THE EDINBURGH REVIEW,

OR

CRITICAL JOURNAL:

FOR

APRIL 1810.....AUGUST 1810.

TO BE CONTINUED QUARTERLY.

JUDEX DAMNATUR CUM NOCENS ABSOLVITUR.
PUBLIUS SYRUS.

VOL. XVI.

Edinburgh:

Printed by David Willison,

FOR ARCHIBALD CONSTABLE AND COMPANY, EDINBURGH; AND
CONSTABLE, HUNTER, PARK, AND HUNTER,
LONDON.

1810.

Digitized by Google

class of impostors are most despicable;—for, as an utter disregard of truth and contempt of decency, characterize the feeble efforts of both classes in nearly the same degree, we cannot stop to apportion the shares of other qualities which may belong to each;—and we recollect the labours of the one and the other with the same impressions.

Art. IX. *British Georgics.* By James Grahame. pp. 340. 4to. Edinburgh, 1809.

We have no great predilection, we must say, for Didactic poetry of any sort,—at least, where it corresponds with its title, and really aims at teaching; and though there are several pieces that have obtained much merited celebrity under that title, we suspect that it has been earned by the passages to which it was least applicable. Some have pleased by the liveliness and beauty of the descriptions which they contained; others by the exquisite polish and elegance of the composition; and the greater part, perhaps, by their episodes and digressions. Who reads the precepts of Hesiod, or the arguments of Lucretius?—or even the maxims about sowing and reaping in Virgil, or the theory of laughter and of general ideas in Akenside?

The poem before us, we fear, will not take away this reproach of the Didactic Muse; and may indeed be divided, more certainly and commodiously than most of its family, into the two great compartments of the legible and the illegible. The agricultural precepts, which are as dull and prosaic as any precepts we ever met with, fortunately are not very intimately mixed up with the descriptive and poetical passages; and those, which are often of great beauty and pathos, are generally so detached and complete in themselves, that they might have stood as well in any other work which treated of rural life and rural scenery; and may be perfectly relished and understood by those who are wicked enough to skip over all the agricultural learning of the volume.

Though 'Georgics' may be, as Mr Grahame assures us, the proper appellation for all treatises of husbandry in verse, the 'Scotish Farmer's Kalendar' would have been a title more descriptive of the plan and substance of the work before us. Not only is the whole scenery borrowed from this end of the island, but the poem is divided into twelve parts or sections, arranged in the order, and under the names of the twelve months of the year, and containing full directions for all farm-work proper to each month respectively, as well as some fine descriptions of the successive ap-

 pearances

pearances of the country, and the condition of its inhabitants; together with many little episodes and reflections arising out of these considerations.

In thus putting the whole year into blank verse, it was evidently next to impossible to avoid clashing with the author of the Seasons;—and those, accordingly, who are jealous of Thomson's original invention, will find frequent occasion to complain of the author before us. At the same time, there are many points in which we think his merits must be admitted by all lovers of poetry, and his originality confessed by the warmest admirers of Thomson. The singular fidelity and clearness of his descriptions, prove him to have studied all his pictures for himself, in nature; —a certain simplicity of thought, and softness of heart, give a peculiar character to his manner, that excludes all idea of imitation; and his fine and discriminating pictures of the Scotish landscape, and the Scotish peasantry, are as new in their subject, as they are excellent in the execution.

There is something irresistibly pleasing in the faithful representation of external nature, even in her simplest and most ordinary aspects. All men have interesting associations with dawnings and sunsets:—and the returns of summer and winter, as they indicate themselves upon the woods and waters, the mountains and fields of our home scenery, recal to every bosom a thousand impressions, more deep and touching than can usually be excited by objects far more new and extraordinary. A lively picture of nature, therefore, pleases everybody—and is the only thing, perhaps, that does so. Nor are we very apt, while we feel indebted to the artist for a clear and striking conception, to blame him for having painted what is common, or even what had been often painted before. If a descriptive poet makes us feel distinctly that he is copying from nature, and not from his predecessors, we excuse a good deal of coincidence, and really receive a new impression from a new portrait of the same grand original.

