

## DIOGENES ON THE PRACTICE OF "CRIBBING."

Medical science has of late years been perplexed by the prevalence of a singular disease which may be described as an irresistible desire on the part of A, to appropriate the property of B, C, or D. This questionable malady has been successfully pleaded as a defence for stealing, just as simulated madness has occasionally saved a perfectly sane murderer from being hanged. There is one sort of stealing, however, for which no "kleptomania" can be alleged as an excuse. It is plagiarism, or literary theft; and an incident which occurred lately, has attracted the attention of DIOGENES to the subject. Before alluding further to this incident, the Cynic will take the opportunity of saying a few words on the general question. The topic is an interesting one and will bear discussion.

Dr. Johnson described plagiarism as one of the most reproachful, if not the most atrocious of literary crimes; and there can be no doubt that, in the main, Ursa Major is right. At the same time there are many different degrees of this Grub Street crime. One man steals a book, a volume, or a chapter, and impudently endeavours to pass it off as his own, while another, like the hen that scratched a jewel from the dunghill, rakes up some bright thought from the rubbish of a past century, and lends it additional brilliancy by the style in which he resets it. Surely, there is a vast difference between these two cases. Many of the giants of literature have dazzled the world with borrowed light. "If that severe doom of Synesius be true," says quaint old Burton, "that it's a greater offence to steal dead men's labours than their clothes, what shall become of most writers? I hold up my hand at the bar among others, and am guilty of felony in this kind." Burke, whose imperial fancy was truly said to have laid all nature under tribute, told Barry that there is no faculty of the mind which can bring its energy into effect, unless the memory be stored with ideas for it to work on. Milton, for instance, as has been amply proved by his commentators, was a magnificent adopter of borrowed ideas. He was well aware of a fact, to which Pascal has alluded, that trees not fruitful in their native earth often yield abundantly if transplanted. Leigh Hunt, speaking on this very subject, humorously declared: "oh yes! Milton 'borrowed' other poets' thoughts, but he did not 'borrow' as gypsies borrow children, spoiling their features that they may not be recognized. No, he returned them improved. Had he 'borrowed' your coat, he would have restored it, *with a new nap upon it.*"

What says Dryden in his "Essay on Dramatic Poesie"? "Ben Jonson was not only a professed imitator of Horace, but a learned plagiary of all the other ancient writers. *You track him everywhere in their snow.*" Could anything be more elegantly expressed? And again, in the same essay: "He invades authors like a monarch, and what would be theft in other poets, is only victory in him." In the same manner La Bruyere declared "que Despreux paroissoit créer les pensées d'autrui." From all this it appears, that, however violently we may declaim against traditional ideas and hereditary phrases, we must by no means disparage that masterly art which improves upon and perfects the suggestions thrown out by previous writers. Swift in his own satirical vein remarked: "I humbly conceive, though I light my candle at my neighbours' fire, that does not alter the property, or make the wick, the wax, the flame, or the whole candle less my own." The passage in which he advises a young poet never to be "without a common-place book," contains more satire but less reason. "There," he writes, "you enter not only your original thoughts (which, a hundred to one, are few and insignificant) but such of other men as you think fit to make your own by entering them there. For, take this for a rule, when an author is in your books, you have the same demand upon him for his wit, as a merchant has for your money,

when you are in his." DIOGENES passes quickly from Swift to Pope, and finds similar sentiments in the preface to his Poems. "All that is left us is to recommend our productions by the imitation of the ancients, and it will be found true that, in every age, the highest character for sense and learning has been obtained by those who have been most indebted to them. Therefore, they who say that our thoughts are not our own, because they resemble those of the ancients, may as well say that our faces are not our own because they are like our fathers'; and indeed it is very unreasonable that people should expect us to be scholars, and yet be angry to find us so."

So impossible is it to avoid borrowing the ideas and even language of our predecessors, that St. Jerome relates that while his teacher Donatus was explaining to him the words of Terence, "nihil est dictum, quod non sit dictum prius," he roundly abused the ancients for having stolen his best thoughts: "Pereant qui ante nos, nostra dixerunt."

Sterne in modern times took occasion to denounce plagiarists, but it is strange that his declamation (as was pointed out by Dr. Ferriar) is taken word for word from Burton's introduction to the "Anatomy of Melancholy." "Shall we forever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting and untwisting the same rope? for ever in the same track—for ever at the same pace?" Lord Byron was more honest than Sterne in acknowledging his obligations, if we are to credit what Moore tells us in his "Life" of him. "Observing a volume in his gondola, with a number of paper marks between the leaves, I inquired of him what it was. 'Only a book,' he answered, 'from which I am trying to crib, as I do whenever I can: and that's the way I get the character of an original poet.'"

This anecdote reminds the Cynic of the purpose for which he commenced this gossiping article, which was simply to hold up to public warning the example of a New York correspondent. If the foregoing remarks and quotations have seemed in any way to make light of the crime of plagiarism, DIOGENES begs to state that he condemns the practice from the bottom of his heart. Occasionally, of course, we cannot avoid adopting the sentiments and diction of others. If we have been great readers, we find it easier (as was the case with Dr. Parr) to borrow the ideas imprinted on our minds by study, than to elaborate new trains of reflection for ourselves. But no honest man will deliberately steal the literary labours of another, and publish them to obtain reputation, or to coin money out of them. But this is what a New York correspondent of the Cynic's has attempted to do, though fortunately his success has not equalled his wishes. He forwarded in manuscript to Montreal, a very humorous autobiographical sketch, which the Cynic at once recognized as an old friend. It was written many years ago by Henry Mackenzie, author of "The Man of Feeling," and would, of course, have been cheerfully purchased and liberally paid for, had it been the work of the *soi-disant* "Bashful Man."

DIOGENES prints below the letter of his correspondent, exactly as he received it, and following the custom of the English Magazines in such cases, he suppresses neither name nor address. The publication of the document may act as a warning to Canadians, and will doubtless be "a caution" to the American.

DIOGENES will please inform the undersigned what remuneration if any, he allows for original articles and what he thinks of the enclosed, signed "Bashful Man." Other articles will follow, should this be deemed worthy of insertion.

In haste,

Yours truly,

P. D. L. CALDER.

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