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Poems

Poems on several occasions

Gay, John

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Canto I

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RURAL SPORTS,

A GEORGIC.

To Mr POPE.

CANTO I.

YOU, who the ſweets of rural life have known,
Deſpiſe th' ungrateful hurry of the town;
In Windſor groves your eaſy hours employ,
And, undiſturb'd, yourſelf and Muſe enjoy:
Thames liſtens to thy ſtrains, and ſilent flows,
And no rude wind through ruſtling oſiers blows,
While all his wond'ring Nymphs around thee throng,
To hear the Syrens warble in thy ſong.
But I, who ne'er was bleſs'd by Fortune's hand,
Nor bright'ned plough-ſhares in paternal land,
Long in the noiſy town have been immur'd,
Reſpir'd its ſmoak, and all its cares endur'd,
Where news and politics divide mankind,
And ſchemes of ſtate involve th' uneaſy mind;
Faction embroils the world; and ev'ry tongue
Is mov'd by flatt'ry, or with ſcandal hung:
Friendſhip, for ſylvan ſhades, the palace flies,
Where all muſt yield to intereſt's dearer ties;

Each rival Machiavel with envy burns,
And honeſty forſakes them all by turns;
While calumny upon each party's thrown,
Which both promote, and both alike diſown.
Fatigu'd at laſt, a calm retreat I choſe,
And ſooth'd my harraſs'd mind with ſweet repoſe,
Where fields, and ſhades, and the refreſhing clime,
Inſpire the ſylvan ſong, and prompt my rhime.
My Muſe ſhall rove through flow'ry meads and plains,
And deck with rural ſports her native ſtrains,
And the ſame road ambitiouſly purſue,
Frequented by the Mantuan ſwain, and you.
'Tis not that rural ſports alone invite,
But all the grateful country breathes delight;
Here blooming Health exerts her gentle reign,
And ſtrings the ſinews of th' induſtrious ſwain.
Soon as the morning lark ſalutes the day,
Through dewy fields I take my frequent way,
Where I behold the farmer's early care,
In the revolving labours of the year.
When the freſh Spring in all her ſtate is crown'd,
And high luxuriant graſs o'erſpreads the ground,
The lab'rer with the bending ſcythe is ſeen,
Shaving the ſurface of the waving green,
Of all her native pride diſrobes the land,
And meads lays waſte before his ſweeping hand;
While with the mounting ſun the meadow glows,
The fading herbage round he looſely throws;
But if ſome ſign portend a laſting ſhow'r,
Th' experienc'd ſwain foreſees the coming hour,
His ſun-burnt hands the ſcatt'ring fork forſake,
And ruddy damſels ply the ſaving rake;

In rising hills the fragrant harvest grows,
And spreads along the field in equal rows.
Now when the height of heav'n bright Phoebus gains,
And level rays cleave wide the thirsty plains,
When heifers seek the shade and cooling lake,
And in the middle path-way basks the snake;
O lead me, guard me from the sultry hours,
Hide me, ye forests, in your closest bowers,
Where the tall oak his spreading arms entwines,
And with the beech a mutual shade combines;
Where flows the murm'ring brook, inviting dreams,
Where bord'ring hazle overhangs the streams,
Whose rolling current winding round and round,
With frequent falls makes all the wood resound;
Upon the mossy couch my limbs I cast,
And ev'n at noon the sweets of ev'ning taste.
Here I peruse the Mantuan Georgic strains,
And learn the labours of Italian swains;
In ev'ry page I see new landscapes rise,
And all Hesperia opens to my eyes.
I wander o'er the various rural toil,
And know the nature of each diff'rent soil;
This waving field is gilded o'er with corn,
That spreading trees with blushing fruit adorn:
Here I survey the purple vintage grow,
Climb round the poles, and rise in graceful row:
Now I behold the steed curvet and bound,
And paw with restless hoof the smoaking ground:
The dew-lap'd bull now chafes along the plain,
While burning love ferments in ev'ry vein;

His well-arm'd front againſt his rival aims,
And by the dint of war his miſtreſs claims:
The careful inſect 'midſt his works I view,
Now from the flow'rs exhauſt the fragrant dew;
With golden treaſures load his little thighs,
And ſtear his diſtant journey through the ſkies:
Some againſt hoſtile drones the hive defend;
Others with ſweets the waxen cells diſtend:
Each in the toil his deſtin'd office bears,
And in the little bulk a mighty ſoul appears.

