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An Essay on Virgils Georgics.

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A N

E S S A Y

O N

VIRGIL'S GEORGICS.

VIRGIL may be reckoned the first who introduced three new kinds of Poetry among the *Romans*, which he copied after three the greatest masters of *Greece*. *Theocritus* and *Homer* have still disputed for the advantage over him in *Pastoral* and *Heroics*, but I think all are unanimous in giving him the precedence to *Hesiod* in his *Georgics*. The truth of it is, the sweetness and rusticity of a *Pastoral* cannot be so well expressed in any other tongue as in the *Greek*, when rightly mixed and qualified with the *Doric* dialect; nor can the majesty of an Heroic Poem any where appear so well as in this language, which has a natural greatness in it, and can be often rendered more deep and sonorous by the pronunciation of the *Ionians*. But in the Middle stile, where the writers in both tongues are on a level, we see how far *Virgil* has excelled all who have written in the same way with him. There

There has been abundance of Criticism spent on *Virgil's Pastorals* and *Aeneids*, but the *Georgics* are a subject which none of the Critics have sufficiently taken into their consideration; most of them passing it over in silence, or casting it under the same head with *Pastoral*; a division by no means proper, unless we suppose the stile of a Husbandman ought to be imitated in a *Georgic*, as that of a Shepherd is in *Pastoral*. But though the scene of both these Poems lies in the same place; the speakers in them are of a quite different character, since the precepts of husbandry are not to be delivered with the simplicity of a Plowman, but with the address of a Poet. No rules therefore that relate to *Pastoral*, can any way affect the *Georgics*, since they fall under that class of Poetry, which consists in giving plain and direct instructions to the reader; whether they be Moral duties, as those of *Theognis* and *Pythagoras*; or Philosophical speculations, as those of *Aratus* and *Lucretius*; or Rules of practice, as those of *Hesiod* and *Virgil*. Among these different kinds of subjects, that which the *Georgics* go upon, is I think the meanest and least improving, but the most pleasing and delightful. Precepts of morality, besides the natural corruption of our tempers, which makes us averse to them, are so abstracted from Ideas of sense, that they seldom give an opportunity for those beautiful descriptions and images which are the spirit and life of Poetry. Natural Philosophy has indeed sensible objects to work upon, but then it often puzzles the Reader with the intricacy of its notions, and perplexes him with the multitude of its disputes. But this kind of Poetry I am now speaking of, addresses it self wholly to the imagination: It is altogether conversant among the fields and woods, and has the most delightful part of Nature for its province. It raises in our minds a plea-

sing variety of scenes and landscapes, whilst it teaches us; and makes the dryest of its precepts look like a description. *A Georgic therefore is some part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the Beauties and Embellishments of Poetry.* Now since this science of Husbandry is of a very large extent, the Poet shews his skill in singling out such precepts to proceed on, as are useful, and at the same time most capable of ornament. *Virgil* was so well acquainted with this secret, that to set off his first *Georgic*, he has run into a set of precepts, which are almost foreign to his subject, in that beautiful account he gives us of the Signs in Nature, which precede the changes of the weather.

And if there be so much art in the choice of fit precepts, there is much more required in the treating of them; that they may fall in after each other by a natural unforced method, and shew themselves in the best and most advantageous light. They should all be so finely wrought together in the same piece, that no coarse seam may discover where they join; as in a curious brede of needle-work, one colour falls away by such just degrees, and another rises so insensibly, that we see the variety, without being able to distinguish the total vanishing of the one from the first appearance of the other. Nor is it sufficient to range and dispose this body of precepts into a clear and easie method, unless they are delivered to us in the most pleasing and agreeable manner: For there are several ways of conveying the same truth to the mind of man; and to chuse the pleasantest of these ways, is that which chiefly distinguishes Poetry from Prose, and makes *Virgil's* rules of Husbandry pleasanter to read than *Varró's*. Where the Prose-writer tells us plainly what ought to be done, the Poet often conceals

conceals the precept in a description, and represents his Country-man performing the action in which he would instruct his reader. Where the one sets out as fully and distinctly as he can, all the parts of the truth, which he would communicate to us; the other singles out the most pleasing circumstance of this truth, and so conveys the whole in a more diverting manner to the understanding. I shall give one instance out of a multitude of this nature that might be found in the *Georgics*, where the reader may see the different ways *Virgil* has taken to express the same thing, and how much pleasanter every manner of expression is, than the plain and direct mention of it would have been. It is in the second *Georgic*, where he tells us what Trees will bear grafting on each other.

Et sæpe alterius ramos impune videmus

Vertere in alterius, mutatamque insita mala

Ferre pyrum, et prunis lapidosa rubescere corna.

—Steriles *Platani malos gessere valentes,*

Castaneæ fagos, ornusque incanuit albo

Flore pyri: Glandemque sues fregere sub ulmis.

—*Nec longum tempus: et ingens*

Exiit ad Cœlum ramis felicibus arbos;

Miraturque novas frondes et non sua poma.

