FROM THE LONDON REVIEW.

Review of NOAH WEBSTER's brief history of epidemic and pestilential diseases.

On no subject has the medical world been more divided in opinion, than on the origin and nature of the Typhus Icteroides; a disease which has, of late years, proved so particularly calamitous to several cities in the United States of North America.—Philadelphia, New-York, Baltimore, &c. have all in their turns experienced its visitations, and suffered by its desolating ravages.

The nature of febrile contagion, is unquestionably a subject involved in much obscurity; and, until still farther advances be made in chemical physiology will probably continue to elude our research. Although neither the particular nature of febril contagion, nor the manner in which it operates in producing disease, be well understood, yet many facts render it sufficiently probable, that all fevers of a pestilential nature derive their origin from heat, moisture, foul air, or marsh miasmata; and that under particular circumstances all of them may become more or less contagious. This holds particularly true in fevers of the typhoid type, when once formed, and raised to a certain pitch of malignity. Divided, however, as the opinions of physicians are, respecting the origin and nature of contagious diseases, they seem all agreed in one point, that, howsoever generated, they may be propagated by infection. Hippocrates was so much aware of the inadequacy of the mere changes of seasons to the explanation of the production of pestilence, that, in order to elude the difficulty, he had recourse to an *aliquid divinum*, or a something divine in the atmosphere. Allied to the opinion of the Grecian sage was the doctrine of the celebrated Sydenham, that certain diseases, and favored the diffusion of others. This doctrine he applied, not only to the plague, in particular, but also to some exanthematic affections, such as the small-pox and measles, when generally prevalent. The author of the present treatise, who decla e, "he has never before turned his attention to chemical or medical science," appears in some sort to have adopted the exploded doctrine of Sydenham; and, reprobating equally the opinion of those physicians who have written in favor of the imported or domestic origin of the yellow fever in America, he argues that it depends upon a pestilential state or constitution of the air, which he terms general or primary contagion.

In support of this theory, Mr. Webster gives what he calls a brief historical View of Pestilential Epidemics, and the phenomena in the physical world which precede, attend, or follow them, from the earliest accounts to 1798 inclusive. Whilst our trans-atlantic author seems willing to renovate and support the almost forgotten theories of the ancients, he condemns, with the most inconceivable illiberality, 'Modern compilers,' as a set of men 'who appear to have written for fame or for money, rather than for the sake of unfolding and diffusing truth,' 'others of them,' he goes on to assert, 'appear to have undertaken historical compilation, solely or principally to support some pre-conceived system of government or religion; and have studied to bend the evidence of facts to the accomplishment of that purpose.' Not satisfied with this indiscriminate abuse, in the course of his extracts Sir Isaac Newton, Volney, the two Russels, Chisholm, Gibbon, and Doctor Cullen, with a long list of truly respectable authors, are accused, by Mr. W. either of gross ignorance, or of distorting and suppressing facts, relative to the origin and propagation of the plague; even the college of Physicians at Philadelphia do not escape without censure.

Speaking of Mr. Gibbon, he says—

'I cannot help noticing the observations of Mr. Gibbon, on the calamities of this period. Our habits of thinking so fondly connect the order of the universe with the fate of man, that this gloomy period of history has been *decorated* with inundations, earthquakes, uncommon meteors, preternatural darkness, and a crowd of prodigies, fictitious or exaggerated.

'If the original writers who have related the above-mentioned, had been as fond of *decorations* as this author, we might well have distrusted their accounts of unusual occurrences. Had this *elegant* writer taken due pains to inform himself of the truth, before he had indulged such reflections on the most credible historians, he would have found similar phenomena to have attended the same calamity (pestilence) in every age, from that period to the present, and many of them, if not all, during his own life, if not within his own observation.

'He goes on to observe, that "famine is almost always followed by epidemic diseases." This point will be afterwards considered. He says, also, that the plague, at this period, "raged from 250 to 265 *without interruption*, in every province, every city, and almost every family of the Roman empire." The words *without interruption*, were probably inserted for the sake of *decoration*. They are not authorized by the original writers, and cannot possibly be true, for an uninterrupted plague in a city or country, would soon leave it without an inhabitant. The truth is, it seldom raged more than six or eight months in the same place, at one time. It seized this town one year, and that, the next, as we observe in modern times, through the whole period. The more I examine the original writers, from whom Gibbon derived his materials, the less confidence I place in his representations of events. He appears to be a partial historian, and superficial philosopher."

