

## ON CRITICS AND CRITICISM.

"His course scarce he had beat,  
And Ralpho that on which he rid,  
When, sitting ope the poem he gide,  
Which they thought best to sally at,  
The foe appear'd, drawn up and drill'd,  
Ready to charge them in the field."—HUDNALL.

THOUGH the principle of taste be like that of truth, firm and immutable, the *temper eadem*, governed by one body of laws only, it is really astonishing to see what different methods the members of the literary diet adopt and pursue for the purpose of extending their prospects, and rising to more eminent stations in the republic of letters. It is not to diversity of object that we allude; because, proficiency in each of the sciences has a characteristic species of fame peculiar to itself, and wholly distinct from every other; as, on a grafted trunk, we behold every branch bearing a different species of fruit. The astronomer envies and endeavours to emulate Newton; the metaphysician, Locke; the poet, Milton; and the painter, Reynolds. The love of fame is the universal passion, the stimulus, and exciting cause in each, and all of them; yet they proceed along, for ever near, but never touching, like the two straight lines in the twenty-seventh proposition of Euclid. This holds true, however, only as each art or science is considered by itself, separately, and apart from all others. But if we select any one of these paths to distinction for our narrower examination, and gaze steadfastly upon it, we shall immediately be aware, that though the candidates are all pushing forward along the same road, and every one, like a Mahometan pilgrim, with his face turned towards the same temple, some tardy and lame, others vigorous and agile; yet, they do not scruple, either to throw obstacles before others, or to tread upon the fallen, or to jostle those who are in their way.

This last sentence happily suggests to us a method of delivering our sentiments on this subject more systematically, and we shall arrange our remarks under three heads: First, We shall point out the uncharitableness of throwing obstacles before others; Secondly, The pusillanimity evinced in treading upon the fallen; and thirdly, The impropriety and want of decorum in jostling one another.

It is wonderful to observe what a degree of regardlessness of duty, authors of established reputation look on the efforts of those, who devote all their time and opportunities to the exertion of their talents, struggling for reputation as we should say, as a caseway sailor ever did to catch hold of a hen-coop. Too often in the period forgotten when they themselves were in the same predicament, laboured with the same assiduity, and with the same uncertainty of success—a success which has dazzled their eyes, and intoxicated their hearts, which makes them look from a proud pre-eminence, with a dignified aplomb, on those who are struggling among the difficult rocks below, who are suspended between hope and fear, in as nice an equilibrium, yet in as precarious a situation, as the doubted Baile Nicol Jarvie was during the Highland skirmish. They have then, themselves sat down in the temple of the ambition to cry bravo and drink Hippocrate; and they turn their backs on the ladder, "scorning the base degrees by which they did ascend." However, it is the faculty of genius to overcome all obstacles, and surmount every difficulty, and attain its end in spite of opposition. Like an air-bald, der thrown into the water, it may be thrust down and trampled upon, but when the pressure is removed, it will reascend to the surface. Like the sun, it may be obscured, but the wind blows, and the clouds pass away, and it bursts forth in undiminished splendour. Withal, however, it may be likened to a hot-bed plant, susceptible of change, and suffering from every chilling and tempestuous gale; never exposing some tender part to injury; or, like the Persian lilac, putting forth its blossoms to the inclemency of the season, without affording leaves to shelter them from it.

Those who are most guilty of treading on the fallen, and of throwing down their neighbours, either, like Irishmen, out of pure good nature, or

for the malicious purpose of laughing at their distresses, and affording amusement to the spectators, while the prostrate are kicking up their heels, are known to the world under the general denomination of critics. They may be considered as

"A pitiful race, on mischief bent,  
Making men's woes their merriment."

However useful they may be in the world, many of them are pert, conceited coxcombs, who, though wrapped up in the mantle of ignorance, assume all the airs of the profoundest erudition and the most consummate wisdom; and even when talking to their masters, use the most insolent tone of superiority, and give out their lessons with an emphatic confidence in their own sufficiency, which would be laughable enough, were they not frequently so dull. They never imagine their readers to be aware of the proverb—that those who take least advantage are ever the most forward of thrusting it upon others. The whole tribe are notoriously addicted to gossiping, and are not very scrupulous either about vilifying a friend or creating a foe, provided they can raise the present laugh among their auditors. They profess no gratitude for the repeal of the statutes against witchcraft, as few of their fraternity were ever suspected of being conjurers. They are, however, eternally prophesying; and, were it not for the useful instrument they professionally adopt, when they issue forth their circular divinations—we're it not for their masks, they would have good reason to blush often, notwithstanding their proverbial glibness, for the non-fulfilments and absurdity of their predictions. But the above instrument is their buckler in time of battle, and their chariot in case of defeat. They are like the followers of Rob Roy, who, concealed among the hills and heather, destroyed the king's troops without affording a chance of retaliation; or rather like the train of the Giaour, that descended from the rocks of Yliakura, and massacred the marriage party of the Turk Hassan. They are great rhodomontades, and speak as if they were the emissaries of a large body, and declared the sentiments of the whole; when the truth is, that they are as isolated from all communication, as Bonaparte on the island of St. Helena.

