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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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shall here insert a letter from my friend WILL HONEYCOMB, who has not lived a month for these forty years out of the smoke of *London*, and rallies me after his way upon my country life.

Dear SPEC.

“ I Suppose this letter will find thee picking of daisies, or smelling to a
 “ lock of hay, or passing away thy time in some innocent country
 “ diversion of the like nature. I have however orders from the Club to
 “ fummon thee up to town, being all of us curfedly afraid thou wilt not
 “ be able to relish our company, after thy conversations with *Moll White*
 “ and *Will Wimble*. Pr’ythee don’t fend us up any more stories of a
 “ cock and a bull, nor frighten the town with spirits and witches. Thy
 “ Speculations begin to smell confoundedly of woods and meadows. If
 “ thou dost not come up quickly, we shall conclude thou art in love with
 “ one of Sir ROGER’s dairy maids. Service to Knight. Sir ANDREW
 “ is grown the cock of the Club since he left us, and if he does not re-
 “ turn quickly, will make every mother’s son of us common-wealths
 “ men.

Dear SPEC, thine eternally,

WILL. HONEYCOMB.

N^o 135. Saturday, August 4.

Est brevitatis opus, ut currat sententia----- Hor.

I Have somewhere read of an eminent person, who used in his private offices of devotion to give thanks to Heaven that he was born a *Frenchman*: for my own part I look upon it as a peculiar blessing that I was born an *Englishman*. Among many other reasons, I think my self very happy in my country, as the *language* of it is wonderfully adapted to a man who is sparing of his words, and an enemy to loquacity.

As I have frequently reflected on my good fortune in this particular, I shall communicate to the publick my Speculations upon the *English*

M 2

tongue,

tongue, not doubting but they will be acceptable to all my curious Readers.

The *English* delight in silence more than any other *European* nation, if the remarks which are made on us by foreigners are true. Our discourse is not kept up in conversation, but falls into more pauses and intervals than in our neighbouring countries; as it is observed, that the matter of our writings is thrown much closer together, and lies in a narrower compass than is usual in the works of foreign Authors: for, to favour our natural taciturnity, when we are obliged to utter our thoughts, we do it in the shortest way we are able, and give as quick a birth to our conceptions as possible.

This humour shews it self in several remarks that we may make upon the *English* language. As first of all by its abounding in monosyllables, which gives us an opportunity of delivering our thoughts in few sounds. This indeed takes off from the elegance of our tongue, but at the same time expresses our ideas in the readiest manner, and consequently answers the first design of speech better than the multitude of syllables, which make the words of other languages more tunable and sonorous. The sounds of our *English* words are commonly like those of string musick, short and transient, which rise and perish upon a single touch; those of other languages are like the notes of wind instruments, sweet and swelling, and lengthened out into variety of modulation.

In the next place we may observe, that where the words are not monosyllables, we often make them so, as much as lies in our power, by our rapidity of pronunciation; as it generally happens in most of our long words which are derived from the *Latin*, where we contract the length of the syllables that gives them a grave and solemn air in their own language, to make them more proper for dispatch, and more conformable to the genius of our tongue. This we may find in a multitude of words, as *Liberty, Conspiracy, Theatre, Orator, &c.*

The same natural aversion to loquacity has of late years made a very considerable alteration in our language, by closing in one syllable the termination of our præterperfect tense, as in the words *drown'd, walk'd, arriv'd*, for *drowned, walked, arrived*, which has very much disfigured the tongue, and turned a tenth part of our smoothest words into so many clusters of consonants. This is the more remarkable, because the want of vowels in our language has been the general complaint of our politest Authors, who nevertheless are the men that have made these retrenchments, and consequently very much increased our former scarcity.

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This reflection on the words that end in *ed*, I have heard in conversation from one of the greatest genius's this age has produced. I think we may add to the foregoing observation, the change which has happened in our language, by the abbreviation of several words that are terminated in *erb*, by substituting an *s* in the room of the last syllable, as in *drowns*, *walks*, *arrives*, and innumerable other words, which in the pronunciation of our fore-fathers were *drowneth*, *walketh*, *arriveth*. This has wonderfully multiplied a letter which was before too frequent in the *English* tongue, and added to that *bissing* in our language, which is taken so much notice of by foreigners; but at the same time humours our taciturnity, and eases us of many superfluous syllables.

I might here observe, that the same single letter on many occasions does the office of a whole word, and represents the *His* and *Her* of our fore-fathers. There is no doubt but the ear of a foreigner, which is the best judge in this case, would very much disapprove of such innovations, which indeed we do our selves in some measure, by retaining the old termination in writing, and in all the solemn offices of our religion.

As in the instances I have given we have epitomized many of our particular words to the detriment of our tongue, so on other occasions we have drawn two words into one, which has likewise very much untuned our language, and clogged it with consonants, as *mayn't*, *can't*, *shd'n't*, *wo'n't*, and the like, for *may not*, *can not*, *shall not*, *will not*, &c.

It is perhaps this humour of speaking no more than we needs must, which has so miserably curtailed some of our words, that in familiar writings and conversations they often lose all but their first syllables, as in *mob. rep. pos. incog.* and the like; and as all ridiculous words make their first entry into a language by familiar phrases, I dare not answer for these that they will not in time be looked upon as a part of our tongue. We see some of our Poets have been so indiscreet as to imitate *Hudibras's* doggrel expressions in their serious compositions, by throwing out the signs of our substantives, which are essential to the *English* language. Nay, this humour of shortning our language had once run so far, that some of our celebrated Authors, among whom we may reckon Sir *Roger L'Esrange* in particular, began to prune their words of all superfluous letters, as they termed them, in order to adjust the spelling to the pronunciation; which would have confounded all our etymologies, and have quite destroyed our tongue.

We may here likewise observe, that our proper names, when familiarized in *English*, generally dwindle to monosyllables, whereas in other modern

modern languages, they receive a softer turn on this occasion, by the addition of a new syllable. *Nick* in *Italian* is *Nicolini*, *Jack* in *French* *Janot*; and so of the rest.

There is another particular in our language which is a great instance of our frugality in words, and that is the suppressing of several particles which must be produced in other tongues to make a sentence intelligible: this often perplexes the best writers, when they find the relatives *whom*, *which*, or *they*, at their mercy whether they may have admission or not; and will never be decided till we have something like an Academy, that by the best authorities and rules drawn from the analogy of languages, shall settle all controversies between grammar and idiom.

I have only considered our language as it shews the genius and natural temper of the *English*, which is modest, thoughtful and sincere, and which perhaps may recommend the people, though it has spoiled the tongue. We might perhaps carry the same thought into other languages, and deduce a great part of what is peculiar to them from the genius of the people who speak them. It is certain the light talkative humour of the *French*, has not a little infected their tongue, which might be shewn by many instances; as the genius of the *Italians*, which is so much addicted to musick and ceremony, has moulded all their words and phrases to those particular uses. The stateliness and gravity of the *Spaniards* shews it self to perfection in the solemnity of their language; and the blunt honest humour of the *Germans* sounds better in the roughness of the *High Dutch*, than it would in a politer tongue.

N^o 159. Saturday, September 1.

-----*Omnem quæ nunc obducta tuenti
Mortales hebetat visus tibi, et humida circum
Caligat, nubem eripiam*-----

Virg.

WHEN I was at *Grand Cairo* I picked up several oriental Manuscripts, which I have still by me. Among others I met with one entituled, *The Visions of Mirza*, which I have read over with