The hyper-criticism of Mr. W. on the version of the words of Zonarae, '*per quindecem continuos annos*,' seems illiberal, and is perhaps unjust. The works of the original writers not being, however, at present accessible, we would not wish to be understood as affirming that the plague absolutely raged, in a strict sense, that is, without the smallest interruption, for the period above-mentioned; we only assert what every school-boy knows, that the word *continuus*, literally signifies without interruption. Let the reader, therefore, judge whether these words were inserted merely for the sake of decoration. Mr. Gibbon, perhaps, like other men, was not free from prejudice and error; yet his Roman history is written in the true spirit of philosophy, and, we may venture to predict, will be read and admired long after the crudities of Mr. W. with the memory of their author, shall have been forgotten.

In the second volume, we are presented with the bills of mortality of several large cities, such as London, Dresden, Philadelphia, &c. with the corresponding state of the weather, occurrence of volcanic eruptions, and the appearance of comets, throughout the greatest part of the globe, from the year 1600 to 1798 inclusive. We are also supplied with a chronological view of the order in which epidemics have prevailed of late years in North America. From these data the author attempts to establish the hypothesis, that pestilential epidemics, from catarrh to the plague and yellow fever, as well as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, &c. brood from one common cause viz. an occult principle of electricity.

'The fire of the globe,' says our author, 'is in perpetual motion or action; and to this great agent, philosophers are agreed, are to be ascribed the changes of seasons, and the generation of rain, hail, and snow. Its operations, however, are not all of them visible, nor even perceptible, until they appear by their effects. It is probable that the *invisible* operations of the electrical fluid produce more effects than those which are seen. Indeed, we may question whether most of the visible phenomena of that principle are not mere effects of that action which influences the vegetable and animal world. It is probable to me, that neither seasons, earthquakes, nor volcanic eruptions, are the causes of the principal derangements we behold in animal and vegetable life, but are themselves the *effect* of those motions and invisible operations which affect mankind. Hence catarrh and other epidemics often appear *before* the visible phenomena of eruptions and earthquakes.'

To follow Mr. W. through his numerous quotations, in the selection of which he has displayed but a very small portion of discrimination; to remark upon his bold and vague assertions, or combat in every instance his inconclusive reasoning; would far exceed the limits of our publication. It will be sufficient to observe, that the author appears to have written the present treatise under the powerful bias of a preconceived theory; and that, if he has not restrained quotations to support his hypothesis he has overlooked those contrary facts by which it would have been rendered doubtful, or altogether overturned.

Diemerbroek, whom our author so often quotes, as well as many other medical writers of the last century, considered the plague as a peculiar infliction from the Deity; and, among the philosophers of that age, it was by no means uncommon to impute it to demoniacal influence. The secondary cause, which they admitted as producing pestilential fever, was a certain state of the atmosphere, supposed to be saturated with the poison; but to this opinion it has long ago been very properly objected, that, were the atmosphere so vitiated, no person could possibly escape the disease. Many circumstances, were it necessary, might be adduced to prove that the plague, and other pestilential diseases, do not depend on any peculiar constitution of the atmosphere: even Diemerbroeck's facts, when impartially considered, tend to the same conclusion, although that author himself held the contrary opinion. Upon the supposition that the yellow fever is the offspring of a pestilential constitution of the air, how, we may be permitted to ask, did it never become, strictly speaking, epidemic throughout the United States?—How, if contagion were not present in those places where it did prevail, shall we account for its dreadful fatality?—Or how has it happened always to originate in large cities, and upon the sea coast?—Is our author prepared to affirm, with Sennertus, that the poison was only dispersed in different circumscribed parts of the atmosphere? And will he contend that these pestife ous portions of the atmosphere hovered over a few devoted cities? These and a great many other absurdities, upon his principle, he must be compelled to admit, or at once shelter himself, like Diemerbroeck, under the supposition that the yellow fever is a peculiar infliction from the Deity.

