

Why are there so few excellent poets? The Reflector, 2 (1811) 299-77

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gaining, and the unbounded license of his story, leaving, though devout enough in the Roman catholic form, no room for those peculiarities, which could not hurt the character of a gentleman. Poisoning, in the manner, when he directs the servant to throw some slanders upon his son's sister, by way of fishing out his secrets from his companions, only carries him to

That they may lead the intent of liberty,
The dark and unobscured of a life, and
A vengeance in vengeance blood.

These observations may induce to show that open confession of some faults by no means implies that others are not concealed; and that although we may safely admit all the ill a man speaks of himself, we must not conclude that one who knew him thoroughly could not bring to light a great deal more. And on the whole, it may be taken for granted that the portraits of persons drawn by their own hands will, if likeness, at least be flattering ones; and that the narratives of their lives, if composed by themselves, will, indeed, be rendered interesting by circumstances which could not be communicated by others; but, at the same time, by the suppression of some facts, and the misrepresentation of others, will mislead the reader who has no means of checking them by different relations. If we possessed no other account of Margaret of Valois, the divorced queen of Henry IV, and one of the most licentious women in France, than her own memoirs, she might pass for a model of chastity.

Of the works of this class, we have many written by statesmen, generals, and persons employed in important public transactions, one object of whom may be generally concluded to have been the giving a favourable view of the part they themselves acted on the scene; for it would be too much to expect of human nature that a public man should sit down to make a statement of his own errors, purely for the benefit of his successors. Such narratives, therefore, though often highly valuable for the information they convey, as being derived from sources inaccessible to other writers, must always be read with a degree of scepticism. We know that Caesar, notwithstanding the air of unpretending simplicity in his Commentaries, was charged in his own time with having passed over in silence various instances of failure and defeat. If Cicero's different narratives of the acts of his consulate had been transmitted to posterity, though they might have acquainted us with some circumstances of which we are now ignorant, yet we may be sure that he who did not scruple to request his friend Lucilius to violate the faith of history by throwing a lustre on his deeds by good their deeds, would not have been more scrupulous in

scratching

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sacrificing truth to vanity with his own pen. Vanity, indeed, is a failing which when strongly marked, may justly impair our reliance upon the narrative of his own actions, how estimable soever in other points. Such a person will at least exaggerate, and give a disproportionate consequence to the transactions in which he was concerned. It was said of the brave but gossaming Montecucoli, that he was one "qui multa fecit, plura scripsit"—who did much, but bragged of more. The vanity and self-importance conspicuous in Bishop Burnet contributed much to weaken the authority of his History of his own Times; and though his reputation for veracity appears in the main to have been gaining ground, it cannot be doubted that he over-rated his own share in many of the affairs of which he is the relator. It was said of Burnet's work, that it might be justly styled "The importance of a Man to himself"—a title well merited by perhaps the generality of auto-biographies. Such are the advantages and defects of this class of biographical writings. They are commonly entertaining and interesting; they afford materials for the history of the human mind which can scarcely be obtained from other sources, and are especially valuable for the means they present of tracing the original formation of character: at the same time they are almost universally partial in the statement of fact; frequently mislead by arrogating to their subjects a greater degree of merit and consequence than belongs to them; and perhaps never portray with that truth of resemblance which would be given by a sagacious and impartial observer. Read all the most noted of these works that fall in your way, but always with a limited and suspended confidence.

I now close my long epistle, and remain your truly affectionate friend,
J. A.

ART. VII.—*Why are there so few excellent Poets?*

It is in reference to many that we employ, in the most strict sense, the word *excellent*. There is a gradation in society—a scale of comparative merit, which relates to all orders of beings. In Europe there are but few supreme magistrates: in England there is but one king:

Et alibi
or 3 alibi pariter. to 3 regem, reg-
fuerit pariter. hauri
certum regem. Plin, Ol. 1.

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That

That is "Some are great above others; but that which is ultimate, and crowns all, is in kings: explore no further." So in the sciences and arts. Numerous as are the philosophers in England, and many who excel others, yet there is but one Newton: numerous as painters were in Greece, and no doubt many that were good, yet she could boast but one Apelles: and numerous as were her poets, yet she could boast but one Homer. All who are any way eminent are so many circles, which are drawn from the same centre, but have different circumferences. Those who take the most extended range, would be called the most excellent; those whose circle is less wide, would be denominated, though they might be good in their way, the less excellent: and in a judgment of comparison, when the apple of contention is thrown down, we must necessarily cry, "*Deiur optimo, let it be given to the best.*"

Again, it is in reference to other arts that we employ the word *excellence*, as a sort of rule of comparison. A French critic has respect to this rule, when he observes, "that in reality poetry is of all arts the most perfect. The perfections of the other arts are limited; that of poetry has no limit: in order to succeed in that, it is necessary to know almost every thing." On the last sentiment I have already delivered my opinion; and certainly it requires great moderation to interpret it according to truth. It shows, however, the high sense put by Rapsin on poetry, and, at the same time, how difficult he conceived the perfection of that exquisite art must be.

