1783 - Blair



means of the debate going on among the personages, he receives a fair and full view of both sides of the argument, and is at the same time amused with polite conversation, and with a display of consistent and well supported characters. An author, therefore, who has genius for executing such a composition after this manner, has it in his power both to instruct and to please.

But the greatest part of modern dialogue writers have no idea of any composition of this sort; and bating the outward forms of conversation, and that one speaks and another answers, it is quite the same as if the author spoke in person throughout the whole. He sets up a Philotheus, perhaps, and a Philathees, or an A and a B; who, after mutual compliments, and after admiring the fineness of the morning or evening, and the beauty of the prospects around them, enter into conference concerning some grave matter; and all that we know farther of them is, that the one personates the author, a man of learning, no doubt, and of good principles; and the other is a man of straw, set up to propose some trivial objections, over which the first gains a most entire triumph, and leaves his skeptical antagonist, at the end, much humbled, and generally, convinced of his error. This is a very frigid and insipid manner of writing; the more so, as it is an attempt toward something, which we see the author cannot support. It is the form, without the spirit, of conversation. The dialogue serves no purpose, but to make awkward interruptions; and we should with more patience hear the author continuing always to reason himself, and remove the objections that are made to his principles, than be troubled with the unmeaning appearance of two persons, whom we see to be in reality no more than one.

Among the ancients, Plato is eminent for the beauty of his dialogues. The scenery, and the circumstances of many of them, are beautifully painted. The characters of the sophists, with whom Socrates disputed, are well drawn: a variety of personages are exhibited to us; we are introduced into a real conversation, often supported with much life and spirit, after the Socratic manner. For richness and beauty of imagination, no philosophic writer, ancient or modern, is comparable to Plato. The only fault of his imagination is, such an excess of fertility as allows it sometimes to obscure his judgment. It frequently carries him into allegory, fiction, enthusiasm, and the airy regions of mystical theology. The philosopher is, at times, lost in the poet. But whether we be edified with the matter or not, (and much edification he often affords,) we are always entertained with the manner; and left with a strong impression of the sublimity of the author's genius.

Cicero's dialogues, or those recitals of conversation, which he has introduced into several of his philosophical and critical works, are not so spirited, nor so characteristical, as those of Plato. Yet some, as that *De Oratore* especially, are agreeable and well supported. They show us conversation carried on among some of the principal persons of ancient Rome, with freedom, good breeding, and dignity. The author of the elegant dialogue, *De Causis Corruptæ Eloquentiæ*, which is annexed sometimes to the works of Quintilian, and sometimes to those of Tacitus, has happily imitated, perhaps has excelled Cicero, in this manner of writing.



Lucian is a dialogue writer of much eminence: though his subjects are seldom such as can entitle him to be ranked among philosophical authors. He has given the model of the light and humourous dialogue, and has carried it to great perfection. A character of levity, and at the same time of wit and penetration, distinguishes all his writings. His great object was, to expose the follies of superstition, and the pedantry of philosophy, which prevailed in his age: and he could not have taken any more successful method for this end, than what he has employed in his dialogues, especially in those of the gods and of the dead, which are full of pleasantry and satire. In this invention of dialogues of the dead, he has been followed by several modern authors. Fontenelle, in particular, has given us dialogues of this sort, which are sprightly and agreeable: but as for characters, whoever his personages be, they all become Frenchmen in his hands. Indeed, few things in composition are more difficult, than in the course of a moral dialogue to exhibit characters properly distinguished; as calm conversation furnishes none of those assistances for bringing characters into light, which the active scenes and interesting situations of the drama afford. Hence few authors are eminent for characteristical dialogue on grave subjects. One of the most remarkable in the English language, is a writer of the last age, Dr. Henry More, in his Divine Dialogues, relating to the foundations of natural religion. Though his style be now in some measure obsolete, and his speakers be marked with the academic stiffness of those times, yet the dialogue is animated by a variety of character, and a sprightliness of conversation, beyond what are commonly met with in writings of this kind. Bishop Berkeley's Dialogues concerning the existence of matter, do not attempt any display of characters; but furnish an instance of a very abstract subject, rendered clear and intelligible by means of conversation properly managed.

I proceed next to make some observations on epistolary writing, which possesses a kind of middle place between the serious and amusing species of composition. Epistolary writing appears, at first view, to stretch into a very wide field. For there is no subject whatever, on which one may not convey his thoughts to the public, in the form of a letter. Lord Shaftesbury, for instance, Mr. Harris, and several other writers, have chosen to give this form to philosophical treatises. But this is not sufficient to class such treatises under the head of epistolary composition. Though they bear, in the title page, a Letter to a Friend, after the first address, the friend disappears, and we see that it is, in truth, the public with whom the author corresponds. Seneca's Epistles are of this sort. There is no probability that they ever passed in correspondence, as real letters. They are no other than miscellaneous dissertations on moral subjects; which the author, for his convenience, chose to put into the epistolary form. Even where one writes a real letter on some formal topic, as of moral or religious consolation, to a person

under distress, such as Sir William Temple has written to the countess of Essex on the death of her daughter, he is at liberty, on such occasions, to write wholly as a divine or as a philosopher, and to assume the style and manner of one, without reprehension. We consider the author not as writing a letter, but as composing a discourse, suited particularly to the circumstances of some one person.

