

Portraits of Authors

WITH the ancients, it was undoubtedly a custom to place the portraits of authors before their works. Martial's 186th epigram of his fourteenth book is a mere play on words concerning a little volume containing the works of Virgil, and which had his portrait prefixed to it. The volume and the characters must have been very diminutive.

*"Quam brevis immensum cepit membrana Maronem!
Ipsius Vultus prima tabella gerit."*

Martial is not the only writer who takes notice of the ancients prefixing portraits to the works of authors. Seneca, in his ninth chapter on the Tranquillity of the Soul, complains of many of the luxurious great, who, like so many of our own collectors, possessed libraries as they did their estates and equipages. "It is melancholy to observe how the portraits of men of genius, and the works of their divine intelligence, are used only as the luxury and the ornaments of walls."

Pliny has nearly the same observation, *Lib. xxxv. cap. 2*. He remarks, that the custom was rather modern in his time; and attributes to Asinius Pollio the honour of having introduced it into Rome. "In consecrating a

library with the portraits of our illustrious authors, he has formed, if I may so express myself, a republic of the intellectual powers of men." To the richness of book-treasures, Asinius Pollio had associated a new source of pleasure, in placing the statues of their authors amidst them, inspiring the minds of the spectators even by their eyes.

A taste for collecting portraits, or busts, was warmly pursued in the happier periods of Rome; for the celebrated Atticus, in a work he published of illustrious Romans, made it more delightful, by ornamenting it with the portraits of those great men; and the learned Varro, in his biography of Seven Hundred celebrated Men, by giving the world their true features and their physiognomy *in some manner, aliquo modo imaginibus* is Pliny's expression, showed that even their persons should not entirely be annihilated; they indeed, adds Pliny, form a spectacle which the gods themselves might contemplate; for if the gods sent those heroes to the earth, it is Varro who secured their immortality, and has so multiplied and distributed them in all places, that we may carry them about us, place them wherever we choose, and fix our eyes on them with perpetual admiration.

A spectacle that every day becomes more varied and interesting, as new heroes appear, and as works of this kind are spread abroad.

But as printing was unknown to the ancients (though *stamping an impression* was daily practised, and, in fact, they possessed the art of printing without being aware of it), how were these portraits of Varro so easily propagated? If copied with a pen, their correctness was in some danger, and their diffusion must have been very confined and slow; perhaps they were outlines. This passage of Pliny excites curiosity, which it may be difficult to satisfy.

Amongst the various advantages which attend a collection of the portraits of illustrious characters, Oldys observes, that they not only serve as matters of entertainment and curiosity, and preserve the different modes or habits of the fashions of the time, but become of infinite importance, by settling our floating ideas upon the true features of famous persons: they fix the chronological particulars of their birth, age, death, sometimes with short characters of them, besides the names of painter, designer, and engraver. It is thus a single print, by the hand of a skilful artist, may become a varied banquet. To this Granger adds, that in a collection of engraved portraits, the contents of many galleries are reduced

into the narrow compass of a few volumes; and the portraits of eminent persons who distinguished themselves for a long succession of ages, may be turned over in a few hours.

“Another advantage,” Granger continues, “attending such an assemblage is, that the methodical arrangement has a surprising effect upon the memory. We see the celebrated contemporaries of every age almost at one view; and the mind is insensibly led to the history of that period. I may add to these an important circumstance, which is, the power that such a collection will have in *awakening genius*. A skilful preceptor will presently, perceive the true bent of the temper of his pupil, by his being struck with a Blake or a Boyle, a Hyde or a Milton.”

A circumstance in the life of Cicero confirms this observation. Atticus had a gallery adorned with the images or portraits of the great men of Rome, under each of which, Cornelius Nepos says, he had severally described their principal acts and honours in a few concise verses of his own composition. It was by the contemplation of two of these portraits (Old Brutus and a venerable relative in one picture) that Cicero seems to have incited Brutus, by the example of these his great ancestors, to dissolve the tyranny of Cæsar. Fairfax

made a collection of engraved portraits of warriors. A story much in favour of portrait-collectors is that of the Athenian courtesan, who, in the midst of a riotous banquet with her lovers, accidentally casting her eyes on the *portrait* of a philosopher that hung opposite to her seat, the happy character of temperance and virtue struck her with so lively an image of her own unworthiness, that she instantly quitted the room, and retired for ever from the scene of debauchery. The Orientalists have felt the same charm in their pictured memorials; for “the imperial Akber,” says Mr. Forbes, in his Oriental Memoirs, “employed artists to make portraits of all the principal omrahs and officers in his court;” they were bound together in a thick volume, wherein, as the Ayeen Akbery or the Institutes of Akber expresses it, “The PAST are kept in lively remembrance; and the PRESENT are insured immortality.”

