

ridge, told that a party of men were bearing some heavy weight across it. Unable longer to submit to the suspense in which they were held, the greater part of the females now rushed from the hall. A cry of horror was heard; and the mysterious anticipations of the gifted Lady Assynt were found to be, in truth, too dreadfully realized.

Lord R——, in the deepest affliction, told the sad tale, with all its circumstances. Though much pressed to remain, Sir Charles had resisted all the kind importunity of their host. Their homeward way lay across the ferry of ——. The sudden squalls affecting such inland arms of the sea are too well known: one of these had assailed them in the middle of the loch, and had been productive of the melancholy catastrophe. Nor was the prophetic conclusion of the seer's vision left unaccomplished. There was no suspicion of Lady D——'s pregnancy at the time; but such proved to be the case, and, according to the prediction, the child was a son, who lived, the sole hope of an old and respectable family. T. L. D.

FRAGMENT OF AN ESSAY ON TASTE.

Supposed to be written by
MR WILLIAM COBBETT.

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In analyzing literary compositions, we ought always to attend to the difference which subsists between that species of merit founded on the direct interest and attraction of the ideas which are employed, and that other sort of merit founded on the skill and dexterity with which materials are combined, and the justness of the relations which we are able to trace among parts. It is evident that the former species of merit is the one to be met with among the early, original, and patriarchal writers of all countries; and that the latter kind of merit is the one most frequently exemplified in the subsequent ages, when the rules of composition have begun to be canvassed and understood, and when men have begun to pry into the means by which their feelings are acted upon. The primitive writers had to address

persons whose feelings are still in their native condition, that is to say, whose feelings had never been excited, except by the real events of life, and who, consequently, had formed no associations or opinions concerning the literary means employed in producing mental excitement. To these unreflecting auditors the means were invisible, and they experienced only the result. On the other hand, authors of a later period have to address themselves, not to human nature in the abstract, but to human nature with a very intricate system of literary associations and opinions superinduced upon it. Unfortunately, too, the nature of these associations depends, not merely upon established models of fine writing, but also upon the daily abortions and failures of literature. Certain materials, from being too easily come at, are habitually preyed upon and deteriorated by bad authors, so that they become as it were proscribed. Add to this the perversity of theorists and babblers, who will not sit with patience and attention till a book has time to work its proper effect, and to transmit the impressions meant by the author, but who must stop to speculate in their own way, at the end of every paragraph; and who, in the course of the perusal, so intermingle the doings of their own minds with those of the author, that the ultimate impression derived from the book depends as much upon what has been thrown in by the reader, as upon what was originally furnished by the writer.

Literary compositions ought certainly not to be adapted to the habits of literary men, but to the habits of the public at large; otherwise they will prove but feeble and short-lived. Literary men are not the best persons to appreciate the real interest and attraction which conceptions will possess for people engaged in the business of the world, whose understandings have been turned to serious concerns, and whose energies are kept in a state of habitual tension. It is not writings which are merely ingenious, graceful, and finely managed, that will do for every-day folks. They must have something broad, vigorous, and rousing, although it should not always be conducted with fine taste, which, after all, is but a morbid state of our per-

ceptions, and luckily will never be acquired by mankind at large. Scholars, owing to the effeminacy of their habits, perceive many things too strongly, and feel other things too weakly. They do not possess the elements of human nature in the average proportion, and therefore are little to be trusted, I think, in judging of poetry and popular literature, which is by no means addressed exclusively to the understanding and imagination, but to the whole aggregate mass of faculties, sentiments, and propensities, which go to make up human nature—a great part of which, as I said before, is often imperfect in studious people. I would be ready to bet any money, if the thing were capable of being ascertained, that a common shopkeeper in London has more feeling of the manly and energetic passages of Shakspeare, than most of those feeble young lads whom a milk-sop constitution has led to addict themselves to the belles lettres. The language of Shakspeare is like the sound of trumpet, and speaks to men of full bloods and masculine temperaments; and it is not easy to conceive how a young consumptive clergyman, perspiring at the nose, with scarcely any drawn upon his legs, should ever be able to crush into the pit of the theatre upon a full night, or enter into the real spirit of Shakspeare after he got there.

