

I N T E R L U D E.

Bookfeller. **Y**OUR verses, Mr. Botanist, consist of *pure description*, I hope there is *sense* in the notes.

Poet. I am only a flower-painter, or occasionally attempt a landscape; and leave the human figure with the subjects of history to abler artists.

B. It is well to know what subjects are within the limits of your pencil; many have failed of success from the want of this self-knowledge. But pray tell me, what is the essential difference between Poetry and Prose? is it solely the melody or measure of the language?

P. I think not solely; for some prose has its melody, and even measure. And good verses, well spoken in a language unknown to the hearer, are not easily to be distinguished from good prose.

B. Is it the sublimity, beauty, or novelty of the sentiments?

P. Not so; for sublime sentiments are often better expressed in prose. Thus when Warwick in one of the plays of Shakespear, is left wounded on the field after the loss of the battle, and his friend says to him, "Oh, could you but fly!" what can be more sublime than his answer, "Why then, I would not fly." No measure of verse, I imagine, could add dignity to this sentiment. And it would be easy to select examples of the beautiful or new from prose writers, which I suppose no measure of verse could improve.

B. In what then consists the essential difference between Poetry and Prose?

P. Next to the measure of the language, the principal distinction appears to me to consist in this: that Poetry admits of but few words expressive of very abstracted ideas, whereas Prose abounds with them. And as our ideas derived from visible objects are more distinct than those derived from the objects of our other senses, the words expressive of these ideas belonging to vision make up the principal part of poetic language. That is, the Poet writes principally

pally to the eye, the Prose-writer uses more abstracted terms. Mr. Pope has written a bad verse in the Windsor Forest :

“ And Kennet swift for silver Eels *renown'd*.”

The word *renown'd* does not present the idea of a visible object to the mind, and is thence prosaic. But change this line thus,

“ And Kennet swift, where silver Graylings *play*.”

and it becomes poetry, because the scenery is then brought before the eye.

B. This may be done in prose.

P. And when it is done in a single word, it animates the prose ; so it is more agreeable to read in Mr. Gibbon's History, “ Germany was at this time *over-shadowed* with extensive forests ;” than Germany was at this time *full* of extensive forests. But where this mode of expression occurs too frequently, the prose approaches to poetry : and in graver works, where we expect to be instructed rather than amused, it becomes tedious and impertinent. Some parts of Mr. Burke's eloquent orations become intricate and enervated by superfluity of poetic ornament ; which quantity of ornament would have been agreeable in a poem, where much ornament is expected.

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B. Is then the office of Poetry only to amuse?

P. The Muses are young ladies, we expect to see them dressed; though not like some modern beauties with so much gauze and feather, that “the Lady herself is the least part of her.” There are however didactic pieces of poetry, which are much admired, as the Georgics of Virgil, Mason’s English Garden, Hayley’s Epistles; nevertheless Science is best delivered in Prose, as its mode of reasoning is from stricter analogies than metaphors or similies.

B. Do not Personifications and Allegories distinguish poetry?

P. These are other arts of bringing objects before the eye; or of expressing sentiments in the language of vision; and are indeed better suited to the pen than the pencil.

B. That is strange, when you have just said they are used to bring their objects before the eye.

P. In poetry the personification or allegoric figure is generally indistinct, and therefore does not strike us so forcibly as to make us attend to its improbability; but in painting, the figures being all
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much more distinct, their improbability becomes apparent, and seizes our attention to it. Thus the person of Concealment is very indistinct, and therefore does not compel us to attend to its improbability, in the following beautiful lines of Shakespear :

“ — She never told her love ;
But let Concealment, like a worm i' th' bud,
Feed on her damask cheek.” —

But in these lines below the person of Reason obtrudes itself into our company, and becomes disagreeable by its distinctness, and consequent improbability.

“ To Reason I flew, and intreated her aid,
Who paused on my case, and each circumstance weigh'd ;
Then gravely reply'd in return to my prayer,
That Hebe was fairest of all that were fair.
That's a truth, reply'd I, I've no need to be taught,
I came to you, Reason, to find out a fault.
If that's all, says Reason, return as you came,
To find fault with Hebe would forfeit my name.”

Allegoric figures are on this account in general less manageable in painting and in statuary than in poetry : and can seldom be introduced in the two former arts in company with natural figures, as is evident from the ridiculous effect of many of the paintings of Rubens in the Luxemburgh gallery ; and for this reason, because their improbability becomes more striking, when there are the figures of real persons by their side to compare them with.

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Mrs. Angelica Kauffman, well apprised of this circumstance, has introduced no mortal figures amongst her Cupids and her Graces. And the great Roubiliac, in his unrivalled monument of Time and Fame struggling for the trophy of General Fleming, has only hung up a medallion of the head of the hero of the piece. There are however some allegoric figures, which we have so often heard described or seen delineated, that we almost forget that they do not exist in common life; and hence view them without astonishment; as the figures of the heathen mythology, of angels, devils, death and time; and almost believe them to be realities, even when they are mixed with representations of the natural forms of man. Whence I conclude, that a certain degree of probability is necessary to prevent us from revolting with distaste from unnatural images; unless we are otherwise so much interested in the contemplation of them as not to perceive their improbability.

