

sonnet put into my mouth in the *Morning Post*, of Monday, the 14th inst. addressed to Mrs. Smith, &c. &c. And, as the essay does not seem written merely on account of any private person, I hope it will be the more eligible to you. The prose that I have alluded to, of my own, are the Letters on figurative Passages of Scripture. You was pleased to hint, that they were "friendly to science, religion, and morality;" and as, in a printed character of me, it was foolishly asserted, that I had not a capacity for prose! the collateral consideration of it here will be much esteemed, and will ensure a continuation of the trifling services my pen may afford your Magazine, in future—as the essay may not be too late for your next.

I am, Sir,
Your's, most respectfully, &c. &c.
W. HAMILTON REID.

December 14, 1789.

The motto was given me by a scholar as suitable.

E S S A Y

On the various Ideas of poetical Excellence and unlettered Genius.

Lussu satis atque bibissi;
Tempus abire tibi est, ne potum largius equo
Rideat, et pulset lascivia decentius ætas.

SUCH has been the force of long custom, that an universal taste in poetry, is yet so far from being formed in many subjects, that instead of it, several divisions have been run into: hence the distinctions of old and new schools, and that rancorous partiality, that has taught many, like Goldsmith, to despise lyric poetry, and blank verse, odes, sonnets, &c. and to relish nothing but rhyme, and the common verse of five feet, or ten syllables. There seems to be something in human nature that inclines to the formation of parties, and as long as any person of eminence, on either side, expresses themselves passionately, sects in literature, will as often occur as they do in religion. Pope is too much of the didactic poet, or, as Mr. Warton has said,

the poet of reason, to be looked upon as the standard of universal excellence; and it is beyond a doubt, that the ease of comprehending him and his level powers, have increased the number of his admirers above any other qualification he was possessed of—and Goldsmith was certainly envious, or angry, when he wrote the preface to his *Deserted Village*. Indeed, with Pope, Johnson, &c. on this side of the question, the appearance, at a distance, must be rather formidable; but it will appear a plain case to the more penetrating, that if either of these had been capable of performing in blank verse, the lyric ode, sonnet, or the Spenserian stanza, some of the heroes of the *Dunciad* had been spared, Goldsmith been silent, the life of Spenser have been given with the lives of the poets, and the small fry that have lately raised an outcry against the sonnets of Mrs. Smith, W. Hamilton Reid, &c. in some of the daily prints, might have lived their twelve hours without being heard of.—Let it remain as an infallible criterion of merit, that those who have excelled in the difficult, could have excelled in the easy; and, if some of them have given no specimen, it has been for want of inclination, not ability.—To make a more immediate application, either Milton, Shakspeare, or Dryden, separately considered, have infinitely more to recommend them as standards of universal excellence, than Pope, Johnson, Goldsmith, and all their &c. &c. put together.

It was on account of versatility of talent, that one of the best judges the world of letters ever produced, (Voltaire, I mean) gave Dryden the lead of the British poets. It was not because he was a dramatist, which Pope attempted in vain; nor that he improved the English language, and had written excellent satire; nor that he had translated the second poet of antiquity; nor that he was the critic of his time; nor that he had written 500 lines smooth and pathetic as the *Deserted Village*:—No! but because, collectively considered, he had done as much as these, and more himself. Notwithstanding this, Dryden has been excelled by Shakspeare, in the dramatic line; and Milton, in his particular walk, Penseroso, &c. has excelled them both: so that to say, as superficialists do, that such a one; or such a one is the greatest, &c. is saying nothing to the purpose; for,

for, though there are various gradations of merit, it is certain that a versatility of powers, that is, a capacity to exceed mediocrity in every department of poetry, the light and the grave, the sublime and the burlesque, in all their various modes and measures—I say, it is certain, that a capacity approaching the nearest to this, is the only unerring evidence of a superior genius.

It is some consolation, however, that an uxorious fondness of Pope, and a contempt of lyric poetry, at present, rests, principally, among old men who sucked the milk of prejudice, and a few pedants who imagine that the production of an epic poem, or an epigram, is the *ne plus ultra* of merit and genius. An epic poem is, certainly a great work; but, we presume, it is more the effect of art than of truth and nature: if not, why not more universal?—Why has not refinement produced them in every nation, in every age? The rapt bards of Arabia never set their harps to notes of any such length! The *Fingal* of Ossian is collected by Macpherson—the principal nations of the orientals knew them not!—and yet none of these, in their poetry, are defective in sublimity or pathos.—And, lastly, the inspired writings, from which their greatest advocates derive a sanction for, or the principles of every species of excellence, afford us a specimen of almost every other kind of poetry, but the epic! Considerations of this kind will tend to regulate and equalize our estimation of this divine art; illustrate its beauties and defects; and, inevitably improve a genuine taste, however it may be encumbered.

