LETTERS

FROM

A FATHER TO HIS SON,

ON VARIOUS TOPICS

RELATIVE TO

LITERATURE AND THE CONDUCT OF LIFE.

VOL. II.

Written in the Years 1798 and 1799.

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in my opinion, more calculated to depreſs and paralyze the mind through deſpair, than to rouſe it to generous emulation. An actual Ariſtides or Waſhington are abundantly more animating than the viſionary and impoſſible *wiſe man* of the Stoics.

Adieu!

LETTER IV.

[redacted]

You muſt frequently, I doubt not, have felt equal ſurpriſe and diſguſt at the dogmatiſm with which the moſt oppoſite opinions relative to the comparative merit of authors are laid down in writing and converſation; and you muſt have wiſhed for ſome poſitive criterion to apply to theſe opinions, in order to aſcertain their ſolidity, at leaſt to your own ſatisfaction, if not to the conviction of the diſputants themſelves. Attempts have been often made, in the walks both of literature and the fine arts, to eſtabliſh ſuch a criterion, and to [redacted] m[redacted]t the

wide differences ſtill ſubſiſting among thoſe who lay claim to this quality, ſufficiently prove the ill ſucceſs of theſe efforts. Senſible as I am, that diverſities either in original conformation, or in early aſſociations, muſt ever prevent mankind from feeling exactly alike with reſpect to the objects preſented to them, I have no ſanguine expectations of a near approach to uniformity in their judgments; yet I conceive it poſſible that a train of thought may be ſuggeſted by which a tolerably unprejudiced mind may make ſome progreſs towards the attainment of rational principles in matters hitherto left to the deciſion of vague ſentiment. I do not ſee why it ſhould be leſs practicable to ſtate the grounds of our preference of one work of genius to another, than of one moral action to another; and I conceive the ſame general method may be applied in both caſes; namely, to conſider what was the *end* in view, and how far the *means* employed have accompliſhed their purpoſe. All the works of human art may be

be examined upon this principle; but I ſhall at preſent confine myſelf to the nobleſt of all, that of *writing*, or *literary compoſition*.

The firſt and moſt obvious purpoſe of writing is to communicate with all poſſible force and preciſion the ideas of the writer to the mind of the reader. This effect is abſolutely indiſpenſable; and therefore every failure ariſing from the feeble, the inadequate, the embarraſſed, the ill-arranged expreſſion of thoughts, is abſolutely contrary to the perfection of a writing. I will not ſtop to particularize inſtances of this defect; yet I cannot forbear obſerving that many works which bear a high character, if judged of by the difficulty found in developing their meaning, the ambiguities and perplexities remaining after every effort of learning and ſagacity to elucidate them, and the feebleneſs with which they at laſt ſtrike the mind of the reader, muſt be very ſhort of that perfection which prejudiced admirers attribute to them. Great allow-

force
precision

ances, doubtleſs, ought to be made in favour of works compoſed in a language long extinct, and referring to modes of thinking or living long obliterated. Yet ſome of the works to which I allude are known to have preſented theſe difficulties from the time of their firſt appearance; and a compariſon with others of the ſame period will ſhow that the faults belonged to the individual, not to the age.

What has been ſaid above refers to *ſtyle* in its moſt confined ſenſe, or the manner in which a writer gives enunciation to his ideas; and the point of perfection thus far is that the language ſhould be an exact tranſcript of the thought. This alone includes many of the firſt qualities of writing. It ſuppoſes in the writer a perfect knowledge of the value and import of all the words he uſes, as well ſingly as in combination; a knowledge which forms no mean part of philoſophy, and cannot be attained without much reflection and research. It ſuppoſes him maſter of the art of combining clauſes and

and ſentences ſo as to exhibit in the cleareſt manner the dependence of ideas one upon another, and the train or ſucceſſion in which the proceſs of argumentation conſiſts. It requires him to have at hand a ſufficient ſtore of expreſſions, and yet to be poſſeſſed of judgment enough not to run into prolixity; to know how long he may dwell upon an idea with advantage, and when its further repetition would be weariſome tautology. It may likewiſe be extended to include that ſenſe of propriety and decorum, that air of good company, which prevents an author from ſhocking his reader by vulgariſms, or diſguſting him by ſingularities. By theſe, which I think are intelligible and poſitive requiſites, a criterion may be eſtabliſhed of writing, as far as it is the dreſs or image of thought.

