

ON THE NEGLECT TO WHICH AUTHORS ARE EXPOSED IN THEIR OWN NEIGHBOURHOOD.

If we look into the retreats of literary men, and view them among their friends or their neighbours, we shall not, perhaps, be decisively of opinion, that their reputation greatly contributes to their domestic comforts. Those names which are highly respected at a distance, excite little veneration at home. The sentiments entertained of an Author in his own contracted neighbourhood, are not such as he really deserves, or actually enjoys, in the liberal world of letters. Among his personal acquaintance, there is always an invidious disposition, which endeavours to bring down his character to a level with the common standard. To this detraactive spirit, the Statesman and the Soldier are equally exposed. The credit they have unquestionably gained, is seldom allowed without reserve, by those "who eat of their own meat, and drink of their own cup."

To account for this circumstance, is by no means difficult.

They who never come forward to public observation but with the dignity of exalted characters, are every day familiarized to their friends, in the most trivial situations. In ordinary life, the little failings of the most eminent are balanced with those virtues or qualifications which the Public only abstractedly see. Envy, however, hesitates to acknowledge even the worth which she cannot but observe; and she is con-

stantly exercised on such objects as are placed in her vicinity. With remote or unfamiliar transactions the envious very seldom interfere, because, what others are not likely to oppose to their merits, they rarely attempt to oppose themselves. To the case of literary people, these observations seem peculiarly applicable.

To procure himself a good reception in his own neighbourhood, an Author has to struggle with a thousand difficulties. From the little world where he hath fixed his residence, he must expel a vast variety of disagreeable prepossessions, which do not exist in the world at large, where he is personally unknown. As he goes so much out of the common track, his neighbours are ever ready to dispute his privilege to deviate; and would bring him back, if they were able, into the ordinary routine of dissipation. Whilst his own relations, perhaps, sullen and reserved, say nothing, though they cannot disapprove, and by their silence damp his ardour for Authorship, his common acquaintance regard him with a scrutinizing eye. Fond of investigating his motives for publishing, they generally come to a very friendly and charitable decision, at the close of their enquiries.

On a general view they accuse him of *vanity*. They compare him with themselves, and accuse him of *arrogance*. They compare his conduct with his own

Book, and accuse him of *inconsistency*. They examine into his particular profession, and charge him with a *neglect of it*.

To the motive of *vanity* an Author's pretended friends industriously trace every Publication, however diffident his pretensions.

If his Book be merely calculated to amuse, it is to set off his own wit or shining talents that he publishes. And though his productions have an evident tendency to correct and reform the manners of the morals of men, it is still with a selfish view to his own reputation, that he appears before the Public. He who prints what he writes, undoubtedly discovers a consciousness that his Work possesses some degree of merit. Every one, if he thinks at all, must estimate in his own mind the value of his performance; and surely no Author would pay so bad a compliment to the Public, as to present them with a Work which he rated as mean and despicable. If there be vanity in the act of publishing, it is, indeed, a venial sin, which is hid by ingenuity, and only rendered glaring by dulness. The question among the friends of a literary man should rather be, "Does he obtrude the subject of his own writings in conversation? Does he make himself the little Hero of his Tale? Does he produce his MSS. in mixt company, or rehearse his Poems, under colour of entertaining his visitors, with an air of pompous recitation?" If this be the case, he is justly censurable, as vain and ill-mannered; though, in printing his performances, he offends not a single individual, and is sure of gratifying those whose taste or sentiments are consonant with his own.

To keep his pieces in MS. and display them on all occasions to his company, is, I confess, unpardonable vanity, even in a Writer who may be justified in entertaining a good opinion of his own abilities. It often happens, that he who disdainfully sneers at the vulgar familiarity of Authors with the Public, and would think it a derogation from the dignity of his genius to appear in print, reserves his unedited pieces as cabinet-curiosities, for the gratification of a private circle. But he always appears to disadvantage, even among people of taste, when he introduces his compositions with an air that seems to say, "They are exquisite—they are a treasure for my friends—my friends

may be obliged to me for so fine a relish of literary delicacies." Who, though he feel the silent emotion of contempt, would, in these circumstances, be so rude as to discommend the most execrable Piece? In his own house, at least, he is secure from ridicule or censure; and thus he reads, perhaps, such reading as was never read, amidst the feebleness of extorted applause, and the somnolence of secret disapprobation. In the mean time, he who publishes, submits his Work to impartial examination. If it be well received, he enjoys the praise which is his due, and endeavours to support its credit. If it be condemned, he lets it sink, whither it is fast tending, into oblivion.