Mr Grahame's descriptions appear to us to be remarkable for their great fidelity, minuteness and brevity,—for the singular simplicity and directness with which they are brought out,—and for a kind of artless earnestness in the manner of their execution which shows the author to have been entirely occupied with the care of rendering faithfully and exactly what was present to his eye or his memory. There is no ambition to be fine or striking,—and no great concern, apparently, about the distant effect or ideal perfection of his landscape,—but an honest determination and endeavour to give his readers precisely what was before him,—and to communicate faithfully to them what had actually made an impression on himself. In this way, he seldom thinks it necessary

Digitized by Google

to call in the aid of exaggeration, or to invent any picturesque or extraordinary circumstances to bespeak an interest for his delineations; but presents his scenes successively in all their native plainness and simplicity,—noting down all the features that really occur in them, without concerning himself whether other poets have represented them or not,—and stopping when these are exhausted, however abrupt or imperfect the composition may consequently appear. The effect of this plan of writing is, that his descriptions are almost always strong and impressive, and present the most distinct and vivid images to the fancy; although they are not often heightened by any great glow of genius or animation, and are frequently broken and irregular, or deficient in that keeping which may be found in the works of those who write more from the love of the art than of the subject.

The great charm, however, of Mr Grahame's poetry, appears to us to consist in its moral character,—in that natural expression of kindness and tenderness of heart, which gives such a peculiar air of paternal goodness and patriarchal simplicity to his writings,—and that earnest and intimate sympathy with the objects of his compassion, which assures us at once that he is not making a theatrical display of sensibility, but merely giving vent to the familiar sentiments of his bosom. We can trace here, in short, and with the same pleasing effects, that entire absence of all art, effort and affectation, which we have already noticed as the most remarkable distinction of his attempts in description. Almost all the other poets with whom we are acquainted, appear but too obviously to put their feelings and affections, as well as their fancies and phrases, into a sort of studied dress, before they venture to present them to the crowded assembly of the public: and though the style and fashion of this dress varies according to the taste and ability of the inventors, still it serves almost equally to hide their native proportions, and to prove that they were a little ashamed or afraid to exhibit them, as they really were. The greater part of those who have aimed at producing a pathetic effect, have attempted to raise and exalt both the characters of their personages and the language in which they are spoken of; and thus to seek an excuse, as it were, for their sensibility in the illusions of vulgar admiration: others have aggravated their distresses with strange and incredible complications,—that it might appear that they did not disturb themselves on light and ordinary grounds: and some few have dressed out both themselves and their heroes in such a tissue of whimsical and capricious affectations, that they are still less in danger than their neighbours of being suspected of indulging in the vulgar sympathies of our nature. Now, Mr Grahame, we think, has got over this general

O 4 nervousness

Digitized by Google

nervousness and shyness about showing the natural and simple feelings with which the contemplation of human emotion should affect us—or rather, has been too seriously occupied, and too constantly engrossed with the feelings themselves, to think how the confession of them might be taken by the generality of his readers,—to concern himself about the contempt of the fastidious, or the derision of the unfeeling. In his poetry, therefore, we meet neither with the Musidoras and Damons of Thomson, nor the gypsywomen and Ellen Orfords of Crabbe; and still less with the Matthew Schoolmasters, Alice Fells, or Martha Raes of Mr Wordsworth;—but we meet with the ordinary peasants of Scotland in their ordinary situations, and with a touching and simple expression of concern for their sufferings, and of generous indulgence for their faults. He is not ashamed of his kindness and condescension, on the one hand; nor is he ostentatious or vain of it, on the other—but gives expression in the most plain and unaffected manner to sentiments that are neither counterfeited nor disguised. We do not know any poetry, indeed, that lets us in so directly to the heart of the writer, and produces so full and pleasing a conviction that it is dictated by the genuine feelings which it aims at communicating to the reader. If there be less fire and elevation than in the strains of some of his contemporaries, there is more truth and tenderness than is commonly found along with those qualities, and less getting up either of language or of sentiment than we recollect to have met with in any modern composition.

