

*Some Notices of Lost Works*

ALTHOUGH it is the opinion of some critics that our literary losses do not amount to the extent which others imagine, they are however much greater than they allow. Our severest losses are felt in the historical province, and particularly in the earliest records, which might not have been the least interesting to philosophical curiosity.

The history of Phœnicia by Sanchoniathon, supposed to be a contemporary with Solomon, is only known to us by a few valuable fragments preserved by Eusebius. The same ill fortune attends Manetho's history of Egypt, and Berosus's history of Chaldea. The researches of the philosopher are therefore limited: and it cannot be doubted that the histories of these most ancient nations, however veiled in fables, or clouded by remoteness, would have presented to the philosopher singular objects of contemplation.

Of the history of Polybius, which once contained forty books, we have now only five; of the historical library of Diodorus Siculus fifteen books only remain out of forty; and half of the Roman antiquities of Dionysius Halicarnassensis has perished. Of the eighty books of the history of Dion Cassius, twenty-five only remain. The present opening book of Ammianus Marcellinus is

entitled the fourteenth. Livy's history consisted of one hundred and forty books, and we only possess thirty-five of that pleasing historian. What a treasure has been lost in the thirty books of Tacitus! little more than four remain. Murphy elegantly observes, that "The reign of Titus, the delight of human kind, is totally lost, and Domitian has escaped the vengeance of the historian's pen." Yet Tacitus in fragments is still the colossal torso of history. It is curious to observe that Velleius Paterculus, of whom a fragment only has reached us, we owe to a single copy: no other having ever been discovered, and which occasions the text of this historian to remain incurably corrupt. Taste and criticism have certainly incurred an irreparable loss in that *Treatise on the Causes of the Corruption of Eloquence*, by Quintilian; which he has himself noticed with so much satisfaction in his "Institutes." Petrarch declares, that in his youth he had seen the works of Varro, and the second Decad of Livy; but all his endeavours to recover them were fruitless.

These are only some of the most known losses which have occurred in the republic of letters; but in reading contemporary writers we are perpetually discovering new and important ones. We have lost two precious works in ancient biography: Varro wrote the lives of

seven hundred illustrious Romans, and Atticus, the friend of Cicero, composed another on the actions of the great men among the Romans; these works were enriched with portraits. When we consider that these writers lived familiarly with the finest geniuses of their times, and were opulent, hospitable, and lovers of the fine arts, their biography and their portraits are felt as an irreparable loss to literature. I suspect likewise we have had great losses of which we are not always aware; for in that curious letter in which the younger Pliny describes in so interesting a manner the sublime industry, for it seems sublime by its greatness, of his uncle (Book III. Letter V. of Melmoth's translation), it appears that his Natural History, that vast register of the wisdom and folly of the ancients, was not his most extraordinary labour. Among his other works we find a history in twenty books, which has entirely perished. We discover also the works of writers, which, by the accounts of them, appear to have equalled in genius those which have descended to us. I refer the curious reader to such a poet whom Pliny, in Book I. Letter XVI., has feelingly described. He tells us that "his works are never out of my hands; and whether I sit down to write anything myself, or to revise what I have already wrote, or

am in a disposition to amuse myself, I constantly take up this agreeable author; and as often as I do so, he is still new." He had before compared this poet to Catullus; and in a critic of so fine a taste as Pliny, to have cherished so constant an intercourse with the writings of this author, indicates high powers. Instances of this kind frequently occur.

The losses which the poetical world has sustained are sufficiently known by those who are conversant with the few invaluable fragments of Menander, who would have interested us much more than Homer: for he was evidently the domestic poet, and the lyre he touched was formed of the strings of the human heart. He was the painter of manners, and the historian of the passions. The opinion of Quintilian is confirmed by the golden fragments preserved for the English reader in the elegant versions of Cumberland. Even of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who each wrote about one hundred dramas, seven only have been preserved, and nineteen of Euripides. Of the one hundred and thirty comedies of Plautus, we only inherit twenty imperfect ones.

I believe that a philosopher would consent to lose any poet to regain an historian; nor is this unjust, for

some future poet may arise to supply the vacant place of a lost poet, but it is not so with the historian. Fancy may be supplied; but Truth once lost in the annals of mankind leaves a chasm never to be filled.