ART. IV. *Poems, never before published, written chiefly at Bremhill, in Wiltshire.* By the Rev. W. L. Bowles. 12mo. pp. 200. London. Cadell and Davies. 1809.

MR. Bowles has long been a candidate for literary fame, and one of the most deservedly popular of our minor poets. There is a certain melancholy sweetness in his style peculiar to himself; and although we have heard it objected to his earlier productions, that they dwell too long and too frequently upon the subject of his own private griefs, yet this is done in a manner so little offensive, that our sympathy towards the man begets our indulgence to the poet.

But although he has already given three volumes of miscellaneous poetry to the public, Mr. Bowles has chiefly been celebrated as a writer of sonnets, a species of poem which we are by no means disposed to place so high in the scale of merit, as its popularity appears to warrant. The dilation of a single idea into fourteen lines accords but ill with the energy of the English language; and it has ever appeared to us, that nothing but the soft melody of the Italian, or the majesty of the Spanish, could reconcile the ear to the monotony of metre, and the perpetual recurrence of the same rhyme necessary to the legitimate sonnet. We are aware, however, that this species of poem is highly esteemed in other countries, particularly in France, where the authority of Boileau may be cited by the advocates of the sonnet, both in support of its merit, and of the extreme difficulty of its composition. But the best of the modern French writers have ventured to dissent from this opinion; and Laharpe has not hesitated to affirm, that the decision of this great critic is more to be attributed to a servile compliance with the fashion of the times, than to his own candid and unbiassed judgment.

It is only within these few years that the sonnet has become so favourite a production with our English poets. Formerly (we speak not of the times of Elizabeth and James) few attempted it, and still fewer succeeded. But the present race of poetasters have made ample amends for this blank in our literature. Attracted by its brevity and supposed facility, and probably not a little dazzled by the meretricious ornament of which it has been found to be susceptible, every rhyming school-boy and love-sick girl now give their crude effusions to the public under the denomination of sonnets. The press teems with volumes of this description, and unless another Censor shall 'sweep the swarm away,' in all probability the evil will progressively increase until it become a real disgrace to British literature.

But,

But, in stating these opinions, we by no means wish to insinuate that this species of poem is totally devoid of merit. The writings of Mr. Bowles alone would be sufficient to convince us of the contrary. Indeed, we are of opinion that his merits as a poet (and merit he certainly has) will be found to rest chiefly upon his success in compositions of this nature. His sonnets are superior to any we have read; and if they never obtain for him the character of a first-rate poet, they will at least secure to him the reputation of a pleasing and not inelegant writer.

With this impression on our minds, the result of Mr. Bowles's former publications, we opened the volume before us. The first poem it contains is entitled 'Old Time's Holiday,' a title for which, after a most careful perusal, we are still unable to account. It is, perhaps, enough to say, that the subject is allegorical, which in modern poetry is nearly a synonimous term for dulness. The versification by no means makes amends for the obscurity of the subject; with the exception of a few pleasing passages, it is extremely negligent. The reader will not easily recognize our author's former style in such verses as these:

> 'Golden lads and lasses gay,
> Now is Life's sweet holiday;
> Time shall lay by his scythe for you,
> And Joy the valley with fresh violets strew.'—p. 8.

The translations from Theocritus, which immediately follow, are imitations of detached passages rather than translations. 'They are not meant' (observes our author) 'to be literal translations, and I have selected only those passages which appeared poetical and would form landscapes.'—This frank avowal renders it an unnecessary task on our part to point out the want of fidelity to the original observable throughout. We must, however, remark, that Mr. Bowles's choice has been far from happy. The pastorals of the old Sicilian might certainly have afforded better subjects for the canvass, than those which are here selected.

'To these pictures from an ancient' (continues Mr. Bowles) 'I have ventured to add as *notes* some pictures from the modern school'—That is to say (for it requires an explanation), Mr. Bowles having translated some passages from Theocritus, as subjects worthy of a distinguished place in the exhibition of the Royal Academy, now takes, *vice versâ*, from the exhibition of the year 1805, some subjects which he conceives to be worthy of a poetical dress. It is necessary to recollect, that these are added as *notes* to his translations from the most natural, if not the most perfect, of pastoral poets; and from this kind of bold competition with Theocritus we are naturally led to expect the very chastest of pastoral compo-

sitions,

sitions, the very breathings of Pan's own pipe. They begin as follows:—

> 'What various objects strike with various force!
> Achilles, Hebe, and Sir Watkin's horse!—
> Here summer scenes, there Pentland's stormy ridge,
> Lords, ladies, Noah's ark, and Cranford bridge—
> Some that display the elegant design,
> The lucid colours, and the flowing line;
> Some that might make, alas! Walsh Porter stare,
> And wonder how the devil they got there.'—p. 29.

