

THE MUSE OF HISTORY

by Vernon Lee

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'History helps me in my shows with her so-called LESSONS.'

[Satan, in 'The Ballet of the Nations']

I

It has been quite fair to make Satan and Clio herself, neither of whom I like, enumerate, as so many merits, some of the very reasons I have for disliking the Muse of History. Some of these characteristics arise from, and all are overshadowed by, the circumstance which sets me most against her.

I know the Muse of History is a sycophantish partisan; a pretentious, often ignorant humbug. She dotes on Satan, cloaking in exemplary denunciations what psychiatry might call a sadistic taste for works of his which only dirty the memory and spread retaliative infection to the feelings. In the still recent Past her feeding bottle (for she has no milk, which is human kindness, in her majestic bosom) nourished that devastating allegorical French female called *La Gloire*. In our own times she has been the nurse of all the artificially incubated Nationalisms and Irredentisms, from the one which near fifty years ago wrenched the Alsatians willy-nilly from France, to that which is restoring at this present moment the same unconsulted people as 'stolen goods,' as might be an umbrella or a hatbox. In this connexion she has desecrated that most modest of decent saints, 'Jehane la Bonne Lorraine,' into a tinselled wax doll, such as the purlieu of St. Sulpice breed on altars symmetrical with those of Notre Dame de Lourdes. She – am still indicting Clio – has abetted ever so many breaches of the peace, besides committing endless frauds and adulterations. I am aware of it all, and much besides; and dislike her in consequence. Yet I confess that what I really least forgive her is that, calling herself History, she is also a Muse.

Before entering on this my personal plea against her, let me safeguard myself from any suspicion of lack of respect for either classical Antiquity or its divinest daughters, the genuine Muses. That Clio should have been accounted one in Greece is, I like to think, mere accident, the accident of [219/20] Herodotus, of all men the most impartially and naively interested in the bare *how* and *why* of human concerns, having dedicated each of his chapters to one of those nine sisters of the Delphic God in whose precipitous and stony sanctuary he read out loud his delightful manuscript to assembled Hellas; the first chapter (and by an easy confusion), the whole work and all similar ones being henceforward placed under the patronage of the eldest sister, Clio. This view of mine is founded on that fact that Herodotus himself, and the whole classical Antiquity, perhaps because their world was so abundantly adorned, garlanded on altar and door-post, with

art and poetry, did not require to put History to the same insidious, dramatic and aesthetic uses as have later, uglier ages, who more and more turned the Recorder, correct or incorrect, of Events into a purveyor of ideal emotions, largely for the pastime of the Ages-to-Come and other bored and futile persons. This much, lest the reader imagine that, because I don't want Homer and Virgil used as spelling-books for little boys, I lack respect towards the Gods of Olympus. As regards the other notion that I may be devoid of aesthetic sensibilities, I joyfully seize this opportunity of inditing a hymn (however prosaic) of praise to the Sacred Nine (always excepting Clio).

II

To solace and sustain Man's spirit with a sufficiency of such emotions of greatness, significance, harmony and splendour, as are denied or charily doled out by life's reality; to brace, restore, make happy, whole and clean, by granting their heart's desire to those who have borne the brunt of reality's shortcomings, and steadily looked into reality's impassive enigmatic face; this is the high, incomparable mission of the Muses, the lucidly inspired Sisters of him who is Sunlight and Prophecy, the great consoling Goddesses presiding over such perfection as Man, requiring it, recognizes as his own unreal handiwork. That handiwork is: Art, Music, Poetry, whether in the public and abiding works of specially gifted and traditionally trained men, or in [220/221] the hidden, evanescent day-dreams of all manner of loving persons, aware, however dimly, that the beloved *is* the beloved just because fashioned of their own soul's cravings. Nothing, not even the pursuit of truth, the glimpses (however partial) of reality by humble recognition of its nature – nothing is nobler, or more needed, than this consoling, fearless, conscious, creation of the harmony we need but find not ready-made. I even suspect that, alongside of its other sacred uses, art and poetry (call it as you please) has helped Man to recognize reality and seek its knowledge, teaching him to discriminate between what exists because he makes it for his pleasure, and those other things which exist (including his own self), apart from his wishes, by the mere necessity of their own nature and not his. Thus the statue he himself has fashioned is no longer an idol like the anointed stone; the drama declaimed on a stage is not a counterfeit of real events; the rhythm and rhyme of a sonnet show that this is not the real passion of real men and women; Music, which fulfils man's craving for the voice of God or of Love, is evidently man's own or that of instruments constructed by himself. And perhaps as much as any philosophical speculations, the undeniable fact that the divine structure in whose soaring spaces and distributed lights and glooms man mends his bruised, bent, spirit, is but so much stone cut, piled and cemented by man's very hand – perhaps the temple or church, which broodingly fulfils his need for something kinder and greater than his own existence, has helped man to the recognition that the surrounding universe is not made for his desires and that the divinity he seeks is the divinity within himself.

