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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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N^o 279. Saturday, January 19.*Reddere personæ scit convenientia cuique.* Hor.

WE have already taken a general survey of the Fable and Characters in *Milton's Paradise Lost*: the parts which remain to be considered, according to *Aristotle's* method, are the *Sentiments* and the *Language*. Before I enter upon the first of these, I must advertise my Reader, that it is my design, as soon as I have finished my general reflections on these four several heads, to give particular instances out of the Poem, now before us, of Beauties and Imperfections which may be observed under each of them, as also of such other particulars as may not properly fall under any of them. This I thought fit to premise, that the Reader may not judge too hastily of this piece of criticism, or look upon it as imperfect, before he has seen the whole extent of it.

The Sentiments in an Epic Poem are the Thoughts and Behaviour which the Author ascribes to the persons whom he introduces, and are *just* when they are conformable to the characters of the several persons. The Sentiments have likewise a relation to *things* as well as *persons*, and are then perfect when they are such as are adapted to the subject. If in either of these cases the Poet endeavours to argue or explain, magnifie or diminish, to raise love or hatred, pity or terror, or any other passion, we ought to consider whether the Sentiments he makes use of are proper for those ends. *Homer* is censured by the Critics for his defect as to this particular in several parts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, though at the same time those who have treated this great Poet with candour, have attributed this defect to the times in which he lived. It was the fault of the age, and not of *Homer*, if there wants that delicacy in some of his sentiments, which now appears in the works of men of a much inferior genius. Besides, if there are blemishes in any particular thoughts, there is an infinite beauty in the greatest part of them. In short, if there are many Poets who would not have fallen into the meanness of some of his sentiments, there

there are none who could have risen up to the greatness of others. *Virgil* has excelled all others in the propriety of his sentiments. *Milton* shines likewise very much in this particular: nor must we omit one consideration which adds to his honour and reputation. *Homer* and *Virgil* introduced persons whose characters are commonly known among men, and such as are to be met with either in history, or in ordinary conversation. *Milton's* characters, most of them, lie out of nature, and were to be formed purely by his own invention. It shows a greater genius in *Shakespear* to have drawn his *Calyban*, than his *Hotspur* or *Julius Cæsar*: the one was to be supplied out of his own imagination, whereas the other might have been formed upon tradition, history, and observation. It was much easier therefore for *Homer* to find proper sentiments for an assembly of *Grecian* Generals, than for *Milton* to diversifie his infernal council with proper characters, and inspire them with a variety of sentiments. The loves of *Dido* and *Æneas* are only copies of what has passed between other persons. *Adam* and *Eve* before the fall are a different species from that of mankind, who are descended from them; and none but a Poet of the most unbounded invention, and the most exquisite judgment, could have filled their conversation and behaviour with so many circumstances during their state of innocence.

Nor is it sufficient for an Epic Poem to be filled with such thoughts as are *natural*, unless it abound also with such as are *sublime*. *Virgil* in this particular falls short of *Homer*. He has not indeed so many thoughts that are low and vulgar; but at the same time has not so many thoughts that are sublime and noble. The truth of it is, *Virgil* seldom rises into very astonishing sentiments, where he is not fired by the *Iliad*. He every where charms and pleases us by the force of his own genius; but seldom elevates and transports us where he does not fetch his hints from *Homer*.

Milton's chief talent, and indeed his distinguishing excellence, lies in the Sublimity of his thoughts. There are others of the moderns who rival him in every other part of Poetry; but in the Greatness of his sentiments he triumphs over all the Poets both modern and ancient, *Homer* only excepted. It is impossible for the imagination of man to distend it self with greater ideas, than those which he has laid together in his first, second, and sixth books. The seventh, which describes the Creation of the world, is likewise wonderfully sublime, though not so apt to stir up emotion in the mind of the Reader, nor consequently so perfect in the Epic way of writing, because it is filled with less action. Let the

judicious Reader compare what *Longinus* has observed on several passages in *Homer*, and he will find parallels for most of them in the *Paradise Lost*.

