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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. VII. Of the History of Arts.

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S E C T. VII.

Of the History of Arts.

WE have already observed, that art is natural to man; and that the skill he acquires after many ages of practice, is only the improvement of a talent he possessed at the first. Vitruvius finds the rudiments of architecture in the form of a Scythian cottage. The armourer may find the first productions of his calling in the sling and the bow; and the ship-wright of his in the canoe of the savage. Even the historian and the poet may find the original essays of their arts in the tale, and the song, which celebrate the wars, the loves, and the adventures of men in their rudest condition.

DESTINED to cultivate his own nature, or to mend his situation, man finds a continual subject of attention, ingenuity, and labour. Even where he does not propose any personal improvement, his faculties are strengthened by those very exercises in which he seems to forget himself: his reason and his affections are thus profitably engaged in the affairs of society; his invention and his skill are exercised in procuring his accommodations and his food; his particular pursuits are prescribed to him by circumstances of the age and of the country in which he lives: in one situation he is occupied with wars and political deliberations; in another, with the care of his

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interest, of his personal ease, or conveniency. He suits his means to the ends he has in view; and, by multiplying contrivances, proceeds, by degrees, to the perfection of his arts. In every step of his progress, if his skill be increased, his desire must likewise have time to extend: and it would be as vain to suggest a contrivance of which he slighted the use, as it would be to tell him of blessings which he could not command.

AGES are generally supposed to have borrowed from those who went before them, and nations to have derived their portion of learning or of art from abroad. The Romans are thought to have learned from the Greeks, and the moderns of Europe from both. In this imagination we frequently proceed so far as to admit of nothing original in the practice or manners of any people. The Greek was a copy of the Egyptian, and even the Egyptian was an imitator, though we have lost sight of the model on which he was formed.

IT is known, that men improve by example and intercourse; but in the case of nations, whose members excite and direct each other, why seek from abroad the origin of arts, of which every society, having the principles in itself, only requires a favourable occasion to bring them to light? When such occasion presents itself to any people, they generally seize it; and while it continues, they improve the inventions to which it gave rise among themselves, or they willingly copy from others: but they never employ their own invention, nor
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look abroad, for instruction on subjects that do not lie in the way of their common pursuits; they never adopt a refinement of which they have not discovered the use.

INVENTIONS, we frequently observe, are accidental; but it is probable, that an accident which escapes the artist in one age, may be seized by one who succeeds him, and who is better apprised of its use. Where circumstances are favourable, and where a people is intent on the objects of any art, every invention is preserved, by being brought into general practice; every model is studied, and every accident is turned to account. If nations actually borrow from their neighbours, they probably borrow only what they are nearly in a condition to have invented themselves.

ANY singular practice of one country, therefore, is seldom transferred to another, till the way be prepared by the introduction of similar circumstances. Hence our frequent complaints of the dullness or obstinacy of mankind, and of the dilatory communication of arts, from one place to another. While the Romans adopted the arts of Greece, the Thracians and Illyrians continued to behold them with indifference. Those arts were, during one period, confined to the Greek colonies, and during another, to the Roman. Even where they were spread by a visible intercourse, they were still received by independent nations with the slowness of invention. They made a progress not more rapid at Rome than they had



done at Athens; and they passed to the extremities of the Roman empire, only in company with new colonies, and joined to Italian policy.

THE modern race, who came abroad to the possession of cultivated provinces, retained the arts they had practised at home: the new master hunted the boar, or pastured his herds, where he might have raised a plentiful harvest: he built a cottage in the view of a palace: he buried, in one common ruin, the edifices, sculptures, paintings, and libraries, of the former inhabitant: he made a settlement upon a plan of his own, and opened anew the source of inventions, without perceiving from a distance to what length their progress might lead his posterity. The cottage of the present race, like that of the former, by degrees enlarged its dimensions; public buildings acquired a magnificence in a new taste. Even this taste came, in a course of ages, to be exploded, and the people of Europe recurred to the models which their fathers destroyed, and wept over the ruins which they could not restore.

