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978-1-108-05948-0 - Letters Written Between the Years 1784 and 1807: Volume 1

Anna Seward

Excerpt

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# LETTERS

OF

ANNA SEWARD.

VOL. I.

A

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## LETTERS.

## LETTER I.

MISS POWYS\*.

*Lichfield, Oct. 23, 1784.*

YOU have obliged me by the translation of Rousseau's SECOND WALK. The perspicuity, and beauty of the language, leave no doubt of its doing every justice to the sentiments of the author;— but, good heaven! what are those sentiments? how shockingly unamiable, how totally absurd! Every being of distinguished genius will, from the prevalence of envy, have a number of foes. Is he therefore to conclude human nature incapable of kind and generous affection? Basely shall he suspect, and ungratefully shall he repress, every glow of kindness and benevolence, when it would shine upon him? So doing, Rousseau was not fit

\* A lady of abilities and accomplishments, unmarried, and resident at Clifton near Bristol. January, 1810.

to converse with the rest of his species, and was deservedly an outcast from them.

What overweening vanity, as well as dark suspicion, appears in these reveries! No books are worth his attention! He has discovered mankind to be so despicable, its interests are below his care! and he deems the most trivial egotisms a more important legacy to society than any *other* subject of disquisition he could possibly choose. Proud and vain, selfish and cold, indeed, Rousseau didst thou become. Thy heart had lost its *health*, for *philanthropy* is the health of the *heart*. What splendour of style can have power to shield thy self-sufficient egotisms from just indignation and contempt? Ah! how little do we perceive in *them* of that open, sprightly, affectionate spirit, which warmed and illumined the morning of thy days! gave vigour to thy scientific researches; drew to thee many amiable individuals, who generously waved, in tribute to thy merit, those objections to plebeian birth which prevail in France with a force so generally exclusive; and who, by thus receiving thee into their society, enlarged thy sphere of characteristic contemplation, and enabled thee to trace the motives of human action, in thy enchanting novel, with truth and accuracy. It is melancholy to reflect, on perusing these thy *later* works, how much less estimable thy age

than thy youth; to see *thee* verifying, in thy example, the following exclamation in “the mournful and angry NIGHT THOUGHTS,”

“How few, of human kind, bring back at *eve*,  
Immaculate, the manners of the *morn!*”

A rheumatic complaint obliged me to make an excursion to Buxton this summer, though most unwilling to leave my dearest father, in his present weak, though not diseased state; but glad tidings of his exemption from every thing like illness blessed my absence, and I found a pleasing succession of animated hours in the medley society of that crowded scene. Many agreeable people sought my regard. Amongst them, my neighbour, the young, the brave, the gallant, unfortunate Captain Arden, who has lost his right-arm in the naval service of this country. He preceded me at Buxton near a fortnight; and, on my arrival, introduced me to all the very desirable intimacies which his pleasing manners had enabled him to form. Soon after I came, the youthful and lovely Lady Foster Cunliffe descended, like a goddess, amongst us. She unites the most engaging affability to the powers of an ingenious mind, and a cultivated understanding, and to the attractions of radiant beauty and majestic grace. She is on a larger scale, both as to face and figure,

but I never saw features, or a countenance so like my lost Honora's. Her complexion is of as glowing bloom, with a superior degree of fairness;—the contour of the face; the form of the mouth; the nose, that between Grecian and Roman, is lovelier than either; the *ethereal smile* on the lip, and the bright glance of intelligence and joy, are *all* HONORA. The same soft complacency shone in her eyes while she conversed with me. I was obliged to explain the source of those involuntary tears which so often filled my eyes, as she hung on my arm, in animated conversation. The regret I felt when we parted was extreme,—more indeed than the shortness of our acquaintance warranted, *but* for the influence of this endearing, this *fascinating* resemblance.

