet. Your choice of queens betrays you. The eighteenth century is gone, and has taken its historians and encyclopædists along with it. It has left a few poets—William Blake for one, who questioned not his corporeal eye any more than he would have questioned a window concerning a sight. He looked through it and not with it. It is this looking through the eye that constitutes metaphor. But it does not draw vagueness in its train. The same Blake remarks that only an idiot has a general knowledge, the knowledge of wise men is of particulars—and so perfectly definite.

Hist. It is late; and I must lose the ten tribes by next week. My publisher will not wait. The moonbeams are playing on your head—which statement I reach by inference, not by vision. Next time we meet let us talk about something we can agree upon.

Poet.

Poet. By all means. The uselessness of useful knowledge, say. Let there not be wrath between us, let us talk about technical education.

Hist. And you will write your history? It is better than twisting the kaleidoscope of the vocabulary to get new patterns of verbiage. Moreover, you might disarm the hostility with which wise men have often regarded your calling. Plato, you know, would have hunted you out of his Republic.

Poet. If Plato were alive, I would banish him out of this commonwealth of England, or rather it would have been done by the mob the day after he published his Republic. The crowd worships great poets (of whom Plato himself is one), not chiefly because they are poets but because they are dead. When there is no Byron-bait or Shelley-hunt on hand, they wile away the time by professing to admire Milton. He died a believer in polygamy, but at least he died. As for your History of Metaphor, you may write it yourself. But beware how you handle your dangerous material; I never knew any one who could not be trapped by the right metaphor. "The Stream of History," or anything else equally cold and slow, will be quite enough to take you off your feet. But never mind, you will reach the sea. And there all of you that is susceptible of promotion will become vapour, and, who knows, you may drop upon Mount Helicon. I am going there on foot. So, for the present, good-bye.