THE literary remains of antiquity were studied and imitated, after the original genius of modern nations had broke forth: the rude efforts of poetry in Italy and Provence, resembled those of the Greeks and the ancient Romans. How far the merit of our works might, without the aid of their models, have risen by successive improvements, or whether we have gained more by imitation than we have lost by quitting our native system of thinking, and
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our vein of fable, must be left to conjecture. We are certainly indebted to them for the materials, as well as the form, of many of our compositions; and without their example, the strain of our literature, together with that of our manners and policy, would have been different from what they at present are. This much however may be said with assurance, that although the Roman and the modern literature favour alike of the Greek original, yet mankind in either instance would not have drank of this fountain, unless they had been hastening to open springs of their own.

SENTIMENT and fancy, the use of the hand or the head, are not inventions of particular men; and the flourishing of arts that depend on them, are, in the case of any people, a proof rather of political felicity at home, than of any instruction received from abroad, or of any natural superiority in point of industry or talents.

WHEN the attentions of men are turned toward particular subjects, when the acquisitions of one age are left entire to the next, when every individual is protected in his place, and left to pursue the suggestion of his wants, devices accumulate; and it is difficult to find the original of any art. The steps which lead to perfection are many; and we are at a loss on whom to bestow the greatest share of our praise; on the first or on the last who may have bore a part in the progress.

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S E C T. VIII.

Of the History of Literature.

IF we may rely on the general observations contained in the last section, the literary, as well as mechanical arts, being a natural produce of the human mind, will rise spontaneously where-ever men are happily placed; and in certain nations it is not more necessary to look abroad for the origin of literature, than it is for the suggestion of any of the pleasures or exercises in which mankind, under a state of prosperity and freedom, are sufficiently inclined to indulge themselves.

WE are apt to consider arts as foreign and adventitious to the nature of man: but there is no art that did not find its occasion in human life, and that was not, in some one or other of the situations in which our species is found, suggested as a means for the attainment of some useful end. The mechanic and commercial arts took their rise from the love of property, and were encouraged by the prospects of safety and of gain: the literary and liberal arts took their rise from the understanding, the fancy, and the heart. They are mere exercises of the mind in search of its peculiar pleasures and occupations; and are promoted by circumstances that suffer the mind to enjoy itself.

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MEN are equally engaged by the past, the present, and the future, and are prepared for every occupation that gives scope to their powers. Productions therefore, whether of narration, fiction, or reasoning, that tend to employ the imagination, or move the heart, continue for ages a subject of attention, and a source of delight. The memory of human transactions being preserved in tradition or writing, is the natural gratification of a passion that consists of curiosity, admiration, and the love of amusement.

BEFORE many books are written, and before science is greatly advanced, the productions of mere genius are sometimes complete: the performer requires not the aid of learning where his description or story relates to near and contiguous objects; where it relates to the conduct and characters of men with whom he himself has acted, and in whose occupations and fortunes he himself has borne a part.

WITH this advantage, the poet is the first to offer the fruits of his genius, and to lead in the career of those arts by which the mind is destined to exhibit its imaginations, and to express its passions. Every tribe of barbarians have their passionate or historic rhymes, which contain the superstition, the enthusiasm, and the admiration of glory, with which the breasts of men, in the earliest state of society, are possessed. They delight in verse-compositions, either because the cadence of numbers is natural to the language of sentiment, or because,
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not having the advantage of writing, they are obliged to bring the ear in aid of the memory, in order to facilitate the repetition, and insure the preservation of their works.

