

recesses of the mind before it can germinate and bring forth fruit. It is the misconception of this fact that produces at times the cry of "plagiarism." There is, moreover, a natural jealousy of abler men on the part of those who, from the lack of assimilative force in their own mental economy, are unable to profit by the treasures of the past so as to enrich the soil of their own minds; and hence they are astonished and puzzled with the alimentation and wonderfully-transmuting power of men of genius.

In spite, however, of the widely-spread mental confusion and misapprehension in regard to the matter, it is just this power of mental assimilation that constitutes the distinction between borrowing and plagiarism, between genius and mediocrity. Nay, more, even the *manner* of selection and quotation at once reveals the difference between intellectual wealth and mental poverty. *Vera incessu patuit dea!* "Genius," says a gifted writer,* who is himself a living illustration of the fact, "borrows nobly." When Shakespeare is charged with debts to his authors, Landor replies: "Yet he was more original than his originals. He breathed upon dead bodies and brought them into life." In like manner, Lord Lytton observes, "Little wits that plagiarize are pickpockets; great wits that plagiarize are conquerors." We rather insist that the conquerors, by their deeds of daring, disprove the insulting charge of "plagiarism." The ideas which genius abducts from any source are so rehabilitated and redomesticated that they can no more be reclaimed than the Sabine virgins, who, as ancient story tells us, were rapturously transformed into Roman matrons.†

It is only in this way that we can reap full benefit from the treasures of the past. If there were no borrowing there would be no progress. Human science and learning have ever advanced, and must continue to

advance, by a process of accretion. The deposits of former ages assist in forming the new creations of the present. We are all in debt to the past, and must of necessity remain so; and to require from those who labor in any department of literature, science, or art, absolute originality, is to seek for a chimera. There is only one Being who is or can be truly and absolutely original, and in Him "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." He is the sum and substance of all knowledge—"the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning:

"Jehovah comprehending all,
Whom none can comprehend."

But all human knowledge is fragmentary (*abrupta scientia*, as Bacon finely expresses it.) Age after age gropes slowly after fuller knowledge, and philosophers, one after another, as the world grows older, add bit after bit; but still each sadly echoes the cry of the dying Goethe—"More light!"

"Still restless nature dies and grows,
From change to change the creatures run."

And from each step, each change we gain something. But all the records of experience and of history tend alike to show that our indebtedness to the labors of our predecessors can never honestly be ignored. The records of the past—that "weird palimpsest old and vast"—will never be wholly obliterated. The strata of ancient formations of mind will here and there crop out above the latest deposits of the human intellect, revealing the older substance upon which the kainozoic productions of the present rest.

Three thousand years ago a royal philosopher, who had "intermeddled with all wisdom," and not a little folly, left on record in the last sad record of his life this striking testimony: "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there anything whereof it may be said, 'See, this is new?' It hath been already of old time which was before us."*

Mr. Emerson, in the same essay from which I have already quoted, recognizes

* Ecclesiastes i., 9, 10.

* Mr. R. W. Emerson, in the *North American Review*, (April, 1868.)

† Compare also the following very striking and beautiful remark of Villemain in regard to the peculiarly discursive style of Montaigne's writings and genius: "*Les abeilles pillotent de ça et de là les fleurs; mais elles en font après le miel qui est tout leur: ce n'est plus thym ni marjolaine.*"