Be that as it may, and whether or not art, by creating for the heart's desire, has taught respect towards reality outside and indifferent to, us; this much is certain, that the nobility and innocence of art depends upon its straightforward standing aloof from assertions of what is true or untrue. This, therefore is one item in the greatness of the Muses, the Consolers, the givers of what life often refuses but man's spirit often needs.

The Muses excepting of course Clio. And hence her hybrid, ambiguous and often unclean nature. [221/222]

III

Let no one imagine I am demanding an inordinate amount of truth from History. No human creature can have entire insight into the character and concatenations of any event, least of all past ones; and everyone sees what he does see in the light or darkness of his prepossessions. It is natural that to one man certain happenings and personages should be attractive, to another repulsive. Carlyle's view of 1793 cannot be the same as Michelet's, though both may represent complementary aspects of the Revolution. Neither must you expect people who write history to restrain their natural eagerness to jump at conclusions and the human, all too human, tampering a tiny trifle with evidence. That happens in all scientific research, and all gets compensated, averaged out, into fairly correct notions on the student's part. Similarly, and as with other sorts of fact, you must not expect (or expecting will be disappointed) that seekers for historical truth should unconsciously or consciously reject the temptation of using their facts to point the moral or adorn the tale. All this is understood, and in so far, harmless. What Clio does (whence my dislike of her) is something else, and usually pure mischief.

I withdraw that statement, not *pure* mischief, not *always* mischief, but *often* mischief; and always recklessness about mischief.

To the extent, neither more nor less, that Clio asserts herself to be a Muse and claims Muse's privilege (and duty) of employing counterfeit presentments for the satisfaction of our emotions, to that extent Clio is an artist, and therefore not a liar nor a pander. This (since the ugly word has come out), this pandering of so-called History to our dramatic instincts, often sanguinary; to our insidious collective vanity and (what is quite harmless in comparison) to the snobbishness which makes simple persons delight in discussing the looks and habits of royalties and pry into the peccadilloes of illustrious men; this pandering implies that we translate the past into terms of the present, else we should sympathize, and thereby cheats us of History's fundamental lesson, which is that *nothing which happens is ever entirely alike*. Now it is [222/3] only such habitual recognition of change which allows real understanding of cause and effect, and allows thereby the just estimation of responsibility. Of course I do not mean that there are not all through the universe apparently stable laws, but these are generalizations which we deduce from recognition of similarity in difference and in alteration. Such abstractions are part of what I have called our recognition of *Otherness*; thereby an essential of true Altruism. For the 'nothing new under the sun' is not a general principle extracted by comparison of single cases; but on the contrary, the indolent expectation of repetition, the unimaginative inability of responding to what our faculties are not yet set for. It is the egotistic intrusion of our own motives into the motives of other folks and other times; indeed the dilettantish assumption that other folks and times, other anything, exist primarily to instruct or amuse *us*. And the expectancy of repetition, even when repetition exists, results not from observation but rather from the lack of it.