Here we see the Poet considered all the effects of this union between Trees of different kinds, and took notice of that effect which had the most surprize, and by consequence the most delight in it, to express the capacity that was in them of being thus united. This way of writing is every where much in use among the Poets, and is particularly practised by *Virgil*, who loves to suggest a truth indirectly, and without gi-

ving us a full and open view of it, to let us see just so much as will naturally lead the imagination into all the parts that lie concealed. This is wonderfully diverting to the understanding, thus to receive a precept, that enters as it were through a by-way, and to apprehend an Idea that draws a whole train after it. For here the Mind, which is always delighted with its own discoveries, only takes the hint from the Poet, and seems to work out the rest by the strength of her own faculties.

But since the inculcating precept upon precept, will at length prove tiresome to the reader, if he meets with no entertainment, the Poet must take care not to encumber his Poem with too much business; but sometimes to relieve the Subject with a moral reflection, or let it rest a-while for the sake of a pleasant and pertinent digression. Nor is it sufficient to run out into beautiful and diverting digressions (as it is generally thought) unless they are brought in aptly, and are something of a piece with the main design of the *Georgic*: For they ought to have a remote alliance at least to the subject, that so the whole Poem may be more uniform and agreeable in all its parts. We should never quite lose sight of the Country, though we are sometimes entertained with a distant prospect of it. Of this nature are *Virgil's* descriptions of the original of *Agriculture*, of the fruitfulness of *Italy*, of a country life, and the like, which are not brought in by force, but naturally rise out of the principal argument and design of the Poem. I know no one digression in the *Georgics* that may seem to contradict this observation, besides that in the latter end of the First book, where the Poet launches out into a discourse of the battel of *Pharsalia*, and the actions of *Augustus*: But it is worth while to consider how admirably he has turned the

the course of his narration into its proper channel, and made his Husbandman concerned even in what relates to the battle, in those inimitable lines,

*Scilicet et tempus veniet, cum finibus illis
Agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro,
Exesa inveniet scabra rubigine pila:
Aut gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanes,
Grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulchris.*

And afterwards speaking of *Augustus's* actions, he still remembers that *Agriculture* ought to be some way hinted at throughout the whole Poem.

-----*Non ullus aratro*

*Dignus honos: squalent abductis arva colonis:
Et curvæ rigidum falces conflantur in ense.*

We now come to the *Stile* which is proper to a *Georgic*; and indeed this is the part on which the Poet must lay out all his strength, that his words may be warm and glowing, and that every thing he describes may immediately present it self, and rise up to the reader's view. He ought in particular to be careful of not letting his subject debase his *stile*, and betray him into a meanness of expression, but every where to keep up his verse in all the pomp of numbers, and dignity of words.

I think nothing which is a Phrase or Saying in common talk, should be admitted into a serious Poem; because it takes off from the solemnity of the expression, and gives it too great a turn of familiarity: Much less ought the low phrases and terms of art, that are adapted to Husbandry, have any place in such a work as the *Georgic*, which is not to appear in the natural simplicity

simplicity and nakedness of its subject, but in the pleasantest dress that Poetry can bestow on it. Thus *Virgil*, to deviate from the common form of words, would not make use of *Tempore* but *Sydere* in his first verse; and every where else abounds with *Metaphors*, *Grecisms*, and *Circumlocutions*, to give his verse the greater pomp, and preserve it from sinking into a *Plebeian* stile. And herein consists *Virgil's* master-piece, who has not only excelled all other Poets, but even himself in the language of his *Georgics*; where we receive more strong and lively *Ideas* of things from his words, than we could have done from the objects themselves: And find our imaginations more affected by his descriptions, than they would have been by the very sight of what he describes.

I shall now, after this short scheme of rules, consider the different success that *Hesiod* and *Virgil* have met with in this kind of Poetry, which may give us some further notion of the excellence of the *Georgics*. To begin with *Hesiod*; if we may guess at his character from his writings, he had much more of the Husbandman than the Poet in his temper: He was wonderfully grave, discreet, and frugal, he lived altogether in the country, and was probably for his great prudence the oracle of the whole neighbourhood. These principles of good Husbandry ran through his works, and directed him to the choice of tillage and merchandize, for the subject of that which is the most celebrated of them. He is every where bent on instruction, avoids all manner of digressions, and does not stir out of the field once in the whole *Georgic*. His method in describing month after month with its proper seasons and employments, is too grave and simple; it takes off from the surprize and variety of the Poem, and makes the whole
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look but like a modern Almanack in verse. The reader is carried through a course of weather, and may before-hand guess whether he is to meet with snow or rain, clouds or sunshine in the next description. His descriptions indeed have abundance of nature in them, but then it is nature in her simplicity and undress. Thus when he speaks of *January*; 'The wild beasts, says he, run shivering through the woods with their heads stooping to the ground, and their tails clapt between their legs; the Goats and Oxen are almost flea'd with cold; but it is not so bad with the Sheep, because they have a thick coat of wool about them. The old men too are bitterly pincht with the weather, but the young girls feel nothing of it, who sit at home with their mothers by a warm fire-side.' Thus does the old gentleman give himself up to a loose kind of rattle, rather than endeavour after a just Poetical description. Nor has he shewn more of art or judgment in the precepts he has given us, which are sown so very thick, that they clog the Poem too much, and are often so minute and full of circumstances, that they weaken and unnerve his verse. But after all, we are beholden to him for the first rough sketch of a *Georgic*: Where we may still discover something venerable in the antickness of the work; but if we would see the design enlarged, the figures reformed, the colouring laid on, and the whole piece finished, we must expect it from a greater master's hand.

