

*On the nature, and improvement of the Faculty of Memory.*

TO THE EDITOR OF THE QUEBEC MAGAZINE.

SIR,

NO faculty of the human mind is more various in different persons, nor perhaps more inexplicable in regard to the cause of those varieties, than that of the memory. While some men have hardly memory sufficient to qualify them for the easiest and dullest employments of life, there are others who rarely ever forget any thing they hear or read with attention. Seneca says of himself that hearing upwards of two hundred verses recited by different persons, he repeated the whole from memory, in the exact order in which he heard them; and what is yet more extraordinary, that he repeated, in the same manner, two thousand names, from hearing them only once read over. † It is recorded of Mr. Pascal, that till the decay of his health impaired his memory, he forgot nothing of what he had done, read, or thought, in any part of his rational age. ‡ And as I have been credibly informed, the editor \* of one of the newspapers, now printed in London, publishes the whole of the speeches in the House of Commons, entirely from memory.

These are phenomena of memory of which mankind in general can scarcely form an idea, they are so far beyond the reach of common capacity. They may also, I presume, be admitted as exceptions to the commonly received maxim,

That, "in the soul while memory prevails,

"The solid power of understanding fails." §

That this maxim, however, though liable to many exceptions, is not entirely without foundation, perhaps cannot be denied; but I apprehend, it ought to be restricted to one kind of memory only. The faculty of memory is of two kinds, *passive* and *active*, or what Aristotle calls *mneme* and *Anamnesis*. The first is simple attention, or that by which images are preserved in the mind without any effort of its own; the second is recollection, or the faculty of reviving former impressions, and calling up ideas, by the activity of the mind itself. The above maxim of Mr. Pope, I am apt to think, ought to be restricted to the first of these. It is certain that a very surprizing degree of what is called *passive memory*, hath frequently been found even in persons bordering on idiotism. I might here mention one instance partly within my own knowledge. I have seen a discourse, of upwards of half an hour long, printed from the memory of a person, who, I have been assured from undoubted authority, was at the same time so defective in understanding, as well as in almost every other mental faculty, that he could hardly be made to comprehend the meaning of any one sentence, in the whole discourse; which he so exactly retained in memory; The same person has also frequently repeated several pages, at a time, from any Greek or Latin author, by only hearing them once read over to him, though he did not understand a word of those languages. But this kind of simple retention, is so surprizing a degree, must be regarded as altogether a

† Sen: Contr. III. l. 1. ‡ Locke's Ess. B. 2. C. 10. \* Woodfall. § Pope's Ess. on Crit. v. 562