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Volume I.

CONDITIONS OF THIS GAZETTE.
THE price to Subscribers is THREE DOLLARS per annum, for fifty-two numbers, exclusive of postage; and in all cases where papers shall be delivered at the expense of the publisher, the price will be, including postage, FOUR DOLLARS U. S. yearly, payable half yearly in advance.

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MISCELLANY.

FROM THE PORTICO.

View of the present state of Politic Learning.

CHAPTER II.
Of the causes of Intellectual Depravement
and Literary Decay.

In an advanced state of literature and science, when the means of improvement grow less obvious and discernible, increased excellence necessarily becomes more arduous. Every step towards the pinnacle of perfection, requires enhanced vigour, dexterity and skill; and as the difficulty augments, there naturally obtains a greater tendency to aberration and decay. An age of refinement, therefore, such as ours, is most liable to literary corruption, and mental indolence; for in proportion to the difficulty of doing what is right, and attaining purity, elegance and novelty in composition, is the danger of committing error, and falling into a vitiated taste, an affected style, and an unnatural manner; and next to this, is the forcible tendency of the mind to quiescence and apathy; than which, even the production of inferior performances seems preferable. To see the embers of genius kindled into a feeble flame, appears more animating, and is certainly to be preferred, to the chill appearance which the total extinction of every effort of genius and intellect presents.

It is not difficult to conceive, how a perfect state of learning, or what we imagine to be so, should beget mental depravation in a subsequent age. As the intellect is then furnished with every variety of pleasing instruction, and the fancy is amused with every species of allegory, invention and imagery, there remains no want of recreation or instruction for the mind, to permit the entrance of that painful vacuity, that *tedium vita*, which has so frequently proved a spur to genius, and pointed the path to immortality. Minds unconscious of their mighty powers, and blind to their destiny, have often from this strong impulse of torpid pain, been suddenly impelled to the most brilliant achievements of learning; and instead of pining in protracted listlessness, they have gained the applause of mankind, and reaped the recompence of genius.

When we do not lack the means of gratification, in objects of curiosity and knowledge, of amusement and comfort, of pleasure and instruction, much incitement to intellectual exertion is necessarily destroyed. All these a refined age abundantly supplies. Polite learning, and general science, being in a high state of excellence, little is left for us to desire, and nothing to invent. We naturally remain therefore, in a fixed state of inaction; or if any wants spring up in the mind, to excite the rebel discontent, we solace ourselves by some perverted production, or monstrous novelty. The stores of nature and truth are exhausted; both the body and the mind luxuriate in the highest enjoyments; and attention is seldom called off by curiosity, to devise inventions hitherto not thought of, or explore the deficiencies of past performances.

An important fact in regard to the present state of learning, naturally arises out of the preceding remarks. It has been alleged, and it may defy denial, that no antecedent age was ever exalted to such stupendous excellence as that to which we have approached or perhaps have just past; and hence it is sufficiently apparent, that no previous pause in the advancement of literature, can bear a perfect analogy to that which we now behold. No principles of reasoning, therefore, or rules of

precedent, or symptoms of health and decay, derived from past time, can now be correctly applied to judge of the present condition of science and letters.

A long cessation of improvement was not formerly an infallible sign of decay; but in the present age, it may bespeak an alarming diminution of wisdom. To stop when we are so far advanced, seems to imply the exhaustion of our vigour; and indicates a want of power, to extend excellence to its highest possible summit. Thus what was but a pause before, in an inferior age, now becomes a complete termination, from the perfect state of all our attainments.

The truth of this remark will strike the mind more forcibly when we recall the intellectual condition of past ages, and trace the gradual improvement of successive periods, and claims, in the various branches of general knowledge.

Compared with the nations of antiquity, the Egyptians were only celebrated for their knowledge of astronomy; and they left all other subjects open to a future age, and a different people. The Greeks next, grew renowned for their perfection in polite letters, in philosophy, and in the fine arts. The Roman people in a later age, only refined on Grecian productions; while they gave birth to scarcely any new improvement not previously struck out by Grecian genius. What was rough, they polished; and what was complete they embellished. They toiled to perform what the Greeks were satisfied by knowing they could suggest; and might, if they pleased, accomplish. Like careless masters in painting, they sketched the outlines of an admirable figure, in the wantonness of invention, and disdained to complete it; while the Romans, like a laborious artist of taste and ability, came behind, and filled up the figure, by drapery, colouring, and expression. In geometry alone, I believe of all the sciences, were they very eminent; and antiquity left an intellectual, as well as physical world, to be discovered and conquered, by the irresistible force of modern genius. For we justly boast an acquired superiority and perfection, in all the abstruse sciences, and useful arts, over the ancients.