Still it may be said that all this is but general: it will be urged, that superior talents and extraordinary application are necessary to reach excellence in any department of literature. So that the question will return: Is the excellence of poetry as accessible as that of the other arts and sciences? It is generally, and I think justly said, It is not. What then are the difficulties which lie in the way? what the dragons which thus guard this golden fruit?

Excellence in poetry is certainly a high attainment. Indeed, some writers have so elevated the character in their descriptions, as to deter almost every body from the hopes of reaching it. Grecian and even Roman writers were accustomed to speak of Homer, as if he were the only man of all antiquity entitled to the sacred appellation. Aristotle very commonly speaks of him under the title of *ὁ Ποιητής*, as if the only poet; and the advocates for original genius in England have expressed themselves in terms equally splendid. Indeed, while Longinus did but throw out general hints, by describing the *rare* qualities of the sublime in poetry,

* En effet, la poésie est de tous les arts le plus parfait: car la perfection des autres arts est bornée; celle de poésie ne l'est point: pour y réussir il faut presque tout savoir.—*Reflex. sur la Poétique*, par Rapsin.

poetry, others have specified names, as well as character, holding forth two or three superior spirits for admiration, and denouncing the rest as a herd of imitators. 'These superior spirits have been ordinarily Shakspeare, Milton, and Spenser,* and if I may be allowed to express my opinion, there are those who sometimes treat cavalierly certain writers, who have some claim to their respect. For though those eminent men, whom they so celebrate, will be allowed to possess more of the poet's eye than most writers, and are therefore more original in their perceptions, and more discernive in their representations; and though Dryden, Pope, and Gray, as must be allowed, were much indebted to other writers, (not that the great men just mentioned were not,) yet let them define ever so high, and discriminate, dissect, and parcel out ever so nicely, I must still believe, with their permission, that Dryden and Pope had creative minds, and that Collins and Gray were not only men of taste and skill, but even geniuses and poets.

Some have a short way of settling this matter, like those who talk about "A Royal Way to all the Arts and Sciences."[†] The notion that a poet is a person inspired, was a favourite one with the ancient poets and critics; he was a kind of elder son of the deity, and distinguished by his partial regards. Homer was spoken of not only as inspired by the deity, but as a divinity himself. Hesiod, after expressing his homage to the nymphs of Helicon, and celebrating their high descent, informs us that they gave him a sceptre, and breathed into him a divine voice. Virgil speaks of poems as synonymous with the gods. Nor need this surprise us, when Longinus maintains that metre, the more measurement of verse, was of divine origin.[‡] So also the northern bards thought of their Runic rimes, and the eastern of their Præciti and Samciti. Our Milton was full of this influence. He had his heavenly muse, his nightly visitant, his Urania, by whom he was led

into the heaven of heavens.

Nor has this language been adopted by such writers only as attempted the higher flights of heroic, lyric, and tragic poetry, which, conversant as they were with heroes and gods, might naturally be expected to use magnificent sentiments and high-sounding language. Every species of poetry possessed a portion of inspiration. Even those writers who immediately attacked the vices, administered the

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* I allude more particularly to Duff on original Genius, a writer I have not at present at hand.

† I allude to a treatise I have never seen, entitled "Via Regia ad omnes Artes et Scientias."

‡ Nihil ille deos, nil carmina gerat.—*Rol.* viii. 102.

§ *Ἀνάκον γὰρ ἀγλαΐων ἄριστον, ὅτι καὶ μύσῃς ὑγίαισι.* *Diogenes Laertius* Fragmenta.

the pleasure, or humoured the follies of mankind,* asserted their dignity. Satire spoke with the ton de majesté, and called herself divine; and even sonnetiers, madrigal and travestie writers, with epigrammists,† drinking deep at the well of inspiration, were full of the deity, and inundated Parnassus with their pleasures.†

But not only critics and poets asserted this supernatural influence in poetry,—they were supported in their claim by philosophers and orators. According to the Greek mythology, as before observed, the Muses were the daughters of Jupiter and Mnemosyne: and Plato, who has written so richly on the Fury of the Muses, asserts roundly that the race of poets is divine, agitated by the gods, and thus compose sacred hymns, embracing Truth attended with the Graces and Muses.‡ In like manner, Cicero, in his admitted oration for Archias the poet,§ says, that the poet is endued by nature, impelled by the powers of his own mind, and inflated as it were by a certain divine spirit. And indeed some talk as if they thought that the very term poet means something like the Creator, a divine being, making something out of nothing: and under the influence of the same notion, not only among the Grecians and ancient Hebrews, as we have already seen, but in the northern nations, the Druids and Bards,* claimed the gift of prophecy; and, among the latter, supernatural charms were ascribed to them by the vulgar.†

This inspiration, however, some will probably say, existed only in the imagination: at least, that this influence was nothing more than a strong belief worked into reality by fancy, or a powerful impulse excited by natural causes. But as the Abbe Le Pluchet‡ supposed that the ancient symbolical language was the foundation of idolatry, we may suppose that this poetical language introduced into the world a little extravagance; or that, in the same manner as painters, by throwing a circle of light over their saints, created fanciful and hyperbolical characters,—so have the poets given a romantic aspect to the genius of song.