His acquaintance, again, are fond of comparing the literary Gentleman with themselves. Perhaps they were brought up with him at the same school; but they observed no decided superiority in his exercises. They were his companions at the University; but they never heard his themes applauded, or remarked any uncommon brilliancy in his declamations: and as to *strings*, he was always deficient in them; so that in logic, he was vastly their inferior, and hardly, indeed, ever escaped, on Disputation-days, without the censure of the College. Admitting all this, he may have treated the subject of his own choice with superior ability. Even if we suppose that a few of his illiberal associates might have excelled him in composition, is he blameable for having done well, because others might have done better? Let them make a trial of their powers, or be silent. In common conversation, his acquaintance, perhaps, insinuate his deficiencies. 'Tis impossible, they say, that a man who says so little to the purpose, who never tells a good story, or discusses a subject with perspicuity, can possess talents to qualify him for an Author. In the recollection even of common historical facts, he hesitates so much, that we absolutely blush for the poor bewildered man; though we can hardly pity his embarrassment, when, in all he hath written, we see so palpable an affectation of historical knowledge. Notwithstanding this, he may possess a better memory than any one of his acquaintances hath a right to boast. To company he may have recourse for relaxation, after exhausting his spirits in composition; and the silent and solitary study of an Author is by no means

the school for tea-table eloquence. To excel in conversation, requires a habit of conversing. Practice in this, as in all other things, is necessary to perfection. Perhaps the embarrassed Gentleman can dictate with equal rapidity and elegance in the closet, what he cannot find terms to express in familiar discourse; and the idea (which those who have any way distinguished themselves cannot help entertaining) that all he says will be particularly noticed, must occasion much perplexing hesitation; whilst, pausing amidst a number of synonymous words, to select the properest expressions, he feels at length the awkwardness of the pause, and loses all in confusion and obscurity. For any little defects or awkwardnesses, however, his acquaintance can find no possible excuse. His conduct, in having assumed the dignity of a writer, is impeded with bitter calumnies; and the articles of his impeachment being summed up, he is unanimously found guilty of *arrogance*.

For such charges they are indefatigable in their search. Perhaps one of his accusers, whose report is taken upon trust, may have read his Book with some attention. With his own Work, then, they are diligent in comparing his sentiments, his conduct, and his character; and should they be fortunate enough to discover the slightest inconsistency, it is at once the subject of general triumph.

If he advance opinions that may apparently clash with what he has written, the opposition is instantly marked with an insulting air. But is any man perfect? And have we not the authority of Scripture to say, that if any one offend not in tongue, he is perfect? Besides, may we not alter our opinions, on a different view of things, without incurring the blame of fickleness or inconsistency? How often do we change our sentiments, in the course of human life!

If the unfortunate Writer swerve, in the most trivial point of conduct, from the morality he hath inculcated, the incongruity between his practice and his precepts is too visible to escape animadversion; and he is stigmatized, by universal consent, with the title of an hypocrite. The most charitable zeal suggests the charge. But a man may feel the beauty of virtue in his closet, and yet, when he goes out into the world, be tempted like others. Though he is

truly sincere in all he advises at the moments of cool reflection, yet passion may betray him into excesses, which, though they seem to weaken or discredit admonition, only prove our common frailty, and urge the necessity of the strictest circumspection. I should not have charged a Don with hypocrisy. Whilst he preached, he felt the force of evangelic truth, and endeavoured to impress his feelings on his auditory. The time, at least, which a Moralist spends in his closet, is unexceptionably employed. However irregular he may be at certain seasons, he dedicates some portion of his life to virtue. In this he hath surely an advantage over those who neither preach nor practise. Instead of being extreme to mark what he did amiss, I should rather overlook his trifling deviations, on account of his useful instructions. For these, abstractedly considered, the world is surely obliged to him. His practice they have no right to examine. There is a species of ingratitude in the inquiry. 'Tis probable, indeed, that his superior talents, so far from imposing a stricter morality, may be the very cause of his incaution and extravagance. From a man of bright parts, mechanical regularity can hardly be expected; and where there is no viciousness, any little wanderings from the road of common life ought to be excused, as an indulgence to genius.