Or when the ploughman leaves the taſk of day,
And trudging homeward whiſtles on the way;
When the big-udder'd cows with patience ſtand,
Waiting the ſtroakings of the damſel's hand;
No warbling chears the woods; the feather'd choir
To court kind ſlumbers to their ſprays retire;
When no rude gale diſturbs the ſleeping trees,
Nor aſpen leaves confeſs the gentleſt breeze;
Engag'd in thought, to Neptune's bounds I ſtray,
To take my farewell of the parting day;
Far in the deep the ſun his glory hides,
A ſtreak of gold the ſea and ſky divides;
The purple clouds their amber linings ſhow,
And edg'd with flame rolls ev'ry wave below:
Here penſive I behold the fading light,
And o'er the diſtant billow loſe my ſight.

Now night in ſilent ſtate begins to riſe,
And twinkling orbs beſtrow th' uncloudy ſkies;
Her borrow'd luſtre growing Cynthia lends,
And on the main a glitt'ring path extends;
Millions of worlds hang in the ſpacious air,
Which round their ſuns their annual circle ſteer.

Sweet contemplation elevates my ſenſe,
While I ſurvey the works of providence.
O could the Muſe in loftier ſtrains rehearſe,
The glorious Author of the univerſe,
Who reins the winds, gives the vaſt ocean bounds,
And circumſcribes the floating worlds their rounds,
My ſoul ſhould overflow in ſongs of praiſe,
And my Creator's name inſpire my lays!
As in ſucceſſive courſe the ſeaſons roll,
So circling pleaſures recreate the ſoul.
When genial ſpring a living warmth beſtows,
And o'er the year her verdant mantle throws,
No ſwelling inundation hides the grounds,
But cryſtal currents glide within their bounds;
The finny brood their wonted haunts forſake,
Float in the ſun, and ſkim along the lake,
With frequent leap they range the ſhallow ſtreams,
Their ſilver coats reflect the dazzling beams.
Now let the fiſherman his toils prepare,
And arm himſelf with ev'ry wat'ry ſnare;
His hooks, his lines peruſe with careful eye,
Increaſe his tackle, and his rode retie.
When floating clouds their ſpongy fleeces drain,
Troubling the ſtreams with ſwift-deſcending rain,
And waters tumbling down the mountain's ſide,
Bear the looſe ſoil into the ſwelling tide;
Then, ſoon as vernal gales begin to riſe,
And drive the liquid burden through the ſkies,
The fiſher to the neighb'ring current ſpeeds,
Whoſe rapid ſurface purls, unknown to weeds;
Upon a riſing border of the brook
He ſits him down, and ties the treach'rous hook;

Now expectation chears his eager thought,
His bosom glows with treasures yet uncaught,
Before his eyes a banquet seems to stand,
Where ev'ry guest applauds his skilful hand.
Far up the stream the twisted hair he throws,
Which down the murm'ring current gently flows;
When if or chance or hunger's pow'rful sway
Directs the roving trout this fatal way,
He greedily sucks in the twining bait,
And tugs and nibbles the fallacious meat:
Now, happy fisherman, now twitch the line!
How thy road bends! behold, the prize is thine!
Cast on the bank, he dies with gasping pains,
And trickling blood his silver mail distains.
You must not ev'ry worm promiscuous use,
Judgment will tell thee proper bait to chuse;
The worm that draws a long immod'rate size
The trout abhors, and the rank morsel flies;
And if too small, the naked fraud's in sight,
And fear forbids, while hunger does invite.
Those baits will best reward the fisher's pains,
Whose polish'd tails a shining yellow stains:
Cleanse them from filth, to give a tempting gloss,
Cherish the sully'd reptile race with moss;
Amid the verdant bed they twine, they toil,
And from their bodies wipe their native soil.
But when the sun displays his glorious beams,
And shallow rivers flow with silver streams,
Then the deceit the scaly breed survey,
Bask in the sun, and look into the day.
You now a more delusive art must try,
And tempt their hunger with the curious fly.