The last peculiarity by which Mr Grahame's poetry is recommended to us, is one which we hesitate a little about naming to our English readers:—to be candid with them, however, it is his great nationality. We do love him in our hearts, we are afraid, for speaking so affectionately of Scotland. But, independent of this partial bias, we must say, that the exquisitely correct pictures which he has drawn of Scottish rustics, and of Scottish rural scenery, have a merit, which even English critics would not think we had overrated if they were as well qualified as we are to judge of their fidelity. We will add, too, in spite of the imputations to which it may expose us, that the rustics of Scotland are a far more interesting race, and far fitter subjects for poetry than their brethren of the same condition in the South. They are much more thoughtful, pious and intelligent—have more delicacy in their affections, and more reflecting, patient and serious kindness in their natures. To say all in a word, they are far less *brutish* than the great body of the English peasantry. At the same time, from being poorer and more lonely, their characters and way of life are more truly simple, while the very want of comfort and accommodation with which they are sometimes surrounded, holds more

of

of the antique age, and connects them more closely with those primitive times, with the customs and even the history of which they are still so generally familiar. The Scotish landscape, too, we must be pardoned for thinking, is better suited for poetical purposes than the prevailing scenery of England. Its great extent and openness—the slight shade of dreariness that is commonly thrown over both its beauty and its sublimity—and the air of wildness and antiquity which it derives from its rocky hills and unploughed valleys,—possess a charm, both to the natives and to strangers, that leads far more readily to poetical associations than the fertile fields and snug villages of the South.

If we have succeeded at all in interesting the reader in this work by these general observations, he will naturally be anxious to judge for himself of their propriety, by perusing some part of the poem. We shall select a few specimens, therefore, in turning over the volume. The following picture of a bright frosty day is evidently drawn from nature.

'Ruddy is now the dawning as in June,
And clear and blue the vault of noon-tide sky:
Nor is the slanting orb of day unfelt.
From sunward rocks, the icicle's faint drop,
By lonely river-side, is heard at times
To break the silence deep: for now the stream
Is mute, or faintly gurgles, far below
Its frozen ceiling: silent stands the mill,
The wheel immoveable, and shod with ice.
The babbling rivulet, at each little slope,
Flows scantily beneath a lucid veil,
And seems a pearly current liquified;
While, at the shelvy side, in thousand shapes
Fantastical, the frostwork domes uprear
Their tiny fabrics,' &c. ——
'Spotless parterres, all freakt with snow-white flowers,
Flowers that no archetype in nature own;
Or spreads the spiky crystals into fields
Of bearded grain, rustling in autumn breeze.' p. 19, 20.

The following sketch of our upland scenery is marked by the same power of nice observation. It makes part of a dissertation on the management of bees.

'When summer's blow of flowers begins to fade,
Some to the moorlands bear their hives, to cull
The treasures of the heathbell; simple flower!
That still extends its purple tint as far
As eye can reach, round many an upland farm:
There still, of genuine breed, the colly * meets,

Barking

* The shepherd's dog.

Barking shrill-toned, the stranger rarely seen;
While near some rushy ricks of meadow hay
The startled horse stands gazing, then around
His tether-length of twisted hair full stretched,
He snorting scours: a toothless harrow serves
For garden gate, where duly ranged, the hives
Stand covered till the evening shades descend.
But when the sun-beams glisten on the dew,
Forth fly the stranger tribes, and far and near
Spread o'er the purple moor, cheering the task
Of him who busy digs his winter fuel;
For 'mid these wilds no sound gives sign of life
Save hum of bee, or grashopper's hoarse chirp;
Or when the heath-fowl strikes her distant call;
Or plovers, lighting on the half-buried tree,
Scream their dire dirge where once the linnet sung.'

p. 139, 140.