There is still another charge, which the pretended friends of Authors are always ready to bring forward—the *neglect of their profession*. Examining minutely the connection between a Writer's profession and publication, they are seldom able to discover an affinity, though it really exist; and clamorously inveigh against the man who affects to perform the most important duties, whilst he actually reposes in indolence, and, for useful realities, is occupied by fanciful reveries. If he be a Clergyman, he had better mind his preaching than his poetry. If a physician, 'tis impossible he can study medicine and the Muse. Poor contracted spirits! Dull and disingenuous, they cannot see the chain that connects every species of literature; and if they could, they would disallow it. But may not he who understands the art of regulating his hours, find sufficient time for a diversity of pursuits that have no relation or correspondence? Not to recur to the examples of those who had
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the extraordinary art of bringing within the compass of a day an almost infinite variety of heterogeneous employments, and yet of attending regularly to all, I think every man of education, though possessing neither a singular capacity nor singular resolution, may indulge himself, if he please, in his literary amusements, without even a momentary neglect of his profession, properly so called. If he rescue an hour from sleep, for his literary gratification, who shall blame the preference of his pen to his pillow? If he write whilst his calumniators yawn, is he, therefore, more indolent than they? If, while others are engaged around him in gaming, intemperance, and scandal, he chuses to instruct mankind, and furnish them with elegant amusement, is he to be reproached for his negligence, or censured for his irregularity? Is he to be blamed for a frivolous waste of time, because he prefers the bosom-foothing Muse to heartless dissipation? We will allow him, however, all the refreshments of ordinary repose—all the social recreations of which others partake; still he must possess a very narrow mind, if he cannot attend to his profession, except it be to the exclusion of every other study. 'Tis remarkable enough, that a physician, in particular, may devote all his afternoons, uncensured, to the Coterie; though if he publish a short Poem, the composition of which could have engaged but very little of his time, he is charged, on all hands, with a neglect of business.

ALL these accusations, in short, have no other source than the malevolent spirit of envy. In respect to an Author, 'tis a spirit which is never at rest: if no real flaw can be detected in his character or his writings, invention is immediately set at work to fabricate defects. But what unworthy conduct is this! Surely, because a man hath published what bids fair for our instruction and entertainment, he is not, therefore, the object of our censure.

If they who have no kind of private communication with him, concur in allowing merit to his Works, we can have no reason to doubt his ingenuity. Instead of attempting to undermine a reputation supported by the applause of candid and impartial judges, we should rather endeavour to strengthen and exalt it. Instead of detracting from what he hath really performed, we should rather give him credit for more than he has done, and place our laudable partiality to the account of our intimacy with so deserving a person. We should be proud of the honour he has conferred on our neighbourhood by his Productions. We should view him with respect and gratitude. HARRIS of *Salisbury* was exposed as much as any literary character, to unmerited detraction and calumny. There was a great deal of low envy among his affected friends; yet, ere this, they probably regret his loss, from a persuasion, rather founded in justice than partiality, that his writings do more honour to their town than those of "*John of Salisbury*," or any other person celebrated in their annals. We should reflect, that however people of eminence are decried in their life-time by their countrymen, the period will always come, when their memories shall be revered. 'Tis a circumstance that has been too often observed and lamented, since the days of the Lyric Poet of Rome.

For our future satisfaction, therefore, we should render the lives of Authors as comfortable as we can. Allow them a little scope for harmless vanity—pay that deference to their opinions which their superiority so justly claims;—on viewing their characters, make proper deductions for the frailties of human nature; and reflect, that, while they devote a portion of their time to genius (which, wherever it exists, ought, doubtless, to be indulged), they are labouring for our own amusement and instruction.