I therefore think it extremely unfortunate, that the respect which mankind feel for intellect and erudition, should enable literary persons to assume the authority which they do assume in matters of taste. For all the intellect and acuteness in the world will only enable a person to decide upon the skill and conduct exhibited in a piece, and upon the neatness of the arrangement of the ideas contained in it, but never upon its general potency as an appeal to human nature. The best ratification of a good work, is when human nature makes the proper responses to it. As for the responses of critics, they put one in mind of the Aldermen of Braywick. "Be not wise beyond what is written," says the Scripture; but in no work do critics perceive distinctly what is written. They always see something more or something else. I say they know not how the thing looks to a plain,

downright, and rational man. They are not in a sound state of mind, any more than those sons of corruption, who, for these thirty years, have been putting the vilest misconstructions upon every thing which I have written, and who continue to do so, although they have been again and again exposed and detected, and a thousand and a thousand times overlaid with argument and fact, and tracked home to the innermost den of hiring malignity.

Taste relates chiefly to fitness and propriety of arrangement. Now, I say, (and so says every vigorous mind) give me a sufficient supply of materials such as Shakspeare pours forth, and I do not care so much about the general design, or the observance of proprieties, which for the most part afford but a feeble and trivial pleasure—a pleasure perceived coldly by the judgment, and not a powerful throbb of passion communicated to the heart, or an enlivening impulse given to the reflective powers. If this preference were not just, how should it happen that men of sense derive so much gratification from the perusal of Shakspeare's writings, which, all the world admits, are a chaos, and nothing but a chaos, of thoughts, observations, and pictures. In making this remark, however, I must not fail to allow that Shakspeare exhibits the utmost coherence in the delineation of human character. This is the highest kind of coherence; and it is the only kind which he possesses. But the very licenses he takes enable him to fill his pages with a greater variety of remarks, images, and mental food, of every sort.

Upon looking over what I have written, I begin to think that I have gone a little too far, and have advanced some thing, avowing of paradox. But let not a malignant rejoinder. My proposition, will be found true in all their bearings, true in every item, if they are properly explained. The sources of pleasure in a literary production are so complicated, that it is not easy to insist much upon the advantages of one, without saying something in prejudice of another. The fact is, that they are not always compatible, and that, like the faculties they address, they sometimes pull different ways. Tenderness and enthusiasm, for instance, incline to dwell

permeatingly upon the same thoughts, or, at least, upon thoughts so much akin to each other, as to cherish and prolong the same sentiment. The undemanding, on the other hand, is often gratified by the juxtaposition and comparison of ideas, which are calculated to produce very different sentiments; and the faculty of ridiculous delights in ideas which bear express contradiction to each other. Now we see that different authors have entertained very different opinions concerning the possibility of reconciling these jarring interests in the same composition. Shakspeare, in keeping the mind always full, is certainly sometimes apt to garble impressions and feelings, so rapidly does he shift the intellectual scene. These mixed masses of thought bear a close resemblance to what really takes place in the human mind; and when viewed in the light of imitations, they are excellent. I will, at the same time, however, admit, that poetry is not altogether an imitative art. It is also a selective and perfecting art; and, by picking out of the general chaos a number of thoughts which have the same character and colour, is often able to produce more sustained and continuous impressions than those which occur in nature. But what I mean to point out is the radical difference between substance and conduct or arrangement. It seems to be a conclusion warranted by the whole history of poetry, that those writers who aim at too high a degree of purity and propriety, generally fall into a corresponding poverty of materials; and for my part, I confess myself to be, on the whole, an advocate for the full and substantial style of composition, as being the one best adapted to the appetites of a vigorous mind.

There is another reason for this preference. Nations vary in their characters; there is a difference of mental constitution to be observed among them; and their literature should be adapted, not to the outlandish and bookish tastes of scholars, who, by too much reading, come to belong to no country, but to the indigenous habits peculiar to each nation. Now I do not think that Englishmen, generally speaking, are remarkable for a quick perception of those exactitudes, neatnesses, and skilful adaptations,

which form so great a part of what is called *fine taste*. At least, the perception of these things does not afford an excitement sufficiently great to fill the minds of Englishmen, who, after all, (and I do not say it contemptuously) are but obtuse cubes in many things; and I think, therefore, that our literature should not make too many appeals to a delicate and quick perception of coherences, but grapple with our passions, imaginations, and intellects,—foggy, robust, and confused as they are. The Frenchmen have far more quicksightedness in these matters. They are speedily able to detect irregularity and unsuitableness wherever it exists; and, on the other hand, their minds are highly gratified by the observance of fitness and decorum, as one may easily perceive in the construction of their tragedies. The ancient Greek, (although very different people from the French) probably resembled them in quicksightedness, to which they added strong and lofty feelings; but their plays are no models for us, who are not what is called classical in our habits of thinking; but plain Englishmen, just as we should be. I remember, on coming home from America, when I landed at Portsmouth, the first thing that met my eye was the sign of the Tankard and Cross Cudgels, which immediately struck me as an happy emblem of the nature of my countrymen.