But the merit of the *thoughts* themſelves cannot be ſeparated from our notion of good writing; and many of its qualities muſt have a reference to the *powers of conception* in the mind whence the ideas

proceed. Here, it muſt be confeſſed, our criterion becomes more vague; and we are in danger of being thrown into all the fluctuation of opinion attendant upon ſubjects of mere taſte. Our only reſource in this caſe is a compariſon between the effects apparently intended to be produced by the writer, and thoſe really produced; —in other words, what he has attempted, and what he has done.

The attempt in ſome caſes is ſo ſimple that it is not difficult to pronounce concerning its ſucceſs. The enunciation of a truth, and the ſtatement of a plain argument, as in ſcientific topics, are complete with reſpect both to conception and expreſſion, when all that is wanted, and no more, is communicated to the reader in its moſt preciſe and intelligible form. Clear notions, in ſubjects of this kind, almoſt neceſſarily clothe themſelves in proper language; and no one, while receiving the whole inſtruction he ſeeks for, feels a want of any thing more perfect. Mathematical demonſtrations, and didactic

tic leſſons of art or ſcience, are of this kind. In theſe, if the writer is methodical, clear, and conciſe, he has done his part.

The narration of a matter of fact perhaps comes next in point of ſimplicity; but here, diverſity of conception has a much wider ſcope. Circumſtances ſtrike different perſons ſo differently, that two are rarely found to agree in their account of the ſame tranſaction, if in any degree complicated. Independently of the propenſity to alter and exaggerate, the ſelection of incidents varies much in different relators. Some dwell minutely upon what to others would appear frivolous and unintereſting. Some dramatiſe a ſtory by aſſigning to each actor his own peculiar language; others relate the whole in their own words. In general, he is the moſt perfect narrator, who puts his reader moſt completely in the ſtate of a ſpectator; who tranſports him to the very ſpot, marks out to him all the perſonages by their characteriſtic features, and fills the

the ſcene with manners and action. For ſucceſs in ſuch an attempt, nothing is ſo neceſſary as an imagination capable of receiving and retaining ſtrong impreſſions. Where this exiſts, and the ſubject of deſcription is an intereſting one, no great artifice of language is requiſite for producing a complete effect; and frequently, the moſt perfect ſimplicity, and the abſence of all deſign, prove moſt ſucceſsful. The ſtory of Joſeph in the Old Teſtament is manifeſtly written without the leaſt art or effort, yet a more affecting one is perhaps no where to be met with. Many other narrations in the Jewiſh ſcriptures are equally unpretending and equally excellent; and it is a remarkable circumſtance, that the oriental ſtyle, ſo ſtrained and figurative in lyrical, prophetic, and even didactic compoſitions, ſhould be ſo ſimple in the deſcription of facts. But this kind of negative merit is almoſt all that is wanted in the ſpecies of writing in queſtion; and if the relator has taſte enough to abſtain from affected phraſeology,

logy, unſeaſonable digreſſions, and impertinent remarks, he can ſcarcely fail, with a ſelection of ſtriking incidents, to produce the deſired effect.