WHEN we attend to the language which savages employ on any solemn occasion, it appears that man is a poet by nature. Whether at first obliged by the mere defects of his tongue, and the scantiness of proper expressions, or seduced by a pleasure of the fancy in stating the analogy of its objects, he clothes every conception in image and metaphor. "We have planted the tree of peace," says an American orator; "we have buried the axe under its roots: we will henceforth repose under its shade; we will join to brighten the chain that binds our nations together." Such are the collections of metaphor which those nations employ in their public harangues. They have likewise already adopted those lively figures, and that daring freedom of language, which the learned have afterwards found so well fitted to express the rapid transitions of the imagination, and the ardours of a passionate mind.

IF we are required to explain, how men could be poets, or orators, before they were aided by the learning of the scholar and the critic? we may inquire, in our turn, how bodies could fall by their weight, before the laws of gravitation were recorded in books? Mind, as well as body, has laws, which are exemplified in the practice of men,



men, and which the critic collects only after the example has shewn what they are.

OCCASIONED, probably, by the physical connection we have mentioned, between the emotions of a heated imagination, and the impressions received from music and pathetic sounds, every tale among rude nations is repeated in verse, and is made to take the form of a song. The early history of all nations is uniform in this particular. Priests, statesmen, and philosophers, in the first ages of Greece, delivered their instructions in poetry, and mixed with the dealers in music and heroic fable.

It is not so surprising, however, that poetry should be the first species of composition in every nation, as it is, that a style apparently so difficult, and so far removed from ordinary use, should be almost as universally the first to attain its maturity. The most admired of all poets lived beyond the reach of history, almost of tradition. The artless song of the savage, the heroic legend of the bard, have sometimes a magnificent beauty, which no change of language can improve, and no refinements of the critic reform.

UNDER the supposed disadvantage of a limited knowledge, and a rude apprehension, the simple poet has impressions that more than compensate the defects of his skill. The best subjects of poetry, the characters of the violent and the brave, the generous and the intrepid, great dangers, trials of fortitude and fidelity, are exhib-

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bited within his view, or are delivered in traditions which animate like truth, because they are equally believed. He is not engaged in recalling, like Virgil or Tasso, the sentiments or scenery of an age remote from his own: he needs not be told by the critic *, to recollect what another would have thought, or in what manner another would have expressed his conception. The simple passions, friendship, resentment, and love, are the movements of his own mind, and he has no occasion to copy. Simple and vehement in his conceptions and feelings, he knows no diversity of thought, or of style, to mislead or to exercise his judgement. He delivers the emotions of the heart, in words suggested by the heart: for he knows no other. And hence it is, that while we admire the judgement and invention of Virgil, and of other later poets, these terms appear misapplied to Homer. Though intelligent, as well as sublime, in his conceptions, we cannot anticipate the lights of his understanding, nor the movements of his heart: he appears to speak from inspiration, not from invention; and to be guided in the choice of his thoughts and expressions by a supernatural instinct, not by reflection.

THE language of early ages, is in one respect, simple and confined; in another, it is varied and free: it allows liberties, which, to the poet of after times, are denied.

* See Longinus.



IN rude ages men are not separated by distinctions of rank or profession. They live in one manner, and speak one dialect. The bard is not to chuse his expression among the singular accents of different conditions. He has not to guard his language from the peculiar errors of the mechanic, the peasant, the scholar, or the courtier, in order to find that elegant propriety, and just elevation, which is free from the vulgar of one class, the pedantic of the second, or the flippant of the third. The name of every object, and of every sentiment, is fixed; and if his conception has the dignity of nature, his expression will have a purity which does not depend on his choice.

WITH this apparent confinement in the choice of his words, he is at liberty to break through the ordinary modes of construction; and in the form of a language not established by rules, may find for himself a cadence agreeable to the tone of his mind. The liberty he takes, while his meaning is striking, and his language is raised, appears an improvement, not a trespass on grammar. He delivers a style to the ages that follow, and becomes a model from which his posterity judge.