Epistolary writing becomes a distinct species of composition, subject to the cognizance of criticism, only, or chiefly, when it is of the easy and familiar kind; when it is conversation carried on upon paper, between two friends at a distance. Such an intercourse, when well conducted, may be rendered very agreeable to readers of taste. If the subject of the letters be important, they will be the more valuable. Even though there should be nothing very considerable in the subject; yet, if the spirit and turn of the correspondence be agreeable; if they be written in a sprightly manner, and with native grace and ease, they may still be entertaining; more especially if there be any thing to interest us, in the characters of those who write them. Hence the curiosity which the public has always discovered concerning the letters of eminent persons. We expect in them to discover somewhat of their real character. It is childish indeed to expect, that in letters we are to find the whole heart of the author unveiled. Concealment and disguise take place, more or less, in all human intercourse. But still, as letters from one friend to another make the nearest approach to conversation, we may expect to see more of a character displayed in these than in other productions, which are studied for public view. We please ourselves with beholding the writer in a situation which allows him to be at his ease, and to give vent occasionally to the overflowings of his heart.

Much, therefore, of the merit, and the agreeableness of epistolary writing, will depend on its introducing us into some acquaintance with the writer. There, if any where, we look for the man, not for the author. Its first and fundamental requisite is, to be natural and simple; for a stiff and laboured manner is as bad in a letter, as it is in conversation. This does not banish sprightliness and wit. These are graceful in letters, just as they are in conversation; when they flow easily, and without being studied; when employed so as to season, not to cloy. One who, either in conversation or in letters, affects to shine and to sparkle always, will not please long. The style of letters should not be too highly polished; it ought to be neat and correct, but no more. All nicety about words, betrays study; and hence musical periods, and appearances of number and harmony in arrangement, should be carefully avoided in letters. The best letters are commonly such as the authors have written with most facility. What the heart or the imagination dictates, always flows readily; but where there is no subject to warm or interest these, constraint appears; and hence, those letters of mere compliment, congratulation, or affected condolence, which have cost the authors most labour in composing, and which, for that reason, they perhaps consider as their masterpieces, never fail of being the most disagreeable and insipid to the readers.



It ought, at the same time, to be remembered, that the ease and simplicity which I have recommended in epistolary correspondence, are not to be understood as importing entire carelessness. In writing to the most intimate friend, a certain degree of attention, both to the subject and the style, is requisite and becoming. It is no more than what we owe both to ourselves and to the friend with whom we correspond. A slovenly and negligent manner of writing, is a disobliging mark of want of respect. The liberty, besides, of writing letters with too careless a hand, is apt to betray persons into imprudence in what they write. The first requisite, both in conversation and in correspondence, is to attend to all the proper decorums which our own character and that of others demand. An imprudent expression in conversation may be forgotten and pass away; but when we take the pen into our hand, we must remember, that 'Litera scripta manet.'

Pliny's Letters are one of the most celebrated collections which the ancients have given us, in the epistolary way. They are elegant and polite; and exhibit a very pleasing and amiable view of the author. But, according to the vulgar phrase, they smell too much of the lamp. They are too elegant and fine; and it is not easy to avoid thinking, that the author is casting an eye towards the public, when he is appearing to write only for his friends. Nothing indeed is more difficult than for an author who publishes his own letters, to divest himself altogether of attention to the opinion of the world in what he says; by which means he becomes much less agreeable than a man of parts would be, if, without any constraint of this sort, he were writing to his intimate friend.

Cicero's Epistles, though not so showy as those of Pliny, are, on several accounts, a far more valuable collection; indeed, the most valuable collection of letters extant in any language. They are letters of real business, written to the greatest men of the age, composed with purity and elegance, but without the least affectation; and, what adds greatly to their merit, written without any intention of being published to the world. For it appears, that Cicero never kept copies of his own letters; and we are wholly indebted to the care of his freedman Tyro, for the large collection that was made, after his death, of those which are now extant, amounting to near a thousand.* They contain the most authentic materials of the history of that age: and are the last monuments which remain of Rome in its free state; the greatest part of them being written during that important crisis, when the republic was on the point of ruin; the most interesting situation, perhaps, which is to be found in the affairs of mankind. To his intimate friends, especially to Atticus, Cicero lays open himself and his heart, with entire freedom. In the course of his correspondence with others, we are introduced into acquaintance with several of the principal personages of Rome; and it is remarkable that most of Cicero's correspondents, as well as him-

* See his letter to Atticus, which was written a year or two before his death, in which he tells him, in answer to some inquiries concerning his epistles, that he had no collection of them, and that Tyro had only about seventy of them. Ad. Att. xvi. 5.

self, are elegant and polite writers: which serves to heighten our idea of the taste and manners of that age.

