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## THE TABLET.

No. LXXIV.

"It is the business of philosophers to guide; and of poets to delight mankind."

THE following speculation, with the remarks that precede it, were put into the hands of the Editor for publication, and they are presented to the public as the seventy-fourth number of the Tablet.

TO THE EDITOR,

SIR,

YOUR early attention to the Essay under the signature "H," which I lately enclosed to you, induces a performance on my part of the promise I then made. The following SKETCH ON POETRY, is an effusion of the same pen, and will, I have no doubt, afford an equal degree of pleasure to those of your readers who delight in PHILOSOPHY, POETRY, the BEAUTIES OF COMPOSITION, OF LIBERAL CRITICISM."

M.

### SKETCH ON POETRY.

IT has been observed, that it seldom falleth to the share of one man, to be both a philosopher and a poet. These two characters in their full extent, may be said to divide betwixt them the whole empire of genius; for all the productions of the human mind, fall naturally under two heads, *works of imagination*, and *works of reason*. There are indeed several kinds of composition, which, to be perfect, must partake of both. In our most celebrated historians, for instance, we meet with a just mixture of the penetration of the philosopher, and the ardor of the poet; still their departments are very wide of one another, and a small degree of attention will be sufficient to shew, why it is so extremely difficult to unite in any high degree, the excellence of each. The end of the poet is to give delight to his readers, which he attempts by addressing their fancy, and moving their sensibility. The philosopher proposes merely to instruct, and therefore thinks it enough if he presents his thoughts in that order, which will render them most perspicuous, and seems best adapted to gain the attention. Their views demand therefore a very different procedure. All that passes under the eye of the poet he surveys in one particular view: Every form and image under which he presents it to the fancy, are descriptive of its effects: He delights to paint every object in motion, that he may raise a similar agitation in the bosom of his reader; but the calm and deliberate thinker, on the contrary, makes it his chief endeavor to seek out the remoter causes and principles which give birth to these appearances.

It is the highest exertion of the philosopher to strip off the false colors that serve to disguise—to remove every particular which fancy, or which folly have combined, and to present to view the simple and naked truth. But the poet, who addresses the imagination and the heart, neglects no circumstance, however fanciful, which may serve to attach his descriptions more closely to the human mind. In describing the awful appearances of nature, he gladly avails himself of all those magic terrors, with which ignorance and superstition have surrounded them; for though the light of reason dispels these shades, they answer the higher purposes of the poet in awakening the passions.

It is the delight of poetry to combine and associate; of philosophy to separate and distinguish. The one resembles a skilful anatomist, who lays open every thing that occurs, and examines the smallest particular of its make. The other, a judicious painter, who conceals what would offend the eye, and embellishes every subject he undertakes to represent. The same object therefore which has engaged the investigating powers of the philosopher, takes a very different appearance from the forming hand of the poet, who adds every grace of coloring, and artfully hides the nakedness of its inward structure, under all the agreeable foldings of elegance and beauty. In philosophical discussions, the end of which is to explain, every part ought to be unfolded with the most lucid perspicuity. But works of imagination never exert a more powerful influence, than when the author has contrived to throw over them a shade of darkness and doubt. The reason of this is obvious, the evils we but imperfectly discern seem to bid defiance to caution—they affect the mind with a fearful anxiety, and by presenting no limit, the imagination easily conceives them boundless. These species of composition differ still further with respect to the situation of mind requisite to produce them. Poetry is the offspring of a mind, heated to an uncommon degree—it is a kind of spirit thrown off in the ferment of agitated feelings. But the utmost calmness and composure is essential to philosophical enquiry. No-

velty, surprize, and astonishment, kindle in the bosom the fire of poetry, whilst philosophy is reared up by cool and continued efforts. There is one circumstance relating to this kind of composition too material to be omitted. In every nation it has been found that poetry is of much earlier date than any other production of the human mind; as in the individual, the imagination and passions are more vigorous in youth, which in mature age subside, and give way to thought and reflection. Something similar to this seems to vary that genius which distinguishes the different periods of society. The most admired poems have been the offspring of uncultivated ages. Pure poetry, consists in descriptions of nature, and the display of the passions; to each of which, a rude state of society is better adapted, than one more polished. They who live in that early period, in which art has not alleviated the calamities of life, are forced to feel their dependence upon nature; her appearances are ever open to their view, and therefore strongly imprinted on their fancy.—They shrink at the approach of a storm, and mark with anxious attention every variation of the sky. The change of season, cloud and sunshine, serenity and tempest, are to them real sources of sorrow and of joy; and we need not therefore wonder they should describe with energy what they feel with so much force. But it is one chief advantage of civilization, that by enabling us in some measure to controul nature, we become less subject to its influence. It opens many new sources of enjoyment. In this situation the gay and cheerful can always mingle in company; whilst the diffusion of knowledge opens to the studious a new world, over which the whirlwind and the blast can exert no influence. The face of nature gradually retires from view, and those who attempt to describe it, often content themselves with copying from books, whereby their descriptions want the freshness and glow of original observation, like the image of an object refracted through various mediums, each of which varies somewhat of its form, and lessens its splendor. The poetry of uncivilized nations, has therefore often excelled the productions of a more refined people, in elevation and pathos. Accustomed to survey nature in her general form, and grander movements, their descriptions cannot fail of carrying with them an air of greatness and sublimity. They paint scenes which every one has felt, and which therefore need only to be presented, to awaken a familiar feeling again. For a while they delight us with the vastness of their conceptions, but the want of various embellishment, and the frequent recurrence of the same images, soon fatigue the attention, and their poetry may be compared to the world of waters, which fills us with amazement, but upon which we gaze for a moment, and then turn away our eyes. It is the advantage of enlightened nations, that their superior knowledge enables them to supply greater variety; and to render poetry more copious. They allure us with an agreeable succession of images. They do not weary with uniformity, nor overpower us with any one exertion, but by perpetually shifting the scenes, they keep us in a constant hurry of delight.