BUT whatever may be the early disposition of mankind to poetry, or the advantages they possess in cultivating this species of literature; whether the early maturity of poetical compositions arise from their being the first studied, or from their having a charm to engage persons of the liveliest genius, who are best qualified to improve the



eloquence of their native tongue ; it is a remarkable fact, that, not only in countries where every vein of composition was original, and was opened in the order of natural succession ; but even at Rome, and in modern Europe, where the learned began early to practise on foreign models, we have poets of every nation, who are perused with pleasure, while the prose writers of the same ages are neglected.

As Sophocles and Euripides preceded the historians and moralists of Greece, not only Nævius and Ennius, who wrote the Roman history in verse, but Lucilius, Plautus, Terence, and we may add Lucretius, were prior to Cicero, Sallust, or Cæsar. Dante and Petrarch went before any good prose writer in Italy ; Corneille and Racine brought on the fine age of prose compositions in France ; and we had in England, not only Chaucer and Spenser, but Shakespear and Milton, while our attempts in history or science were yet in their infancy ; and deserve our attention, only for the sake of the matter they treat.

HILLANICUS, who is reckoned among the first prose writers in Greece, and who immediately preceded, or was the contemporary of Herodotus, set out with declaring his intention to remove from history the wild representations, and extravagant fictions, with which it had been disgraced by the poets *. The want of records or

* Quoted by Demetrius Phalerius.

authorities,

authorities, relating to any distant transactions, may have hindered him, as it did his immediate successor, from giving truth all the advantage it might have reaped from this transition to prose. There are, however, ages in the progress of society, when such a proposition must be favourably received. When men become occupied on the subjects of policy, or commercial arts, they wish to be informed and instructed, as well as moved. They are interested by what was real in past transactions. They build on this foundation, the reflections and reasonings they apply to present affairs, and wish to receive information on the subject of different pursuits, and of projects in which they begin to be engaged. The manners of men, the practice of ordinary life, and the form of society, furnish their subjects to the moral and political writer. Mere ingenuity, justness of sentiment, and correct representation, though conveyed in ordinary language, are understood to constitute literary merit, and by applying to reason more than to the imagination and passions, meet with a reception that is due to the instruction they bring.

THE talents of men come to be employed in a variety of affairs, and their inquiries directed to different subjects. Knowledge is important in every department of civil society, and requisite to the practice of every art. The science of nature, morals, politics, and history, find their several admirers; and even poetry itself, which retains its former station in the region of warm imagination



tion and enthusiastic passion, appears in a growing variety of forms.

MATTERS have proceeded so far, without the aid of foreign examples, or the direction of schools. The cart of Thespis was changed into a theatre, not to gratify the learned, but to please the Athenian populace: and the prize of poetical merit was decided by this populace equally before and after the invention of rules. The Greeks were unacquainted with every language but their own; and if they became learned, it was only by studying what they themselves had produced: the childish mythology, which they are said to have copied from Asia, was equally of little avail in promoting their love of arts, or their success in the practice of them.

WHEN the historian is struck with the events he has witnessed, or heard; when he is excited to relate them by his reflections or his passions; when the statesman, who is required to speak in public, is obliged to prepare for every remarkable appearance in studied harangues; when conversation becomes extensive and refined; and when the social feelings and reflections of men are committed to writing, a system of learning may arise from the bustle of an active life. Society itself is the school, and its lessons are delivered in the practice of real affairs. An author writes from observations he has made on his subject, not from the suggestion of books; and every production carries the mark of his character as a man, not of his mere proficiency as a student or scholar. It
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may be made a question, whether the trouble of seeking for distant models, and of wading for instruction, through dark allusions and languages unknown, might not have quenched his fire, and rendered him a writer of a very inferior class.