There is great truth, and a spirit of freshness and beauty, in this picture of a summer dawn.

'Yes,—let the husbandman arouse to toil,
While yet the sky a deep-empurpled tint
Northward displays,—before the corncraik's call
In mist-veiled meads awake the nestling lark,
To hail the dawn. Sweet is the dubious bound
Of night and morn, when spray and plant are drenched
In dew; sweet now the odour-breathing birch,
The gaudy broom, the orchard's blushing boughs,
The milk-white thorn, on which the blackbird roosts,
Till light he shakes his ruffling plumes, and chants
His roundelay; and sweet the beanfield rows,
'Tween which the drilling plough is artful steered,
Shaking the dew-drop gently from the bloom.'

'Thence on their lingering wings the west winds waft
A balmy odour: struck with new delight,
The toil-worn traveller pauses on his way.
Perhaps some veteran, whom Egyptic sands
Have reft of sight, (O, when will warfare cease!)
Leans on his staff, and wishes that but once,
But only once, he could behold those blooms,
Which now recal his father's little field.' p. 105–7.

The content and calm of closing harvest seems also to breathe in these lines.

——'O pleasant sight!
These lozenged ropes that, at the tapering top,
End in a wisp-wound pinnacle, a gladsome perch,
On which already sits poor Robin, proud,
And sweetly sings a song, to Harvest Home!

The

Digitized by Google

'The fields are swept, a tranquil silence reigns,
And pause of rural labour, far and near.
Deep is the morning's hush; from grange to grange
Responsive cock-crows, in the distance heard
Distinct as if it at hand, soothe the pleased ear;
And oft, at intervals, the flail, remote,
Sends faintly through the air its deafened sound.' p. 174-5.

The following antithetical view of the effects of judicious culture, is pleasing, from the variety and clearness of the images it presents.

' By such resources so applied, I've seen,
As if it were, a new creation smile;
Have seen the clover, red and white, supplant
The purple heath-bell; rustling ears succeed
The dreary stillness of the lurid moor;
The glutted heifer lowing for the pail,
Where starving sheep picked up their scanty fare;
The sheltering hawthorn blossom, where the furze
Its rugged aspect reared; and I have heard,
Where melancholy plovers hovering screamed,
The partridge-call, at gloamin's lovely hour,
Far o'er the ridges break the tranquil hush;
And morning larks ascend with songs of joy,
Where erst the whinchat chirped from stone to stone.' p. 41-2.

The reader may now wish to see how Mr Grahame manages his living figures. This is a description of the cottager's winter occupation, when

' He shuts again his door, and turns his hand
To home employment,—mending now a hive,
With bark of brier darned pliant through the seams;
Or, looking forward through the wintry gloom
To summer days, and meadows newly mown,
Repairs his toothless rake; or feeds his bees;
Or drives a nail into his studded shoon;
Or twists a wisp, and winds the spiral steps
Around the henroost ladder: deeply fixed,
Meanwhile, his children quit their play, and stand
With look inquiring, and inquiring tongue,
Admiring much his skill. Thus glides the day;
Thus glide the evening hours, when laid to rest
His imps are stilled, and with its deep-toned hum
The wool-wheel joins the excluded tempest's howl.
Perhaps some neighbour braves the blast, and cheers
The fire-side ring; then blaze the added peats,
Or moss-dug faggot, brightening roof and wall,
And rows of glancing plates that grace the shelves.
The jest meanwhile, or story of old times,

Goes

Digitized by Google

Goes cheery round; or, from some well-soiled page,
Are read the deeds of heroes, by the light
Mayhap of brands, whereon—when greenwood trees
Were all their canopy—their armour hung.' p. 228, 220.

The author's tenderness and kindness of heart, we think, is very conspicuous in the following extract. It closes a long exhortation in favour of planting willows for basket-making.