Mr. W. proceeds to consider the means of preventing or mitigating pestilential diseases. In this part of the work, we meet with some judicious remarks respecting temperance, cleanliness, the mode of building cities, &c. observations however, which, were our author's theory true, it appears to us, could be of little avail. Indeed, he himself admits, that 'epidemic pestilence is not under human control.' Is it necessary to observe how pernicious such a doctrine, if acted upon would prove to the health and lives of mankind? Its consequences, by destroying every motive to exertion, would be equally baneful to the moral and physical powers of man, as the predestination of the Turks. Mr. W.'s observations respecting health laws deserve the severest reprehension. At page 317, vol 2d, he says—

'The application of quarantine laws to our epidemic pestilential fever, is just, as useless as the order of the Sultan, Achmet I. in the wasting plague of 1613, for transporting all the cats in Constantinople to the island of Scutari. The Jewish physicians told the emperor, that the plague was occasioned by the cats; and the poor cats were dispatched into exile. Yet this did not restrain the plague.'

We agree, with our author, that 'nothing is more dangerous than to build a theory, or to establish a principle, on a few detached facts, inaccurately stated and ill understood.' Yet quarantine laws, of such vast importance to the safety and prosperity of whole countries, Mr. W. decides to be of no utility, simply because they have not hitherto produced all the effects which might have been expected. That they have not done so, in some instances, may be easily traced to something defective, either in their organisation or execution; and, in others, to the arts resorted to by the cupidity of the mercantile world, to evade and render abortive the best devised regulations. Respecting the truth of these facts, the author might have satisfied himself, by consulting the works of the justly celebrated Mr. Howard. He next endeavours to invalidate the propriety of the quarantine enjoined by the English government on vessels from the West-Indies and United States; because, according to him, the yellow fever cannot spread even in the summer temperature of our Island. We are not to learn, that cold is favorable to the extinction of the contagion producing Typhus Icteroides; hence it has been too rashly inferred, by our author, that we should not entertain apprehension of its importation into Great Britain, or places under similar parallels of latitude: but, if we may be allowed to reason from analogy and facts, such apprehensions will not appear so perfectly groundless as Mr. W. would insinuate; for since the plague, which is a disease of warm climates, has not unfrequently passed into the cold and temperate regions of the earth, we are warranted thence to infer, that the Typhus Icteroides, a disease not essentially different, may in like manner be imported. It must therefore be obvious, that, during our commercial intercourse with the United States, we cannot be too much on our guard against the danger of an importation of the pestilential contagion into Great Britain. The sensations produced, among the American merchants, by the proposition to stop all intercourse with the West-Indies, and the Mediterranean, during the summer months, are well known. Whether Mr. W. be a merchant, or connected with that body of men, we know not: certain it is, the Treatise before us appears in a very questionable shape, and has more the appearance of the memorial of a pleader in a court of law, than the work of a philosopher anxious only for the discovery of truth. Let us continue, then, to employ those prophylactic measures against the introduction of pestilential contagion—which, although hitherto but imperfectly executed, have preserved, in a great measure, Europe from its desolating scourge; and which, while no restraints were imposed on the free and unlimited intercourse between different parts of the Roman Empire, frequently depopulated and laid waste its provinces. Let us recall to mind, that the abuse of trade has almost always given rise to pestilential importation, which frequently the greatest skill of the physician, and the greatest vigilance on the part of the police magistrates, have been scarcely able to subdue. Such is the account we have found ourselves compelled to give of a work, in which the author appears to us to have wantonly hazarded an hypothesis fraught with the greatest danger to the lives of an incalculable portion of mankind;—an hypothesis, the adoption of which would mislead nations into a fatal security, and to a neglect of the only rational means adapted to ward off the destructive agency of epidemic pestilence.

The style of Mr. W. is sometimes incorrect, and frequently deformed by quaint expressions and provincial idioms.

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JOHN ARDREY,
PHILIP ALEXANDER.
WM. WASHINGTON.

April 29, 1801. 3t