na, from the associates of his overthrown dynasty.

We come now to make a few observations on the impolicy of jostling each other. This is a species of impoliteness which was very much in vogue in Queen Anne's time, and almost universally practised by the wits of her age. When a new literary adventurer entered the field, it was esteemed little less than a challenge to the established authorities to adjudge him a trial by single combat, and one of their embassies was forthwith despatched to make him taste of the vengeance he had provoked. If he was overthrown in the contest, he was trodden on, and hooted and laughed at; but if he chanced to overcome, he was thenceforth entitled to a seat, if not in the temple of fame, at least in Will's coffee-house, which was nearly equivalent for all useful purposes. Every one had his Bodech Glas, or attendant spirit, which haunted his steps wherever he went, and mimicked his voice in company, and laughed at him when alone; moreover, to establish and demonstrate the validity of what Mr Locke has thrown out concerning spirits, and that they can be seen in broad day light, a particular species of them did not hesitate to make their appearance at any time; it only required a few sheets to be sent to press, and the conjuration was effected.

Others, however, found it less dangerous and more convenient never to pay to their devoirs till after sunset, nor to approach the campus martius, and enter upon the combat, before having provided themselves with a cap, which, like that of the redoubled giant-killer, rendered them invisible. The names of Dryden's tormentors were Maclellan, and Blackmore, and Collier. Pope had a great many; but the Armines or master spirit among them was denominated Dennis, who, though petulant enough, did not scruple sometimes to give a judicious advice.

In our times, these pernicious and disagreeable practices have been abolished; and have been reckoned unworthy of so refined and generous an age. The literary republic seldom, or perhaps never, enjoyed a period of such lengthened and profound tranquillity; or was bound together by a compact of amity and concord so firm. Between its members all is contes-

nion, and friendship, and politeness; the banners of hostility are furled, and the temple of Janus is shut; and, where the professions of attachment are so loud, no one, surely, is foolish enough to imagine, that there can be any risk or danger of hollowness. Every one gives the preference to his neighbours, and confesses his own inferiority, and is fond of blazing their perfections; while that wrangling and detestation, and jealousy, which was the characteristic mark of other times, is banished altogether, or at most, only found among the disappointed, or the stupid, or the profligate. But, as spleen must have vent in one way or another, a more ingenious, but not less cruel practice is now adopted. One author, for example, mentions another, who has treated before him of the same subject; but, who deduced very opposite conclusions from the same arguments. He is introduced with all possible politeness, and frequently with a kind of satirical eulogium on his philosophical acuteness and perspicacity; when, lo! the scene is shifted; and immediately follows a learned speech on the absurdity of his hypotheses, and an elaborate refutation of all his deductions from them. "Hippocrates," such a one will observe, "was a very great physician; nay, the greatest that antiquity can boast of; but were he alive now, I could show him that the liver hath not five lobes; and, that the blood circulates, and has not a flux and reflux from the heart, like a tide;" or, he may launch out in praises of the Epicurean philosophy; and then clearly demonstrate the impossibility of the mechanical formation of the universe. How different from the renowned Martinus Scriblerus!

He does not allow the poor unfortunate, however, to rest here, or draw the veil of obscurity over his errors; but giving him a hearty shake, rouses him from his nap, and hurries him along for much the same purpose that our nobles did their fools; not to profit by their mistakes, but to laugh at their infirmities. The guest finds himself in about as pleasant company as those of Dean Swift did, when he chased them purely for his own amusement along his passages, and through his rooms, and up stairs with a horse-whip in his hand; or, in a situation as agreeable as Gulliver was

in at Brobding, when the monarch invited him to an sitting upon the tiles. This subject forcibly brings to our recollection some remarks made by Dr Johnson in one of his conversations. "There is sometimes," says he, "as much clarity in helping a man down hill, as in helping him up hill; that is, if his tendency be downward; for till he is at the bottom he flounders; get him once there, and he is quiet. Swift tells us, that Stella had a trick which she learned from Addison, of encouraging a man in absurdity, instead of endeavouring to excite him; it saved argument, she said, and prevented noise."

