

REFLECTIONS on the PRESENT STATE of LITERATURE in
ENGLAND,

IT will appear a paradox to advance, and be considered as no small temerity to venture, the assertion, that Literature is on the wane in this country. If it can be proved that this position is a groundless one, no person will more heartily rejoice in the proof than he who here presumes to express his present opinion to be, that the assertion is true.

It is principally for the purpose of obtaining this satisfaction, if that be possible, that he hazards a sentiment, against which temporary and other prejudices will, no doubt, excite a general complaint. But, however this may be, he cannot help bringing it forward, and that in one of the first periodical publications of this age, in order, if it should be true, to turn the minds of some persons more towards the interests of *valuable* than *superficial* learning; or in case it should be false, he may happily have his doubts removed, and conceive a greater esteem for the age he lives in, than he is now inclined to entertain of it.

To mention living authors in contrast with those who have been long

since removed beyond the reach of either praise or blame, and particularly in confirmation of a principle which is apparently designed to depreciate the celebrity they have acquired, and the value of their labours, is an invidious task, to which he does not feel himself prompted by prudence or inclination.

That this is a reading age cannot well be denied, for the continued swarms of new publications, the increase of Circulating Libraries, and the establishment of Book-Clubs in every part of the kingdom, sufficiently prove this; but the obvious and necessary question is, what kind of reading is most in vogue? As to the polite part of the world, *literature*, if such it may be called, is only one of their numerous vehicles of amusement. Novels, and a modern species of writing which differs but little from Novels, namely, *Tours* and *Journals*, form what we may stile their literary pleasure. And with respect to persons of a cast somewhat different from these, and who are dignified with the appellation of Men of Letters, it will be difficult to find them engaged in any thing better than the light *superficial*

perfcial parts of literature. Works of deep and refined erudition are as seldom published as they are enquired after or read. Now, as the numbers of the *Men of Letters*, as they are called, are very numerous, it is a clear case, that those erudite researches which constituted the character of Men of Letters formerly, do not form their's, and of course, from want of vigorous cultivation, deep and solid learning must be on the decline.

The elegancies of language, according to the modern notion of literary elegance, will set off a book of very trifling merit, and procure for the author a comfortable, and a profitable station too in the Temple of celebrated Authors; when a work of a hundred times more real sterling merit shall lie neglected in obscurity, or be condemned to oblivion with all the arbitrary fury of false criticism. From this kind of taste it has arisen, that some Histories in our language are cried up as the first historic compositions that have appeared since the days of Thucydides and Livy, though the elegance for which they are so celebrated consists chiefly in the smoothness of their periods, quaint turns of expression, and a novelistic method of drawing characters and representing incidents. If any historical work of the present time can be produced equal in all the essential requisites necessary in that species of literature, to Knolles's History of the Turks, Clarendon's History of the Rebellion, or Burnet's History of the Reformation, a considerable step will be made towards demolishing the position here advanced.

With respect to Poetry, though we have many ingenious, and indeed elegant claimants to an eminent seat on Parnassus, yet it is an absolute impossibility to mention any of them in competition with the names of Milton and Dryden. The best English Poets, as well dramatic as otherwise, trod close upon the heels of each other in point of time, down to the end of the reign of George the First, but from thence they have appeared at very unequal distances, and the number has gradually lessened from thence into a very small compass.

The systematic theology of the former Age, however it may be ridiculed now, had to boast a far more extensive number of learned and pious professors, than, as we have great reason to fear,

can be found among us. Let the slipshod concise harangues of our modern Ecclesiastics, half made up of Heathen, and the other part of Christian morality, without any connection with the texts, or any regular order in their parts, be compared by an impartial and judicious person with the sermons published in the last century, and then let him determine which appears best calculated to instruct a congregation in the principles of the Christian Religion. That there are sermons published by some living Divines which do honour to their piety, learning, and judgment, cannot be disputed; but it will not be easy to match an equal number of these with a number that can be brought of those of the last Age.

The subjects of our most celebrated sermons are moral duties, or some light sentiments, which require in the elucidation not so much depth of judgment as power of expression. We perceive the discourses of our old Divines strongly tinged with the lamp, and evincing a close thinking, as well as extensive reading, on the part of their authors. This is rarely to be found in the popular discourses of our day. Who can be matched with the logical, the forcible, and the nervous Barrow? That name alone of the last Age will overbalance the whole host of moderns in this department of literature.

In the philosophical and mathematical walks there is evidently a very great falling off. There are, indeed, some eminent names on the list of these branches of science now flourishing among us; but then their names are few, and their consequence inconsiderable, in comparison of the shining host of sages who illuminated the scientific world at the close of the last and the early part of the present century. The names of Barrow, Newton, Wallis, Gregory, Boyle, Flamsteed, Halley, Whiston, Cotes, with a number of others, may be mentioned as a groupe, the like of which now may be looked for in vain.

As to classical literature, the people of the present age are accustomed to consider it as a matter of very trifling, if any consequence, except it be to Gentlemen of particular professions; and hence a man has little encouragement to turn the bent of his studies that way. Formerly, when Men of Quality were in general scholars, they patronized learned men merely because they were

so; but this is seldom if ever the case in our time. From the correspondence of some of the most eminent men of the last century, we find that works published in the learned languages by Vossius, Scaliger, Grotius, Usher, &c. were certain of a good price and a rapid sale; but there are few book sellers now who would be inclined to undertake publishing even a small treatise in the Latin language, written by ever so good a scholar.

We have, it is true, still great Schools and Universities, nor are they deficient in students. The decay of learning has not yet proceeded quite so far as to render a liberal education unfashionable. But if observation, and the testimony of some of the most respectable modern authors, may be relied on, the state of literature has not improved in either of the latter foundations for the space of half a century past. Our young gentlemen, and even those who are placed in a profession to which learning appears necessarily attached, perceiving that there is a shorter and less rugged method of obtaining the character of Men of Letters, than by poring over a quantity of old Authors, and devoting a considerable portion of their time to close study, soon abandon the latter course as unfashionable, and unproductive of profit or pleasure.

One cause why the learned languages have sunk into disrepute of late years, has been the disuse of quotations from them by our most esteemed modern authors. In the time of James the First, and for a long space afterwards, the affectation of quoting from Latin and Greek writers was carried to a most ridiculous extreme. commonly one part

of a sentence being in English, and the remainder in a language few readers could understand. At present we are deviated to the opposite point, and the Classics are supplanted by quotations from our own poets or by French phrases. This conveys an idea to many, that the learned languages are of little or no value; and therefore numbers of young persons who have received their education at the Grammar School, after they have quitted it abandon all they have learnt there.

By a judicious quotation either from the Latin or Greek, an author relieves himself, pleases the intelligent reader, and creates a desire in the inquisitive mind to get acquainted with the meaning of it.

The intention of these few reflections is not to imply that the state of learning is indeed grossly or rapidly on the decline. He who throws them out is fully sensible of the merits of a good number of valuable writers now living, and is happy in acknowledging, that great and important improvements have been made of late years in the field of Science, by men who deserve well of their country and of mankind. But, notwithstanding this, he thinks the characteristic of this age is *lightness*, or a regard for what is superficial and gaudy, to the neglect of what is solid and durable. A degeneracy in learning always precedes or accompanies a degeneracy of manners, and whether either, or both, do not distinguish the present period, he humbly leaves to the consideration of those who have greater abilities, and more opportunities of observation, than he is possessed of.