HUME is an author so celebrated, a philosopher so serene, and a man so extremely amiable, if not fortunate, that we may be surprised to meet his name inscribed in a catalogue of literary calamities. Look into his literary life, and you will discover that the greater portion was mortified and angried; and that the stoic so lost his temper, that had not circumstances intervened which did not depend on himself, Hume had abandoned his country and changed his name!

"The first success of most of my writings was not such as to be an object of vanity." His "Treatise of Human Nature" fell dead-born from the press. It was cast anew with another title, and was at first little more successful. The following letter to Des Maiseaux, which I believe is now first published, gives us the feelings of the youthful and modest philosopher:--

"DAVID HUME TO DES MAISEAUX.

"SIR,--Whenever you see my name, you'll readily imagine the subject of my letter. A young author can scarce forbear speaking of his performance to all the world; but when he meets with one that is a good judge, and whose instruction and advice he depends on, there ought some indulgence to be given him. You were so good as to promise me, that if you could find leisure from your other occupations, you would look over my system of philosophy, and at the same time ask the opinion of such of your acquaintance as you thought proper judges. Have you found it sufficiently intelligible? Does it appear true to you? Do the style and language seem tolerable? These three questions comprehend everything; and I beg of you to answer them with the utmost freedom and sincerity. I know 'tis a custom to flatter poets on their performances, but I hope philosophers may be exempted; and the more so that their cases are by no means alike. When we do not approve of anything in a poet we commonly can give no reason for our dislikes but our particular taste; which not being convincing, we think it better to conceal our sentiments altogether. But every error in philosophy can be distinctly marked and proved to be such; and this is a favour I flatter myself you'll indulge me in with regard to the performance I put into your hands. I am, indeed, afraid that it would be too great a trouble for you to mark all the errors you have observed; I shall only insist upon being informed of the most material of them, and you may assure yourself will consider it as a singular favour. I am, with great esteem

"Sir, your most obedient and most humble servant,

"Aprile 6, 1739.

"DAVID HUME.

"Please direct to me at Ninewells, near Berwick-upon-Tweed."

Hume's own favourite "Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals" came unnoticed and unobserved in the world. When he published the first portion of his "History," which made even Hume himself sanguine in his expectations, he
tells his own tale:--

"I thought that I was the only historian that had at once neglected present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudices; and, as the subject was suited to every capacity, I expected proportional applause. But miserable was my disappointment! All classes of men and readers united in their rage against him who had presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I. and the Earl of Strafford." "What was still more mortifying, the book seemed to sink into oblivion, and in a twelvemonth not more than forty-five copies were sold."

Even Hume, a stoic hitherto in his literary character, was struck down, and dismayed--he lost all courage to proceed--and, had the war not prevented him, "he had resolved to change his name, and never more to have returned to his native country."

But an author, though born to suffer martyrdom, does not always expire; he may be flayed like St. Bartholomew, and yet he can breathe without a skin; stoned, like St. Stephen, and yet write on with a broken head; and he has been even known to survive the flames, notwithstanding the most precious part of an author, which is obviously his book, has been burnt in an *auto da fe*. Hume once more tried the press in "The Natural History of Religion." It proved but another martyrdom! Still was the fall (as he terms it) of the first volume of his History haunting his nervous imagination, when he found himself yet strong enough to hold a pen in his hand, and ventured to produce a second, which "helped to buoy up its unfortunate brother." But the third part, containing the reign of Elizabeth, was particularly obnoxious, and he was doubtful whether he was again to be led to the stake. But Hume, a little hardened by a little success, grew, to use his own words, "callous against the impressions of public folly," and completed his History, which was now received "with tolerable, and but tolerable, success."

At length, in the sixty-fifth year of his age, our author began, a year or two before he died, as he writes, to see "many symptoms of my literary reputation breaking out at last" with additional lustre, though I know that I can have but few years to enjoy it." What a provoking consolation for a philosopher, who, according to the result of his own system, was close upon a state of annihilation!

To Hume, let us add the illustrious name of DRYDEN.

It was after preparing a second edition of Virgil, that the great Dryden, who had lived, and was to die in harness, found himself still obliged to seek for daily bread. Scarcely relieved from one heavy task, he was compelled to hasten to another; and his efforts were now stimulated by a domestic feeling, the expected return of his son in ill-health from Rome. In a letter to his bookseller he pathetically writes--"If it please God that I must die of over-study, I cannot spend my life better than in preserving his." It was on this occasion, on the verge of his seventieth year, as he describes himself in the dedication of his Virgil, that, "worn out with study, and oppressed with fortune," he contracted to supply the bookseller with 10,000 verses at sixpence a line!