There is another species of error, which the critics of this age have almost uniformly fallen into; and which we lament, as being equally illiberal, uncandid, and unjust. An author has frequently the sentence of approval or condemnation passed upon his writings, just as he happens to coincide or differ in political opinions; while the records of his private character are narrowly examined, and eagerly scrutinized, in order to form a proper estimate of his literary excellence. But, let it be remembered, that men may differ in opinion from the purest of all possible motives; and, that there is an essential, and radical difference between goodness and greatness; and though it be a disparagement to a great man to say that he is not good; it is more a misfortune than a fault, in a good man, that he is not great. We will not believe, with some illiberal Whigs, that Walter Scott is an indifferent poet, because he is of the Tories; nor will we allow to the latter, that Thomas Campbell is not a great genius, because his compositions are neither bulky nor voluminous. Moreover, Alfieri is acknowledged to be one of the greatest among modern dramatists, though his life was neither squared by rectitude, nor regulated by the plumb-line of principle. It certainly would be, we think, for the benefit of literature, were the private life of authors less exposed to the public eye; although, we rejoice to say, we could point out some, who have no reason to shrink from the severest scrutiny, or to dread the narrowest inspection; whose hearts are unsullied, and whose thoughts are pure, and whose lives are commentaries on the doctrines inculcated in their writings. But, alas!

1850.]

the mischief and misfortune is, that all are not so. Often has envy too substantial grounds on which to calumniate! Too often has malignant pride a favourable opportunity of exposing the follies of genius to ridicule, and its weaknesses to assault, and its crimes to abhorrence; till the sun of intellectual grandeur is obscured by the clouds of moral depravity, and the darkness becomes more apparent, from succeeding to meridian sunshine.

Poetry is above every other department of general literature—involving, and fair, and fascinating to the youthful mind; which, accordingly, decks out the poet in all the splendid trappings of intellectual grandeur, and all the clustered graces of moral worth. He is the Hesper among the stars in the hemisphere of Imagination; but he proves himself, too often, to be only the Pallas in the planetary system of Understanding. The reader, however, is dazzled and bewildered; he examines the diamond more narrowly, and discovers that it is only charcoal; and he is as chagrined and horrified at the discovery, as was the unfortunate Zelmane, when she expected to behold the radiance of the divine countenance; and, turning, beheld the unveiled face of the prophet in all the hideousness of unnatural deformity.

After being imbued with the sentiments that seemed to lift us above ourselves, and link us with superior orders of intelligence, and made us proud in the elevation of our common nature, we are brought down to the level of social life, and called upon to sympathize with human infirmity. It is on

this account, that those writers, who have passed their days in seclusion, and withdrawn themselves from the bustle of the world to the more immediate contemplation of nature, and the endearing circle of selected friendship, have retained some portion of the exalted estimation, which the reader has formed of them, from the perusal of their works. Nor is it to be doubted, that our opinions are frequently much influenced on this head; for, we are naturally anxious to learn something of the fate of a being to whom we are indebted for so much gratification, and to whose sentiments we bow with submissive admiration. We crave, and inquire, and feel anxious, and uneasy, till this sensation is gratified; and yet we are, in nine cases out of ten, disappointed when it is so.

Some portion of our reverence for the ancients is unquestionably owing to the oblivion in which the events of their private lives are shrouded. They are visible to us only "at their pride of place," as they descend, the clouds intervene, and hide them from our view. "They are familiar to us as poets, and historians, and philosophers; not as subjects and citizens, parents and husbands. Could we see Virgil, and Cicero, and Livy, in the ordinary affairs of their lives, in their quotidian operations, as Dr Johnson would have termed it, we would probably be nettled, and cease to come to the humiliating conclusion, that the ancients were something, like ourselves, and that mankind have been pretty much alike in all ages. Alas! for the doctrine of human perfection. D. M.

## THE BRANCHERS.\*

## 1.

I SAT to bask, one sunny morn,  
Beneath a silvery blooming thorn,  
All near a pebbly rill;  
The yellow whins perfumed the ground,  
In all their golden splendour round,  
On side of rising hill;  
Aloft in air were lav'rocks singing,  
Hid far in bluest sky,  
And all around their notes were ringing,  
Themselves concealed on high.

\* Birds which have just left the nest, to betake themselves for the first time to the trees, are in Scotland called "Branchers."