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**The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.**

In Four Volumes

**Addison, Joseph**

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*Ne quicumque Deus, quicumque adbibebitur heros,  
Regali conspectus in auro nuper et ostro,  
Migret in obscuras humili sermone tabernas:  
Aut dum vitat humum, nubes et inania captet.*

Hor.

HAVING already treated of the Fable, the Characters and Sentiments in the *Paradise Lost*, we are in the last place to consider the *Language*; and as the learned world is very much divided upon *Milton* as to this point, I hope they will excuse me if I appear particular in any of my opinions, and encline to those who judge the most advantageously of the Author.

It is requisite that the Language of an Heroic poem should be both Perspicuous and Sublime. In proportion as either of these two qualities are wanting, the Language is imperfect. Perspicuity is the first and most necessary qualification; insomuch that a good-natured Reader sometimes over-looks a little slip even in the Grammar or Syntax, where it is impossible for him to mistake the Poet's sense. Of this kind is that passage in *Milton*, wherein he speaks of *Satan*.

— God and his Son except,  
Created thing nought valu'd he nor shunn'd.

And that in which he describes *Adam* and *Eve*.

*Adam* the goodliest man of men since born  
*His sons*, the fairest of her daughters *Eve*.

It is plain, that in the former of these passages, according to the natural Syntax, the divine Persons mentioned in the first line are represented as Created Beings; and that in the other, *Adam* and *Eve* are confounded with their sons and daughters. Such little blemishes as these, when the thought is great and natural, we should, with *Horace*, impute to a pardo-

pardonable inadvertency, or to the weakness of human nature, which cannot attend to each minute particular, and give the last finishing to every circumstance in so long a work. The ancient Critics therefore, who were act'd by a spirit of candour, rather than that of cavilling, invented certain figures of speech, on purpose to palliate little errors of this nature in the writings of those Authors who had so many greater beauties to atone for them.

If Clearness and Perspicuity were only to be consulted, the Poet would have nothing else to do but to cloath his thoughts in the most plain and natural expressions. But since it often happens that the most obvious phrases, and those which are used in ordinary conversation, become too familiar to the ear, and contract a kind of Meanness by passing through the mouths of the vulgar, a Poet should take particular care to guard himself against idiomatic ways of speaking. *Ovid* and *Lucan* have many poornesses of expression upon this account, as taking up with the first phrases that offer'd, without putting themselves to the trouble of looking after such as would not only be natural, but also elevated and sublime. *Milton* has but a few failings in this kind, of which, however, you may meet with some instances, as in the following passages.

*Embryo's and Idiots, Eremites and Fryars*

White, black and grey, with all their trumpery,

Here Pilgrims roam——

—— A while discourse they hold,

No fear least dinner cool; when thus began

Our Author——

Who of all Ages to succeed, but feeling

The evil on him brought by me, will curse

My head, ill fare our Ancestor impure,

For this we may thank Adam——

The great masters in composition know very well that many an elegant phrase becomes improper for a Poet or an Orator, when it has been debas'd by common use. For this reason the works of ancient Authors, which are written in dead languages, have a great advantage over those which are written in languages that are now spoken. Were there any mean phrases or idioms in *Virgil* and *Homer*, they would not shock the ear of the most delicate modern Reader, so much as they would have done that of an old *Greek* or *Roman*, because we never hear them pronounced in our streets, or in ordinary conversation.

It

It is not therefore sufficient, that the Language of an Epic poem be Perspicuous, unless it be also Sublime. To this end it ought to deviate from the common forms and ordinary phrases of speech. The judgment of a Poet very much discovers it self in shunning the common roads of expression, without falling into such ways of speech as may seem stiff and unnatural; he must not swell into a false sublime, by endeavouring to avoid the other extreme. Among the *Greeks*, *Æschylus*, and sometimes *Sophocles* were guilty of this fault; among the *Latins*, *Claudian* and *Stattius*; and among our own countrymen, *Shakespeare* and *Lee*. In these Authors the affectation of Greatness often hurts the Perspicuity of the stile, as in many others the endeavour after Perspicuity prejudices its Greatness.

*Aristotle* has observed, that the Idiomatic stile may be avoided, and the Sublime formed, by the following methods. First, by the use of metaphors: such are those in *Milton*.

Imparadis'd in one anothers arms,  
 ———— And in his hand a reed  
 Stood waving tipt with fire; ————  
 The grassie clods now calv'd. ————  
 Spangled with eyes ————

In these and innumerable other instances, the metaphors are very bold but just; I must however observe, that the metaphors are not thick-sown in *Milton*, which always favours too much of wit; that they never clash with one another, which, as *Aristotle* observes, turns a sentence into a kind of an *Ænigma* or Riddle; and that he seldom has recourse to them where the proper and natural words will do as well.