The

* Quicquid agunt homines, volum, limor, ira, voluptas, Gaudia, discursus, nostri est farrago libelli.—JUVENAL, Sat. I. 83.

† Qui prout les effrit? et qui, pour les blâmer, Maître Muse et Phœbus a'aprendu à rimer?

Non, non, sur ce sujet pour écrire avec grace,

Il ne faut point moner sur le tombeau de Parnasse.—SAL. I.

‡ Leur nombre impétueux inonda le Parnasse.

§ De Lagibus, lib. iii.

¶ Poetam natura ipsa volare, et mentis vitibus exiliari, et quasi diviso quodam spiritu affari.—*Oratio pro Archia Poët.*

** Walker's Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards, page 10. This is true of almost all the most ancient poets of most countries.

†† Carmina vel cælo possunt deducere Lunam.—VIRG. Eccl. viii. 69.

‡‡ In his History of the Hebrews.

The painter, also, have made similar claims for their most exquisite art. They have considered such a capability as necessary to form a great painter, a sort of heavenly inspiration.

"Genius," says Monsieur de Piles,* "is a present which Nature makes to a man at the hour of his birth; and though she commonly gives it to one thing only, she is sometimes so liberal as to make it general in one person. There have been several men on whom she has bestowed this plenitude of influences:" and he says of Giovanni Lanfranco, "that his works come from a vein quite opposite to those of Dominichino. The latter," he says, "made himself a painter in spite of Minerva: the former was born with a happy genius." And this sentiment also pervades Dufrenoy's Latin poem on painting. Sir Joshua Reynolds, indeed, was disposed to put a check on this claim, perceiving it liable to run into extravagance, though he did not altogether deny its existence.

And can we indeed suppose that all these great men, the most consummate critics and sublimest poets, the accomplished orators, and profoundest of philosophers, spoke altogether ramblingly, without meaning or rule? It is more safe to suppose that their words are couched in a little figure; and that, as fable often betrays in truth, so does figure point to reality.

True it is, that every thing of man, whether of his corporeal organs or intellectual faculties, all of this wonderful microcosm, must be referred, mediately or immediately, to the great power which formed him; and, perhaps, in the very mechanism of the human mind are interwoven those peculiarities, which render sensation more touching, perception more vivid, ideas more impressive; which awaken more exquisite sensibilities, more powerful energies, vaster capabilities for the association of ideas, and all that wonderful electrical flow of imagination, which distinguishes, and as it were sets on fire, one intelligent being more than another. The effects will be the same, and therefore the dispute need not take a different turn, whether the human soul is a separate existence distinct from matter, or the effect merely of matter organized, systematized according to established laws and regular modifications. On either system it might be said that Nature loves variety: and that in those characteristic differences, which are of her creating, lie the boundaries which limit the different excellencies in man; and that amidst the characteristic differences lie the regions of genius.

As to the question, What is poetical genius? I am reminded of some eloquent flights of Proclus when speaking of this divine inspiration, of that Fury, which bursts forth from a sublime poet when under its influence, something like the power of electricity, giving

giving him a sensible shock, and calling forth all his latent fires* which pervade the soul.

The reader, therefore, will please to consider all that I have said before on subjection to rules,† as nothing without this prior claim, this secret divine capability, which must inhere and preoccupy the soul. But as a spring in some machine may never be set in motion; as secret fires may be lodged where they may have no vent; and as waters may be confined so as never to flow down in a current; thus it is with the vast capabilities of man:—Gray's line,

Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,

is not a mere poetical flourish—it is full of meaning. If in the sense just laid down there is any thing in genius, thousands and thousands of geniuses have, perhaps, been never called forth.

In the pursuit of all art and science, practice and experience must unite with capability. Without a discipline peculiarly adapted to the poetical character, nothing is attained which is permanently excellent, transcendently great,—that which is called the *grace* in the works of painters. All excellence is attained by discipline and practice, and is attainable in no other way. There is a certain chain of cause and effect in every thing,—some suitableness of means,—some menstruum nutritive of a disposition. And though it would not be safe to say, that what is excellent in poetry is to be attained by mechanical rules, or by following some precise regimen of the schools, yet even they may be bent into its service. Thus must circumstances conspire,—nature be felt, and in her best mood,—much exercise endured,—many sacrifices be made,—much time consumed,—before what has a claim to excellence can exist. And as there must be a certain suitableness of mind, and a suitableness of circumstances, in the formation of true excellence,—no must there be something auspicious in the circumstances of the time, before it can meet with a favourable reception. The