This leads to a discussion of the mode of writing that has attracted the most of the public attention for some time past, that is, the sonnet. One thing proves to us, that, the more simple these are in their construction, the longer they will please. This is evident in the admiration those of Mrs. Charlotte Smith have obtained, in preference to many others.

The author of the *Canons of Criticism* wrote several in the imitation of the Italian, or Petrarchian mode, but they had few readers. "The frequent recurrence of the rhyme," has been noticed as dissonant to an English ear, and is no merit in the Italian poets, as it arose from a want of variety in their terminations.—

An imitation of these, among us, undoubtedly requires the skill of a Seward, in their execution; but it is still thrown away upon the many; for, as long as the multitude, in another respect, will prefer an English or Scots tune to an Italian air or finale, so long will the common ear prefer the simple sonnet, viz. that composed of three stanzas of alternate rhimes and a couplet. No derogation, notwithstanding, is intended to either of these: genius is genius, whatever direction it may take. But genius independent of acquirements, or unlettered, has been much talked of these few years past; and, according to some critics, if they were not ironical, it is now frequent! Pretensions to it may have become frequent. Chatterton, Robert Burns, Mrs. Yearley, and W. Hamilton Reid, in the poetical world, have set it on this foot; but it was the untimely death of the former, more than his merit, that made his advocates so warm in his favour; and, with Dr. Gregory, every susceptible mind is liable to be transported with pity and indignation. Burns' claim is admitted—Mrs. Yearley has many admirers—and the public have been long delighted with Reid's inspiration, in every channel he has appeared in; and, in some of them, his abilities have been mentioned by some of the first characters in the literary or poetical world. But, closely viewed, unlettered genius is but the creature of the moment; the love of writing naturally begets a love of reading, even where it did not exist as a previous habit. Few, as some able critics have observed of Chatterton, "write to be read without reading to write!" but the mischief is, that too many people confound learning with knowledge, good sense, or discrimination. There is, as Mr. Pope says, a vast difference between learning, intelligence, or languages; "and if a man has knowledge, it is not any great matter whether he has it from one language or another."

Upon the whole, the ardour of those who have been too warm in the cause of unlettered genius is to be excused, as it is evident that much of the semblance of learning or intelligence may be whipped into any dull subject, in the course of a number of years. Simple poetic genius is then a capacity for fine writing; and, properly, the best ground for letters, as

For as they are concerned in composition: so that it is an unfounded notion, that a capacity for writing good prose is not congenial with a poetical genius. — For who that had a genius for poetry but excelled in prose? Pope's was the most musical, Swift's the most correct, and Milton's eminently nervous; and without any idea of comparison, we could even point out some prose pieces of Mr. Hamilton Reid's, which, deriving their excellence from his reading, scientific taste, and powers peculiarly discriminating, would, like the *versatility* of his poetical talents as must excite astonishment at his obscure situation, as they would tend to gratify any other affection.

The BARONS of VERGEN.

(Continued from page 497.)

THE duke was so deeply affected with this charge of treason, in a man for whom he had entertained so unbounded an esteem, that the whole night he was denied the enjoyment of repose. The next morning he sent for Agolan; and, after having bitterly reproached him for his ingratitude and perfidy, he ordered him, that very day, to quit the duchy, if he did not wish the next to perish upon a gibbet.

These unexpected menaces, these cruel and unmerited reproaches, so confounded the knight, that for some moments, he was incapable of making an answer. The thought, alone, of being for ever separated from his beloved Vergen froze his faculties with horror: but when he had recovered from his consternation, he entreated the duke to call to mind his zeal and fidelity, and not condemn, without proof on the suggestion, perhaps, of some malignant enemy, a man whose bravery had been proved, and whose conduct had been irreproachable. "It is not an enemy," said the duke: "it is the duchess herself who is your accuser: dare you call in question her testimony?"

This atrocious conduct of the duchess, filled Agolan with horror. He would not, however, accuse her, in order to

justify himself; but, with an air of resignation, he went no farther than to say, "Since her grace has complained of me, she is, doubtless, conscious that she has good grounds for it, and I had best acquiesce: besides, now that you are prejudiced against me, what steps could I take to prove my innocence?"