What was his entire dramatic life but a series of vexation and hostility, from his first play to his last? On those very boards whence Dryden was to have derived the means of his existence and his fame, he saw his foibles aggravated, and his morals aspersed. Overwhelmed by the keen ridicule of Buckingham, and maliciously mortified by the triumph which Settle, his meanest rival, was allowed to obtain over him, and doomed still to encounter the cool malignant eye of Langbaine, who read poetry only to detect plagiarism. Contemporary genius is inspected with too much familiarity to be felt with reverence; and the angry prefaces of Dryden only excited the little revenge of the wits. How could such sympathise with injured, but with lofty feelings? They spread two reports of him, which may not be true, but which hurt him with the public. It was said that, being jealous of the success of Creech, for his version of Lucretius, he advised him to attempt Horace, in which Dryden knew he would fail--and a contemporary haunter of the theatre, in a curious letter(1) on *The Winter Diversions*, says of Congreve's angry preface to the *Double Dealer*, that--

"The critics were severe upon this play, which gave the author occasion to lash them in his epistle dedicatory--so that 'tis generally thought he has done his business and lost himself; a thing he owes to Mr. Dryden's *treacherous friendship*, who being *jealous of the applause* he had got by his *Old Bachelor deluded him* into a foolish imitation of his own way of writing angry prefaces."
This lively critic is still more vivacious on the great Dryden, who had then produced his *Love Triumphant*, which, the critic says,

"Was damned by the universal cry of the town, *nemine contradicente* but the *conceited poet*. He says in his prologue that 'this is the last the town must expect from him;' he had done himself a kindness had he taken his leave before." He then describes the success of Southerne's *Fatal Marriage, or the Innocent Adultery*, and concludes, "This kind usage will encourage desponding minor poets, and *vex huffing Dryden and Congreve to madness*.

I have quoted thus much of this letter, that we may have before us a true image of those feelings which contemporaries entertain of the greater geniuses of their age; how they seek to level them; and in what manner men of genius are doomed to be treated--slighted, starved, and abused. Dryden and Congreve! the one the finest genius, the other the most exquisite wit of our nation, are to be *vexed to madness*!--their failures are not to excite sympathy, but contempt or ridicule! How the feelings and the language of contemporaries differ from that of posterity! And yet let us not exult in our purer and more dignified feelings--we are, indeed, the *posterity* of Dryden and Congreve; but we are the *contemporaries* of others who must patiently hope for better treatment from our sons than they have received from the fathers.

Dryden was no master of the pathetic, yet never were compositions more pathetic than the Prefaces this great man has transmitted to posterity! Opening all the feelings of his heart, we live among his domestic sorrows. Johnson censures Dryden for saying *he has few thanks to pay his stars that he was born among Englishmen.* (134) We have just seen that Hume went farther, and sighed to fly to a retreat beyond that country which knew not to reward genius. What, if Dryden felt the dignity of that character he supported, dare we blame his frankness? If the age be ungenerous, shall contemporaries escape the scourge of the great author, who feels he is addressing another age more favourable to him? Johnson, too, notices his "Self-commendation; his diligence in reminding the world of his merits, and expressing, with very little scruple, his high opinion of his own powers." Dryden shall answer in his own words; with all the simplicity of Montaigne, he expresses himself with the dignity that would have become Milton or Gray:

"It is a vanity common to all writers to overvalue their own productions; and it is better for me to own this failing in myself, than the world to do it for me. *Why am I grown old in seeking so barren a reward as fame?* The same parts and application which have made me a poet, might have raised me to any honours of the gown, which are often given to men of as little learning, and less honesty, than myself."

How feelingly Whitehead paints the situation of Dryden in his old age:

Yet lives the man, how wild soe'er his aim,
Would madly barter fortune's smiles for fame?
Well pleas'd to shine, through each recording page,
The hapless Dryden of a shameless age!

Ill-fated bard! where'er thy name appears,
The weeping verse a sad memento bears;
Ah! what avail'd the enormous blaze between
Thy dawn of glory and thy closing scene!
When sinking nature asks our kind repairs,
Unstrung the nerves, and silver'd o'er the hairs;
When stay'd reflection came uncall'd at last,
And gray experience counts each folly past!