B. Is this reasoning about degrees of probability just?—When Sir Joshua Reynolds, who is unequalled both in the theory and practice of his art, and who is a great master of the pen as well as the pencil, has asserted in a discourse delivered to the Royal Academy, December 11, 1786, that “the higher styles of painting, like the higher kinds of the Drama, do not aim at any thing like deception; or have any expectation, that the spectators should think the events there represented are really passing before them.” And he then accuses Mr. Fielding of bad judgment, when he attempts to compliment Mr. Garrick in one of his novels, by introducing an ignorant man, mistaking the representation of a scene in Hamlet for a reality; and

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thinks, because he was an ignorant man, he was less liable to make such a mistake.

P. It is a metaphysical question, and requires more attention than Sir Joshua has bestowed upon it.—You will allow, that we are perfectly deceived in our dreams; and that even in our waking reveries, we are often so much absorbed in the contemplation of what passes in our imaginations, that for a while we do not attend to the lapse of time or to our own locality; and thus suffer a similar kind of deception as in our dreams. That is, we believe things present before our eyes, which are not so.

There are two circumstances, which contribute to this complete deception in our dreams. First, because in sleep the organs of sense are closed or inert, and hence the trains of ideas associated in our imaginations are never interrupted or disordered by the irritations of external objects, and can not therefore be contrasted with our sensations. On this account, though we are affected with a variety of passions in our dreams, as anger, love, joy; yet we never experience surprize.—For surprize is only produced when any external irritations suddenly obtrude themselves, and disperse our passing trains of ideas.

Secondly, because in sleep there is a total suspension of our voluntary power, both over the muscles of our bodies, and the ideas of our minds; for we neither walk about, nor reason in complete sleep. Hence, as the trains of ideas are passing in our imaginations in dreams, we cannot compare them with our previous knowledge of things, as we do in our waking hours; for this is a voluntary exertion; and thus we cannot perceive their incongruity.

Thus we are deprived in sleep of the only two means by which we can distinguish the trains of ideas passing in our imaginations, from those excited by our sensations; and are led by their vivacity to believe them to belong to the latter. For the vivacity of these trains of ideas, passing in the imagination, is greatly increased by the causes above-mentioned; that is, by their not being disturbed or disordered either by the impulses of external bodies, as in surprize; or by our voluntary exertions in comparing them with our previous knowledge of things, as in reasoning upon them.

B. Now to apply.

P. When by the art of the Painter or Poet a train of ideas is suggested to our imaginations, which interests us so much by the pain or pleasure it affords, that we cease to attend to the irritations of common external objects, and cease also to use any voluntary efforts to compare these interesting trains of ideas with our previous knowledge of things, a compleat reverie is produced: during which time, however short, if it be but for a moment, the objects themselves appear to exist before us. This, I think, has been called by an ingenious critic “the ideal presence” of such objects. (*Elements of Criticism* by Lord Kaimes). And in respect to the compliment intended by Mr. Fielding to Mr. Garrick, it would seem that an ignorant Ruffic at the play of Hamlet, who has some previous belief in the appearance of Ghosts, would sooner be liable to fall into reverie, and continue in it longer, than one who possessed more know-

ledge of the real nature of things, and had a greater facility of exercising his reason.

B. It must require great art in the Painter or Poet to produce this kind of deception?

P. The matter must be interesting from its sublimity, beauty, or novelty; this is the scientific part; and the art consists in bringing these distinctly before the eye, so as to produce (as above-mentioned) the ideal presence of the object, in which the great Shakespear particularly excells.

B. Then it is not of any consequence whether the representations correspond with nature?

P. Not if they so much interest the reader or spectator as to induce the reverie above described. Nature may be seen in the market-place, or at the card-table; but we expect something more than this in the play-house or picture-room. The further the artists recedes from nature, the greater novelty he is likely to produce; if he rises above nature, he produces the sublime; and beauty is probably a selection and new combination of her most agreeable parts. Yourself will be sensible of the truth of this doctrine by recollecting over

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in your mind the works of three of our celebrated artists. Sir Joshua Reynolds has introduced sublimity even into its portraits; we admire the representation of persons, whose reality we should have passed by unnoticed. Mrs. Angelica Kauffman attracts our eyes with beauty, which I suppose no where exists; certainly few Grecian faces are seen in this country. And the daring pencil of Fuseli transports us beyond the boundaries of nature, and ravishes us with the charm of the most interesting novelty. And Shakespear, who excels in all these together, so far captivates the spectator, as to make him unmindful of every kind of violation of Time, Place, or Existence. As at the first appearance of the Ghost of Hamlet, "his ear must be dull as the fat weed, which roots itself on Lethe's brink," who can attend to the improbability of the exhibition. So in many scenes of the Tempest we perpetually believe the action passing before our eyes, and relapse with somewhat of distaste into common life at the intervals of the representation.

B. I suppose a poet of less ability would find such great machinery difficult and cumbersome to manage?

P. Just so, we should be shocked at the apparent improbabilities. As in the gardens of a Scicilian nobleman, described in Mr. Brydone's and in Mr. Swinburn's travels, there are said to be six hundred statues of imaginary monsters, which so disgust the spectators, that the state had once a serious design of destroying them; and yet the very
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improbable monsters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have entertained the world for many centuries.

B. The monsters in your *Botanic Garden*, I hope, are of the latter kind?

P. The candid reader must determine.