

For the Port Folio.

POETICAL INQUIRIES.

No. 2.

ON THE POETRY OF THE ARABS.

THE Moällakat, or rather the Seven Arabian Poems of that description, and known in Europe by that name, have already been mentioned as the intended objects of our first Inquiries; but, before we turn to these compositions, it will be neither disagreeable nor useless to consider, in general, the poetry of the Arabs. Sir William Jones, whose zeal in the cause of Asiatic literature has secured to him an illustrious memory, besides furnishing us, on the present occasion, with a translation of the Moällakat, in which form alone we propose to consider it, has left us an Essay on the Poetry of the Eastern Nations, of which, from so much as relates to the poetry of the Arabs, we shall borrow largely, in the present paper. Sir William argues, *à priori*, for the excellence of Arabian poetry, which he deduces from soil, climate, and manners.

' Arabia, I mean that part of it which we call the Happy, and which the Asiatics know by the name of Yemen, seems to be the only country in the world, in which we can properly lay the scene of pastoral poetry; because no nation, at this day, can vie with the Arabians, in the delightfulness of their climate, and the simplicity of their manners. There is a valley, indeed, to the north of Indostan, called Cashmir, which, according to an account written by a native of it, is a perfect garden, exceedingly fruitful, and watered by a thousand rivulets: but, when its inhabitants were subdued by the stratagem of a Mogul prince, they lost their happiness with their liberty, and Arabia retained its old title, without any rival to dispute it. These are not the fancies of a poet: the beauties of Yemen are proved by the concurrent testimony of all travellers, by the descriptions of it in all the writings of Asia, and by the nature and situation of the country itself, which lies between the eleventh and fifteenth degrees of northern lati-

tude, under a serene sky, and exposed to the most favourable influence of the sun; it is enclosed on one side by vast rocks, and deserts, and defended on the other by a tempestuous sea, so that it seems to have been designed by Providence for the most secure, as well as the most beautiful, region of the East.

' Its principal cities are Sanaa, usually considered as its metropolis; Zebid, a commercial town, that lies in a large plain near the sea of Omman; and Aden, surrounded with pleasant gardens and woods, which is situated eleven degrees from the equator, and seventy-six from the Fortunate Islands, or Canaries, where the geographers of Asia fix their first meridian. It is observable that Aden, in the eastern dialects, is precisely the same word with Eden, which we apply to the garden of paradise: it has two senses, according to a slight difference in its pronunciation; its first meaning is a *settled abode*; its second, *delight, softness, or tranquillity*: the word Eden had, probably, one of these senses in the sacred text, though we use it as a proper name. We may also observe in this place, that Yemen itself takes its name from a word which signifies *verdure and felicity*; for in those sultry climates the freshness of the shade, and the coolness of water, are ideas almost inseparable from that of happiness; and this may be a reason why most of the oriental nations agree in a tradition concerning a delightful spot, where the first inhabitants of the earth were placed before their fall. The ancients, who gave the name of Eudaimon, or Happy, to this country, either meant to translate the word Yemen, or, more probably, only alluded to the valuable spice-trees, and balsamic plants that grow in it, and, without speaking poetically, give a real perfume to the air.'

Beautiful objects in nature present beautiful topics to the mind; and whatever is delightful to the senses produces the beautiful when described. But the Arabs are not conversant with beauty only; they are also acquainted with the sublime; with rocks, precipices, deserts, and lions. Now, it is certain,

that the *sublime* and the *beautiful*, in *diction*, spring from the sublime and the beautiful in *imagery*. Words convey the ideas of things; and words are sublime, or beautiful, only when they convey the ideas of things sublime, or beautiful. It is the object that gives the diction.

'If we allow,' continues Sir William, 'the natural objects with which the Arabs are perpetually conversant to be *sublime* and *beautiful*, our next step must be to confess that their comparisons, metaphors, and allegories, are so likewise; for an allegory is a string of metaphors, a metaphor is a short simile, and the finest similes are drawn from natural objects. It is true, that many of the Eastern figures are common to other nations; but some of them receive a propriety from the manners of the Arabians, who dwell in plains and woods, which would be lost if they came from the inhabitants of cities: thus, the *dew of liberality* and the *odour of reputation*, are metaphors used by most people; but they are wonderfully proper in the mouths of those who have so much need of being refreshed by *the dews*, and who gratify their sense of smelling with the *sweetest odours* in the world. Again, it is very usual, in all countries, to make frequent allusions to the brightness of the celestial luminaries, which give their light to all; but the metaphors taken from them have an additional beauty, if we consider them as made by a nation who pass most of their nights in the open air, or in tents, and consequently see the moon and stars in their greatest splendour. This way of considering their poetical figures will give many of them a grace, which they would not have in our languages: so, when they compare *the foreheads of their mistresses to the morning*, *their locks to the night*, *their faces to the sun*, *to the moon*, or *the blossoms of jasmine*; *their cheeks to roses or ripe fruit*, *their teeth to pearls*, *hail-stones*, and *snow-drops*; *their eyes to the flowers of the narcissus*, *their curled hair to black scorpions*, and *to hyacinths*; *their lips to rubies or wine*, *the form of their breasts to pomegranates*, and the

colour of them to snow; *their shape to that of a fine tree*, and *their stature to that of a cypress, a palm tree, or a javelin*, &c. these comparisons, many of which would seem forced in our idioms, have undoubtedly a great delicacy in theirs, and affect their minds in a peculiar manner; yet upon the whole their similes are very just and striking; as that of *the blue eyes of a fine woman bathed in tears*, *to violets dropping with dew*, and that of *a warrior, advancing at the head of his army*, *to an eagle sailing through the air*, and *piercing the clouds with his wings*.'