MICKLE’S version of the Lusiad offers an affecting instance of the melancholy fears which often accompany the
progress of works of magnitude, undertaken by men of genius. Five years he had buried himself in a farm-house, devoted to the solitary labour; and he closes his preface with the fragment of a poem, whose stanzas have perpetuated all the tremblings and the emotions, whose unhappy influence the author had experienced through the long work. Thus pathetically he addresses the Muse:

----Well thy meed repays thy worthless toil;
Upon thy houseless head pale want descends
In bitter shower; and taunting scorn still rends
And wakes thee trembling from thy golden dream:
In vetchy bed, or loathly dungeon ends
Thy idled life----

And when, at length, the great and anxious labour was completed, the author was still more unhappy than under the former influence of his foreboding terrors. The work is dedicated to the Duke of Buccleugh. Whether his Grace had been prejudiced against the poetical labour by Adam Smith, who had as little comprehension of the nature of poetry as becomes a political economist, or from whatever cause, after possessing it for six weeks the Duke had never condescended to open the volume. It is to the honour of Mickle that the Dedication is a simple respectful inscription, in which the poet had not compromised his dignity,—and that in the second edition he had the magnanimity not to withdraw the dedication to this statue-like patron. Neither was the critical reception of this splendid labour of five devoted years grateful to the sensibility of the author: he writes to a friend—

"Though my work is well received at Oxford, I will honestly own to you, some things have hurt me. A few grammatical slips in the introduction have been mentioned; and some things in the notes about Virgil, Milton, and Homer, have been called the arrogance of criticism. But the greatest offence of all is, what I say of blank verse."

He was, indeed, after this great work was given to the public, as unhappy as at any preceding period of his life; and Mickle, too, like Hume and Dryden, could feel a wish to forsake his native land! He still found his "head houseless;" and "the vetchy bed" and "loathly dungeon" still haunted his dreams. "To write for the booksellers is what I never will do," exclaimed this man of genius, though struck by poverty. He projected an edition of his own poems by subscription.

"Desirous of giving an edition of my works, in which I shall bestow the utmost attention, which, perhaps, will be my final farewell to that blighted spot (worse than the most bleak mountains of Scotland) yclept Parnassus; after this labour is finished, if Governor Johnstone cannot or does not help me to a little independence, I will certainly bid adieu to Europe, to unhappy suspense, and perhaps also to the chagrin of soul which I feel to accompany it."

Such was the language which cannot now be read without exciting our sympathy for the author of the version of an epic, which, after a solemn devotion of no small portion of the most valuable years of life, had been presented to the world, with not sufficient remuneration or notice of the author to create even hope in the sanguine temperament of a poet. Mickle was more honoured at Lisbon than in his own country. So imperceptible are the gradations of public favour to the feelings of genius, and so vast an interval separates that author who does not immediately address the tastes or the fashions of his age, from the reward or the enjoyment of his studies.

We cannot account, among the lesser calamities of literature, that of a man of genius, who, dedicating his days to the composition of a voluminous and national work, when that labour is accomplished, finds, on its publication, the hope of fame, and perhaps other hopes as necessary to reward past toil, and open to future enterprise, all annihilated. Yet this work neglected or not relished, perhaps even the sport of witlings, afterwards is placed among the treasures of our language, when the author is no more! but what is posthumous gratitude, could it reach even the ear of an angel?

The calamity is unavoidable; but this circumstance does not lessen it. New works must for a time be submitted to popular favour; but posterity is the inheritance of genius. The man of genius, however, who has composed this great work, calculates his vigils, is best acquainted with its merits, and is not without an anticipation of the future feeling of
his country; he

*But weeps the more, because he weeps in vain.*

Such is the fate which has awaited many great works; and the heart of genius has died away on its own labours. I need not go so far back as the Elizabethan age to illustrate a calamity which will excite the sympathy of every man of letters; but the great work of a man of no ordinary genius presents itself on this occasion.

This great work is "The Polyolbion" of MICHAEL DRAYTON; a poem unrivalled for its magnitude and its character.(3) The genealogy of poetry is always suspicious; yet I think it owed its birth to Leland's magnificent view of his intended work on Britain, and was probably nourished by the "Britannia" of Camden, who inherited the mighty industry, with out the poetical spirit, of Leland; Drayton embraced both. This singular combination of topographical erudition and poetical fancy constitutes a national work--a union that some may conceive not fortunate, no more than "the slow length" of its Alexandrine metre, for the purposes of mere delight. Yet what theme can be more elevating than a bard chanting to his "Fatherland," as the Hollanders called their country? Our tales of ancient glory, our worthies who must not die, our towns, our rivers, and our mountains, all glancing before the picturesque eye of the naturalist and the poet! It is, indeed, a labour of Hercules; but it was not unaccompanied by the lyre of Apollo.

This national work was ill received; and the great author dejected, never pardoned his contemporaries, and even lost his temper.(4) Drayton and his poetical friends beheld indignantly the trifles of the hour overpowering the neglected Polyolbion.

