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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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-----*Ubi plura nitent in carmine, non ego paucis
Offendar maculis, quas aut incuria fudit,
Aut humana parum cavit natura*----- Hor.

I Have now considered *Milton's Paradise Lost* under those four great heads of the Fable, the Characters, the Sentiments, and the Language; and have shewn that he excels, in general, under each of these heads. I hope that I have made several discoveries which may appear new, even to those who are versed in critical learning. Were I indeed to chuse my Readers, by whose judgment I would stand or fall, they should not be such as are acquainted only with the *French* and *Italian* Critics, but also with the Ancient and Modern who have written in either of the learned languages. Above all, I would have them well versed in the *Greek* and *Latin* Poets, without which a man very often fancies that he understands a Critic, when in reality he does not comprehend his meaning.

It is in Criticism, as in all other sciences and speculations; one who brings with him any implicit notions and observations which he has made in his reading of the Poets, will find his own reflections methodized and explained, and perhaps several little hints that had passed in his mind, perfected and improved in the Works of a good Critic; whereas one who has not these previous lights, is very often an utter stranger to what he reads, and apt to put a wrong interpretation upon it.

Nor is it sufficient, that a man who sets up for a Judge in Criticism, should have perused the Authors above-mentioned, unless he has also a clear and logical head. Without this Talent he is perpetually puzzled and perplexed amidst his own Blunders, mistakes the sense of those he would confute, or if he chances to think right, does not know how to convey his thoughts to another with clearness and perspicuity. *Aristotle*, who was the best Critic, was also one of the best Logicians that ever appeared in the world.

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Mr.

Mr. *Lock's* Essay on human understanding would be thought a very odd book for a man to make himself master of, who would get a reputation by critical writings; though at the same time it is very certain, that an Author who has not learned the art of distinguishing between words and things, and of ranging his thoughts, and setting them in proper lights, whatever notions he may have, will lose himself in confusion and obscurity. I might further observe, that there is not a *Greek* or *Latin* Critic who has not shewn, even in the stile of his Criticisms, that he was a master of all the elegance and delicacy of his native tongue.

The truth of it is, there is nothing more absurd than for a man to set up for a Critic, without a good insight into all the parts of learning; whereas many of those who have endeavoured to signalize themselves by works of this nature among our *English* writers, are not only defective in the above-mentioned particulars, but plainly discover by the phrases which they make use of, and by their confused way of thinking, that they are not acquainted with the most common and ordinary systems of arts and sciences. A few general rules extracted out of the *French* Authors, with a certain cant of words, has sometimes set up an illiterate heavy writer for a most judicious and formidable Critic.

One great mark, by which you may discover a Critic who has neither taste nor learning, is this, that he seldom ventures to praise any passage in an Author which has not been before received and applauded by the publick, and that his criticism turns wholly upon little faults and errors. This part of a Critic is so very easy to succeed in, that we find every ordinary Reader, upon the publishing of a new Poem, has wit and ill-nature enough to turn several passages of it into ridicule, and very often in the right place. This Mr. *Dryden* has very agreeably remarked in those two celebrated lines,

*Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow;
He who would search for pearls, must dive below.*

A true Critic ought to dwell rather upon excellencies than imperfections, to discover the concealed beauties of a writer, and communicate to the world such things as are worth their observation. The most exquisite words and finest strokes of an Author are those which very often appear the most doubtful and exceptionable, to a man who wants a relish for polite learning; and they are these, which a soure undistinguishing Critic generally attacks with the greatest violence. *Tully* observes, that it is very easy to brand or fix a mark upon what he calls *verbum ardens*, or,

as it may be rendred into *English*, a glowing bold expression, and to turn it into ridicule by a cold ill-natured criticism. A little wit is equally capable of exposing a beauty, and of aggravating a fault; and though such a treatment of an Author naturally produces indignation in the mind of an understanding reader, it has however its effect among the generality of those whose hands it falls into; the rabble of mankind being very apt to think that every thing which is laughed at with any mixture of wit, is ridiculous in it self.

Such a mirth as this is always unseasonable in a Critic, as it rather prejudices the Reader than convinces him, and is capable of making a beauty, as well as a blemish, the subject of derision. A man, who cannot write with wit on a proper subject, is dull and stupid, but one who shews it in an improper place, is as impertinent and absurd. Besides, a man who has the gift of ridicule, is apt to find fault with any thing that gives him an opportunity of exerting his beloved talent, and very often censures a passage, not because there is any fault in it, but because he can be merry upon it. Such kinds of pleasantry are very unfair and disingenuous in works of Criticism, in which the greatest masters, both antient and modern, have always appeared with a serious and instructive air.

As I intend in my next paper to shew the defects in *Milton's Paradise Lost*, I thought fit to premise these few particulars, to the end that the Reader may know I enter upon it, as on a very ungrateful work, and that I shall just point at the imperfections, without endeavouring to enflame them with ridicule. I must also observe with *Longinus*, that the productions of a great genius, with many lapses and inadvertencies, are infinitely preferable to the works of an inferior kind of Author, which are scrupulously exact and conformable to all the rules of correct writing.

I shall conclude my paper with a story out of *Boccalini*, which sufficiently shews us the opinion that judicious Author entertained of the sort of Critics I have been here mentioning. A famous Critic, says he, having gathered together all the faults of an eminent Poet, made a present of them to *Apollo*, who received them very graciously, and resolved to make the Author a suitable return for the trouble he had been at in collecting them. In order to this, he set before him a sack of wheat, as it had been just threshed out of the sheaf. He then bid him pick out the chaff from among the corn, and lay it aside by it self. The Critic applied himself to the task with great industry and pleasure, and after having made the due separation, was presented by *Apollo* with the chaff for his pains.

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