— — — — —

The autumnal glory of this day puts to shame the summer's sullenness. I sit writing upon this dear green terrace, feeding, at intervals, my little golden-breasted songsters. The embosomed vale of Stow, which you know it overlooks, glows sunny through the Claud-Lorain-tint, which is spread over the scene, like the blue mist over a plumb. How often has our lost Honora hung over the wall of this terrace, enamoured of its scenic graces! Never more will such *bright* glances discriminate and admire them. Well do I know

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that the sadness of this reflection touches *your* heart as it does mine. *That* source of sympathy between us is sacred, and inexhaustible. Farewell.

## LETTER II.

MISS WESTON\*.

*Lichfield, Oct. 29, 1784.*

I have lately been in the almost daily habit of contemplating a very melancholy spectacle. The great Johnson is here, labouring under the paroxysms of a disease, which must speedily be fatal. He shrinks from the consciousness with the extremest horror. It is by his repeatedly expressed desire that I visit him often: yet I am sure he neither does, nor ever did feel much regard for me; but he would fain escape, for a time, in any society, from the terrible idea of his approach-

\* An intelligent friend of Miss Seward, residing, at the date of this correspondence, at Ludlow: since married to Mr Pennington, master of the ceremonies at Clifton, near Bristol.

ing dissolution. I never would be awed by his sarcasms, or his frowns, into acquiescence with his general injustice to the merits of *other* writers; with his national, or party aversions; but I feel the truest compassion for his present sufferings, and fervently wish I had power to relieve them.

A few days since I was to drink tea with him, by his request, at Mrs Porter's. When I went into the room, he was in deep but agitated slumber, in an arm-chair. Opening the door with that caution due to the sick, he did not awaken at my entrance. I stood by him several minutes, mournfully contemplating the temporary suspension of those vast intellectual powers, which must so soon, as to *this* world, be eternally quenched.

Upon the servant entering to announce the arrival of a gentleman of the university, introduced by Mr White, he awoke with convulsive starts,—but rising, with more alacrity than could have been expected, he said, “Come, my dear lady, let you and I attend these gentlemen in the study.” He received them with more than usual complacence; but whimsically chose to get astride upon his chair-seat, with his face to its back, keeping a trotting motion as if on horseback; but, in this odd position, he poured forth streams of eloquence, illumined by frequent flashes of wit and humour, without any tincture of malignity. That amusing



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part of this conversation, which alluded to the learned Pig, and his demi-rational exhibitions, I shall transmit to you hereafter.



## LETTER III.

REV. T. S. WHALLEY.

*Lichfield, Nov. 7, 1784.*

*Large* is my debt to you, dear friend, for those exquisite, those *living* descriptions of the Alpine scenery, with which you have favoured me. You enable me to see their picturesque wonders without the fatigue and danger of the journey. I explore the Glaciers; I ascend Mount Blanc, and contemplate its varied sublimities with the most awakened enthusiasm. I walk with you to Vevay and Clarens. Why is not Clarens *such* a situation as might enable our imagination to indulge its deceptions; to make those believe, who actually visit that spot, that they tread in the steps of Julie, and St Preux, of Clara, and Wolmar? Ah! it is the vivid glow of these *local* interests that constitutes the highest triumph of genius, after it has delivered an immortal work to the world.

You exchange the magnificent landscapes of Savoy and Switzerland, for the softer environs of Avignon:—but they include VAUCLUSE, whose interwoven recollections will recompense all the inferiority in point of scenery on the laurel-shaded Sorga, compared with that of the mighty Alps, with their stupendous cataracts, green lakes, vine-curtained mountains, and bloomy vallies.—Yes, the spirit of love and poetry will recompense their loss at that consecrated fountain, “ Clear as a mirror, as an ocean deep.”

The old literary Colossus\* has been some time in Lichfield. The extinction, in our sphere, of that mighty spirit approaches fast. A confirmed dropsy deluges the vital source. It is melancholy to observe with what terror he contemplates his approaching fate. The religion of Johnson was always deeply tinctured with that gloomy and servile superstition which marks his political opinions. He expresses these terrors, and justly calls them *miserable*, which thus shrink from the exchange of a diseased and painful existence, which *gentler* human beings consider as the all-recompensing reward of a well-spent life. Yet have not these humiliating terrors by any means subdued that malevolent and envious pride, and literary jealousy,

\* Johnson.