* I allude to some very striking passages in Proclus's Commentary on Plato, as quoted by Mr. Thomas Taylor. The fancy concerning electricity is my own. But I see nothing absurd in supposing that Genius is the effect of some electrical principle. The electric matter, that great fifth element, affects all nature; it glitters in the waters, flashes in the lightning, rolls in the thunder, and in the howls of the earth excites all those mighty commotions which shake and overturn vast districts: it is well known, too, that it resides in the different parts of the human body, and has a mighty influence over it. Mr. Brydson, in the first volume of his *Travels*, gives several remarkable instances of the power of electricity on the human body; and it might, perhaps, be employed in accounting for some of the phenomena of the human mind. Mirabeau, in that chapter of his *Systeme de la Nature* in which he endeavours to show that our intellectual faculties are ultimately to be traced to sensation, excepts no mental operation from this rule. See *Systeme de la Nature*, Vol. I, chap. viii.

† Alludes to an Essay not inserted in the *Reflector*.

The question, "By what order of things was it, that none equalled Homer in epic poetry for two thousand seven hundred years; nor any ever excelled him before?" has been agitated in all forms and directions many years ago. Plato and the ancients called in a miracle—

Οὐ γὰρ οὐδὲν ἄλλο, καὶ θεὸς ἤρξατο.

That is,

As the god, and the prophet of the gods, speaks.

The author of *An Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* resolves it all into natural causes; the accidents and time of his birth; the climate and propitious aspect of his country; the fortunes of his life; the peculiar influence of misfortune; the contumacious and disturbed state of Greece; and the simple manners of that age. The following passage I quote at large;—the author is speaking of what was peculiar to the days of Homer:—"Arms were in repute, and force decided possession: he saw towns taken and plundered, the men put to the sword, and the women made slaves: he beheld their despairing faces and suppliant postures; heard their mourning over their murdered husbands, and prayers for their infants to the victor.

"On the other hand, he might view cities blessed with peace, spirited by liberty, flourishing in trade, and increasing in wealth. He was not engaged in affairs himself, to draw off his attention; but he wandered through the various scenes, and observed them at leisure. Nor was it the least instructive sight to see a colony led out, a city founded, the foundation of order and policy laid, with all the provision for the security of the people. Such scenes afford extended views, and natural ones too, as they are the immediate effect of the great parent of invention, necessity, in its young and untaught essays."

This inquiry abounds with much reading on the common topics of the life of Homer; and shows well enough that great talents are wont to be brought into exercise by great occasions; and that the great poet was brought under the discipline of the times in which he lived, was the creature of circumstances, and trained in the school of experience; a sort of trials, indeed, in regard to Homer.

But if the history of Homer, made up as it is from the testimony of ancient authors, is true,—which, however, there is some reason to doubt,†—it would go further; it would shew,—not only that great occasions call forth great talents,—but that, as a subject so luxuriously rich, and talents so transcendently sublime and comprehensive,

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* Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer, p. 25.

† I allude to the opinions of Wolfius and Heyne.

prehensive, so exactly in harmony with the subject, can but rarely be combined,—so a production like the *Iliad* must necessarily be a

For

Rara avis in terra, nigroque similis cygno !

The force of nature can no farther go.

It would furnish us with another reason, why, with respect to ancient times, so few excellent poets remain. Homer was the "Aaron's rod, which swallowed up all *the rest.*" In poetry, mankind are not content with what is excellent: they look for what is most excellent. What is comparatively good, in reference to something of inferior goodness, loses its name when compared with something that is transcendently excellent. There were, no doubt, before the time in which we suppose Homer lived, many productions which animated the authors, and which pleased and instructed their contemporaries,—many flowers, which in their native beds were fresh and fair, and, when made into a poetry, looked agreeably to the eye of many beholders,—but which, being exposed on the stream of time, floated down on the surface of the waters, and are seen no more;—while Homer, like the water lily, kept his seat, and the surrounding waters, instead of extinguishing his lustre, withering his bloom, or impairing his strength, supported him on their bosom, and nourished his roots.

The truth is, the fine arts, in general, are not among the necessities of life, but they increase its enjoyments. They are not the daily bread which supports man's existence; but men are willing to be pleased with them, and, not content with that, they wish to be charmed. Hence it is, that for their favourite poets they look for such as are not merely excellent, but the most excellent; what they admired once, they perhaps cease to admire, if they should find what is more admirable. Poets, therefore, are not uncommonly treated by the world, as his pearl necklace was by Tippoo Sultan. He used to remove one pearl, when he procured one that was better: and at length his pearl necklace was deemed invaluable.

If we suppose the system of Voltaire and Heyne to be true,—and it is as old at least as the time of Josephus and Elihu,—still the course of our argument need not be greatly interrupted. For, could the *Iliad* be proved to be a mere rhapsody,* formed out of different parts, and composed at different times, and even by different persons, still the case, with respect both to cause and effect, will be much the same. There must have been an extraordinary quantity of mind, a great combination of concurring circumstances, the most favourable adaptation of means and opportunities, of times and seasons, conspiring severally, like so many rays of light

* See *Wald's Prolegomena*, and *Heyn's Extremum II.* ad *Homerum*.

all converging to one focus, to the production of an *Iliad*,—of a poem which has always obtained, and must for ever preserve, the admiration of mankind.