Being thus inertly prone to think in terms of sameness, the study of the Past might serve us as corrective to an intellectual and (since justice cannot exist apart from understanding) moral lack of activity whence we all suffer, and whereby we all make others suffer. For History could show us conditions differing from our own and from one another, and show the modifications (and their *modus operandi*) which connect those dissimilar conditions in a great chain of change. In other words, History, if treated as a science, would be par excellence the Science of Change, showing it us in stages more minute and complex than geology or biology. Instead of which, thanks to the Muse and her Votaries, the notion of Evolution has had to be introduced into History from geology and biology; and it is because of our recognition of the gradual transitions which have built up continents in epochs far out-spanning our imagination; it is because of the study of living and extinct animal species, and the concatenation of form in fossils and in embryos, that we are beginning to think of human institutions in terms of evolution, and to be interested in their varying and allied forms. Indeed it is one of Clio's unintended practical jokes that we are more able [223/4] and willing to do this in connexion with remote periods, whose sole records are broken potsherds and unpolished flints, than with the life-time of our grandfathers and grandmothers, whereof the verbal record is more accessible than what we leave (and hide) from week to week. For the Muse has no use for flints and potsherds. What *she* wants are human personages to gape at on a puppet show or ferret out in the places where we keep rags and dirty linen. The Muse caters for our various imaginative needs, noble or base, giving us the heroes and martyrs and villains for whom our sentimentality, megalomania, and morbid passions clamour; personages great enough, abominable enough, pure enough, unhappy enough to be the cherished companions, the hugged dolls, of our presumptuous day-dreams; also mean enough, dirty enough in all their splendour of royalty or genius, to comfort our own meanness with the thought: 'Well! they also were human (which often means brutish), just like ourselves.' Scaffolds and stakes, alcoves and backstairs; she provides them with perfection; and often, and alas, as in some of her greatest ministrants (I am thinking of the incomparable Michelet) all mingled in nauseous or piquant concoctions.

Nay, Clio caters for even humbler tastes; for the same naïf pleasure experienced when, being children, we beheaded (or were beheaded, Elizabeth or Mary turn about) with fire-irons across footstools; and to that intense satisfaction of indulging for honourable motives in dishonourable works, looking through key-holes, listening behind curtains, tampering with correspondence and generally behaving like blackguards with a perfect conscience; the enjoyment which makes big and small children love detective stories; the joy of having a hand in scandals like the Diamond Necklace or horrors like those of Gilles de Retz, yet remain decent; to reincarnate retrospectively in Messalina, Marie Antoinette, the Merry Monarch, Napoleon, Ezzelino the Tyrant, or the Oxford Martyrs, while living unobtrusive, honourable lives in Chelsea, or at Wimbledon. What play-house has ever rivalled that of Clio, where, with the greatest convenience, we are both actor and audience!

All of which historical delectations depend largely on treating [224/5] the Past as if its personages belonged to our own day, our class, our visiting list; for a man or woman of

the Past as he or she really existed would often be as disagreeable to our feelings as would the methods of ablution of the Grand Monarque, let alone the forkless banquets of the Homeric Kings poking eager fingers into the succulent thighs of freshly slaughtered beasts.

We want the Past, its romance and raciness. But a Past for our personal, present use. And Clio provides it.

IV

Should any reader object that all this is a slanderous view of history, my answer is: so much the better. I am not speaking of History as it (I like the nice impersonal neuter as opposed to my high-bosomed super-personal Muse!) may and should be; as it, doubtless, already sometimes is, may even always have been from time to time. I am speaking of History in so far as symbolized by Clio. I am speaking of Clio. And no one believes more than I do that History is destined to become an ever finer thing; and Clio to lose her footing in it, finally to vanish altogether or turn, as other Goddesses have in their day, into some amusing little crone, Mother Hubbard or such like, for the delight of nurseries.

Which leads me to say that if there is a branch of human knowledge which cannot be learned by, and should never be taught to children, except as just such an adjunct to *Grimm's goblins* or *Piglet Bland*, it is surely History. Children cannot understand the meaning of Change, the full sense of which is indeed a mark of intellectual and moral maturity to which we latter day grown-ups barely attain. Children have no sense of otherness; the tiny world gathering around their little half-grown bodies and lovely heads whose every feature is still out of place – that childish world is all of ‘my-my’ as it needs must be in creatures whose *I* has only just arrived; who possess no real *mine* both in the Law's eyes and as opposed to a real *thine*. History is or should be the study of Time working in human concerns; and for Children Time is measured from getting up to going to bed; at most by months bringing with them changes so great as well-nigh cancel previous memories. [225/6]

