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

In Four Volumes

**Addison, Joseph**

**London, 1721**

No 4. Thursday, October 5.

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“ upon his dray-cart; and if I can finish my conquest sooner, I will not  
 “ fail to meet him there in a triumphant chariot. But, O ye Gods! let  
 “ not the King of *Persia* laugh at the fall of *Alcibiades*! Let him not  
 “ say, *the Athenians have avenged me upon their own Generals*; or let  
 “ me be rather struck dead by the hand of a *Lacedæmonian*, than disgra-  
 “ ced by the voices of my fellow-citizens.

N<sup>o</sup> 4. *Thursday, October 5.*

*Satis eloquentiæ, sapientiæ parum.*

Sal.

**H** *Udibras* has defined nonsense (as *Cowley* does wit) by negatives. Nonsense (says he) is that which is neither true nor false. These two great properties of nonsense, which are always essential to it, give it such a peculiar advantage over all other writings, that it is incapable of being either answered or contradicted. It stands upon its own basis like a rock of adamant, secured by its natural situation against all conquests or attacks. There is no one place about it weaker than another, to favour an enemy in his approaches. The major and the minor are of equal strength. Its questions admit of no reply, and its assertions are not to be invalidated. A man may as well hope to distinguish colours in the midst of darkness, as to find out what to approve and disapprove in nonsense: you may as well assault an army that is buried in intrenchments. If it affirms any thing, you cannot lay hold of it; or if it denies, you cannot confute it. In a word, there are greater depths and obscurities, greater intricacies and perplexities, in an elaborate and well-written piece of nonsense, than in the most abstruse and profound tract of school-divinity.

After this short panegyrick upon nonsense, which may appear as extravagant to an ordinary Reader, as *Erasmus's Encomium of folly*; I must here solemnly protest, that I have not done it to curry favour with my antagonist, or to reflect any praise in an oblique manner upon the *Letter to the Examiner*: I have no private considerations to warp me in this controversy, since my first entring upon it. But before I proceed any fur-

VOL. IV.

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ther, because it may be of great use to me in this dispute, to state the whole nature of nonsense; and because 'tis a subject entirely new, I must take notice that there are two kinds of it, *viz*, high nonsense and low nonsense.

Low nonsense is the talent of a cold phlegmatick temper, that in a poor dispirited style creeps along servilely through darkness and confusion. A writer of this complexion gropes his way softly amongst self-contradictions, and grovels in absurdities.

*Videri vult pauper, & est pauper.*

He has neither wit nor sense, and pretends to none.

On the contrary, your high nonsense blusters and makes a noise, it stalks upon hard words, and rattles through polysyllables. It is loud and sonorous, smooth and periodical. It has something in it like manliness and force, and makes one think of the name of Sir *Hercules Nonsense* in the play called *the nest of fools*. In a word, your high nonsense has a majestic appearance, and wears a most tremendous garb, like *Æsop's* ass clothed in a lion's skin.

When *Aristotle* lay upon his death-bed, and was asked whom he would appoint for his successor in his school, two of his scholars being Candidates for it; he called for two different sorts of wine, and by the character which he gave of them, denoted the different qualities and perfections that shewed themselves in the style and writings of each of the competitors. As rational writings have been represented by *wine*; I shall represent those kinds of writings we are now speaking of, by *small-beer*.

Low nonsense is like that in the barrel, which is altogether flat, tasteless, and insipid. High nonsense is like that in the bottle, which has in reality no more strength and spirit than the other, but frets and flies, and bounces, and by the help of a little wind that is got into it, imitates the passions of a much nobler liquor.

We meet with a low groveling nonsense in every *Grub-street* production; but I think there are none of our present writers who have hit the sublime in nonsense, besides Dr. *S——l* in divinity, and the Author of this letter in politicks; between whose characters in their respective professions, there seems to be a very nice resemblance.

There is still another qualification in nonsense which I must not pass over, being that which gives it the last finishing and perfection, and eminently discovers it self in the letter to the Examiner.—This is when an Author without any meaning, seems to have it; and so imposes upon us  
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by the found and ranging of his words, that one is apt to fancy they signify something. Any one who reads this letter, as he goes through it, will lie under the same delusion; but after having read it, let him consider what he has learnt from it, and he will immediately discover the deceit. I did not indeed at first imagine there was in it such a jargon of ideas, such an inconsistency of notions, such a confusion of particles, that rather puzzle than connect the sense, which in some places he seems to have aimed at, as I found upon my nearer perusal of it: Nevertheless, as no body writes a book without meaning something, though he may not have the faculty of writing consequentially, and expressing his meaning; I think I have with a great deal of attention and difficulty found out what this Gentleman would say, had he the gift of utterance. The System of his politicks, when disembroiled and cleared of all those incoherences and independent matters that are woven into this motley piece, will be as follows. The conduct of the late Ministry is considered first of all in respect to foreign affairs, and secondly to domestick: As to the first, he tells us, that *the motives which engaged Britain in the present war, were both wise and generous*; so that the Ministry is cleared as to that particular. These motives he tells us, *were to restore the Spanish monarchy to the house of Austria, and to regain a barrier for Holland. The last of these two motives, he says, was effectually answered by the reduction of the Netherlands in the year 1706, or might have been so by the concessions which it is notorious that the enemy offered.* So that the Ministry are here blamed for not contenting themselves with the barrier they had gained in the year 1706, nor with the concessions which the enemy then offered. The other motive of our entering into the war, *viz. The restoring the Spanish monarchy to the house of Austria, he tells us, remained still in its full force; and we were told, says he, that though the barrier of Holland was secured, the trade of Britain and the ballance of power in Europe would be still precarious: Spain therefore must be conquered.* He then loses himself in matter foreign to his purpose: But what he endeavours in the sequel of his discourse, is to shew, that we have not taken the proper method to recover the Spanish monarchy; *that the whole stress of the war has been wantonly laid where France is best able to keep us at bay; that the French King has made it impossible for himself to give up Spain, and that the Duke of Anjou has made it as impossible for us to conquer it: Nay, that instead of regaining Spain, we shall find the Duke of Anjou in a condition to pay the debt of gratitude, and support the Grandfather in his declining years, by whose arms in the days of his infan-*