From what has been said we may infer, that as there are two kinds of Sentiments, the Natural and the Sublime, which are always to be pursued in an heroic Poem; there are also two kinds of thoughts which are carefully to be avoided. The first are such as are affected and unnatural; the second such as are mean and vulgar. As for the first kind of thoughts, we meet with little or nothing that is like them in *Virgil*: he has none of those trifling points and puerilities that are so often to be met with in *Ovid*, none of the Epigrammatic turns of *Lucan*, none of those swelling sentiments which are so frequently in *Statius* and *Claudian*, none of those mixed embellishments of *Tasso*. Every thing is just and natural. His Sentiments show that he had a perfect insight into humane nature, and that he knew every thing which was the most proper to affect it.

Mr. *Dryden* has in some places, which I may hereafter take notice of, misrepresented *Virgil's* way of thinking as to this particular, in the translation he has given us of the *Æneid*. I do not remember that *Homer* any where falls into the faults above-mentioned, which were indeed the false refinements of later ages. *Milton*, it must be confessed, has sometimes erred in this respect, as I shall shew more at large in another paper; though considering all the Poets of the age in which he writ were infected with this wrong way of thinking, he is rather to be admired that he did not give more into it, than that he did sometimes comply with the vicious taste which still prevails so much among modern writers.

But since several thoughts may be natural which are low and groveling, an Epic Poet should not only avoid such Sentiments as are unnatural or affected, but also such as are mean and vulgar. *Homer* has opened a great field of raillery to men of more delicacy than greatness of genius, by the homeliness of some of his sentiments. But, as I have before said, these are rather to be imputed to the simplicity of the age in which he lived, to which I may also add, of that which he described, than to any imperfection in that divine Poet. *Zöilus*, among the ancients, and Monsieur *Perrault* among the moderns, pushed their ridicule very far upon him, on account of some such sentiments. There is no blemish to be observed in *Virgil*, under this head, and but a very few in *Milton*.

I shall give but one instance of this impropriety of thought in *Homer*, and at the same time compare it with an instance of the same nature, both in *Virgil* and *Milton*. Sentiments which raise laughter can very seldom

be

be admitted with any decency into an heroic Poem, whose business is to excite passions of a much nobler nature. *Homer*, however, in his characters of *Vulcan* and *Thersites*, in his story of *Mars* and *Venus*, in his behaviour of *Irus*, and in other passages, has been observed to have lapsed into the Burlesque character, and to have departed from that serious Air which seems essential to the magnificence of an Epic Poem. I remember but one laugh in the whole *Aeneid*, which rises in the fifth book upon *Monætes*, where he is represented as thrown overboard, and drying himself upon a rock. But this piece of mirth is so well timed, that the severest Critic can have nothing to say against it, for it is in the book of games and diversions, where the Reader's mind may be supposed to be sufficiently relaxed for such an entertainment. The only piece of pleasantry in *Paradise Lost*, is where the evil spirits are described as rallying the Angels upon the success of their new invented artillery. This passage I look upon to be the most exceptionable in the whole Poem, as being nothing else but a string of puns, and those too very indifferent.

——— *Satan beheld their plight,*

And to his mates thus in derision call'd.

O friends, why come not on these victors proud!

Ere while they fierce were coming, and when we,

To entertain them fair with open front,

And breast, (what could we more) propounded terms

Of composition; straight they changed their minds,

Flew off, and into strange vagaries fell,

As they would dance, yet for a dance they seem'd

Somewhat extravagant and wild, perhaps

For joy of offer'd peace; but I suppose

If our proposals once again were heard,

We should compel them to a quick result.

To whom thus Belial in like game some moode.

Leader, the terms we sent, were terms of weight,

Of hard contents, and full of force urg'd home,

Such as we might perceive amus'd them all,

And stumbled many; who receives them right,

Had need, from head to foot, well understand;

Not understood, this gift they have besides,

They shew us when our foes walk not upright.

Thus they among themselves in pleasant vein

Stood scoffing ———

Saturday,