I recollect of seeing lately, in the Edinburgh Review, a discourse upon literary compositions, in which it was said, that a perfect performance should have but one beauty, and should not be crowded with too many incidental strokes of genius; in short, that it should resemble, in purity and simplicity, a Greek temple. But there is a material difference between a poem, and a visible object like a Greek temple. A temple can afford to be plain and meagre in its details, because we see the whole at once, and, in contemplating the general design, find no dearth of mental occupation; since, in fact, it exhibits as many parts, and as many beautiful relations of parts, as can be attended to without confusion. But the conceptions and impressions we derive from a poem are successive and multifarious; and I am thoroughly convinced, that nine persons

out of ten, after having read a poem or play, have scarcely any notion whether the general design has been well conducted or not. Most readers go forward blindly, and have not sufficient comprehension of mind to perceive the relation of one scene or incident to another. They must therefore be furnished with temporary excitements for the faculties, as they proceed. Every person has seen a boy using the same stratagem to make a goose or other wild animal follow him. He takes a handful of pease, we shall suppose, and drops them one by one to the greedy bird, which is thus led on, step after step, to the place to which he means to conduct it. But the continued fullness of ideas, in a book, is a very different thing from the vile affection of saying fine things at every turn, which is the mere restlessness of pretension, and not a proof either of fecundity or of compilatory judgment.

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LETTERS ON THE PRESENT STATE
OF GERMANY.

LETTER I.

Dusseldorf, April 1, 1818.

MY DEAR FRIEND,
Your letter has indeed astonished me. The questions you ask, and the language of such English newspapers as I have lately met with, convince me that, amused and occupied with domestic trifles, the nation remains in a state of utter ignorance concerning many things that should at present rivet the attention of all European politicians. The Whigs and the Tories are, I doubt not, alike to blame. The former know nothing about the thoughts, feelings, sufferings, and intentions, of the Germans; and the latter are afraid to promote any discussion about these things, from a mistaken view of their own interests,—from fears that have, I am persuaded, their foundation in any thing but the truth. One small party among you say, that they hope Germany is on the eve of a revolution, and insinuate that England is, or ought to be, in a similar condition. The adherents of the ministry suffer themselves to be too much wrought upon by the foolish babbling of these

the most insignificant of their nents, and almost persuade them that those Germans who are defied with the state of affairs in country, resemble the vulgar, ill and despicable crew who are the present advocates of reform in England. If ever Britain needs a reform, in God she will not listen to the advice of such men as recommend her now. But it argues the most plorable ignorance on the part of an Englishman to suppose, that the contented party in Germany bear resemblance to that nest of crows with which London is infested once needed a revolution, and yet it was brought about by such as Hampden, Sidney, Fairfax, Milton. Germany needs a revolution now; and she is likely to obtain the accomplishment of her wishes by means of men who are not unworthy of being named with those illustrious Englishmen,—or who at least scorn to be considered as having sympathy, either of opinions or wishes, with your paltry rabble of Hunts, Hones, and Waithmans. The land is fallen indeed, if she, whose ministers are subject to the insults of an enlightened senate, and who possesses, in all her provinces, a dance of honourable, high-minded and patriotic gentlemen,—is not schooled into political wisdom by the noisy ravings of ambitious and meddling shopkeepers. With what contempt would those lofty, devoted heroic spirits, that opposed the tyrant of Charles, look down upon the mean and unprincipled plebeians who presume to call themselves their successors. With what disgust would one of them contemplate the idle and senseless orgies of the Council room or of Moorfield, satisfied, that Germany does not dread any such outrageous and abominable manifestations of demerit. It is indeed well that it should be so; for ours is the only country in the world wherein they can be despised and tolerated.

However we may differ in our opinions about its causes, or whatever may be our hopes or our fears with respect to its probable effects, the existence of a great ferment in the national mind of the Germans at this moment, a fact which