

opinion;" and then, like the old officer at Calais, concluded by saying, "we shall never be happy till we have a King." To this he was answered, that not being a competent judge to determine which government might be best, he should only observe, that this was not the first time he had visited this country, having seen various parts of it before the revolution; but that he had never observed it so well cultivated, or the peasantry so comfortable as they apparently were at present. "Ah! Sir," returned he, flurrying up his shoulders, "we see clearly that you know nothing of France, but by the most superficial observation; and I am not surprised at what you say; for the poor are obliged to work day and night to obtain a livelihood; whereas, in former times, many were supported by the noble. Oh! that those times could return, when luxury and show flourished! for I could sell ten ell of linen then for one that I sell now!" an odd kind of argument, which, by the bye, confirms my former assertions; for, in consequence of the rapid progress made by egotism in this country, self becomes the principle object, and we really find each individual prompted to speak and judge of the revolution in proportion as it more or less affected his interest.

STRICTURES ON THE FALSE TASTE

OF

MODERN POETRY.

English poetry, like that in the latter ages of Rome, is nothing, at present but a combination of luxuriant images, without plot or connexion; a string of epithets that improve the sound, without carrying on the sense.

GOLDSMITH.

THAT human nature is apt to run into extremes, is a remark which, however true it may appear, is not sufficiently attended to. For, if we consider the

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conduct of individuals, or of mankind collectively, we shall find, that they have no sooner refined one error, than they are hurried by the prejudices and opinions of the moment to excesses of a contrary nature; and there is, perhaps, no instance in which the truth of this observation has been more fully exemplified, than in the progress of poetical studies in this country. When Chaucer first surprized and entertained his native plains by the rude notes of his lyre, he found the language in which he wrote immersed in barbarism; he however began the course of its refinement, and almost every succeeding writer of any eminence, made some addition to its copiousness, smoothness, and elegance, till it seemed to reach its climax of improvement, under the auspices of Pope, and his contemporaries. But from that period, it has been the prevalent custom to seek after mistaken beauties, and to load the productions of fancy with that exuberance of ornament which must disgust rather than please a refined taste. So much indeed has this been the case of late, that the imagination is fatigued by the turgid obscurity, and inane pomposity of modern poetry; which in general fails of interesting either the judgment or the passions.

It is my intention, in this essay, to confine myself to the consideration of the first part of an assertion contained in the motto: "That English poetry is nothing at present but a combination of luxuriant images, without plot or connexion;" and to point out some of the principal errors committed by modern writers, in the formation and arrangement of their ideas. It has been justly observed, that poetry may be denominated a painting in words. In the introduction of the delightful science among any people, it is chiefly employed in describing the beauties of nature, or the simple manners and transactions of society in its unpolished state: As mankind advance in improvement, these descriptions fall of their effect, and become trite and unpleasing from being often repeated. Hence the poet is induced to leave the paths

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of material being, to wander in the regions of unreal existence. The virtues, the vices, and passions of human nature are personified, and its various pursuits wrap in the pleasing disguise of allegorical fiction. This species of description, when regulated by a sound judgment, is productive of the greatest advantages; the mind is thereby introduced to scenes much more various and magnificent than any combination of sensible objects can produce, and the aid of fancy is called in to adorn those metaphysical disquisitions, which, if confined to abstract ideas, and literal expressions, become dry and disgusting.

As an author who employs his talents in this mode of writing, if successful, deserves great applause, so he is in much greater danger of running into absurdities than one who confines himself to nature; since he runs the risk of mistaking the absurd chimeras of a confused imagination, for the sublime conceptions produced by poetical enthusiasm.

One fruitful source of error among poets, is the absurd combination of allegorical figures. A number of ideas strike their minds at once, as appropriate to their subject, which, without taking the pains to separate, they commit to paper: Such an imagery may at first sight appear splendid; but, if we attempt to examine it minutely, we shall find it like the crude conceptions of a dream, it presents no regular form, or connected series of action, to the mind. It was a fault of this kind, that Dr. Johnson so severely condemned in Gray's *Progress of Poetry*, wherein a tide of music is described as follows:

Now tolling down the steep again,
Headlong, impetuous see it pour,
While rocks, and nodding groves, re-bellow to the roar.