Voilà la belle nature! exclaimed Voltaire, after reading one of the most extravagant passages of our divine Milton. The admirers of Theocritus will not be less struck with the delicate simplicity and true pastoral expression of these lines. They breathe the very soul of the Sicilian bard!—The portraits of Lady M. and the Hon. Miss Mercer are equally happy; but it is in his description of Loutherbourg's scene in France that our author has reached the acmé of pastoral excellence:—

> 'Artist! I own thy genius; but the touch
> May be too restless, and the glare too much:
> And sure none ever saw a landscape shine,
> Basking in beams of such a sun as thine,
> But felt a fervid dew upon his phiz,
> And panting cry'd, "Oh Lord, how hot it is!"'

We cannot but congratulate the public upon this valuable addition to the Idylls of Theocritus. In these Notes the classical reader will no doubt distinguish the very great and praiseworthy attention that has been paid to the peculiar excellencies of the Syracusan bard. Simplicity and nature are the characteristic features of his writings, and who will be bold enough to deny the same merits to his imitator?

The poem entitled 'The Visionary Boy,' though often extremely obscure, contains some poetical lines. Our author prettily says of the 'heart-sick Minstrel,'

> 'For him romantic Solitude
> Shall pile sublime her mountains rude;
> For him, with shades more soft imprest,
> The lucid lake's transparent breast
> Shall show the banks, the woods, the hill,
> More clear, more beautiful, more still;
> For him, more musical shall wave
> The pines o'er Echo's moonlight cave,
> While sounds as of a fairy lyre
> Amid the shadowy cliffs expire.'—p. 49.

Other

Other passages, equally pleasing, might have been extracted, had the limits, which we were obliged to prescribe to this article, allowed their insertion.—We cannot, however, leave the consideration of this poem without strongly objecting to such epithets as '*skiey blue*' (p. 51) and '*bluey* fading hills' (p. 54)—Nor can our ears be reconciled to the substitution of 'winged griffin horse' for hippogriff,—especially in a passage which is partly conveyed ('*convey* the wise it call') from the beautiful lyrics of the Satyr in the Faithful Shepherdess of Fletcher:—

> 'I can sail, and I can fly
> To all regions of the sky,
> Or the shooting meteor course
> On a winged griffin horse.'—p. 62.

The fancy readily attaches something wild and poetical to the word hippogriff, but the 'winged griffin horse' can recal nothing to the imagination but one of those 'chimæras dire' that live only in the distempered imagination of the sign-painter.

But the longest and most remarkable poem in the volume is entitled 'The Sylph of Summer, or Air.' Mr. Bowles informs us, 'that it was written as part of a projected poem on the elements; air, earth, fire, water—The subject is in every respect capable of the highest poetical ornament. I leave it to abler hands, having closed my book for ever.' The poem opens in the following manner:—

> 'God said, let there be light, and there was light!—
> At once the glorious Sun, at his command,
> From space illimitable, void and dark,
> Sprung jubilant, and angel hierarchies,
> Whose long hosannah peal'd from orb to orb,
> Sung, Glory be to thee, God of all worlds!'—p. 99.

The full-mouthed majesty of this exordium certainly prepared us to expect the introduction of personages very different from sylphs and spirits; but on proceeding we found, to our extreme astonishment, that the Deity was merely brought forward as a kind of *avant-courier* to prepare the way for the Spirit of Air, and Sylph of the Summer Gale:—

> 'To thee,
> Spirit of Air! I lift the venturous song,
> Whose viewless presence fills the living scene;
> Whose element ten thousand thousand wings
> Fan joyous; o'er whose fields the morning clouds
> Ride high; whose rule the lightning shafts obey
> And the deep thunder's long careering march.

The

The winds too are thy subjects: from the breeze,
That, like a child upon a holiday,
On the high mountain's van pursues the down
Of the grey thistle, ere the autumnal shower
Steals soft and mars his pastime, to the King
Of Hurricanes, that sounds his mighty shell,
And bids Tornado sweep the western world.
Sylph of the summer gale, to thee I call, &c.'—p. 101.

The poetical propriety of Mr. Bowles's sylphic mythology we are by no means inclined to dispute, but we most certainly object to this absurd combination of truth and fable; to this division of power between the Deity and the Spirit of Air,

. . . . 'whose rule the lightning shafts obey,
And the deep thunder's long careering march.'

In fact, the exordium is no way connected with the poem. The introduction of the Deity is nearly as much misplaced, as it would have been at the commencement of the 'Rape of the Lock,' nor can we account for it in any other way, than by supposing that Mr. Bowles had a beginning ready made in his portfolio, which, as he was about to close his book for ever, he determined should not be lost to the public.