Man is, the creature of exact circumstances; and the exact creature of circumstances: by circumstance every individual is what he is, and cannot be other; he is as much the creature of necessity, as all the other parts of the universe. Circumstances as real and effective made a Milton, as a Homer. Those circumstances, relatively to the former, operated as efficiently as they could on the latter. They produced similar, though not the same effects: just as the same movements, the same rhythms, the same tunes, may be played on musical instruments differently constructed. Milton's history illustrates how times and seasons may be either favourable or unfavourable to the popularity or suppression of poetic excellence. For, let a musical performance be ever so excellent, it must have approvers and admirers to enquire it before the world: be a garden ever so full of sweets, it must have favouring gales to spread them around. And we may, perhaps, say, that as even Milton was a long time kept down, at least as to the fortune of his great poem,—in the same manner, spirits as great as Milton's or Homer's may, from some predominant prejudices, have been quite obliterated from the world. And, indeed, Nature herself may be said to be not more merciful often to poets, than she is systematically to the human race at large. She preserves the species alive, but she entombs the individual in the grave. She has sometimes an extraordinary birth; but, like a prolific parent, she can afford to lose;—as perhaps worlds, and systems of worlds, may have been extinguished from the universe—she feels herself not at all impoverished, but is carrying on her silent, and, as it were without any emotion, her sublime operations still.

Gray is an instance of a person of great capabilities, and placed in the way of great motives,—very operative circumstances, a most efficient discipline. Yet in him the circumstances differed materially from those which we conceive to have operated on the other great poets just now mentioned. Here apparently were none of those violent or warm passions, which are often among the moving springs of a great genius. An early love of retirement,—a silent fondness for literature,—the pleasure of poetical amusement,—the delight of polishing and finishing his little creations,—the ardour of independence, mixed probably with a thirst of fame,—these seem to have been the circumstances which surrounded him, the discipline under which he was trained. Mr. Mason's *Life of Gray* is the history of a mere scholar, a sort of idle man of letters, little agitated or influenced by any circumstances of his age, and whose poetry was little affected by what

was passing in the world: all that is local in one of his odes was written under the constraint of gratitude, if not as an exercise of office.

The history of Collins is that of a mind constituted similarly to Gray's, somewhat similarly circumstanced, and regularly formed. Yet Collins lived like Shakespeare, in the poet's true province, the region of imagination: and how a mind lives, and moves, and rises, and expands in an element composed, as it were, of all the elements of the world,—did we live in the region of spirit with Plato and Berkeley, or were we linked together as close to matter as Hartley or Priestley,—we perhaps should not be able correctly to describe. It may, however, safely be said, that a powerful imagination is formed by circumstances, as well as every thing else; and all its amusements, creations, excursions apparently eccentric, and returns to order, are but links of one chain, though perhaps too nicely united together to be seen by our eyes. Nay, those links may be, as it were, so crowded together, or mysteriously united, that it may be beyond human power to calculate the source of their order, or the tendency of their progress: and some secret inscrutable power, as real as inspiration, may be the most powerful uniting link of all.

In speaking of the excellencies of poetry, it will be always recollected, that, as there are in poetry, as in architecture, different orders, so may each have its peculiar excellence, and each different degrees of excellence in reference to works of the same class. There is also an excellence combining some properties peculiar to all, like what has been said of that vast building, Blenheim House, relative to the different orders of architecture. That building has been over-criticised, as a modern writer* on the Picturesque has observed, by principles which it disowns, and has beauties peculiar to itself, which critics, judging by those principles, are apt to overlook.

This prepares the way for a few allusions to what has been called the picturesque in poetry, in reference to the picturesque in scenery, or, perhaps what, in reference to a term in architecture, might be called the *composed*; as being not reducible to any of the orders of poetry, but as consisting of the varieties; parts of which, perhaps, belong to a particular order, but which, as a whole, is made up according to the genius of a particular age, or the taste of a particular writer. This description of poetic writing is not seldom of the energetic, sublime character; and two or three Asiatic poets, of this description, shall be here noticed, as being the most illustrative of my idea.

The

* Mr. Gilpin, *Observations relative to Picturesque Beauty*, vol. i. p. 26.

The first is an Arabian poet, Ebn Arabab, the author of *The History of Times*, described by Sir William Jones as an admirable writer. This poem abounds, according to his account, with beautiful images, with pleasing narrations, and descriptions of nature, manners, and passions; is so illuminated with magnificent figures, and a sweet variety of numbers, and interspersed with such a copiousness of elegance, that nothing could have been conceived better fitted for delighting or instructing, or for moving the reader. Compared with the lyrics and odes of the Arabians,—I all along borrow Sir William Jones's words,—it is mere prose, yet capable of being distinguished by the sweetest and best regulated rhythm; not regulated by the strict laws either of tragedy or of epic poetry, but partaking of some of the best properties of both.