Leonard Aretin, when young and in prison, found a portrait of Petrarch, on which his eyes were perpetually fixed; and this sort of contemplation inflamed the desire of imitating this great man. Buffon hung the portrait of Newton before his writing-table.

On this subject, how sublimely Tacitus expresses himself at the close of his admired biography of Agri-

cola! “I do not mean to censure the custom of preserving in brass or marble the shape and stature of eminent men; but busts and statues, like their originals, are frail and perishable. The soul is formed of finer elements, its inward form is not to be expressed by the hand of an artist with unconscious matter; our manners and our morals may in some degree trace the resemblance. All of Agricola that gained our love and raised our admiration still subsists, and ever will subsist, preserved in the minds of men, the register of ages and the records of fame.”

What is more agreeable to the curiosity of the mind and the eye than the portraits of great characters? An old philosopher whom Marville invited to see a collection of landscapes by a celebrated artist replied, “landscapes I prefer seeing in the country itself, but I am fond of contemplating the pictures of illustrious men.” This opinion has some truth; Lord Orford preferred an interesting portrait to either landscape or historical painting. “A landscape,” said he, “however excellent in its distributions of wood, and water, and buildings, leaves not one trace in the memory; historical painting is perpetually false in a variety of ways, in the costume, the grouping, the portraits, and is nothing more than

fabulous painting; but a real portrait is truth itself, and calls up so many collateral ideas as to fill an intelligent mind more than any other species.”

Marville justly reprehends the fastidious feelings of those ingenious men who have resisted the solicitations of the artist, to sit for their portraits. In them it is sometimes as much pride as it is vanity in those who are less difficult in this respect. Of Gray, Shenstone, Fielding, and Akenside, we have no heads for which they sat; a circumstance regretted by their admirers, and by physiognomists.

To an arranged collection of PORTRAITS, we owe several interesting works. Granger’s justly esteemed volumes originated in such a collection. Perrault’s *Eloges* of “the illustrious men of the seventeenth century” were drawn up to accompany the engraved portraits of the most celebrated characters of the age, which a fervent lover of the fine arts and literature had had engraved as an elegant tribute to the fame of those great men. They are confined to his nation, as Granger’s to ours. The parent of this race of books may perhaps be the Eulogiums of Paulus Jovius, which originated in a beautiful CABINET, whose situation he has described with all its amenity.

Paulus Jovius had a country house, in an insular situation of a most romantic aspect. It was built on the ruins of the villa of Pliny; and in his time the foundations were still to be traced. When the surrounding lake was calm, in its lucid bosom were still viewed sculptured marbles, the trunks of columns, and the fragments of those pyramids which had once adorned the residence of the friend of Trajan. Jovius was an enthusiast of literary leisure; an historian, with the imagination of a poet; a Christian prelate nourished on the sweet fictions of pagan mythology. His pen colours like a pencil. He paints rapturously his gardens bathed by the waters of the lake, the shade and freshness of his woods, his green hills, his sparkling fountains, the deep silence, and the calm of solitude. He describes a statue raised in his gardens to NATURE; in his hall an Apollo presided with his lyre, and the Muses with their attributes; his library was guarded by Mercury, and an apartment devoted to the three Graces was embellished by Doric columns, and paintings of the most pleasing kind. Such was the interior! Without, the pure and transparent lake spread its broad mirror, rolled its voluminous windings, while the banks were richly covered with olives and laurels, and in the distance, towns, promontories, hills rising

in an amphitheatre blushing with vines, and the elevations of the Alps covered with woods and pasturage and sprinkled with herds and flocks.

In the centre of this enchanting habitation stood the CABINET, where Paulus Jovius had collected, at great cost, the PORTRAITS of celebrated men of the fourteenth and two succeeding centuries. The daily view of them animated his mind to compose their eulogiums. These are still curious, both for the facts they preserve, and the happy conciseness with which Jovius delineates a character. He had collected these portraits as others form a collection of natural history; and he pursued in their characters what others do in their experiments.

One caution in collecting portraits must not be forgotten: it respects their authenticity. We have too many supposititious heads, and ideal personages. Conrad ab Uffenbach, who seems to have been the first collector who projected a methodical arrangement, condemned those portraits which were not genuine, as fit only for the amusements of children. The painter does not always give a correct likeness, or the engraver misses it in his copy. The faithful Vertue refused to engrave for Houbraken's set, because they did not authenticate their originals; and some of these are spurious. Busts are not so liable to these accidents. It is to be regretted that

men of genius have not been careful to transmit their own portraits to their admirers; it forms a part of their character; a false delicacy has interfered. Erasmus did not like to have his own diminutive person sent down to posterity, but Holbein was always affectionately painting his friend: Bayle and others have refused; but Montesquieu once sat to Dassier, after repeated denials, won over by the ingenious argument of the artist: "Do you not think," said Dassier, "that there is as much pride in refusing my offer as in accepting it?"