

COMMUNICATIONS ORIGINAL AND SELECTED.

ESSAY ON IRISH BULLS.

A TASTE for ridicule may be considered as one of the strongest features in the character of the true born Englishman. The Spanish Don, the Dutch Mynheer, the French Monsieur, the Scotch Sawney, the Irish Blunderer, &c &c are appellations in the British phraseology which are always associated with the ideas of ridicule, and are used to convey indirectly a supposed superiority in an Englishman over the characters of the personages so denominated. We need not stop to analyze this peculiar mode of national feeling, as metaphysical enquiries might possibly be necessary in the course of the research; and metaphysical enquiries are, in my opinion, rather a laborious means of shewing a man's ignorance, than a science of real utility, I think it therefore more prudent to have recourse to a plain and simple course of reasoning in the following inquiry, "Are the natives of this island more prone to blundering than any other nation in Europe?"

In putting the case into a questionable shape, you will see, sir, that I am for considering this matter completely as one liable to discussion. I am not sufficiently national to deny positively that a character so uniformly attributed to our countrymen, may not have some foundation in the nature of things. But at the same time, I consider the charge so very *outré* so poorly accounted for on the principles of common reasoning, that I cannot help looking on it as worthy of general discussion.

It is usually remarked that the Irish character is peculiarly turbulent; that it exhibits a vivacity of a peculiar nature, and a consequent rapidity of thought which frequently hurries them forward in the expres-

sion of their ideas with such velocity as frequently to expose them to all the bulls, blunders, and errors arising from unusual quickness. Let us examine this statement of the matter.

All violent passions are liable to disturb the usual current of language. The angry man, for instance, will not depict his feelings with minute precision, he will convey his meaning elliptically, His mind is too much agitated to adhere to the alphabetical arrangement of his ideas, he is satisfied if he can be understood by short, detached sentences; there are consequently many hiatuses in his language which are left to the sagacity of his hearers to fill up, and which rarely require much overstrained reasoning to accomplish.—The rage of Hotspur and its cause may be easily collected from the heterogeneous mass of sentences which he pours forth. If the Irishman expresses his anger in a manner peculiar, and distinct from every other person, it must follow, that the turbulence and vivacity of an Irishman are totally different from those of any other human being, or they are not; the dilemma I think indisputable. The former has been frequently asserted without that *trifling appendage* to assertion, the *proof* necessary to make it more than *mere assertion*, and so long as this shall be the case, I may without being accused of much national prejudice, deny the proposition.

The fact is, our countrymen are as liable as people of other nations to allow their passions, at times, to gain the ascendancy over them, and as they have not as yet felt the full effects of civilization, it may very naturally happen, that we are more frequently liable to unevenness of

temper, and to those violent exertions of it, than others who have enjoyed the advantages of superior national education; but surely no one will hazard the assertion, that absurdities of expression vanish as the light of science rises to its meridian. If it be so, I think it might be a profitable speculation for some one of the London printers to send a cargo of his hungry writers to the wilds of Caffraria, or Negroland, in search of (what by the courtesy of England he may call) "a collection of Irish Bulls."

On the subject of national character in general, I am inclined to differ from the usual opinions on the subject; education can bend the human mind into any form. Climate may give a trivial cast to the character; the poverty of a country may make its inhabitants inhospitable; profusion in the soil may encourage generosity; but education and government alone form the soul of man. When I compare the hardy African who crossed the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Rhone, the Durance, and carried terror and dismay into the very heart of the Roman territory, with him who is now toiling in his chains, or indulging in the voluptuous recesses of a scraglio; must I bewail the change of climate or of government? The question I conceive requires no answer.

It is asserted by Miss Edgeworth, (vide her essay on bulls) that the period when this stigma of bull-making began to be attached to the Irish character, cannot be ascertained, and all we can positively state on the subject at present, is, that the imputation was not laid to our charge so early as the reign of Elizabeth. This we can ascertain to a very critical degree of accuracy, from the *dramatis personæ* of that period. Among Shakespeare's characters, for instance, we see the

Frenchmen held up to ridicule; the Cambrian too has fallen under the severity of his humour, and it is probable we should have met with some *caricatures* from Scotland, had not the state of affairs rendered such an exertion of wit impolitic, in one who was a kind of appendage to the court; but no consideration of policy exempted him from exerting all his talents in delineating the absurdities of our national character, had such absurdities existed at the time. Capt. Macmorris (in Henry the V.) is brave, impetuous and addicted to swearing; but in this character I can see nothing of a national cast. The *traits* above-mentioned are such as frequently occur in the composition of a military character, and (with the exception of the brogue of Capt. Macmorris) he might easily pass for an individual of any nation in Europe.