'The man bowed down with age, the sickly youth,
The widowed mother with her little child,
That lends its aid and loves to be employed,
Find, from this easy toil, a help in need.
The blind man's blessing lights on him who plants
An osier bed: O I have seen a smile
Of mild content upon the assembled group
Of piteous visages, whose dexterous hands,
Taught by the public care, plied the light task;
And I have heard, their hour of labour done,
That simple, sacred strain, *By Babel's streams,*
Rise from the sightless band, with such a power
Of heart-dissolving melody,—move such a host
Of strong o'erwhelming feelings in the breast,
As wrung a tear from most obdurate eyes.
Once I beheld a captive, whom these wars
Had made an inmate of the prison-house,
Cheering with wicker-work (that almost seemed
To him a sort of play) his dreary hours.
I asked his story: in my native tongue,
(Long use had made it easy as his own)
He answered thus:—Before these wars began,
I dwelt upon the willowy banks of Loire:
I married one who, from my boyish days,
Had been my playmate. One morn,—I'll ne'er forget!—
While busy choosing out the prettiest twigs,
To warp a cradle for our child unborn,
We heard the tidings, that the conscript-lot
Had fallen on me; it came like a death-knell.
The mother perished, but the babe survived;
And, ere my parting day, his rocking couch
I made complete, and saw him sleeping smile,—
The smile that played upon the cheek of her
Who lay clay-cold. Alas! the hour soon came
That forced my fettered arms to quit my child;
And whether now he lives to deck with flowers
The sod upon his mother's grave, or lies
Beneath it by her side, I ne'er could learn:
I think he's gone; and now I only wish
For liberty and home, that I may see,
And stretch myself and die upon that grave.' p. 48—51.

The

Digitized by Google

The same amiable turn of mind is visible, we think, in the objects upon which he has chosen to dwell, in presenting to his readers the melancholy but common picture of a family of cottagers condemned to migrate to the stifling lanes of a city. The *dog* and the *children* are introduced with great tenderness and simplicity.

——— ' Behold the band
With some small remnant of their household gear,
Drawn by the horse which once they called their own;
Behold them take a last look of that roof,
From whence no smoke ascends, and onward move
In silence; whilst each passing object wakes
Remembrances of scenes that never more
Will glad their hearts;—the mill, the smiddy blaze
So cheerful, and the doubling hammer's clink,
Now dying on the ear, now on the breeze
Heard once again. Ah, why that joyous *bark*
Precursive! Little dost thou ween, poor thing!
That ne'er again the slowly-stepping herd,
And nibbling flock, thou'lt drive afield or home;
That ne'er again thou'lt chase the limping hare,
While, knowing well thy eager yelp, she scorns
Thy utmost speed, and, from the thistly lea,
Espies, secure, thy puzzled, fruitless search.'—
——— ' But soon thou wilt forget
The cheerful fields; not so the infant train,
Thy playmates gay.'—
——' Oft from their high
And wretched roof, they look, trying, through clouds
Of driving smoke, a glimpse of the green fields
To gain, while, at the view, they feel their hearts
Sinking within them. Ah! these vain regrets
For happiness, that now is but a dream,
Are not their sorest evil. No; disease
(The harvest of the crowded house of toil)
Approaches, withering first the opening bloom
Of infant years.'—
——' O! that heart-wringing cry,
To take them home,—to take them home again,—
Their ceaseless, deathbed cry, poor innocents!
Repeated while the power to lisp is theirs;—
Alas! that home no more shall ye behold;
No more along the thistly lea pursue
The flying down; no more, transported, rush
From learning's humble door, with playmates blythe,
To gather pebbles in the shallow burn.' p. 95—97.

The Highland reapers, who travel annually to cut down the Lowland harvest, make a musical march in Mr Grahame's verses.

' Oft,

'Oft, at this season, faintly meets the ear
The song of harvest bands, that plod their way
From dark Lochaber, or the distant isles,
Journeying for weeks to gain a month of toil:
Sweet is the falling of the single voice,
And sweet the joining of the choral swell,
Without a pause ta'en up by old and young,
Alternating, in wildly-measured strain.
Thus they, 'mid clouds of flying dust, beguile,
With songs of antient times, their tedious way.' p. 151.