To enhance the renown of antiquity, we cannot disseminate, on the other hand, that we have never improved upon their incomparable models in the Belles Lettres, and the fine arts; and indeed have rarely equalled their blaze of excellence, in these departments of polite learning. A conclusive proof of the futility of attempting to render that better which is already perfect. Attempts that always end in the vitiation of taste, and the corruption of knowledge.

Thus each age has had its peculiar department allotted, as it for improvement; till at last having completed the sciences themselves, there seems to be nothing left for posterity to perform. Who can imagine a higher polish in literature; or conceive an important addition to science, in which we are now defective? Can the cartoons of Raphael be retouched to advantage; or the magick eloquence of Pitt or Burke, be sublimated to the oratory of angels.

The natural inference from these truths, is unhappily of a desponding complexion; but though it cuts off tardy hope, it does not inspire the anguish of despair. It is that as we cannot go farther in the track of excellence, without danger, there is a sort of unavoidable propensity to corruption, the way to true beauties, is not only rugged, but slippery and narrow, the acclivity is steep, and he who attempts the height, must be dashed to the bottom, where darkness and oblivion will repay his temerity, and crush his ambition. This propensity however, may be more or less gradual, or altogether insuperable, according to accidental circumstances; but our retrogression appears certain. An exuberance of the gifts of fortune, not only begets a proneness to pleasure, but impels the possessor to pervert them to irrational purposes, and destructive ends. When no active principle of progression employs the mind, it will ever indulge in the mischievous occupation of innovating on what is established, or of corrupting what is perfect. Hence the feeble imitations, the ponderous commentaries, and the injudicious compilations, that now prevail, which swell the bulk of literature to an unwholesome magnitude.

Some minds can never be driven into inactivity and torpor; but like strong and fat

soils, continue fertile, though they produce nothing precious. Thus the fervid impetuosity of genius itself, leads to a pernicious declension in taste, learning and science, when the flame of excellence has spread over the world of letters. Those who feel the impulsive power of superior intelligence, are impatient of restraint, and ambitious of renown. They pant for the golden fruit, although they see that it is not to be obtained; and as they survey the ambient fields of learning, blooming in exuberant verdure, they are animated to every enterprise, and plunge into the first unbeaten track that presents itself, rather with the force of despatch, than the assurance of surpassing what they emulate. But they are at least certain of obtaining novelty, either from singularity, invention, or fancy; and novelty is known to be fascinating to every mind, whether repugnant or not to reason and nature. Careless whether they deprive the literary taste, or obstruct improvement, so long as their abilities become conspicuous, and their ambition is gratified.

With trusting hearts
They spread their spurious talents to the sun,
And bid the world admire! but chief the glance
Of wanton envy draws their joy bright eyes,
And life with self applause each lordly brow.
In numbers boundless as the blooms of spring,
Behold their glaring idols empty shapes,
By fancy gilded o'er, and then let op
For adoration. Some in learning's garb,
With formal hand, undash'd count'ry gover
And rigs of mouldy volumes."

Every species of intellectual refinement continues to degradations, as it treads upon the border of the opposite extreme of recklessness and puerility; and excessive refinement, and total barbarity, exhibit the same effect, only produced by different means. When the learning of Greece and Rome arrived to a state of sickly delicacy it was but the precursor of its entire depression; and whether it was not a collateral cause of its degeneracy, may reasonably be questioned. In modern Italy, a similar effect was produced by the same clamorous, and the frequency of so impudent an occurrence, seems to demand a research into the origin of its existence.

It was before remarked, that when excellence is already resplendent, quick improvement is necessarily hindered. Those who hastily attempt to carry perfection still higher, mostly fall into some unnatural method, and adopt the most phantasick rules for the creation of unknown beauties. The rivals of Demosthenes and Cicero in oratory, and of Virgil and Horace in poetry, who endeavored to surpass their superiors, became pygmies by their presumption; and corrupted the publick taste or helped to corrupt it, to the utter degeneracy of genuine poetry, and true eloquence. For the truth of this, we have the testimony of Pliny, and of Juvenal, the latter of whom ridicules with caustick severity, the frivolous themes of these conceited imitators; against the influence of whose example Tacitus attempts to guard the popular taste, by the most classick productions. Hence the futility of refining on that which is in appearance already perfect; in place of giving the mind a direction to that department of letters or of science, whose deficiency is perceptible; and which will thus augment the general stock of useful wisdom.