The manner in which he delivered these words made its impression upon the duke. His former attachment and esteem for the knight already began to operate in his favour; but this sentiment was checked by a malignant remark the duchess made on his indifference: that observation had struck the duke in a very singular manner, and he had scarcely a doubt upon his mind, but that he, who had never yet been known to admire any of the court beauties, had conceived a passion for the duchess. To satisfy his scruples, on this head, he required of Agolan to swear, upon his honour, that he would answer, with truth, a question that was about to be proposed to him. The knight, who perceived but one practicable method to preserve, at once, the friendship of his sovereign and the possession of his mistress, took the oath, without hesitation. "Well," rejoined the duke, "you have never been known, either at court or elsewhere, to have had an attachment; and, so long as I am in that uncertainty, I shall believe — Have you any secret? — Admit me into that confidence, which I think is due to my friendship; on that condition, it is restored to you: but, if you refuse, I shall consider you in no other point of view than that of a perfidious traitor, an object deserving my most indignant anger. Make your choice."

Then was Agolan made sensible of his imprudence in taking the proffered oath, and the cruel embarrassment of his situation. Could he dare to acknowledge to the duke the love he entertained for his niece? Could he transgress the inviolable secrecy that Vergen had required of him? If he declines an answer, he adds the guilt of perjury to the condemnation of banishment; if he speaks out, he betrays his mistress; and, in either case, he is sure to lose her.

[To be continued.]

POETICAL

POETICAL PIECES.

BENEVOLENCE.

Addressed to the FEMALE READER.

"Nor till invoked
Can restless goodness wait; your active search
Leaves no cold wintry corner unexplored!
Like silent-working Heaven, surprising oft
The lovely heart with unexpected good."
Thomson.

HAPPY the fair, whose heart does ever flow,

With feeling pity for another's woe,
And strives to comfort those that are in need
Of her assistance, with the greatest speed;
Nor tardy goes, when any claims her care,
For to relieve, what pleasure to be there!
Ah! tell me you who've heard the mournful tale

Of private woe, can't pity then prevail,
And won't the heart with sympathy dilate,
For those that are in misery's cheerless state?
I know it must, how oft does sorrow fill
The heart when feeling for another's ill?
To dwell on these in various ways oppress'd,
With sorrows ne'er perhaps to be redress'd;
What painful thoughts will crowd upon the mind,

When we reflect of want and misery join'd
Unhappy race! so many of you too,
And yet your pity'd only by a few,
Whose worthy deeds in generous acts are known,

For they relieve, and make the case their own!

Ye lovely fair! may every joy attend,
On you who are to human kind the friend!
Long may you live, rever'd by all for worth!
Till death arrests you to the native earth!
How pleasing thus to goodness give around,
With liberal hand when objects fit are found;
As nought but this I'm certain can secure,
A tranquil calm forever to endure;
For none from us our feelings can deprive,
From which we may true happiness derive:
Be then humane, and hear the widow's cry,
Relieve her wants in giving each supply;
And not to her, but others free impart,
What is requir'd to cheer the drooping heart.
Do you my fair rejoice in deeds like these,
That can your hearts above all others please;
To soothe from sorrow, or the hungry feed,

I know you'll say is pleasure great indeed!
Dec. 1789.

O! let your hearts, when misery shall complain,
To always pity and relieve her pain;
And whilst in life make this a constant plan,
To ever do the greatest good you can.

EDWY.

Lines composed on setting Sail from the Greenland Seas, after a Month's Confinement amongst prodigious Bodies of Ice.

Thanks! gentle breeze, whose breath benign,
Restores fresh hopes to this sad breast!
That bids me all my fears resign,
That sets my sorrowing heart at rest!

And shall I then behold once more,
O! peerless, inexpressive joy!
My dear, my long-lost native shore,
Whose charms my ev'ry wish employ!

Hail, Britain! empress of the main!
Blest mother of a noble race! —
Unmatch'd thy sons, on valour's plain;
Thy daughter's in each female grace.

Here freedom finds a safe retreat;
Here commerce brings exotic gain;
Here learning holds her splendid seat,
And arts and manufactures reign.

Here Pan and Ceres deign reside;
Here Flora and Pomona smile;
Here the bright Naiads, too, abide,
And blest with golden age the isle! —

Here first the vital air I drew;
Here happy spent my tender years;
Here felt the charms of lovely Sue,
The lover's hopes, the lover's fears! —

Guard her from all impending harms,
O! ye angelic powers above!
And quick restore me to the arms
Of the soft gentle maid I love! —

Where'er the lovely wand'rer roves,
By tinkling rills, or verdant bow'rs,
Still tend her, all ye little loves,
And strew the way with fragrant flow'rs.

May no rude gale or sudden rain
E'er discompose my wand'ring fair! —
May Zephyr from the western main,
Just waft aside her floating hair!

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