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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl Of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

General Criticism on Dr. Johnson's Writings

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GENERAL CRITICISM

ON

DR. JOHNSON'S WRITINGS.

DR. Johnson's works have obtained so much reputation, and the execution of them, from partiality to his abilities, has been rated so far above their merit, that, without detracting from his capacity or his learning, it may be useful to caution young authors against admiration of his *style* and *manner*; both of which are uncommonly vicious, and unworthy of imitation by any man who aims at excellence in writing his own language.

A marked *manner*, when it runs through all the compositions of any master, is a defect in itself, and indicates a deviation from nature. The writer betrays his having been struck by some particular tint, and his having overlooked nature's variety. It is true that the greatest masters of composition are so far imperfect, as that they always leave some marks by which we may discover their *hand*. He approaches the nearest to universality, whose works make it difficult for our quickness or sagacity to observe certain characteristic touches which ascertain the specific author.

Dr. Johnson's works are as easily distinguished as those of the most affected writer; for exuberance is a fault as much as quaintness. There is meaning in almost every thing Johnson says; he is often profound, and a just reasoner—I mean, when prejudice, bigotry, and arrogance do not cloud or debase his logic. He is benevolent in the application of his morality; dogmatically uncharitable in the dispensation of his censures; and equally so, when he differs with his antagonist on general truths or partial doctrines.

The first criterion that stamps Johnson's works for his, is the loaded style. I will not call it verbose, because verbosity generally implies unmeaning verbiage; a censure he does not deserve. I have allowed and do allow, that most

of his words have an adequate, and frequently an illustrating purport, the true use of epithets; but then his words are indiscriminately select, and too forceful for ordinary occasions. They form a hardness of diction and a muscular toughness that resist all ease and graceful movement. Every sentence is as high-coloured as any: no paragraph improves; the position is as robust as the demonstration; and the weakest part of the sentence (I mean, in the effect, not in the solution) is generally the conclusion: he illustrates till he fatigues, and continues to prove, after he has convinced. This fault is so usual with him, he is so apt to charge with three different set of phrases of the same calibre, that, if I did not condemn his laboured coinage of new words, I would call his threefold inundation of synonymous expressions, *triptology*.

He prefers learned words to the simple and common. He is never simple, elegant or light. He destroys more enemies with the weight of his shield than with the point of his spear, and had rather make three mortal wounds in the same part than one. This monotony, the grievous effect of pedantry and self-conceit, prevents him from being eloquent. He excites no passions but indignation: his writings send the reader away more satiated than pleased. If he attempts humour, he makes your reason smile, without making you gay; because the study that his learned mirth requires, destroys cheerfulness. It is the clumsy gambol of a lettered elephant. We wonder that so grave an animal should have strayed into the province of the ape; yet admire that practice should have given the bulky quadruped so much agility.

Upon the whole, Johnson's style appears to me so encumbered, so void of ear and harmony, that I know no modern writer whose works can be read aloud with so little satisfaction. I question whether one should not read a page of equal length in any modern author, in a minute's time less than one of Johnson's, all proper pauses and accents being duly attended to in both.

His works are the antipodes of taste, and he a schoolmaster of truth, but never its parent; for his doctrines have no novelty, and are never inculcated with indulgence either to the forward child or to the dull one. He has set nothing in a new light, yet is as diffuse as if we had every thing to learn. Modern writers have improved on the ancients only by conciseness. Dr. Johnson, like the chymists of Laputa, endeavours to carry back what has been digested, to its pristine and crude principles. He is a standing proof that the Muses leave works unfinished, if they are not embellished by the Graces.