To teach children History is to allow them, like those innocents of Victor Hugo's, to make hay of precious missals and scandalous documents in the Castle library. At its best it is to let them play with a few cheap court cards, a splendid game. By all means use history to supplement other toys, educating the little creatures, all unconsciously, to colour, to movement, and to drama; there is no better puppet show. Only let it be understood, if not by the children themselves, at least by the grown-ups, that it is a kind of Punch and Judy. But here Clio steps in, severe, sometimes even brandishing a pedagogic rod, lays pedantic hands on all these babes; seats them on her hard key-patterned knee and administers, not without painful show of duty, the drams and syrups for which adults go to her. I doubt whether grown-up men and women would swallow patriotic lies so greedily had they not sucked them already at the age of barley sugar. Surely a grown-up man or woman, fairly educated and moderately experienced, might from time to time be struck by the queerness of its happening that just his or her own country (whichever it be) should be, not only *often*, but *always*, the supremely wise, good

and glorious one among the lot. The oddness of this agreeable coincidence might even be brought home by noticing that the grown-ups of every other country are under the same impression, only about *their* country. Even a suspicion might arise in a few sceptical minds, that since there was evidently some muddle about each country being solely wise, good and glorious, it might well be that none was. But we have learned these views from our tenderest years, and they have taken on that warm, dim, comfortable, religious familiarity and rightness with which long habit invests everything, turning myth into dogma. Indeed it all countries nowadays History is taught with just this object in view, as a kind of religion, a help to docility, a training to *doing and dying without asking why*; and incidentally a preparation for readiness to coerce or fleece our neighbours. I know, for instance, what has been taught in French schools since 1871, reversing Gambetta's advice, '*Pensons y toujours, n'en parlons jamais.*' But these teachings were merely applying to a different country the hatred long cultivated against *Perfide Albion* which nearly provoked war about Marchand's flag at Fashoda; and may, who knows? Some day be turned once more against the country which is to-day France's ally. That hatred of England would not have been so ready twenty years ago (was it M. Clemenceau who suggested rolling this perfidious nation in blood and mud?) if small French children had not, like myself (for I was a small French child among successive incarnations) eaten their nursery meals off plates pictured with the story of Joan of Arc, appropriately explained in decorative scrolls. At all events those nursery plates (and all the books, lectures, monographs, plays, *cours de dictées, lectures patriotiques*, which succeeded them) made it immensely more difficult for, say, my own French cousins to grasp the fact (which they never have) that what was called *France* in the days of Joan and duly brought its portion of faggots to here burning, was a mediaeval medley, Provençal, Burgundian, Angevin, English, which would never have recognized itself in the Third Republic; that the English who, as Villon also recorded, burned her at Rouen, were not the English whom street boys there and elsewhere would playfully pursue with '*Angliche Goddam, vivent les Boers.*' Indeed that all that horrible business can be understood only in the light of witch trials and burnings of heretics, in fact only if you grasp the difference between our own time and the late Middle Ages. But such difference would enormously damp the interest, quench the passions which enliven our dull lives, even as poor Joan's and all other autos da fé enliven the gaping, illiterate dullness of our forbears. Hence Clio never brings that difference forward. For her it is the name which makes the identity; the name allowing us to stick pins into wax images (sometimes also realities) and roast them before a slow fire like Sister Helen. It was Clio who, in a street-song of the Tripoli War, called on the Italy of Giolitti and of Sonnino to buckle on the Helmet of Scipio Africanus . . . Let alone similar historical inducements even more recent.

At other moments when the Orchestra of Patriotism is in full swing, Clio obligingly hides away certain analogies; that, for instance, between our present English attitude towards the Russian revolution and our interference with the Regicide Republic of Burke's *Reflections* and speeches.

Industrious artificer of faked nationalities as well as preserver of bygone enmities; parasite, sycophant, purveyor of drawingroom entertainments; agent of holy and

unhallowed alliances; there are few jobs which Clio will not do or get done to oblige her clients. She will even, when absolutely required to, tell quite a lot of truth.

Christmas, 1918