One poet tells us that

------------------------they prefer
The fawning lines of every pamphleteer.
GEO. WITHERS.

And a contemporary records the utter neglect of this great poet:--

Why lives Drayton when the times refuse
Both means to live, and matter for a muse,
Only without excuse to leave us quite,
And tell us, durst we act, he durst to write?
W. BROWNE.

Drayton published his Polyolbion first in eighteen parts; and the second portion afterwards. In this interval we have a letter to Drummond, dated in 1619:--

"I thank you, my dear sweet Drummond, for your good opinion of Polyolbion. I have done twelve books more, that is, from the 18th book, which was Kent (if you note it), all the east parts and north to the river of Tweed; but it lieth by me, for the booksellers and I are in terms; they are a company of base knaves, whom I scorn and kick at."

The vengeance of the poet had been more justly wreaked on the buyers of books than on the sellers, who, though knavery has a strong connexion with trade, yet, were they knaves, they would be true to their own interests. Far from impeding a successful author, booksellers are apt to hurry his labours; for they prefer the crude to the mature fruit, whenever the public taste can be appeased even by an unripened dessert.

These "knaves," however, seem to have succeeded in forcing poor Drayton to observe an abstinence from the press, which must have convulsed all the feelings of authorship. The second part was not published till three years after this letter was written; and then without maps. Its preface is remarkable enough; it is pathetic, till Drayton loses the dignity of genius in its asperity. In is inscribed, in no good humour--
"TO ANY THAT WILL READ IT!

"When I first undertook this poem, or, as some have pleased to term it, this Herculean labour, I was by some virtuous friends persuaded that I should receive much comfort and encouragement; and for these reasons: First, it was a new clear way, never before gone by any; that it contained all the delicacies, delights, and rarities of this renowned isle, interwoven with the histories of the Britons, Saxons, Normans, and the later English. And further, that there is scarcely any of the nobility or gentry of this land, but that he is some way or other interested therein.

"But it hath fallen out otherwise; for instead of that comfort which my noble friends proposed as my due, I have met with barbarous ignorance and base detraction; such a cloud hath the devil drawn over the world's judgment. Some of the stationers that had the selling of the first part of this poem, because it went not so fast away in the selling as some of their beastly and abominable trash (a shame both to our language and our nation), have despightfully left out the epistles to the readers, and so have cousened the buyers with imperfected books, which those that have undertaken the second part have been forced to amend in the first, for the small number that are yet remaining in their hands.

"And some of our outlandish, unnatural English (I know not how otherwise to express them) stick not to say that there is nothing in this island worth studying for, and take a great pride to be ignorant in anything thereof. As for these cattle, odi profanum vulgus, et arceo; of which I account them, be they never so great."

Yet, as a true poet, whose impulse, like fate, overturns all opposition, Drayton is not to be thrown out of his avocation; but intrepidly closes by promising "they shall not deter me from going on with Scotland, if means and time do not hinder me to perform as much as I have promised in my first song." Who could have imagined that such bitterness of style, and such angry emotions, could have been raised in the breast of a poet of pastoral elegance and fancy?

Whose bounding muse o'er ev'ry mountain rode,
And every river warbled as it flow'd.
KIRKPATRICK.

It is melancholy to reflect that some of the greatest works in our language have involved their authors in distress and anxiety: and that many have gone down to their grave insensible of that glory which soon covered it.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) A letter found among the papers of the late Mr. Windham, which Mr. Malone has preserved.

(2) There is an affecting remonstrance of Dryden to Hyde, Earl of Rochester, on the state of his poverty and neglect--in which is this remarkable passage:--"It is enough for one age to have neglected Mr. Cowley and starved Mr. Butler."

(3) The author explains the nature of his book in his title-page when he calls it "A Chorographcall Description of tracts, rivers, mountaines, forests, and other parts of this renowned Isle of Great Britaine, with intermixture of the most remarquable stories, antiquities, wonders, rarities, pleasures, and commodities of the same; digested in a Poem." The maps with which it is illustrated are curious for the impersonations of the nymphs of wood and water, the sylvan gods, and other characters of the poem; to which the learned Selden supplied notes. Ellis calls it "a wonderful work, exhibiting at once the learning of an historian, an antiquary, a naturalist, and a geographer, and embellished by the imagination of a poet."--ED.
(4) In the dedication of the first part to Prince Henry, the author says of his work, "it cannot want envie: for even in the birth it alreadie finds that."--ED.

(The end)

Isaac Disraeli's essay: Miseries Of Successful Authors

By Isaac Disraeli