"The poet's eye, in a fine phrenzy rolling,

"Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,

"And as imagination bodies forth,

"The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen

"Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing

"A local habitation, and a name."

SHAKESPEARE'S *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I cannot help observing that poetical genius seems capable of a much greater variety than talents for philosophizing. The power of thinking and reasoning is a simple energy, which exerts itself in all men nearly in the same manner. Indeed the chief varieties that have been observed in it, may be traced to two, a capacity of abstract and mathematical reasoning—and a talent for collecting facts, and making observations. These qualities of mind blend in various proportions, will for the most part account for any peculiarities attending men's modes of thinking. But the ingredients that constitute a poet are far more various and complicated. A poet is in a high degree under the influence of the imagination and passions, principles of mind very various and extensive. Whatever is complicated is capable of much greater variety, and will be extremely more diversified in its form, than that which is more simple. In this case every ingredient is a source of variety, and by being mingled in the composition, in a greater or less degree, may give an original cast to the whole. To explain the particular causes which vary the direction of the fancy in different men, would perhaps be no easy task. We are led, it may be, at first, through accident, to the survey of one class of objects—this calls up a particular train of thinking, which we afterwards freely indulge:

It easily finds access to the mind upon all occasions. The slightest accident serves to suggest it. It is nursed by habit, reared up with attention, till it gradually swells to a torrent, which bears away every obstacle, and awakens in the mind a consciousness of peculiar powers. Such sensations eagerly impel to a particular purpose, and are sufficient to give to composition a distinct and determinate character. Poetical genius is likewise much under the influence of the passions. The pleated and the splenetic, the serious and the gay, survey nature with very different eyes. That elevation of fancy which with a melancholly turn will produce scenes of gloomy grandeur and awful solemnity, will lead another of cheerful complexion to delight, by presenting images of splendor and gaiety, and by inspiring gladness and joy. Tho these and other similar causes may be traced, that boundless variety which diversifies the works of imagination, and which is so great that I have tho't the perusal of fine authors, is like traversing the different regions of the earth; some glow with a pleasant and refreshing warmth, whilst others kindle with a fierce and fiery heat. In one we meet with scenes of elegance and art, all is correct and regular, and a thousand beautiful objects spread their colors to the eye and regale the senses: In another we behold nature in an unadorned majestic simplicity—scouring the plain with tempests—sitting upon a rock, or walking upon the wings of the wind. Here we meet with a STERNE who fans us with the softest breeze of delicacy: And there with a ROUSSEAU who hurries us along in whirlwind and tempest. Hence that delightful succession of emotions which are felt in the bosom of sensibility. We feel the empire of genius, we imbibe its impression, and the mind resembles an enchanted mansion, which at one touch of some superior hand, at one, brightens into beauty, and at another time, darkens into horror!

Even where the talents of men approach most nearly, an attentive eye will ever remark some small shades of difference, sufficient to distinguish them. Perhaps few authors have been distinguished by more similar features of character, than HOMER and MILTON. That vastness of thought which fills the imagination, and that sensibility of spirit which renders every circumstance interesting are the qualities of both. But MILTON is the most sublime—HOMER the most picturesque. HOMER lived in an early age, before knowledge was much advanced, he could derive little from any acquired abilities, and may be therefore styled the poet of nature; to this source perhaps we may trace the principal difference between HOMER and MILTON. The Grecian poet was left to the natural movements of his own mind, and to the full influence of that variety of passions, which are common to all. His conceptions are therefore distinguished by their simplicity and force. In MILTON who was skilled in almost every department of science, learning seems sometimes to have shaded the splendor of his genius. No epic poet excites emotion so fervid as HOMER, or possesses so much fire; but in point of sublimity he can not be compared to MILTON. I rather think the Greek poet has been thought to excel in this quality more than he really does, for want of a proper conception of its effects. When the perusal of an author raises us above our usual tone of mind, we immediately ascribe these sensations to the sublime, without considering whether they light on the imagination or the feelings: Whether they elevate the fancy or only fire the passions. The sublime has for its object the fancy only; and its influence is not so much to occasion any fervor of feeling, as the calmness of fixed astonishment. If we consider the sublime as thus distinguished from every other quality MILTON will appear to possess it in an uncommon degree: And here indeed lies the secret of his power. The perusal of HOMER inspires us with an ardent sensibility. MILTON with the stillness of surprize. The one fills and delights the mind with the confluence of various emotions. The other amazes with the vastness of his ideas. The movements of MILTON'S mind are steady and progressive—he carries the fancy through various successive stages of elevation, and gradually increases the heat, by adding fuel to the fire. The flights of HOMER are more sudden and transitory. MILTON whose mind was enlightened by science appears the most comprehensive—he shews more acuteness in his reflections, and more subtlety of thought. HOMER who lived more with men, and had perhaps a deeper tincture of the human passions, is by far the most vehement and picturesque. To the view of MILTON the wide scenes of the universe seem to have been thrown open, which he regards with a cool and comprehensive survey, little agitated, and superior to those emotions which affect inferior mortals. HOMER when he rises the highest goes not