The next is a Persian poet, Ferdushee, the author of that wonderful poem already alluded to,* as being copiously illustrated by Mr. Scot Waring. This too, from its complex nature, seems to take too eccentric flights, to try too boundless a range for the epic, and must therefore be considered, for character, design, and execution, as of the same description of poetry with the *History of Timur*, and as possessing, like that, uncommon vigour, and the sublimest representation.

Some works, considered as the most highly poetical among the Hindoos, are in prose, like Fenelon's *Telemachus*, or the *Death of Abel* by Genser: others are in prose and verse. Of their dramatic works,—which of all their compositions best suit the taste of Europeans,—the most singular performance is that of Bharabhatti, as illustrated by Mr. Colebrooke. It is in prose and verse,—written in different dialects,—of enormously long metres,—and full of magic and supernatural powers. Some, which we should call its peculiarities, the Hindoos would pronounce its excellencies; as some of its excellencies the Hindoos may deem its peculiarities. Yet Mr. Colebrooke proclaims it, in general terms, as "the unrivalled drama," and, in reference to Sanscrit literature, as "of the highest order of composition."[†]

These are considered as the most excellent poets of those nations; and, however defective in parts,—I speak in reference to the objections already made, or to any models formed after a Greek or European model,—are, probably, worthy of being thought great among the poets of any nation. For, however defective they may be in the *constitution of the fable*, and the other *unities of Aristotle*,—the minor excellencies of the epic and drama,—yet in the greatest;† even in the judgment of Aristotle himself, they are allowed to be very excellent; and accordingly

Sir

* In an Essay not introduced here.

† It is entitled *Mahat Madhavi*. *Asthetic Researches*, vol. x. p. 485.

† Such I mean as relate to human life and manners. *Vide Aristotelis Poet.* cap. 15.

Sir William Jones, forgetting their defects, or rather absorbed in their excellencies, scrupled not to say, "there is but one law for poetry,—the will of the poet."

The above were great poets, both from nature and situation. And I have introduced them to explain, amidst the other reasons which lead to the same point, why, probably, it is that we have so few excellent poets,—I mean, in the higher essentials of poetry according to Aristotle's sense, in the *arête* *poétique*, the very flower of poetry, as Pindar speaks,—and it seems to be, partly, because few, comparatively, are in situations favourable to extraordinary energies, as the above poets were; and partly because poets are more regulated by feelings which belong to an age of taste, than such as are peculiar to an age of genius.

This reminds me of the distinction to be made between an age of genius and taste; and, with a full recollection of what has been said of the comparatively small number of poets truly excellent, to ask with due submission, whether the sublimest efforts of poetic talent are not to be looked for in the former period rather than in the latter. The ingenious Mr. Robert Southey† observes, that in all countries the age of genius has preceded that of taste, and he has assigned very satisfactory reasons why the poets of Spain and Portugal never attained to the arena of taste. These are, the despotic nature of their government, the erring attacks of their superstition, and the degrading influence of false literature which had long infected Europe; and he observes, that as these circumstances influenced Lope de Vega, so did "the dangerous abilities of Lope de Vega assist the progress of the evil."

Mr. Southey is undoubtedly correct; for such evils act in various directions. They check genius, and unnerve integrity, the most powerful spring of human action: inquiry is, as it were, strangled in the birth: a bad taste becomes the public feeling: all motives to enthusiasm are destroyed: one bad imitator tracks the path of another:—and these are circumstances all ruinous to excellence.

Yet under these circumstances Camoens and Lope de Vega reached their portion of excellence; and under more fostering causes, more invigorating motives, they would probably have been more excellent poets. For the age of genius seems more susceptible of some great qualities than an age of taste. Genius is the towering eagle that soars high, sails on the whirlwind, and sees and feels vast things. Taste loves security, and is apt to fear encountering a storm. Strength yields to tameness,—grandeur to splendour,—the reality and sublimity of feeling to the more regular, the

* What Sir W. says on this subject is highly worthy of consideration. Comment. Faci. Asiai, Part IV. cap. 19.

† Letters written during a short Residence in Spain and Portugal, p. 124.

the more monotonous notes of passion. While, therefore, scribbling to an age of taste the acquisition of many improvements, we must, at the same time, ascribe to it the loss of some excellencies. Despotic governments are certainly unfavourable to true excellence.

However men define taste, and wherever they fix the principles of judgment, some affections there are so natural to man, and of such pervading, powerful energies, as to command, wherever they predominate, all the powers of poetry and eloquence. They, as it were, open the very springs of language, and urge the stream forward with a strong irresistible force: or, by some secret melting influence, they cause the sweetest undulations of melody, and produce all its refreshing, its most delightful salubrity, all its most romantic excursions, and entrancing charms.