The wits of Charles' days were equally inattentive to this *imputed* characteristic of our nation; we may therefore naturally conclude that we had not then arrived at that degree of confusion in our reasoning faculties which has been since attributed to us, which would authorize their notice. It was not till a much later period that wit began to single us out for ridicule. After the extensive settlements made in the country by the followers of Cromwell, and after they had propagated a new race of beings in Ireland, the British dramatists and novelists commenced their attacks upon Hibernian absurdity. Before that period, we were only stigmatized as savages, but henceforward we are to look upon ourselves not only as savages, but as the remnants of the builders of Babel, speaking one thing and meaning another. It is rather whimsical, that this part of our national character should have attracted notice at so critical a time. Had it been proved that we were capable of ma-

king bulls prior to *this period of settlement*, we might fairly challenge the full and undisputed claim to this peculiar form of absurdity. But as the imputation has not been mentioned till after a certain period when our blood began to flow in mingled currents, we cannot with any justice withhold from the settlers of the sister isle a portion of the credit attached to such a character.

To bring the matter fairly into discussion, we should institute a trial of skill between ourselves and the different nations of Europe; but as this would be rather a tedious operation, should it be carried on with all the minuteness and precision of a lawsuit, should we call upon the individuals of each nation, question, cross-question, puzzle, &c. &c. we must abandon this mode of procedure, and rest contented with examining the authors of those different nations, comparing them with our own, fairly pointing out their respective absurdities wherever they may occur, and *let common sense draw the conclusion*.

Before we proceed, however, I wish to make a few remarks on the absurdities of the classic authors in the Greek and Latin languages, and to account in some manner for the exemption which they have enjoyed from the imputation laid to our charge.

The laws of composition amongst the antients, though rigidly enforced, will nevertheless in many instances, be found to grant a latitude to writers which is not at all allowable in the present day. When Virgil calls the *sun*, *a lantern*, we immediately call to mind the figure of speech by which the expression was authorized, and pass it over without a comment. The Tapinosis removes every quailm of conscience in a Roman or Grecian scholar, should he encounter any discordancy of expression, any poverty of language peeping out

here or there in his favourite author.

But when he shall chance to meet with any thing like downright nonsense, even here, he feels himself perfectly relieved from every kind of embarrassment, *sunt certa piacula*, ANGLICE, *figures of speech*, which like so many knight-errants are ready at the word of command to go forth the professed champions of every absurdity of expression.

When Virgil makes his hero exhort his companions in arms, first, *to die*, and after that to *rush into the middle of the battle*;* how easily a man of literature can *swallow* this blunder, by seasoning it moderately with the *ὄψρον, προσρον*, (vulgarly called *putting the cart before the horse*.) Rhadamanthus too, is represented by the same poet as first *punishing* the souls of the damned, and then *putting them to the bar*.† The sentence we must allow, is somewhat awkward, but is easily made evident to the meanest capacity, by the aid of the foregoing figure of speech!!!

The Catechresis was another valuable auxiliary to antient literature. By this figure, Virgil and Juvenal were at liberty to say, *ra'ere litora, metit barbam*, though, "shaving the grass," "mowing the beard," are absolutely adduced by the authors of the *Bathos* as expressions worthy of being held up to ridicule.

Wherever the antient authors have deviated into an absurdity of expression, their advocates have acquired a happy mode, not only of repelling any insinuation against their characters, but have even contrived to turn every attack of this nature to the advantage of their favourite au-

.....Moriamur, et in media arma
ruamus. Æn. ii. 353.

† Gnosius hæc Rhadamanthus habet durissima regna
Castigatque, auditque dolos, subigitque
fateri. Æn. vi. 566. 567.

thor; a mistake, a bull, or a blunder, is termed a *strong, bold expression*. — There is much virtue in a good name.

.....Mugire videbis
Sub pedibus terram.

ÆN. iv. lines 490, 491,

“Thou shalt behold,” says Dido, “the earth to *below* under your feet.” To hear the *bellying* of the earth would require only a trifling exertion of the magic art; but how extraordinary must the power be that could make a *sound visible* to the *naked eye*.

.....hic labor, hoc opus est.

Dido, in the violence of her rage, tells Æneas, that she will *pursue* him in *her absence*. *Seqnar atris ignibus absens*.* This is, in the energetic language of Lord Chatham, *trampling on impossibilities*.

Juvenal informs us, that poor Codrus possessed *nothing*, yet withal, he was robbed of this *nothing*.† The strength of this expression lies, I suppose in this, that, whereas robbing a man of *something*, is to be considered as a mere common breach of the law, to take from him what he *never* had, required such a reach of talent, and of *nil, laing too*, as makes the whole transaction unusually atrocious; hence are evident the beauty, force, and strength of the expression.