With respect to the influence of manners on the poetry of Arabia, Sir William expresses himself thus: 'Here I must be understood to speak of those Arabians who, like the old Nomades, dwell constantly in their tents, and remove from place to place according to the seasons; for the inhabitants of the cities, who traffic with the merchants of Europe, in spices, perfumes, and coffee, must have lost a great deal of their ancient simplicity: the others have, certainly, retained it; and, except when their tribes are engaged in war, spend their days in watering their flocks and camels, or in repeating their native songs, which they pour out almost extempore, professing a contempt for the stately pillars and solemn buildings of the cities, compared with the natural charms of the country, and the coolness of their tents: thus they pass their lives in the highest pleasure of which they have any conception, in the contemplation of the most delightful objects, and in the enjoyment of perpetual spring; for we may apply to part of Arabia that elegant couplet of Waller, in his poem of the Summer-Island,

The gentle Spring, that but salutes us here,
Inhabits there, and courts them all the year.'

In a subsequent passage, this writer considers the strong inclination of the Arabs for amatory verse, and presents us with the general features of their compositions:

'As the Arabians are such admirers of beauty, and as they enjoy such ease and leisure, they must naturally be

susceptible of that passion which is the true spring and source of agreeable poetry; and we find, indeed, that *love* has a greater share in their poems than any other passion: it seems to be always uppermost in their minds, and there is hardly an elegy, a panegyric, or even a satire, in their language, which does not begin with the complaints of an unfortunate, or the exultations of a successful, lover. It sometimes happens, that the young men of one tribe are in love with the damsels of another; and, as the tents are frequently removed on a sudden, the lovers are often separated in the progress of the courtship: hence all the Arabic poems open in this manner; the author bewails the sudden departure of his mistress, Hinda, Maia, Zeineb, or Azza, and describes her beauty, comparing her to a wanton fawn, that plays among the aromatic shrubs; his friends endeavour to comfort him, but he refuses consolation; he declares his resolution of visiting his beloved, though the way to her tribe lie through a dreadful wilderness, or even through a den of lions; here, he commonly gives a description of the horse, or camel, upon which he designs to go, and thence passes, by an easy transition, to the principal subject of his poem, whether it be the praise of his own tribe, or a satire on the timidity of his friends, who refuse to attend him in his expedition; though very frequently the piece turns wholly upon love.

In our next number, we shall further examine, under some new aspects, the genius of the poetry of the Arabs.

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LITERARY INTELLIGENCE.

Mr. J. Osborn of the city of New-York who is not a mere bookseller, but a man of letters and taste, has lately done excellent service to the cause of pure morals and elegant literature, by republishing a work which has recently appeared in England, entitled "The Fashionable World Displayed." This little volume, which, in a very brief period, run through five editions, ap-

peared first under the fictitious name of *Theophilus Christian*, but it now presents us with the real name of the author, John Owen, who, whether we regard the moral or the literary merit of his book, had no sufficient cause for concealment, for "he is armed so strong in honesty" that he *may come out* with the confidence of a champion. The dedication to the most accomplished and exemplary prelate in the British empire, is so justly and so elegantly expressed, that we will transcribe it for the admiration of the reader. "To the right reverend Beilby Proteus, D. D. Lord Bishop of London, not more distinguished by his eloquence as a preacher, his vigilance as a prelate, his sanctity as a Christian, and his various accomplishments as a scholar and a man, than by his indefatigable exertions to detect the errors, rebuke the follies, and reform the vices of the Fashionable World, the following attempt to benefit that part of society, by means too frequently employed to corrupt it, is respectfully inscribed," &c.

The style of this work is a continued irony, and is as successful a specimen of that figure, as has appeared since the publication of Dean Swift's admirable "Argument against abolishing Christianity." In the guise of a sort of geographical treatise, it describes the situation, boundaries, climate, seasons, government, laws, religion and morality, education, manners, language, dress and amusements of the Fashionable World. Though this Fashionable World is limited to the west end of London, and though, therefore, much of the satire is local, still there are numerous passages that, in the phrase of Almanac makers may serve without any essential variation, for the 'meridian of the United States.'

To give the reader an idea of the entertainment he may expect from this volume, we shall transcribe a passage or two in which the writer's correct sentiments and playful style are very well displayed:

"The individuals who compose the Fashionable World are not absolute wanderers, like the tribes of Arabia,