

JOSEPH ADDISON

1672—1719

23            *A Letter from Italy, to the Right Honourable  
                 Charles Lord Halifax*

WHILE you, my lord, the rural shades admire,  
And from Britannia's public posts retire,  
Nor longer, her ungrateful sons to please,  
For their advantage sacrifice your ease;  
Me into foreign realms my fate conveys,  
Through nations fruitful of immortal lays,  
Where the soft season and inviting clime  
Conspire to trouble your repose with rhyme.

          For wheresoe'er I turn my ravished eyes,  
Gay gilded scenes and shining prospects rise,            10  
Poetic fields encompass me around,  
And still I seem to tread on classic ground;  
For here the Muse so oft her harp has strung  
That not a mountain rears its head unsung,  
Renowned in verse each shady thicket grows,  
And ev'ry stream in heavenly numbers flows.

          How am I pleased to search the hills and woods  
For rising springs and celebrated floods!  
To view the Nar, tumultuous in his course,            20  
And trace the smooth Clitumnus to his source,  
To see the Mincio draw his watry store  
Through the long windings of a fruitful shore,  
And hoary Albula's infected tide  
O'er the warm bed of smoking sulphur glide.

          Fired with a thousand raptures I survey  
Eridanus through flowery meadows stray,  
The king of floods! that rolling o'er the plains  
The tow'ring Alps of half their moisture drains,  
And, proudly swoll'n with a whole winter's snows,            30  
Distributes wealth and plenty where he flows.

          Sometimes, misguided by the tuneful throng,  
I look for streams immortalized in song,  
That lost in silence and oblivion lie  
(Dumb are their fountains and their channels dry),  
Yet run for ever by the Muse's skill,  
And in the smooth description murmur still.

          Sometimes to gentle Tiber I retire,  
And the famed river's empty shores admire,  
That destitute of strength derives its course  
From thrifty urns and an unfruitful source;            40  
Yet, sung so often in poetic lays,

With scorn the Danube and the Nile surveys;  
So high the deathless Muse exalts her theme!  
Such was the Boyne, a poor inglorious stream,  
That in Hibernian vales obscurely strayed,  
And unobserved in wild meanders played;  
Till by your lines and Nassau's sword renowned,  
Its rising billows through the world resound,  
Where'er the hero's godlike acts can pierce,  
Or where the fame of an immortal verse. 50

Oh, could the Muse my ravished breast inspire  
With warmth like yours, and raise an equal fire,  
Unnumbered beauties in my verse should shine,  
And Virgil's Italy should yield to mine!

See how the golden groves around me smile,  
That shun the coast of Britain's stormy isle,  
Or, when transplanted and preserved with care,  
Curse the cold clime and starve in northern air.  
Here kindly warmth their mounting juice ferments  
To nobler tastes and more exalted scents: 60  
Ev'n the rough rocks with tender myrtle bloom,  
And trodden weeds send out a rich perfume.  
Bear me, some god, to Baia's gentle seats,  
Or cover me in Umbria's green retreats;  
Where western gales eternally reside,  
And all the seasons lavish all their pride:  
Blossoms and fruits and flowers together rise,  
And the whole year in gay confusion lies.

Immortal glories in my mind revive,  
And in my soul a thousand passions strive, 70  
When Rome's exalted beauties I descry  
Magnificent in piles of ruin lie.

An amphitheatre's amazing height  
Here fills my eye with terror and delight,  
That on its public shows unpeopled Rome,  
And held uncrowded nations in its womb.  
Here pillars rough with sculpture pierce the skies:  
And here the proud triumphal arches rise,  
Where the old Romans' deathless acts displayed  
Their base degenerate progeny upbraid. 80

Whole rivers here forsake the fields below,  
And wond'ring at their height through airy channels flow.  
Still to new scenes my wand'ring Muse retires,  
And the dumb show of breathing rocks admires;  
Where the smooth chisel all its force has shown,  
And softened into flesh the rugged stone.  
In solemn silence, a majestic band,  
Heroes and gods and Roman consuls stand,  
Stern tyrants, whom their cruelties renown,  
And emperors in Parian marble frown; 90  
While the bright dames, to whom they humbly sued,  
Still show the charms that their proud hearts subdued.

Fain would I Raphael's godlike art rehearse,  
And show th' immortal labours in my verse,  
Where from the mingled strength of shade and light  
A new creation rises to my sight:  
Such heav'nly figures from his pencil flow,  
So warm with life his blended colours glow.  
From theme to theme with secret pleasure tossed,  
Amidst the soft variety I'm lost: 100  
Here pleasing airs my ravished soul confound  
With circling notes and labyrinths of sound;  
Here domes and temples rise in distant views,  
And opening palaces invite my Muse.

How has kind heav'n adorned the happy land,  
And scattered blessings with a wasteful hand!  
But what avail her unexhausted stores,  
Her blooming mountains and her sunny shores,  
With all the gifts that heav'n and earth impart,  
The smiles of nature and the charms of art, 110  
While proud Oppression in her valleys reigns,  
And Tyranny usurps her happy plains?  
The poor inhabitant beholds in vain  
The redd'ning orange and the swelling grain:  
Joyless he sees the growing oils and wines,  
And in the myrtle's fragrant shade repines:  
Starves, in the midst of nature's bounty cursed,  
And in the laden vineyard dies for thirst.

Oh Liberty, thou goddess heavenly bright,  
Profuse of bliss and pregnant with delight, 120  
Eternal pleasures in thy presence reign,  
And smiling Plenty leads thy wanton train!  
Eased of her load Subjection grows more light,  
And Poverty looks cheerful in thy sight;  
Thou mak'st the gloomy face of nature gay,  
Giv'st beauty to the sun, and pleasure to the day.

Thee, goddess, thee, Britannia's isle adores;  
How has she oft exhausted all her stores,  
How oft in fields of death thy presence sought,  
Nor thinks the mighty prize too dearly bought! 130  
On foreign mountains may the sun refine  
The grape's soft juice, and mellow it to wine,  
With citron groves adorn a distant soil,  
And the fat olive swell with floods of oil:  
We envy not the warmer clime that lies  
In ten degrees of more indulgent skies,  
Nor at the coarseness of our heav'n repine,  
Though o'er our heads the frozen Pleiads shine:  
'Tis Liberty that crowns Britannia's isle,  
And makes her barren rocks and her bleak mountains smile. 140

Others with towering piles may please the sight,

And in their proud aspiring domes delight;  
A nicer touch to the stretched canvas give,  
Or teach their animated rocks to live:  
'Tis Britain's care to watch o'er Europe's fate,  
And hold in balance each contending state,  
To threaten bold presumptuous kings with war,  
And answer her afflicted neighbours' pray'r.  
The Dane and Swede, roused up by fierce alarms,  
Bless the wise conduct of her pious arms: 150  
Soon as her fleets appear their terrors cease,  
And all the northern world lies hushed in peace.

Th' ambitious Gaul beholds with secret dread  
Her thunder aimed at his aspiring head,  
And fain her godlike sons would disunite  
By foreign gold or by domestic spite;  
But strives in vain to conquer or divide,  
Whom Nassau's arms defend and counsels guide.

Fired with the name, which I so oft have found  
The distant climes and different tongues resound, 160  
I bridle in my struggling Muse with pain,  
That longs to launch into a bolder strain.

But I've already troubled you too long,  
Nor dare attempt a more advent'rous song.  
My humble verse demands a softer theme,  
A painted meadow or a purling stream;  
Unfit for heroes, whom immortal lays,  
And lines like Virgil's or like yours, should praise.