At harvest-home we have them again on their return;—and the analogy of their Celtic partialities draws a fine and very natural burst of nationality from the author.

'Far on their homeward way, the Highland bands
Approach the mountain range, the bound sublime
Of Scotia's beateous plains, while gleams of joy,
Not tearless, tint each face: and now the clouds,
That lower along those steeps, slowly ascend,
And whiten, as they upward flit, in flakes
Still thin and thinner spreading, till, at last,
Each lofty summit gleams, each torrent-fall
Reflects the radiance of the setting sun.
And now, upon the way-worn traveller's ear,
The much-loved language, in his native glen,
Seems music sweet:—what joy! scarce more he feels
When, in the lowly thatch his sickle hung,
He clasps his children to his throbbing heart.
How pleasant came thy rushing, silver Tweed!
Upon *my* ear, when, after roaming long
In southern plains, I've reached thy lovely bank!
How bright, renowned Sark! thy little stream,
Like ray of columned light chasing a shower,
Would cross my *homeward* path;—how sweet the sound,
When I, to hear the Doric tongue's reply,
Would ask thy well-known name!
And must I leave,
Dear land, thy bonny braes, thy dales,
Each haunted by its wizard stream, o'erhung
With all the varied charms of bush and tree;
And must I leave the friends of youthful years,
And mould my heart anew, to take the stamp
Of foreign friendships, in a foreign land,
And learn to love the music of strange tongues!—
Yes, I may love the music of strange tongues,
And mould my heart anew, to take the stamp
Of foreign friendships, in a foreign land:—
But, to my parched mouth's roof, cleave this tongue;
My fancy fade into the yellow leaf;

And

Digitized by Google

And this oft-pausing heart forget to throb,
If, Scotland! thee and thine I e'er forget.' p. 178—181.

The description of the rustic wedding is fine and characteristic, —and of the winter home-scene in a cheerful cottage. But we have no longer room for any further extracts; and shall terminate our quotations with the following pretty lines that happened to turn up just as we were closing the volume.

'Ah! spare, thou pitying swain, a ridge-breadth round
The partridge nest! so shall no new-come lord—
To ope a vista to some ivied tower—
Thy cottage raze; but when the day is done,
Still shall the twig-bowered seat, on which thy sire
Was wont at even-tide to talk, invite
Thy weary limbs; there peace and health shall bless
Thy frugal fare, served by the unhired hand,
That seeks no wages save a parent's smile.' p. 113.

For the sake of these, and of many other passages, we must pardon Mr Grahame, we believe, for his bucolic lectures—his scraps, half versified, from the Farmer's Magazine, and all his dulness about drains, fences, and manures; but we cannot quite so easily forgive him for his long prose notes, and for the great price of his volume. No practical farmer, he may depend upon it, will ever submit to be schooled in blank verse, however near it may approach to prose, or will ever condescend to look into the British Georgics for instruction;—while the lovers of poetry must be very generally disgusted by the tediousness of those discourses on practical husbandry, which break in every now and then, so ungracefully, on the loftier strains of the poet. They who do read on, however, will be rewarded, we think, by many very pleasing and beautiful passages;—and even those, whose natures are too ungentle to admire this kind of poetry, must love the character from which it proceeds, and which it has so strong a tendency to form.

ART. X. *Tableau Physique des Regions Equatoriales*, &c. Par Alexandre de Humboldt. 4to. Paris, 1807, *et seqq.*

No name stands higher than that of Humboldt, among the lovers of geographical and physical science. In exploring the tropical regions of the New World, this accomplished traveller has displayed a resolution and perseverance that have never been surpassed by any former adventurer. Very few individuals, indeed, were better qualified than M. de Humboldt, for executing that arduous undertaking. Zealous, active, vigorous; imbued with liberal knowledge; skilled in general physics, and particularly

Digitized by Google