IF society may thus be considered as a school for letters, it is probable that its lessons are varied in every separate state, and in every age. For a certain period, the severe applications of the Roman people to policy and war suppressed the literary arts, and appear to have stifled the genius even of the historian and the poet. The institutions of Sparta gave a professed contempt for whatever was not connected with the practical virtues of a vigorous and resolute spirit: the charms of imagination, and the parade of language, were by this people classed with the arts of the cook and the perfumer: their songs in praise of fortitude are mentioned by some writers; and collections of their witty sayings and repartees are still preserved: they indicate the virtues and the abilities of an active people, not their proficiency in science or literary taste. Possessed of what was essential to happiness in the virtues of the heart, they had a discernment of its value, unimbarassed by the numberless objects on which mankind in general are so much at a loss to adjust their esteem: fixed in their own apprehension, they turned a sharp edge on the follies of mankind. "When will you begin to practise it?" was the question of a Spartan to



a person who, in an advanced age of life, was still occupied with questions on the nature of virtue.

WHILE this people confined their studies to one question, How to improve and to preserve the courage and the disinterested affections of the human heart? their rivals the Athenians gave a scope to refinement on every object of reflection or passion. By the rewards, either of profit or of reputation, which they bestowed on every effort of ingenuity employed in ministering to the pleasure, the decoration, or the conveniency of life; by the variety of conditions in which their citizens were placed; by their inequalities of fortune, and their several pursuits in war, politics, commerce, and lucrative arts, they awakened whatever was either good or bad in the natural dispositions of men. Every road to eminence was opened: eloquence, fortitude, military skill, envy, detraction, faction, and treason, even the muse herself, was courted to bestow importance among a busy, acute, and turbulent people.

FROM this example, we may safely conclude, that although business is sometimes a rival to study, retirement and leisure are not the principal requisites to the improvement, perhaps not even to the exercise, of literary talents. The most striking exertions of imagination and sentiment have a reference to mankind: they are excited by the presence and intercourse of men: they have most vigour when actuated in the mind by the operation
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of its principal springs, by the emulations, the friendships, and the oppositions, which subsist among a forward and aspiring people. Amidst the great occasions which put a free, and even a licentious, society in motion, its members become capable of every exertion; and the same scenes which gave employment to Themistocles and Thrasylulus, inspired, by contagion, the genius of Sophocles and Plato. The petulant and the ingenuous find an equal scope to their talents; and literary monuments become the repositories of envy and folly, as well as of wisdom and virtue.

GREECE, divided into many little states, and agitated, beyond any spot on the globe, by domestic contentions and foreign wars, set the example in every species of literature. The fire was communicated to Rome; not when the state ceased to be warlike, and had discontinued her political agitations, but when she mixed the love of refinement and of pleasure with her national pursuits, and indulged an inclination to study in the midst of ferments, occasioned by the wars and pretensions of opposite factions. It was revived in modern Europe among the turbulent states of Italy, and spread to the North, together with the spirit which shook the fabric of the Gothic policy: it rose while men were divided into parties, under civil or religious denominations, and when they were at variance on subjects held the most important and sacred.

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WE may be satisfied, from the example of many ages, that liberal endowments bestowed on learned societies, and the leisure with which they were furnished for study, are not the likeliest means to excite the exertions of genius: even science itself, the supposed offspring of leisure, pined in the shade of monastic retirement. Men at a distance from the objects of useful knowledge, untouched by the motives that animate an active and a vigorous mind, could produce only the jargon of a technical language, and accumulate the impertinence of academical forms.

To speak or to write justly from an observation of nature, it is necessary to have felt the sentiments of nature. He who is penetrating and ardent in the conduct of life, will probably exert a proportional force and ingenuity in the exercise of his literary talents: and although writing may become a trade, and require all the application and study which are bestowed on any other calling; yet the principal requisites in this calling are, the spirit and sensibility of a vigorous mind.

IN one period, the school may take its light and direction from active life; in another, it is true, the remains of an active spirit are greatly supported by literary monuments, and by the history of transactions that preserve the examples and the experience of former and of better times. But in whatever manner men are formed for great efforts of elocution or conduct, it appears

appears the most glaring of all other deceptions, to look for the accomplishments of a human character in the mere attainments of speculation, whilst we neglect the qualities of fortitude and public affection, which are so necessary to render our knowledge an article of happiness or of use.

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