

A
On Poetry.

Among the many hints for perfecting this work, with which the editor has been favoured since the first publication of the prospectus of it, are the two following:

My first correspondent says, "The only thing I presume to suggest, at present, as a fault in your prospectus, is offering a premium for poetical essays; and that you seem not to be sensible of yourself." We have four times more poetry, both in our own and other languages, than any wise man, whatever be his station or circumstances, ought to read; and therefore, to tempt vain or inconsiderate men to add to the mass, seems to me injurious both to themselves and the public. I have known many for nearly half a century, who were deemed by no considerable critics, to possess a good degree of poetical merit, though few of their performances reached the public eye, except under fictitious names; but not one of the whole (a northern professor excepted) who did not become bankrupts in reputation and trade. They might sometimes, perhaps, afford an acquaintance an opportunity of spending, or rather killing an idle hour agreeably, by reading a manuscript fully of imagination; but that acquaintance must have possessed a dull invention, if he could not have spent the hour more usefully, and even as agreeably. Could you turn the thoughts of your countrymen to the best method of abolishing feudal maxims and ideas; to consider in a true light the natural rights of man; to devise the cheapest, and most speedy mode of obtaining justice at the different courts; to class society properly, and from thence select jury-men, so that justice may be fairly distributed without respect of persons: I say, could you do all these

"things, you would deserve better of your country, than if you produced a poem containing the united beauties of the Iliad, the Æneid, Paradise lost, and Fin-gal!"

Now, though it is most readily admitted, that the objects pointed out by this very judicious correspondent, are of the highest utility, and that there is perhaps ten times as much poetry written as any wise man would choose to read; yet, it by no means follows from hence, that poetry should be actually proscribed from this work. If it be right to cherish the sweet feelings of the heart; if hilarity of disposition promotes the pleasurable intercourses of civil society; if innocent recreation tends to divert the mind from hurtful pursuits; and if the happiness of man be augmented by indulging those tender propensities which spring from the contemplating acts of beneficence and disinterested bounty; if pious exercises tend to elevate the soul to praiseworthy exertions; then shall we be forced to allow that poetry, which, if judiciously selected, tends to promote all these good ends, so far from being hurtful, ought to be admitted as a very useful part of its miscellany. For these and other obvious reasons, though it shall be our study never to forget the useful pursuits here pointed out, we shall also make it our business to search for such pieces of poetry, ancient or modern, as appear to be deserving the attention of the public.

Poetry is indeed so congenial to the human mind, that it has been, among all nations, the first species of composition that has attracted the universal attention of the people; and it is in the language of poetry, that a spirit of devotion has naturally been expressed. Among the most savage tribes, its charms have been recognized; and it is only after refinement has weakened the natural tones of the human mind, that its influence comes to be disputed. The poetry of nations therefore, affords perhaps the best and the most universal key for tracing the progress of civil society; for though the natural

"on Poetry," The Bee, or Literary Weekly
Intelligence, 1 (1790), 20-24.

affections of devotion, magnanimity, generosity, fidelity, parental affection, and love, have formed universally the favourite object of poetical effusions; yet the tones which these assume, are so infinitely diversified, by the varying circumstances of civil society, the modes of thinking that have incidentally prevailed for a time; and the language in which they have been expressed, has been so various, that these productions, while they exhibit the most undimable proofs, that the human mind is radically the same in all nations, afford a like decisive testimony, that it is susceptible of being bent into a variety of forms by accidental circumstances.

As the traveller, therefore, by visiting many countries, comes gradually to lose those prejudices, which his mind would naturally have imbibed, by a continual residence in any one of these; so the philologist, by being made acquainted with the different modes of poetry that have prevailed, will gradually come to distinguish the permanent and invariable traits of the human mind, from those accidental features that at times have tended to disguise it, under the mask of ornament or affectation. With this view, we shall not fail to present our readers with a few of those poetic effusions of our forefathers, which have hitherto been neglected because of their excellence, from the ravens tooth of all destroying time; and sometimes, though rarely, we shall perhaps insert some fragments of the poetry of other nations; but this shall be done with a sparing hand, and with a due attention to our English readers.

The present state of poetry in Britain, is in many respects considerably different from that which prevailed in former times. Yet, among these ancient relics, are discoverable many productions of unequalled merit. Ever among those heaps of rubbish, which a false taste had piled up, a gem of inestimable value may be sometimes found. In this class may perhaps be

1790.

LITERARY INTELLIGENCE.

23

raked the two following quotations, selected by an ingenious correspondent from a collection that few have seen, or had any opportunity of consulting. They are to be found in a book intitled "A choice of emblems and other devices, for the most part gathered out of fantastic writers, Englished and moralized, and divers newly devised, by Geoffrey Whitney." Imp. printed at Leyden, in the house of Christopher Plantyn, by Francis Raphalengius, 1583.

" The nightingall that chaunteth all the springe,
Whose warblinge notes throughout the wooddes are

harde,

" Being kept in cage she cecceeth for to singe,
And mourns because her libertie is bande." p. 100.

" The longest day in time refignes to nighte;
The greatest oke in time to duste doth turne;

" The raven dies, the eagle falls of flighte;
The phenix rare in time herself doth burne;

" The princely flagge at lengthe his race doth runne,
And all mult ende that ever was begonne." p. 23.

No apology, it is hoped will be necessary, for subjoining the following beautiful ode, that was composed by an unknown Scottish bard, shortly after the unfortunate battle of Flodden, in which King James the Fourth of Scotland was slain, and the flower of his nobility destroyed, with a great slaughter of all ranks, by the English army, under the command of the Earl of Surrey, in the year 1513. This beautiful ode is still sung as a popular ballad in Scotland. It is written in the Scottish dialect of that time. That English readers

† The editor will be much obliged to his readers for sending down any thing curious, in this or other respects, that shall occur to them in the course of their reading; and merely referring to the books where they are to be found, where it would prove inconvenient to transcribe them; and where the books are not so rare, as easily to be found.