Again, Ovid in the loves of Pyramus and Thisbe lets us know the extraordinary *powers* possessed by fathers in the days of old, in the following verse :

Sed vetere patres, quod non potuere
vetare.‡

* ÆN. 4, line 384

† Nil habuit Codrus; quis enim negat? et tamen illud Perdidit infelix totum nil.

Juv. Sat. iii. 208.

‡ The blunder may be avoided by making a full stop at “patres,” and referring the sentence “sed vetere patres,” to that which precedes it, a correction which I

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In English thus, “Their fathers forbade them to do, what *they had it not in their power to forbid them to do*.” Here are strength, beauty, parental authority, and.....nonsense in one line !!!

I could multiply examples of this figure of speech *ad infinitum*, did I conceive it capable of answering any good purpose. I shall bid adieu to this part of my subject, after having quoted one strong expression from the sublime father of poetry. In the 3d book of the Iliad and 40th verse, Hector is made to express a wish that Paris had never been born, and *had never been married*. The reader will observe the precaution used by Hector, a precaution that would have done honour to a special attorney; his *non existence* was not sufficient to satisfy him, unless he were to remain during this state of non-existence in a *state of celibacy too*.

The blunders usually attributed to the Irish, may be traced in general to some other quarter; that this remark has not been as yet made by some English writer, cannot be attributed to their want of information on the subject: for contemptible as the author may be, I dare affirm, few of them have passed by the the facetious Joe Millar’s jests. The absurdities of *Paddy*, and *Teague* are too gratifying to the feelings of Englishmen not to be noticed. I shall take the liberty of producing a few of the *imputed* blunders and the *originals*.

“The greatest misfortunes are always *attended by greater*.” Milton, to express the dreadful feelings of Satan, makes him say,

And, in the *lowest* deep, a *lower* deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide.
Par. Lost, iv. 76. 77.

Perhaps we may trace this still

have not noticed in any edition of Ovid which has fallen into my hands, though recommended by *Burnes*.

farther back in the *Stultior es stultissimo* of Plautus.

"Arragh the devil burn you," says Teague to his nurse, "it's what you *changed* me while I was at your breast."—This is the very language of Sancho Panza.

"Hah! bad luck to you, you spalpeen," says Paddy, "If you were not idle, you would not be doing that mischief."

Whoever will take the trouble of turning to the Tom Jones of the elegant and witty Fielding, will find these words: "I have heard it remarked by a friend, that when a child is doing *nothing*, he is doing *mischief*."—Now I do remember a remark somewhat similar to this by Swift, that when a child is *silent*, he is surely committing some mischief. But, perhaps, the expression of Fielding's friend may be considered stronger, and therefore preferable.

(To be concluded in our next.)

To the Editor of the Belfast Magazine.

TABLE-TALK, OR SKETCHES OF
MODERN MANNERS.

SIR,

EVERY person who has devoted any time to the perusal of the classics, knows how to value any the slightest information contained in them, relative to the domestic arrangements and familiar incidents of their times. Cincinnatus, routing the enemies of his country, and extending her boundaries by his conquests, commands our respect; but we are deeply interested in his concerns, when the historian depicts him at his plough, called thence to be invested with the highest honours his country could bestow, and regretting, that in consequence of his absence his little farm must remain untilled. In like manner, Philopœmen, in his public character, secures our veneration: but we begin

to love him when we see him assisting the poor woman to collect sticks for her little fire. It is thus with all the personages recorded in the revering memories of men: they are esteemed and respected so long as they are beheld amidst their splendor; but love does not mingle itself with our esteem; as, perhaps, a little jealousy will always be found mixed in the estimates we form of those who are our superiors. But when some qualifying weakness is discovered, we then begin to love. This, together with the curiosity ingrafted in our nature, urges us to search into the most minute particulars of antient times, and in the pursuit we feel gratified at the discovery of things most familiar amongst ourselves, even though it were no more, as Le Sage humorously says, than the discovery, that at Athens children cried when they were whipped. Thus things the most trivial are gilded as if with the full grace of novelty, and though we would ridicule the man who would now commit such things to writing, we endeavour to perpetuate, with honour, the names of those ancients who have recorded them.

While we would not be understood as attributing actual desert to those writers, we must allow them incidental desert; as we should be ungrateful indeed, if we did not make some return to those, who, though not exclusively purposing it, have yet contributed to our entertainment and instruction. Female critics, for example, are not a little pleased when their insinuations about the hair, complexion, and various perfections of a rival beauty are established through the mean of a high wind or warm ball-room. Now these critics have, no doubt, heard either from their mamas or learned from some old-fashioned goody book, that such conduct savours a little of envy; that moralists nickname such hinting *slander*, and