Another way of raising the language, and giving it a poetical turn, is to make use of the Idioms of other tongues. *Virgil* is full of the *Greek* forms of speech, which the Critics call *Hellenisms*, as *Horace* in his Odes abounds with them, much more than *Virgil*. I need not mention the several dialects which *Homer* has made use of for this end. *Milton* in conformity with the practice of the ancient Poets, and with *Aristotle's* rule, has infused a great many *Latinisms* as well as *Græcisms*, and sometimes *Hebraisms*, into the language of his poem; as towards the beginning of it,

Nor did they not perceive the evil plight  
 In which they were, or the fierce pains not feel.

Yet

Yet to their General's voice they soon obey'd.  
 — Who shall tempt with wandering feet  
 The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss,  
 And through the palpable obscure find out  
 His uncouth way, or spread his airy flight  
 Upborn with indefatigable wings  
 Over the vast Abrupt!

— So both ascend  
 In the visions of God —

B. II.

Under this head may be reckoned the placing the adjective after the substantive, the transposition of words, the turning the adjective into a substantive, with several other foreign modes of speech, which this Poet has naturalized to give his verse the greater sound, and throw it out of prose.

The third method mentioned by *Aristotle*, is what agrees with the Genius of the *Greek* language more than with that of any other tongue, and is therefore more used by *Homer* than by any other Poet. I mean the lengthening of a phrase by the addition of words, which may either be inserted or omitted, as also by the extending or contracting of particular words by the insertion or omission of certain syllables. *Milton* has put in practice this method of raising his language, as far as the nature of our tongue will permit, as in the passage above-mentioned, *Eremit*, for what is *Hermite* in common discourse. If you observe the measure of his verse, he has with great judgment suppressed a syllable in several words, and shortned those of two syllables into one, by which method, besides the above-mentioned advantage, he has given a greater variety to his numbers. But this practice is more particularly remarkable in the names of persons and of countries, as *Beelzebub*, *Hesbon*, and in many other particulars, wherein he has either changed the name, or made use of that which is not the most commonly known, that he might the better depart from the language of the vulgar.

The same reason recommended to him several old words, which also makes his poem appear the more venerable, and gives it a greater air of antiquity.

I must likewise take notice, that there are in *Milton* several words of his own coining, as *Cerberian*, *miscreated*, *hell-doom'd*, *Embryon Atoms*, and many others. If the Reader is offended at this Liberty in our *English* Poet, I would recommend him to a discourse in *Plutarch*, which shews us how frequently *Homer* has made use of the same liberty.

*Milton* by the above-mentioned helps, and by the choice of the noblest words and phrases which our tongue would afford him, has carried our language to a greater height than any of the *English* Poets have ever done before or after him, and made the sublimity of his style equal to that of his sentiments.

I have been the more particular in these observations on *Milton's* style, because it is that part of him in which he appears the most singular. The remarks I have here made upon the practice of other Poets, with my observations out of *Aristotle*, will perhaps alleviate the prejudice which some have taken to his poem upon this account; tho' after all, I must confess, that I think his style, though admirable in general, is in some places too much stiffened and obscured by the frequent use of those methods, which *Aristotle* has prescribed for the raising of it.

This redundancy of those several ways of speech which *Aristotle* calls *foreign language*, and with which *Milton* has so very much enriched, and in some places darkned the language of his poem, was the more proper for his use, because his poem is written in blank verse. Rhyme, without any other assistance, throws the language off from prose, and very often makes an indifferent phrase pass unregarded; but where the verse is not built upon rhymes, there pomp of sound, and energy of expression, are indispensably necessary to support the style, and keep it from falling into the flatness of prose.

Those who have not a taste for this elevation of style, and are apt to ridicule a Poet when he goes out of the common forms of expression, would do well to see how *Aristotle* has treated an ancient author, called *Euclid*, for his insipid mirth upon this occasion. Mr. *Dryden* used to call this sort of men his *Prose-critics*.

I should, under this head of the Language, consider *Milton's* Numbers, in which he has made use of several elisions, that are not customary among other *English* Poets, as may be particularly observed in his cutting off the Letter *T*, when it precedes a vowel. This, and some other innovations in the measure of his verse, has varied his numbers, in such a manner, as makes them incapable of satiating the ear and cloying the Reader, which the same uniform measure would certainly have done, and which the perpetual returns of rhyme never fail to do in long narrative poems. I shall close these reflections upon the Language of *Paradise Lost*, with observing that *Milton* has copied after *Homer*, rather than *Virgil*, in the length of his periods, the copiousness of his phrases, and the running of his verses into one another.

Saturday,