The next in order of ſimplicity ſeems to be, an attempt to convince by a proceſs of argumentation addreſſed to the reaſon. When a perſon is maſter of his ſubject, and has it laid up in his mind in its proper ordonnance of gradation, proceeding from the ſimpleſt propoſitions to the more complex, and eſtabliſhing a regular ſeries of deduction till he arrives at the intended concluſion, it may be thought that his power of communicating to others the notions he himſelf entertains, will follow almoſt of courſe. Yet, I believe, experience has ſhewn that men of undoubted intellectual ſagacity have not always been happy in attempts of this kind; and on reflection it will be ſeen that literary talents, if not of the higheſt claſs, yet rare and reſpectable, are required for attaining the firſt rank as a logical or argumentative writer. Great preciſion in the

the uſe of words, clear arrangement of all the members of a ſentence, cloſeneſs of method, ſtrength and conciſeneſs of expreſſion without harſhneſs or obſcurity, are eſſential to perfection in this department of writing; and if ſomewhat of the grace and amenity of language be added, which is not incompatible with the other requiſites, the effect of conviction may be promoted, by leading on the reader pleaſantly through a topic perhaps naturally dry and unalluring. I conceive Cicero and Hume to be examples of this union of every uſeful and agreeable quality in diſcuſſions purely philoſophical.

If the manner of the former of theſe writers in his ſtricter philoſophical works be compared with that in his popular ethical pieces, and his orations, a juſt idea may be formed of the progreſs from an addreſs to the reaſon alone, to an attempt to perſuade by addreſſing the affections likewiſe. This combination is *oratory* or *eloquence*; and there are few occaſions of importance in human life in which the poſſeſſion

poſſeſſion of this quality, either in ſpeech or writing, is not felt as a high degree of ſuperiority. Its field, too, is ſo large, that its point of abſolute perfection is ſcarcely aſſignable; and *genius*, that celeſtial faculty, to the powers of which no limits can be aſſigned, finds in it ſufficient play for all its energies. Rhetoric has long ago been defined "the art of perſuaſion;" its end, therefore, is ſufficiently obvious; and it may be ſaid, in a general way, to be perfect when it attains that end. But there will commonly be room to aſk, Would not ſomething more excellent have anſwered it better? might not a more ſkilful orator gain over conviction to the oppoſite ſide of the queſtion? Reaſon, by itſelf, is a principle of tolerably equal operation in minds properly diſpoſed to receive it; but where the paſſions are of the party, no one can be ſure of the event. Taſte alſo aſſumes great ſway where appeals are made to the imagination or to the finer feelings; and admiration may contribute to bias the

the deciſions of the judgment. The perfection of oratory, then, will be ſeen to be a very complicated conſideration, referring not only to the ſubject treated of, but to the perſons to whom it is addreſſed. Let us, however, limit the caſe to an addreſs to perſons prepared by a certain degree of refinement in manners, and of acquaintance with the beauties of literature; to perſons, alſo, of ſenſe and knowledge of the world, and under no immediate impreſſion of enthuſiaſm. In theſe circumſtances, I conceive that argument ſhould be the ſtaple, the main body, of the diſcourſe; and that the appearance of a declamatory effuſion of common-place rhetoric ſhould by all means be avoided. But argument may be greatly aſſiſted by the variety of lights in which it is placed—by ſtrong deſcriptions, pathetic or humorous, reſulting from real or hypothetical conſequences of the matter in debate—by drawing to a luminous point or focus all the inferences and deductions flowing from the train of reaſoning

reaſoning—and by a ſtyle of language animated with energetic expreſſions and lively images. In theſe particulars conſiſts the true art of oratory, an art which it is in vain to teach by formal rules, enjoining certain diviſions and ſubdiviſions of a ſubject, and directing the orator when to be warm, and when to be cool, when ſimple, and when metaphorical. Such ſyſtematical rhetoric produces nothing but pedantic and tedious harangues, which weary the patience of every hearer, and though they may be applauded in the ſchools, are of no uſe or effect in real life. The orator who wiſhes to perſuade, muſt take his rules from his ſubject, his audience, his own feelings, and his own peculiar talents; for talents of very different kinds may by proper management be made equally to concur in the grand effect of perſuaſion. In ſome, a rapid ſtrain of argument, ſtrictly deduced from the matter in debate, delivered in earneſt, glowing, but not choice or ornamented language, and

