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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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-----*Cui mens divinior, atque os
Magna sonaturum, des nominis hujus honorem.* Hor.

THERE is no character more frequently given to a writer, than that of being a Genius. I have heard many a little sonneteer called a *fine Genius*. There is not an heroic scribler in the nation, that has not his admirers who think him a *great Genius*; and as for your smatterers in Tragedy, there is scarce a man among them who is not cried up by one or other for a *prodigious Genius*.

My design in this paper is to consider what is properly a great Genius, and to throw some thoughts together on so uncommon a subject.

Among great Genius's, those few draw the admiration of all the world upon them, and stand up as the prodigies of mankind, who by the meer strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning, have produced works that were the delight of their own times, and the wonder of posterity. There appears something nobly wild and extravagant in these great natural Genius's, that is infinitely more beautiful than all the turn and polishing of what the *French* call a *Bel Esprit*, by which they would express a Genius refined by conversation, reflection, and the reading of the most polite Authors. The greatest Genius which runs through the arts and sciences, takes a kind of tincture from them, and falls unavoidably into imitation.

Many of these great natural Genius's that were never disciplined and broken by rules of art, are to be found among the ancients, and in particular among those of the more eastern parts of the world. *Homer* has innumerable flights that *Virgil* was not able to reach, and in the Old Testament we find several passages more elevated and sublime than any in *Homer*. At the same time that we allow a greater and more daring Genius to the ancients, we must own that the greatest of them very much failed in, or, if you will, that they were much above, the nicety

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and correctness of the moderns. In their similitudes and allusions, provided there was a likeness, they did not much trouble themselves about the decency of the comparison: thus *Solomon* resembles the nose of his beloved to the tower of *Lebanon* which looketh toward *Damascus*; as the coming of a thief in the night, is a similitude of the same kind in the New Testament. It would be endless to make collections of this nature: *Homer* illustrates one of his heroes encompassed with the enemy, by an ass in a field of corn that has his sides belaboured by all the boys of the village without stirring a foot for it; and another of them tossing to and fro in his bed and burning with resentment, to a piece of flesh broiled on the coals. This particular failure in the ancients, opens a large field of raillery to the little wits, who can laugh at an indecency, but not relish the sublime in these sorts of writings. The present Emperor of *Persia*, conformable to this eastern way of thinking, amidst a great many pompous titles denominates himself the Sun of glory and the *Nutmeg of delight*. In short, to cut off all cavilling against the ancients, and particularly those of the warmer climates, who had most heat and life in their imaginations, we are to consider that the rule of observing what the *French* call the *Bienveillance* in an allusion, has been found out of latter years, and in the colder regions of the world; where we would make some amends for our want of force and spirit, by a scrupulous nicety and exactness in our compositions. Our countryman *Shakespeare* was a remarkable instance of this first kind of great Genius's.

I cannot quit this head without observing that *Pindar* was a great Genius of the first Class, who was hurried on by a natural fire and impetuosity to vast conceptions of things, and noble sallies of imagination. At the same time, can any thing be more ridiculous than for men of a sober and moderate fancy to imitate this Poet's way of writing in those monstrous compositions which go among us under the name of Pindaricks? When I see people copying works, which, as *Horace* has represented them, are singular in their kind and inimitable; when I see men following irregularities by rule, and by the little tricks of art straining after the most unbounded flights of nature, I cannot but apply to them that passage in *Terence*.

—*incerta hæc si tu postules*
Ratione certa facere, nihilo plus agas,
Quàm si des operam, ut cum ratione insanias,

In short, a modern Pindarick writer compared with *Pindar*, is like a sister among the *Camisars* compared with *Virgil's* Sibyl: there is the distortion, grimace, and outward figure, but nothing of that divine impulse which raises the mind above it self, and makes the sounds more than humane.

There is another kind of great Genius's which I shall place in a second class, not as I think them inferior to the first, but only for distinction's sake as they are of a different kind. This second class of great Genius's are those that have formed themselves by rules, and submitted the greatness of their natural talents to the corrections and restraints of art. Such among the *Greeks* were *Plato* and *Aristotle*, among the *Romans* *Virgil* and *Tully*, among the *English* *Milton* and *Sir Francis Bacon*.

The genius in both these classes of Authors may be equally great, but shews it self after a different manner. In the first it is like a rich soil in a happy climate, that produces a whole wilderness of noble plants rising in a thousand beautiful landskips without any certain order or regularity. In the other it is the same rich soil under the same happy climate, that has been laid out in walks and parterres, and cut into shape and beauty by the skill of the gardener.

The great danger in these latter kind of Genius's, is, least they cramp their own abilities too much by imitation, and form themselves altogether upon models, without giving the full play to their own natural parts. An imitation of the best Authors is not to compare with a good original; and I believe we may observe that very few writers make an extraordinary figure in the world, who have not something in their way of thinking or expressing themselves that is peculiar to them, and entirely their own.

It is odd to consider what great Genius's are sometimes thrown away upon trifles.

I once saw a shepherd, says a famous *Italian* Author, who used to divert himself in his solitudes with tossing up eggs and catching them again without breaking them: In which he had arrived to so great degree of perfection, that he would keep up four at a time for several minutes together playing in the air, and falling into his hand by turns. I think, says the Author, I never saw a greater severity than in this man's face; for by his wonderful perseverance and application, he had contracted the seriousness and gravity of a Privy-counsellor; I could not but reflect with my self, that the same assiduity and attention, had they been rightly applied, might have made him a greater mathematician than *Archimedes*.

Wednesday,