Shakspeare tells us, that

'The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heav'n to earth, from earth to heav'n;'

and certainly we have never seen this so fully exemplified, as in the poem now before us. Mr. Bowles has wandered from heaven to earth, and from earth to heaven, in so extraordinary a manner, that we must either give him credit for the finest frenzy that ever attacked a poet's brain, or be compelled to suspect that these divine flights and abrupt transitions are merely the result of chance, the obvious consequence of injudiciously joining the shreds and patches of a poet's common-place book. We give the following example, the first that presents itself, of the abruptness to which we allude. After five pages on the existence of a Deity, Mr. Bowles concludes,

'Let Man then walk meek, humble, pure, and just;
Though meek, yet dignified; though humble, raised
The heir of life and immortality;
Conscious that in this awful world he stands
The only of all living things ordain'd
To think, and know, and feel "there is a God!"
Child of the Air! though most I love to hear
Thy gentle summons whisper, when the Spring
At the first carol of the village lark
Looks out and smiles,' &c.

Who

Who this 'Child of the Air' is, or why he is introduced immediately upon the completion of our author's proofs of the existence of a Deity, the reader is left to divine. Mr. Bowles's religious flight is preceded by some common-place reflections on the 'sole erratic comet,' whose re-appearance he nicely calculates at 'twice three hundred years.'—p. 111.

At page 106 Mr. Bowles attributes a property to the leaves of the white poplar, which, we believe, has escaped the researches of the Linnæan Society.

> 'The magic instrument . . . . . .
> . . . . . most musically rings,
> Sometimes in joyance, as the flaunting leaf
> Of the white poplar,' &c.

Now we have never heard of a leaf ringing either in joyance, or in sorrow. We have hitherto presumed the 'music of the groves' to be a figurative expression, alluding to the feathered tribe rather than to the grove itself. It appears, however, that poets are more matter-of-fact men than we had supposed them to be, and that when they talk of such music they mean literally the music of the oaks, the elms, and the white poplars. This truly pastoral idea would not have disgraced our author's valuable additions to Theocritus.

We were not a little surprised at the many instances of bad taste with which this poem abounds. Amongst the number we particularly noticed the comparison between the 'proud patriot King,' and 'the *laboured* hind' sitting on his 'inverted barrow' as 'solemn as a Sophi,' smoking 'his broken tube,' 'feeding robins,' and 'snaring mice:'—

> . . . . . 'and say, ye great,
> Ye mighty monarchs of this earthly scene,
> What nobler views can elevate the heart
> Of a proud patriot King, than thus to chase
> The bold, rapacious spoilers from the field,
> And with an eye of merciful regard
> To look on humble worth, wet from the storm,
> And chill'd by indigence?'—p. 119.

We remember to have seen, some years ago, certain poems, called Botany Bay Eclogues, where such an appeal to the 'mighty monarchs of this earthly scene' would by no means have been misplaced. It came upon us rather unexpectedly in the present volume. Mr. Bowles does not appear to be aware of the absurdity of endeavouring to assimilate things in themselves totally dissimilar.

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The lesser poems deserve little notice, with the exception of the 'Dirge of Nelson,' which we may safely pronounce to be the very worst of all the bad poems which have been written upon the same subject.

In summing up our opinion of the present publication, we are reluctantly obliged to pronounce it to be unworthy of the author whose name it bears. It is evidently a patched compilation from the refuse of his portfolio. We cannot allow ourselves to be disarmed by the declaration 'that he has closed his book for ever.' It has been so much the custom lately for authors to launch forth their crude and undigested productions under this pretence, that we deem it necessary to endeavour to check a practice by which our press is inundated and our literature disgraced. Still, we are willing to admit that the present volume contains some few passages fully equal to anything of our author's composition. The poem called 'The Winds,' which is given in the Appendix, is of this description—we regret that its length prevents us from transcribing it. The opening of the little poem written at Cadland possesses all the prettiness of his earlier manner.

> 'If ever sea-maid, from her coral cave,
> Beneath the hum of the great surge, has lov'd
> To pass delighted from her green abode,
> And, seated on a summer bank, to sing
> No earthly music; in a spot like this
> The Bard might feign he heard her, as she dry'd
> Her golden hair, yet dripping from the main,
> In the slant sun-beam,' &c.

But, in our opinion, neither a few pleasing passages, nor the eight dedications with which the present volume is graced, will long preserve it from oblivion. Indeed, we almost fear that its weight may prove sufficient to involve its three predecessors in a similar fate. Few persons are fastidious enough to refuse a place in their libraries to a volume of pleasing poetry, but it requires merit of a superior cast to entitle four to a similar admission. Upon leaving off trade, why did Mr. Bowles think it necessary to regale us with the sweepings of his literary shopboard?—Many authors have been misled by a certain degree of success, and by the ill-judged flattery of friends; we most sincerely regret that Mr. Bowles should be found amongst the number.

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