These affections may be felt in the thunder of Demosthenes, the strength of Thucydides, the address of Pericles, the elegance of Lyrius, no less than in the sweet melodies of Plato, the elegant simplicity of Xenophon. The same affections generate all the most excellent qualities of poetry. Hence the animation and grandeur of Tyrtæus, the ardour, the vehemence of Alcæus, the loftiness of Pindar, and the majesty of Sæstichorus. As the love of money and of pleasure are the usual attendants on a declining empire, so are they the secret but inveterate enemies of genius: they take the citadel by a stratagem, and they force every faculty into subjection. Then enters Slavery with her vile party of marauders, who plunder it of every thing which constitutes the pride of generosity, the triumph of independence.

All the best energies of the mind are then compelled to be obedient: the powers of speech are then subdued into the service of the oppressor; genius, if it does not relapse in disgust, wastes itself in meanness, or dreams away life in listlessness and sensuality. The poet is content to become the retailer of trifles and nicknacks; or, borne down by the tide of general corruption, a plunderer to tyrants, and the sycophant of slaves. To the loss of freedom, therefore, Longinus justly attributed the decay of genius, and the departure of all that is great and sublime in writing, from the Grecians.* When the sun of freedom set, science and taste gradually disappeared, and were succeeded by a night of ignorance and dulness.† Rome, therefore, or modern Greece, in a modern Greek poem,† after comparing her present condition, degraded

* *Utopia* and *Sto.*

† What has been here said on the influence of government is copied from some former Essay of the writer's, though with some alterations, not in the *Reflector*.

‡ O *Taxos* *mu* *tau* *Proudhon* (this is modern Greek) en *Voyage de Disme* *Nicolas* *Stephanoupoli* *en* *Grece*, pendant les années 1797, 1798, *Tome II.*

ed in talents, and bereaved of all dignity, property, and
are my evils and my regrets; their source is in my slavery.”
could boast no more excellent poets.

me, in regard to her poets, was similarly circumstanced.
different the writers under the emperors to those of the Au-
age! The former were flowers, blooming, and beautiful, and
the latter were flowers all shrivelled, that are just on the
e, with little fragrance. Eloquence and poetry shared the
fortune.* They withered as liberty declined.

history of literature, too, furnishes many examples illustra-
the point now under consideration. In the destruction of
the libraries, like that of Alexandria, much that is excellent
are perished; and as some writings are to be traced only in
ors, such as Athenæus and Stobæus, so by the zeal of
much may have been destroyed. An ages of fanaticism
oppression, suppression as well as forgery was common-
ised: we have false diplomas, false bulls, and false gospels; t
stances might be given of magnificent editions of the Scrip-
that have been suppressed.† Of some excellent writers we
nothing but by the scraps, preserved, as in scorn, by their
en. And may not all this have happened with respect to
that was truly excellent in poetry?

itself, that great destroyer, has in this destruction of ex-
e united with Goths, and has, perhaps, sacrificed as much in
y, as he has preserved from ruin.

Some felt the alien stroke of moldering age,
Some hostile fury, some religious rage;
Barbarian blindness, Christian zeal combine,
And Papal piety, and Gothic fire.

Pope's Epistle to Addison.

here I cannot help just mentioning, though with reluctance,
as been said by some, that poets themselves have not been
so favourable to their own order as could be wished:
er it is, that the temple of Fame is supposed to be of such
dimensions as to admit but few within its walls; or that
are, when it becomes a commercial concern, is apt, like
commercial speculations, to excite competition, rivalry,
y, and by a sort of spongy softness to absorb the more gen-
erations.

What

am res populi Romani memorabatur pars eloquentis et libertatis.

Hist.
Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti a Fabricio, and James's Cor-
of the Fathers.

e patronized by the Polish Prince Radzivil, another edited by

What Rattinus* says of Aristotle's burning the writings of many
philosophers, that what he borrowed from them might not be de-
lected,—has been said by an ancient writer,—I forget who,—of
Homer. Such reports, however, for the honour of all that is
great in human nature, it is to be hoped are mere fabrications, and
with respect more particularly to Homer, may be thrown over to
the mass of idle stories that have been propagated about the great
bard. I am not willing to enter much upon this subject now, and
therefore I shall only at present say, that such as choose to see how
a spirit like this may operate, may find several examples to his
mind in Rattinus.

If in the above causes there exist reasons why much that is ex-
cellent may have been destroyed or suppressed, in the motives
which influence mankind in writing there exist others, why much
has not been produced. From muddy springs flow muddy waters;
and if in their course they do not clear themselves by the beds
over which they flow, or by mingling insensibly with purer waters,
they will continue muddy till they are buried in the sea. So must
pure writings have a pure source, a wholesome direction, and,
whatever meandering they make, must fertilize and enrich the
land. The love of gain, the desire of gratifying a frivolous or
vicious taste, the humiliation of administering to base passions,
the little vanity which feeds on the smile of the day, and is satisfied
with superficial compliments,—these are not the motives which stir
great passions,—which form great conceptions,—which authorize
noble daring,—which give that confirmed persevering enthusiasm,
—which conspire to form the poet, *omnibus numeris absolutum*.
It is a desire to please, that he may instruct, and to instruct that
he may benefit mankind; to live in the good opinion of a future age,
that he may improve and bless it. This is the true love of fame,
the nurse of all that is truly excellent; and one reason, the principal
reason, why amidst all the poetical contentions in the world, there
have existed so few excellent poets, is, that the spring and source
do not arise in majesty and true greatness.