Superstition in former ages, was often justly alleged as one of the chief causes of intellectual deterioration. But whether it is so formidable a one, in the present age, may reasonably be doubted. It pervades but partially the minds of a few, who can in any degree, hinder the advancement, or promote the extinction of letters; and is of minor importance, when put in competition with other causes. Entire sects, however, from a false appreciation, and unreasonable extension of religion, are known to be entangled in pious ignorance, and perverse stupidity. Some in particular who assume the demureness of sanctity, and exult in the sinful pride of exterior self-denial, contribute essentially, to chill the growth, and hinder the perfection of the fine arts, and whatever adds to the establishment of beauty, or the decoration of life. They prostrate, in the heat of fanaticism, the product of the Painter, the Statuary, and the Architect; and lop every superflux, which by presenting beauty, harmony, and grace, may offend the bleared eye of barbarous superstition.

Although a too servile reverence for the

learning and institutions of antiquity, has an immediate tendency to shackle improvement and by consequence, to induce some degree of mental depravity, yet an opposite extreme is still more pernicious. To discard altogether, the chaste and exalted principles, which the classic ages gratuitously afford; and bound at once, into the unexplored regions of capricious imagination, in quest of crude novelty, would be pregnant with every corruption that taste can bear, and every absurdity from which reason revolts.

The extreme of every suspicious condition, and acknowledged good, is hurtful and unhappy. The fervid rays of a temperate sun, cause the fields to become florid, and the land to smile in plenty; but the scorching beams of the torrid zone, produce desolation and preclude fertility.

Hence it has occurred, that the same freedom, which when moderate and rational, conducted to the quick growth of learning, now proves one of the most influential causes, of its obstruction and decay. Modern liberty, in many instances, has burst the bounds of reason and virtue, by degenerating into savage equality, and brutal licentiousness. In spite of fostering the expansive excellence of literature, it has done little else, than wage an open war, against all taste, science, and refinement. The irruption of those myriads of Goths, Huns, and Vandals, that swept the Roman gran-deur into ruin, was in one sense favorable to letters, when compared with that wanton liberty, which in recent periods has blasted the hopes of erudition, and nipt the fruits of genius!

An equality of freedom, that destroys all distinctions, honors, and rewards, must ever be detrimental to improvement, and must chill the aspiring flame of ambition, that climbs to honor and renown! If you extinguish every incitement to pre-eminent performances. Though fame is the natural food of genius, for which it puts forth its efforts, and by which its toil is required; yet fame alone is sufficient in itself, to promote the progress of learning, or arrest the career of decay!

Noble natures of exalted endowments, mostly possess a delicate diffidence, that should be checked by courtesy and kind attention, and not wounded by neglect or offence. Authors have wants, that the recompense of their works should supply, by a liberal and extended patronage; and which ought never to be satisfied by the petitions of charity. Thus an age of national penury, avaricious enterprise or barbarous manners, is wholly adverse to the felicities of genius, which require a happy mixture of opulence, taste, good breeding, and liberality!

"Unhappy White, whose life was in its spring,
And thy young Muse just waved her joyous wing,
The spoiler came; all, all thy promise fair,
Has sought the grave, to sleep forever there!"

Honor and rewards, should encourage and nourish them to a full perfection, and hardy maturity. Neglected and unrewarded they pine in sorrow, languish in obscurity, and perish from want. Let the horrid fate of the ingenious Chatterton admonish mankind of this melancholy truth, and excite them to generosity. Devoid of the means of subsistence, what mind is so vigorous as not to sink into imbecility, or be driven to despair? That poverty does not enhance the force of invention, brighten the brilliancy of the fancy, or add to the exuberance of wit, has not yet been controverted by the course of experience, in the most renowned heroes of eastern romance.

Another important cause of literary depravement, in an age of affluence and refinement, consists in the superficial method of education, that generally prevails. An age of affluence is an age of pleasure. Those accomplishments will then only be esteemed, which contribute to general pleasure and mutual enjoyment; which require little toil, and do not possess the appearance of study. Such acquirements, therefore, as they procure most admiration, will be most sought after, and cultivated. Among them, exterior graces and refined manners, will chiefly occupy attention, and hinder the mind from imbibing profound knowledge, or indulging in a comprehensive circle of instruction. The glitter of frivolity usurps the place of solid sense, and useful knowledge; and the vain desire of sparkling for the moment, and pleasing every one, supersedes the nobler ambition of literary renown, and the dignified virtue of discriminating courtesy. A desire to please, is a commendable qual-