It is plain that Gray, at the time of writing this, was thinking both of a stream of music floating through the air, and a stream of water; and that, without flaying to analyze those separate ideas, he connected objects which

were

were totally different in their nature. To avoid such an error, writers should consider that when immaterial beings are represented to the mind under the form of some object, that may be apprehended by the senses, the latter should never have any quality ascribed to it which it might not be supposed to possess, if it really existed. Thus, if the above-mentioned writer meant to compare the progress of poetry to a stream of harmony, he ought not to have introduced into his allegory the qualities of a river, or a water-fall.

Another fault, not much unlike the former, is the jumbling of literal and metaphorical thoughts and expressions together. The poet meets with a simile which he thinks applicable to his subject, but forgets to complete it, and the fancy is disgusted with a mutilated, or half formed figure, of which it can form no distinct idea. I have often thought a passage in the poem, from which I have already taken a quotation, an instance of this kind: in the beginning of the last verse, we meet with the following lines:—

"Hark! his hands the lyre explore!
Bright-eyed fancy, how'ring o'er,
Scatters from her pictur'd urn
Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn."

I could never conceive, by any effort of imagination, how thoughts and words could be scattered from an urn; the comparison, in itself, does not appear remarkable either for its elegance or justness of application; but, if Mr. Gray thought that the idea of an urn would answer his purpose, he should, to have completed his metaphor, have represented the effusions of fancy under the simile of some material being, which might be supposed either to flow, or to be scattered from an urn. Various other faults, common in the formation of poetical imagery, may deserve some notice, though, as they have been often mentioned by former writers, I shall just content myself with a few cursory remarks upon them. Among others,

others, is that of being too minute and tedious in description; the consequence is, the mind becomes distracted by an attention to too great a variety of objects; and is incapable of distinguishing the more prominent traits which ought chiefly to engage the fancy, or affect the sensibility: To this may be added those mistaken attempts at excellence, consisting in unnatural distortions and caricatures of colouring, which form caricatures rather than agreeable images, and tend more to excite risibility than admiration.

But it is not merely in the incorrect drawing of poetical figures that modern writers are defective; for though such figures may in themselves be just and elegant, they may yet be used injudiciously, or to excess; which indeed is the common practice at present. It appears to be the opinion, that poetical excellence consists entirely in far-fetched ideas, and splendid flights of fancy. Hence the morning, the evening, the winds, the virtues, the vices, &c. are personified, and decked out with all the properties which a luxuriant imagination can bestow on them. Nymphs and satyrs, cherubs and furies, "Black spirits and white, blue spirits and grey," are conjured into existence, and join in the mystic fray: the mind is led into the fairy licenes of allegory; and hills and dales, lawns and groves, alternately rise and vanish in metaphor. But of all extravagancies, there is none, perhaps, so truly ridiculous as a poetical lover, who is driven almost melancholy mad by the cruelty of his fair tyrant. Lightnings, darts, and flames, are but ordinary similes to express the irresistible influence of her eyes, while he, wandering in some unfrequented shade,

"Affix's the pouring rains with brimful eyes,
And aids hoarse howling Boreas with his sighs."

Here let it not be imagined that it is my intention satirically to condemn, as improper, the partial use of such images. On the contrary, it is from such that the sublimest beauties of poetry are derived; yet he deserves

severe censure, who, from a mistaken ambition, exceeds the bounds of propriety; or who, without regard to regularity, combines a profusion of heterogeneous ideas, without order, and bewilders the minds of his readers in a splendid chaos, the abortive creation of a lively but ungoverned fancy.

A modern writer is often regardless of what ought to be his principal design. Is his poem didactic? his endeavour should then be to instruct; he ought therefore to admit of as much ornament as will render the vehicle by which his precepts are conveyed, agreeable: If he exceeds this bound, he diverts the attention from the moral of his piece to its embellishments. Again, does he wish to affect the feelings? he should confine himself to the simple, yet energetic paths of nature. The heart discovers the influence of art; and regards with indifference those writings which are designed to raise sighs and tears by figures of rhetoric. In such works, no ornament should be admitted that is calculated to check the rising tide of sensibility.

I have thus endeavoured, in these few incoherent observations, to point out some of those false refinements in the imagery of modern poetry, by which I have been often disgusted. I shall, in a future paper, consider the style and mode of expression now in use.

JOHN JAMES PEAT.

A MOST REMARKABLE INCIDENT.

As related in a letter from a gentleman of Toulough, dated April 29, 1768, to his friend at Galway, in Ireland.

THE most remarkable occurrence here, is the extraordinary case of a criminal under sentence of death, and who was to have been broke on the wheel the adjacent day. The day before he was to have been executed, he fell into a profound sleep, and has lived since without any