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The Works Of The Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.

In Four Volumes

Addison, Joseph

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in the midſt of his pleading, but he had better have let it alone, for he loſt his cauſe by his jeſt.

I have all along acknowledged my ſelf to be a dumb man, and therefore may be thought a very improper perſon to give rules for oratory; but I believe every one will agree with me in this, that we ought either to lay aſide all kinds of geſture, (which ſeems to be very ſuitable to the genius of our nation) or at leaſt to make uſe of ſuch only as are graceful and expreſſive.

N^o 409. *Thursday, June 19.*

----- *Museo contingere cuncta lepore.* Lucr.

GRATIAN very often recommends *the fine taſte*, as the utmoſt perfection of an accompliſhed man. As this word ariſes very often in converſation, I ſhall endeavour to give ſome account of it, and to lay down rules how we may know whether we are poſſeſſed of it, and how we may acquire that fine taſte of writing, which is ſo much talk- ed of among the polite world.

Moſt Languages make uſe of this metaphor, to expreſs that faculty of the mind, which diſtinguiſhes all the moſt concealed faults and niceſt perfections in writing. We may be ſure this metaphor would not have been ſo general in all tongues, had there not been a very great conformity between that mental taſte, which is the ſubject of this paper, and that ſenſitive taſte which gives us a reliſh of every different flavour that affects the palate. Accordingly we find, there are as many degrees of refine- ment in the intellectual faculty, as in the ſenſe, which is marked out by this common denomination.

I knew a perſon who poſſeſſed the one in ſo great a perfection, that after having taſted ten different kinds of tea, he would diſtinguiſh, with- out ſeeing the colour of it, the particular ſort which was offered him; and not only ſo, but any two ſorts of them that were mixt together in an equal proportion; nay, he has carried the experiment ſo far, as upon taſting the compoſition of three different ſorts, to name the parcels from

whence the three several ingredients were taken. A man of a fine taste in writing will discern, after the same manner, not only the general beauties and imperfections of an Author, but discover the several ways of thinking and expressing himself, which diversify him from all other Authors, with the several foreign infusions of thought and language, and the particular Authors from whom they were borrowed.

After having thus far explained what is generally meant by a fine taste in writing, and shewn the propriety of the metaphor which is used on this occasion, I think I may define it to be *that faculty of the soul, which discerns the beauties of an Author with pleasure, and the imperfections with dislike*. If a man would know whether he is possessed of this faculty, I would have him read over the celebrated works of antiquity, which have stood the test of so many different ages and countries; or those works among the moderns, which have the sanction of the politer part of our contemporaries. If upon the perusal of such writings he does not find himself delighted in an extraordinary manner, or if, upon reading the admired passages in such Authors, he finds a coldness and indifference in his thoughts, he ought to conclude, not (as is too usual among tasteless Readers) that the Author wants those perfections which have been admired in him, but that he himself wants the faculty of discovering them.

He should, in the second place, be very careful to observe, whether he tastes the distinguishing perfections, or, if I may be allowed to call them so, the specific qualities of the Author whom he peruses; whether he is particularly pleased with *Livy* for his manner of telling a story, with *Salust* for his entering into those internal principles of Action which arise from the characters and manners of the persons he describes, or with *Tacitus* for his displaying those outward motives of safety and interest, which give birth to the whole series of transactions which he relates.

He may likewise consider, how differently he is affected by the same thought, which presents it self in a great writer, from what he is when he finds it delivered by a person of an ordinary Genius. For there is as much difference in apprehending a thought cloathed in *Cicero's* language, and that of a common Author, as in seeing an object by the light of a taper, or by the light of the Sun.

It is very difficult to lay down rules for the acquirement of such a taste as that I am here speaking of. The faculty must in some degree be born with us, and it very often happens, that those who have other qualities in perfection, are wholly void of this. One of the most eminent

Mathema-

Mathematicians of the Age has assured me, that the greatest pleasure he took in reading *Virgil*, was in examining *Aeneas* his voyage by the map; as I question not but many a modern compiler of history, would be delighted with little more in that divine Author, than in the bare matters of fact.

But notwithstanding this faculty must in some measure be born with us, there are several methods for cultivating and improving it, and without which it will be very uncertain, and of little use to the person that possesses it. The most natural method for this purpose is, to be conversant among the writings of the most polite Authors. A man who has any relish for fine writing, either discovers new beauties, or receives stronger impressions from the masterly strokes of a great Author every time he peruses him: Besides that he naturally wears himself into the same manner of speaking and thinking.

Conversation with men of a polite genius is another method of improving our natural taste. It is impossible for a man of the greatest parts to consider any thing in its whole extent, and in all its variety of lights. Every man, besides those general observations which are to be made upon an Author, forms several reflections that are peculiar to his own manner of thinking; so that conversation will naturally furnish us with hints which we did not attend to, and make us enjoy other mens parts and reflections as well as our own. This is the best reason I can give for the observation which several have made, that men of great genius in the same way of writing seldom rise up singly, but at certain periods of time appear together, and in a body; as they did at *Rome* in the reign of *Augustus*, and in *Greece* about the Age of *Socrates*. I cannot think that *Corneille*, *Racine*, *Moliere*, *Boileau*, *la Fontaine*, *Bruyere*, *Bossu*, or the *Daciers*, would have written so well as they have done, had they not been friends and contemporaries.

It is likewise necessary for a man who would form to himself a finished taste of good writing, to be well versed in the works of the best *Critics* both ancient and modern. I must confess that I could wish there were Authors of this kind, who, beside the mechanical rules which a man of very little taste may discourse upon, would enter into the very spirit and soul of fine writing, and shew us the several sources of that pleasure which rises in the mind upon the perusal of a noble work. Thus although in poetry it be absolutely necessary that the unities of time, place and action, with other points of the same nature, should be thoroughly explained and understood; there is still something more essential to the art,

art, something that elevates and astonishes the fancy, and gives a greatness of mind to the Reader, which few of the Critics besides *Longinus* have considered.

Our general taste in *England* is for epigram, turns of wit, and forced conceits, which have no manner of influence, either for the bettering or enlarging the mind of him who reads them, and have been carefully avoided by the greatest writers, both among the ancients and moderns. I have endeavoured in several of my Speculations to banish this *Gothic* taste, which has taken possession among us. I entertained the town, for a week together, with an Essay upon Wit, in which I endeavoured to detect several of those false kinds which have been admired in the different Ages of the world; and at the same time to shew wherein the nature of true wit consists. I afterwards gave an instance of the great force which lyes in a natural simplicity of thought to affect the mind of the Reader, from such vulgar pieces as have little else besides this single qualification to recommend them. I have likewise examined the works of the greatest Poet which our nation or perhaps any other has produced, and particularized most of those rational and manly beauties which give a value to that divine work. I shall next *Saturday* enter upon an Essay on the pleasures of the Imagination, which, though it shall consider that subject at large, will perhaps suggest to the Reader what it is that gives a beauty to many passages of the finest writers both in prose and verse. As an undertaking of this nature is entirely new, I question not but it will be received with candour.

N^o 411. *Saturday, June 21.*

*Avia Pieridum peragro loca, nullius ante
Trita solo; juvat integros accedere fonteis;
Atque haurire: -----*

Lucr.

OUR Sight is the most perfect and most delightful of all our senses. It fills the mind with the largest variety of ideas, converses with its objects at the greatest distance, and continues the longest in action