Virgil has drawn out the rules of Tillage and Planting into two books, which *Hesiod* has dispatched in half a one; but has so raised the natural rudeness and simplicity of his subject with such a significancy of expression, such a pomp of verse, such variety of transitions, and such a solemn air in his reflections,

tions, that if we look on both Poets together, we see in one the plainness of a downright Countryman, and in the other, something of a rustick majesty, like that of a *Roman Dictator* at the plow-tail. He delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur, he breaks the clods and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulness. His prognostications of the weather are taken out of *Aratus*, where we may see how judiciously he has pickt out those that are most proper for his Husbandman's observation; how he has enforced the expression, and heightened the images which he found in the original.

The second book has more wit in it, and a greater boldness in its metaphors than any of the rest. The Poet with a great beauty, applies oblivion, ignorance, wonder, desire, and the like, to his Trees. The last *Georgic* has indeed as many metaphors, but not so daring as this; for human thoughts and passions may be more naturally ascribed to a Bee, than to an inanimate Plant. He who reads over the pleasures of a Country life, as they are described by *Virgil* in the latter end of this book, can scarce be of *Virgil's* mind in preferring even the life of a Philosopher to it.

We may I think read the Poet's clime in his description, for he seems to have been in a sweat at the writing of it.

-----*O quis me gelidis sub montibus Hæmi
Sistat, et ingenti ramorum protegat umbrâ!*

And is every where mentioning among his chief pleasures, the coolness of his shades and rivers, vales and grottos, which a more Northern Poet would have omitted for the description of a sunny hill, and fire-side.

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The Third *Georgic* seems to be the most laboured of them all; there is a wonderful vigour and spirit in the description of the Horse and Chariot-race. The force of Love is represented in noble instances, and very sublime expressions. The *Scythian* winter-piece appears so very cold and bleak to the eye, that a man can scarce look on it without shivering. The Murrain at the end has all the expressiveness that words can give. It was here that the Poet strained hard to out-do *Lucretius* in the description of his plague, and if the reader would see what success he had, he may find it at large in *Scaliger*.

But *Virgil* seems no where so well pleased, as when he is got among his Bees in the Fourth *Georgic*: and ennobles the actions of so trivial a creature, with metaphors drawn from the most important concerns of mankind. His verses are not in a greater noise and hurry in the battels of *Æneas* and *Turnus*, than in the engagement of two swarms. And as in his *Æneis* he compares the labours of his *Trojans* to those of Bees and Pismires, here he compares the labours of the Bees to those of the *Cyclops*. In short, the last *Georgic* was a good prelude to the *Æneis*; and very well shewed what the Poet could do in the description of what was really great, by his describing the mock-grandeur of an Insect with so good a grace. There is more pleasantness in the little platform of a garden, which he gives us about the middle of this book, than in all the spacious walks and water-works of *Rapin*. The speech of *Proteus* at the end can never be enough admired, and was indeed very fit to conclude so divine a work.

After this particular account of the Beauties in the *Georgics*, I should in the next place endeavour to point out its Imperfections, if it has any. But though I think there are some

few parts in it that are not so beautiful as the rest, I shall not presume to name them, as rather suspecting my own judgment, than I can believe a fault to be in that Poem, which lay so long under *Virgil's* correction, and had his last hand put to it. The first *Georgic* was probably burlesqued in the Author's life-time; for we still find in the Scholiasts a verse that ridicules part of a line translated from *Hesiod*. *Nudus ara, sere nudus*---- And we may easily guess at the judgment of this extraordinary Critick, whoever he was, from his censuring this particular precept. We may be sure *Virgil* would not have translated it from *Hesiod*, had he not discovered some beauty in it; and indeed the beauty of it is what I have before observed to be frequently met with in *Virgil*, the delivering the precept so indirectly, and singling out the particular circumstance of sowing and plowing Naked, to suggest to us that these employments are proper only in the Hot season of the year.

I shall not here compare the stile of the *Georgics* with that of *Lucretius*, which the reader may see already done in the preface to the second volume of *Miscellany Poems*; but shall conclude this Poem to be the most complete, elaborate, and finisht piece of all Antiquity. The *Æneis* indeed is of a Nobler kind, but the *Georgic* is more Perfect in its kind. The *Æneis* has a greater variety of beauties in it, but those of the *Georgic* are more exquisite. In short, the *Georgic* has all the perfection that can be expected in a Poem written by the greatest Poet in the flower of his age, when his invention was ready, his imagination warm, his judgment settled, and all his faculties in their full vigour and maturity.