dwelling long and fully upon the ſame topics, has proved highly ſucceſsful. Such appears to have been the eloquence of the Grecian Demoſthenes; and ſuch is that of a ſpeaker, certainly not his inferior in powers of mind, the Engliſh Fox. This ſpecies, however, ſeems better adapted for oral delivery, than for writing. To the hearer its effect is enhanced by the accompaniments of voice and action; nor is he liable to be offended with negligencies or tautologies which might give diſguſt in the leiſurely ſurvey of a reader. On the contrary, the wide reach and compaſs of thought, the ſplendour and copiouſneſs of illuſtration, the profuſe imagery and poetical conceptions of a Burke (a man whom I know not where to parallel), might often bewilder and fatigue the hearer, while to the reader they have afforded the higheſt gratification, and often proved irreſiſtibly convincing. The ſtrong, pointed, homely ſenſe of a Paine, however, has not been inferior in efficacy to his antagoniſt's profuſion

fuſion of excellencies; and thus every different mode of oratory, if practiſed by a maſter, may produce in its favour the criterion of perfection. This is, to convince the reaſon in the very face of prepoſſeſſion; to wield at will the paſſions; to calm the furious and rouſe the torpid; in ſhort, to effect by the mere power of perſuaſion, all that can be done by brute force or all-ſubduing gold.

The perfection of hiſtorical compoſition demands a ſtill greater aſſemblage of literary qualifications. Oratory, in the direct form of harangues, once conſtituted a part of it; and ſome of the beſt ſpecimens of eloquence of this kind are to be found in hiſtories. But though this practice is now aboliſhed (I think, judiciouſly, as it injured the moſt eſſential of all impreſſions, that of veracity), yet occaſions continually occur in an intereſting narrative in which ſcope is given for the moſt genuine eloquence. And notwithſtanding it may be true, that authentic hiſtory, however written, is capable of giving

pleaſure, yet I preſume there are few readers to whom it would be indifferent whether they took the relation of Agrippina's landing at Brunduſium, of the trial of Strafford, of the death of Mary queen of Scots, from a Tacitus, Hume, or Robertſon, or from one of the vulgar chroniclers of the time. Moreover, we expect from the complete hiſtorian a lucid arrangement and ſkilful developement of facts, often involved and perplexed with contradictions; ſagacity to trace the connexion of cauſes and effects; penetration to detect the motives and true characters of men, however diſguiſed by artifice; together with that philoſophical ſpirit and freedom from prejudice which entitle the writer to aſſume the office of an inſtructor, and point the great leſſon of human events. Poſſeſſed of theſe requiſites, the hiſtorian may be allowed conſiderable latitude in his ſtyle. If he is merely perſpicuous, correct, and elegant, he will avoid blame; but he will not attain the praiſe of a fine writer without the power of enriching his

language, when the ſubject favours him, with every figure that can give it force, majeſty, and beauty. Hiſtorical writing is in proſe, what the epic is in verſe—a field for every varied exertion of which the compoſer's mind may be capable.

This obſervation leads me to the ſpecies of compoſition with which I mean to conclude; Poetry—the moſt difficult of all to reduce to the laws of critical judgment. The diſtinguiſhing purpoſe of poetry has often been ſtated to be that of *pleaſing*; but various explanations ſeem neceſſary before this principle can be adapted to uſe. Perhaps the whole buſineſs of *verſification* may at once be referred to the *pleaſure* it is by experience found capable of giving to the ear; an idea I ſhould willingly admit, as it would eſtabliſh an eaſy diſcrimination between poetry and proſe by a ſingle characteriſtic, which otherwiſe is not to be found. But in order to eſtimate the value of the other ingredients of which poetry is compoſed, we ought, I conceive, to proceed beyond