The most distinguished collection of letters in the English language, is that of Mr. Pope, Dean Swift, and their friends; partly published in Mr. Pope's works, and partly in those of Dean Swift. This collection is, on the whole, an entertaining and agreeable one; and contains much wit and refinement. It is not, however, altogether free from the fault which I imputed to Pliny's Epistles, of too much study and refinement. In the variety of letters from different persons, contained in that collection, we find many that are written with ease, and a beautiful simplicity. Those of Dr. Arbuthnot, in particular, always deserve that praise. Dean Swift's also are unaffected; and as a proof of their being so, they exhibit his character fully, with all its defects; though it were to be wished, for the honour of his memory, that his epistolary correspondence had not been drained to the dregs, by so many successive publications as have been given to the world. Several of Lord Bolingbroke's and of Bishop Atterbury's letters, are masterly. The censure of writing letters in too artificial a manner, falls heaviest on Mr. Pope himself. There is visibly more study, and less of nature and the heart in his letters, than in those of some of his correspondents. He had formed himself on the manner of Voiture, and is too fond of writing like a wit. His letters to ladies are full of affectation. Even in writing to his friends, how forced an introduction is the following, of a letter to Mr. Addison: 'I am more joyed at your return, than I should be at that of the sun, as much as I wish for him in this melancholy wet season; but it is his fate too, like yours, to be displeasing to owls and obscene animals, who cannot bear his lustre.' How stiff a compliment is it which he pays to Bishop Atterbury! 'Though the noise and daily bustle for the public be now over, I dare say you are still tendering its welfare; as the sun in winter, when seeming to retire from the world, is preparing warmth and benedictions for a better season.' This sentence might be tolerated in a harangue; but is very unsuitable to the style of one friend corresponding with another.

The gayety and vivacity of the French genius appear to much advantage in their letters, and have given birth to several agreeable publications. In the last age, Balzac and Voiture were the two most celebrated epistolary writers. Balzac's reputation indeed soon declined, on account of his swelling periods and pompous style. But Voiture continued long a favourite author. His composition is extremely sparkling; he shows a great deal of wit, and can trifle in the most entertaining manner. His only fault is, that he is too open and professed a wit, to be thoroughly agreeable as a letter writer. The letters of Madame de Sevigné are now esteemed the most accomplished model of a familiar correspondence. They turn indeed very much upon trifles, the incidents of the day, and the news of the town; and they are overloaded with extravagant compliments, and expressions of fondness, to her favourite daughter; but withal, they show such perpetual sprightliness, they contain such easy and varied



narration, and so many strokes of the most lively and beautiful painting, perfectly free from any affectation, that they are justly entitled to high praise. The letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague are not unworthy of being named after those of Madame de Sevigné. They have much of the French ease and vivacity: and retain more the character of agreeable epistolary style, than perhaps any letters which have appeared in the English language.

There remains to be treated of, another species of composition in prose, which comprehends a very numerous, though, in general, a very insignificant class of writings, known by the name of romances and novels. These may, at first view, seem too insignificant, to deserve that any particular notice should be taken of them. But I cannot be of this opinion. Mr. Fletcher, of Salton, in one of his tracts, quotes it as the saying of a wise man, that, give him the making of all the ballads of a nation, he would allow any one that pleased to make their laws. The saying was founded on reflection and good sense, and is applicable to the subject now before us. For any kind of writing, how trifling soever in appearance, that obtains a general currency, and especially that early preoccupies the imagination of the youth of both sexes, must demand particular attention. Its influence is likely to be considerable, both on the morals and taste of a nation.

In fact, fictitious histories might be employed for very useful purposes. They furnish one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for showing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable and vice odious. The effect of well contrived stories, towards accomplishing these purposes, is stronger than any effect that can be produced by simple and naked instruction; and hence we find, that the wisest men in all ages have more or less employed fables and fictions, as the vehicles of knowledge. These have ever been the basis of both epic and dramatic poetry. It is not, therefore, the nature of this sort of writing, considered in itself, but the faulty manner of its execution, that can expose it to any contempt. Lord Bacon takes notice of our taste for fictitious history, as a proof of the greatness and dignity of the human mind. He observes very ingeniously, that the objects of this world, and the common train of affairs which we behold going on in it, do not fill the mind, nor give it entire satisfaction. We seek for something that shall expand the mind in a greater degree: we seek for more heroic and illustrious deeds, for more diversified and surprising events, for a more splendid order of things, a more regular and just distribution of rewards and punishments, than what we find here: because we meet not with these in true history, we have recourse to fictitious. We create worlds according to our fancy, in order to gratify our capacious desires: "Accommodando," says that great philosopher, "rerum simulacra ad animi desideria, non submittendo animum rebus, quod ratio facit, et historia."* Let us then, since the subject

* "Accommodating the appearances of things to the desires of the mind, not bringing down the mind, as history and philosophy do, to the course of events."