*cy he was upheld.* He then intimates to us, that the *Dutch* and the Emperor will be so very well satisfied with what they have already conquered, that they may probably leave the house of *Bourbon* in the quiet possession of the *Spanish* Monarchy.

This strange huddle of politicks has been so fully answered by General *Stanhope*, that if the Author had delayed the publishing of his letter but a fortnight, the world would have been deprived of that elaborate production. Notwithstanding all that the *French* King or the Duke of *Anjou* have been able to do, notwithstanding the feeble efforts we have made in *Spain*, notwithstanding *the little care the Emperor takes to support King Charles*, notwithstanding the *Dutch* might have been contented *with a larger and better country than their own already conquered for them*, that victorious General at the head of *English* and *Dutch* forces, in conjunction with those of the Emperor, has wrested *Spain* out of the hands of the house of *Bourbon*; and added the conquest of *Navarre*, *Aragon*, and *Castile*, to those of *Catalonia*, *Bavaria*, *Flanders*, *Mantua*, *Milan*, *Naples*, *Sicily*, *Majorca*, *Minorca*, and *Sardinia*. Such a wonderful series of victories, and those astonishing returns of ingratitude which they have met with, appear both of them rather like dreams than realities: They puzzle and confound the present age, and it is to be hoped they will not be believed by posterity. Will the trifling Author of this letter say, that the Ministry did not apply themselves to the reduction of *Spain*, when the whole Kingdom was twice conquered in their administration? The Letter-writer says, *that the Dutch had gained a good barrier after the battel of Ramillies in the year 1706.* But I would fain ask him, whether he thinks *Antwerp* and *Brussels*, *Ghent* and *Bruges*, could be thought a strong barrier, or that those important conquests did not want several towns and forts to cover them? But it seems our great General on that side has done more for us than we expected of him, and made the barrier too impregnable. *But*, says the Letter-writer, *the stress of the war was laid in the wrong place:* But if the laying the stress of the war in the *Low-Countries* drew thither the whole strength of *France*; if it weakened *Spain*, and left it exposed to an equal force; if *France*, without being pressed on this side, could have assisted the Duke of *Anjou* with a numerous army; and if by the advantage of the situation, it could have sent and maintained in *Spain* ten regiments with as little trouble and expence as *England* could two regiments; every impartial Judge would think that the stress of the war has been laid in the right place.

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The Author in this confused dissertation on foreign affairs, would fain make us believe, that *England* has gained nothing by these conquests, and put us out of humour with our chief Allies, the Emperor and the *Dutch*. He tells us, *they hoped England would have been taken care of, after having secured a barrier for Holland*: As if *England* were not taken care of by this very securing a barrier for *Holland*; which has always been looked upon as our Bulwark, or as Mr. *Waller* expresses it, our *outguard on the continent*; and which if it had fallen into the hands of the *French*, would have made *France* more strong by sea than all *Europe* besides. Has not *England* been taken care of by gaining a new mart in *Flanders*, by opening our trade into the *Levant*, by securing ports for us in *Gibraltar*, *Minorca* and *Naples*, and by that happy prospect we have of renewing that great branch of our commerce into *Spain*, which will be of more advantage to *England* than any conquest we can make of towns and provinces? Not to mention the demolishing of *Dunkirk*, which we were in a fair way of obtaining during the last Parliament, and which we never so much as proposed to our selves at our first engaging in this war.

As for this Author's aspersions of the *Dutch* and *Germans*, I have sometimes wondered that he has not been complained of for it to the Secretary of state. Had not he been looked upon as an insignificant scribler, he must have occasioned remonstrances and memorials: Such national injuries are not to be put up, but when the offender is below resentment. This puts me in mind of an honest *Scotchman*, who as he was walking along the streets of *London*, heard one calling out after him *Scot, Scot*, and casting forth in a clamorous manner a great deal of opprobrious language against that antient nation: *Sawny* turned about in a great passion, and found, to his surprize, that the person who abused him was a saucy parrot that hung up not far from him in a cage; upon which he clapped his hand to his sword, and told him, were he a man as he was a green-goose, he would have run him through the wemb.

The next head our Politician goes upon, relates to our domestick affairs; where I am extremely at a loss to know what he wou'd be at: All that I can gather from him is, that *the Queen had grieved her subjects* in making choice of such men for her Ministers, as raised the nation to a greater pitch of glory than ever it was in the days of our forefathers, or than any other nation in these our days.

Thursday,