I close this Essay with an excellent passage from Longinus's
Treatise on the Sublime, as being much to our purpose. “If,”
says he, “we submit to our consideration how Homer, were he
present, or Demosthenes, would hear what we say, or how they
would be affected; to constitute such a tribunal and theatre for
our writings, and to be disciplined to give the grounds of our
writings, before such heroes, judges, and witnesses, would excite a
great contest *after excellence*. But the incitement is still greater,
if you add, how will every age that comes after me, hear what I
have written?”

The

* Oratio de Plagio Literario, p. 16

The reader may observe that I have passed over, or rather merely alluded to, one great mould of original genius,—the servile imitation of others. This subject I have elsewhere examined. I have made due allowance for particular circumstances, which ought to operate as modifications on general principles; and I would make a distinction betwixt governments settled and long established, as the Eastern, and governments on the decline, as those of Greece and Rome. And for similar reasons I deem it unnecessary to enter on the question, What think you of the age of Louis the Fourteenth?

AN OBSERVER.

ART. VIII.—*On the best Means of Promoting the Fundamental Principles of the English Constitution.*

Hobbes acts out in his "Philosophical Elements concerning a Citizen," with observing, that "if in those matters on which we speculate for the sake of exercising our genius, any error is introduced, no loss but of our time ensues; but that in our meditations which relate to the purposes of life, not only from our error but our ignorance necessarily must arise offences, quarrels, and violent deaths."

Locke seems to have started from nearly the same point, if one may judge by the quotation from *Lamy* prefixed to his *Treatise on Government*, and was evidently much indebted to Hobbes for some principles; but they were urged on by different impulses, and took different directions: Hobbes, as seeing the horrors of a civil storm, thought quiet was to be found only under arbitrary power;* Locke, as seeing a storm passed, and as having in view peace and liberty under the revolution.

Algernon Sidney and Harrington had previously taken nearly the same course as Locke, though under different circumstances; and they took a different course from Hobbes, though under circumstances nearly similar.

Political systems should be considered relatively to their principles and tendencies, as well as to any present state of things; and civil dissensions no less than civil harmonies rather be traced to

* I infer this from what Hobbes says in the preface to his readers, of his book de Cive, "quapropter si aliqua inveniuntur non minus certa, nec magis quam necesse erat, actus-declara, cum non partium, sed pectus studio et ab eo dicta sunt, eorum, propriis patris presentem calamitatem, dolorem jure atque condignum equum est, ea ut equis animo disceptant, lectoris, oro et postulo." Hobbes's book de Cive was written at Paris in 1646.

to cause than explored in their consequences. The material, animal, and intellectual world, as wholes, and as parts, are necessarily and individually subject to certain laws; the laws of their nature. They cannot escape their influence; they cannot exceed their limits: matter in all its forms is obedient to those laws; and with respect to their operation, physical and moral man is the same, a creature of circumstances, though in different relations. His actions may be modified by art, by laws, by his place in civil society: but his organization is the work of nature, and in its minutest as well as its grandest movements, in its most energetic as well as its most ordinary affections, invariably subject to those laws.

When philosophers assure us we cannot understand causes, that we perceive only effects, philosophically speaking, they say the truth: but all our actions,—this is no less true,—are wheels within wheels, a train of causes and effects. Though of primary causes we know nothing, yet what are but effects with respect to what preceded, become causes with respect to what follows. And what is our guide in all the regular, useful pursuits of human life, but correct observations of those causes, and a right application of our knowledge for purposes of just reasoning and daily experience?

Thus when the body is diseased, we refer, as to the cause, to the taking of too much or too little food, of too much or too little exercise, to immoderate passions, or other casualties and influences inducted to our nature: on beholding a building in ruins, we consider the materials of which it was composed, and the purposes for which it was raised, more than the time it has lasted, or the power by which it was destroyed. So with respect to those tumults and wars and violent deaths in civil communities, it is not so much a question of what now is, as of what has been? Whence come wars and rumours of wars?

The opinions, professions, and conduct of men, are as necessarily influenced by causes, as the events which take place in civil society; and we must estimate the writings of men in the same manner. Thus in the writings of Bacon and Hobbes, judging from the principles laid down, or the occasional concessions introduced in the writings of those philosophers, I infer, that some of their opinions took as impulse from their relative situations, from the circumstances of the times, more than from the genuine impulse of their own great minds, or from following the order of their own systems. And this is the most candid account that can be given of the matter, in cases where the principles of civil liberty and of arbitrary power are intermingled, like contradictory massed arguments in one body, in the same system.

Burke was a striking example of this vacillating state of mind. Whether, as another person spoke of himself, he could not afford