the ſimple notion of pleaſing, and expand our idea of the art to the comprehenſion of *all that in writing is capable of imparting to the mind every impreſſion in its moſt exquiſite degree.* It would lead me too far were I to enumerate the various figures of poetry, and attempt to ſhow how each contributes to the augmentation of *impreſſion.* It is obvious, however, that the figures of compariſon illuſtrate and enforce the original idea; and that proſopopœia and perſonification bring the ſcene directly before the eye, and beſtow on it life and action. That the peculiarities of poetical language alſo give *pleaſure* I mean not to deny; and perhaps poets have in ſome caſes more attended to the amuſement of their readers, than to the enforcement of a particular ſubject. This ſeems eſpecially to be with ſome writers the intention of *ſimile*, which, if purſued to minuteneſs, as many of Homer's, ſubſtitute a new picture to the imagination, often to the temporary obliteration of the original one. But this is really a fault when it interrupts

interrupts the courſe of a narrative of itſelf highly intereſting.

The poetry of deſcription and of ſentiment is no other than *eloquence in verſe*; and the advantage of this form over that of proſe ariſes from the pleaſure, and indeed, in ſome caſes, the conſonance of effect, obtained by meaſured harmony, together with the licence of uſing without reſtraint thoſe figures which give glow and animation to language. One of the moſt perfect examples of the efficacy of theſe means is Pope's epiſtle of Eloiſa to Abelard, of which the thoughts are almoſt all to be found in the real correſpondence between thoſe celebrated characters: but how are they heightened, how adorned, how animated by the rich melody and vivid expreſſion of that great maſter! Compare, too, the ſketch given by Virgil of the battle of Actium with any proſe relation of the ſame event. With how much more force and diſtinctneſs is the ſcene brought to view! how is it aggrandized by a ſelection of great in-

cidents, and the ſuppreſſion of every thing petty and trivial! above all, what dignity is thrown about it by the introduction of fictitious perſonages, ſuperior to human! It is this uſe of *fiction* that many critics have regarded as the principal characteriſtic of true poetry; and doubtleſs, when it contributes to enhance the deſired impreſſion, it is the nobleſt exertion of poetical genius. But how frequently is it found that the introduction of celeſtial beings only tends to degrade the human; and that the mixture of preternatural events *unrealizes* (if I may uſe the expreſſion) the natural part of the fable? The mere production of wonder and ſurpriſe, which ſome have repreſented as the moſt eſſential buſineſs of poetry, is often attempted with at leaſt as great ſucceſs in proſe; witneſs the Arabian Nights, and the whole claſs of novels and romances. On the other hand, ſome of the fineſt poems are limited to what is ſtrictly natural in deſcription, only heightened by a ſelection of the moſt ſtriking circumſtances and the

the moſt perfect ſpecimens, and ſet off with all the glow and relief of ſtrong colouring.

I return then to the criterion of perfect poetry, and venture to ſuggeſt that it conſiſts in the *force* with which it impreſſes the heart or the imagination, joined to the *pleaſure* it affords by the artifice of its numbers, and by the variety and ſplendour of its diction. The number of ſubjects on which poetry is employed, and the different forms it is made to aſſume, will ever allow a wide ſcope to the diverſities of taſte in ſelecting its favourites; nor can any general rules controul the effect of partial aſſociations. It is, however, deſirable that the mind ſhould acquire a ſenſibility to excellence of as many kinds as poſſible; and he is the happieſt reader of poetry who can enjoy the maſterpieces of every age and country, and in every ſpecies of poetical compoſition. There ſeems to be a greater propenſity to make compariſons of merit in this, than in any other department of

literature; and in none does dogmatiſm of opinion ſo much prevail. It is an uſual thing for thoſe who are the moſt rapturous admirers of one author, to affect the profoundeſt contempt for another, perhaps his rival in general fame. Yet I imagine the criterion above mentioned, if fairly applied, will afford as deciſive a teſt of poetical merit, as exiſts for many other kinds of literary excellence. One exception, however, muſt be admitted. It is impoſſible for any one to acquire an adequate feeling of the beauties of *verſification* in a foreign language; and therefore he ſhould decline all compariſons in this point except between the writers in his own.