To frame the little animal, provide
All the gay hues that wait on female pride:
Let nature guide thee; ſometimes golden wire
The ſhining bellies of the fly require;
The peacock's plumes thy tackle muſt not fail,
Nor the dear purchaſe of the ſable's tail.
Each guady bird ſome ſlender tribute brings,
And lends the growing inſect proper wings:
Silks of all colours muſt their aid impart,
And ev'ry fur promote the fiſher's art.
So the gay lady, with expenſive care,
Borrows the pride of land, of ſea, and air;
Furs, pearls, and plumes, the glitt'ring thing diſ-
plays,
Dazzles our eyes, and eaſy hearts betrays.
Mark well the various ſeaſons of the year,
How the ſucceeding inſect-race appear;
In this revolving moon one colour reigns,
Which in the next the fickle trout diſdains.
Oft have I ſeen a ſkilful angler try
The various colours of the treach'rous fly;
When he with fruitleſs pain hath ſkim'd the brook,
And the coy fiſh rejects the ſkipping hook,
He ſhakes the boughs that on the margin grow,
Which o'er the ſtream a waving foreſt throw;
When if an inſect fall, (his certain guide)
He gently takes him from the whirling tide:
Examines well his form with curious eyes,
His gaudy veſt, his wings, his horns and ſize.
Then round his hook the choſen fur he winds,
And on the back a ſpectled feather binds;

So the juſt colours ſhine through ev'ry part,
That nature ſeems to live again in art.
Let not thy wary ſteps advance too near,
While all thy hope hangs on a ſingle hair:
The new-form'd inſect on the water moves,
The ſpeckled trout the curious ſnare approves;
Upon the curling ſurface let it glide,
With nat'ral motion from thy hand ſupply'd,
Againſt the ſtream now gently let it play,
Now in the rapid eddy roll away.
The ſcaly ſhoals float by, and, ſeiz'd with fear,
Behold their fellows toſs'd in thinner air;
But ſoon they leap, and catch the ſwimming bait,
Plunge on the hook, and ſhare an equal fate.

When a briſk gale againſt the current blows,
And all the wat'ry plain in wrinkles flows,
Then let the fiſherman his art repeat,
Where bubbling eddies favour the deceit.
If an enormous ſalmon chance to ſpy
The wanton errors of the floating fly,
He lifts his ſilver gills above the flood,
And greedily ſucks in th' unfaithful food;
Then downward plunges with the fraudful prey,
And bears with joy the little ſpoil away.
Soon in ſmart pain he feels the dire miſtake,
Laſhes the wave, and beats the foamy lake:
With ſudden rage he now aloft appears,
And in his eye convulſive anguiſh bears;
And now again, impatient of the wound,
He rolls and wreathes his ſhining body round;
Then headlong ſhoots beneath the daſhing tide,
The trembling fins the boiling wave divide;

Now hope exalts the fiſher's beating heart,
Now he turns pale, and fears his dubious art;
He views the tumbling fiſh with longing eyes;
While the line ſtretches with th' unwieldy prize;
Each motion humours with his ſteady hands,
And one ſlight hair the mighty bulk commands:
Till tir'd at laſt, deſpoil'd of all his ſtrength,
The game athwart the ſtream unfolds his length.
He now, with pleaſure, views the gaſping prize
Gnaſh his ſharp teeth, and roll his blood-ſhot eyes;
Then draws him to the ſhore with artful care,
And lifts his noſtrils in the ſick'ning air:
Upon the burden'd ſtream he floating lies,
Stretching his quiv'ring fins, and gaſping dies.

Would you preſerve a num'rous finny race?
Let your fierce dogs the rav'nous otter chaſe;
Th' amphibious monſter ranges all the ſhores,
Darts through the waves, and ev'ry haunt explores:
Or let the gin his roving ſteps betray,
And ſave from hoſtile jaws the ſcaly prey.

I never wander where the bordering reeds
O'erlooks the muddy ſtream, whoſe tangling weeds
Perplex the fiſher; I, nor chuſe to bear
The thieviſh nightly net, nor barbed ſpear;
Nor drain I ponds the golden carp to take,
Nor trowle for pikes, diſpeoplers of the lake.
Around the ſteel no tortur'd worm ſhall twine,
No blood of living inſect ſtain my line;
Let me, leſs cruel, caſt the feather'd hook,
With pliant rod athwart the pebbled brook,
Silent along the mazy margin ſtray,
And with the fur-wrought fly delude the prey.