From the notion above given of the perfection of poetry, I think it will follow as a corollary, that true taſte cannot approve any of thoſe devices for making it eaſier to the compoſer which have been lately practiſed, conſiſting of looſe verſification, the abſence of rhyme where expected, proſaic ſimplicity of language, and the

the like; for, that the real purpoſe of ſuch liberties is to favour the lazineſs of the writers, and not to add an agreeable variety to their performances, I am well convinced. As poetry is a luxury and not a neceſſary, its multiplication is not an object to be ſtudied at the expence of its excellence; and a little of it, of the fineſt kind and richeſt flavour, anſwers its purpoſe much better than an abundance of ordinary growth.

What, then, after theſe particular inquiries, ſhall we ſay conſtitutes the general perfection of writing? I can diſcover no other univerſal principle in this caſe, than that which is applicable to every effort of art—the degree in which it accompliſhes the purpoſe intended. This conſideration will, no doubt, ever leave room for ſome diverſity of judgment; ſince neither the purpoſe, nor its attainment, will appear exactly in the ſame light to all. Yet I cannot but think that it offers a more promiſing acceſs to uniformity, than might be conceived

ceived by one who had never ſeriouſly dwelt upon it. Erroneous judgments, eſpecially of the unfavourable kind, are often made from the unreaſonable expectation of what was never deſigned—of what was impoſſible to be effected.

Let the critic then begin with obtaining a clear idea of what he ought to look for in a work of literature, and not pronounce its condemnation becauſe he does not find what ignorance alone could have led him to expect. With a judgment ſo prepared, and a mind free from ordinary prejudices and partialities, he will probably ſeldom fail of deciding rightly concerning that *approach* to perfection, which is all that the condition of human nature will permit to the moſt exalted genius.

Farewell!

LETTER V.

ON AUTHORITY IN MATTER OF OPINION.

DEAR SON,

I NOW mean to fulfil an expectation I formerly raiſed, of making the important topic of *authority* the ſubject of a letter. It is the authority exerciſed over the underſtanding, to which I ſhall confine my diſcuſſion; a ſpecies, concerning which it may be aſſumed, that man has given up none of his rights on entering into ſociety, and therefore that it is at all times fully open to inquiry. There have been ages, indeed, in which ſubmiſſion to authority was conſidered as one of the moſt ſacred duties; and no arguments were allowed to be adduced againſt the dictates of thoſe who had obtained, no one exactly knew

then judge of the encouragement ſuch an employment of the faculties affords. How eaſy would it be to multiply examples to this effect, were it neceſſary!

Another diviſion of ſtudies may be formed (not, indeed, with ſtrict accuracy of arrangement, but ſufficient for the preſent purpoſe) upon a view of what *man has done*, conſidered as a creator in art and ſcience. A multiplicity of objects here opens upon the mind, of which I ſhall content myſelf with ſelecting two or three for particular conſideration.

As the nobleſt diſtinction of a human being is the uſe of language, that art which teaches to uſe it in the beſt manner, or the *art of compoſition*, may take the lead under this diviſion. By ſtudying its principles, ſo as to be able to enter into all the beauties and delicacies of fine writing, a ſource of entertainment of the higheſt kind is provided, independently of the power acquired of imitating what we admire. I have already touched upon this ſubject in my letter on the advantages reſulting

reſulting from a taſte for poetry, but it is capable of great extenſion by comprehending the art of criticiſm in all its branches. This comprizes an accurate reſearch into the nature of language in general, and the genius of thoſe particular languages in which the ſtudent is converſant; an acquaintance with the character of ſtyle in all its diverſities, and the various figures of ſpeech employed to adorn or invigorate it; a knowledge of the eſſential diſtinctions between the different ſpecies of compoſition; and a familiarity with all the principal works of different ages and countries, in order to trace imitations and form exact ideas of comparative merit. The number of capital productions in verſe and proſe to which the ancient and a few of the modern languages give acceſs, is ſo great, that the critical ſtudy of them will furniſh employment for all the leiſure any ſcholar can command; and ſo ſeductive is this branch of literature, that perſons claſſically educated are often ſeen to make it almoſt the ſole occupation