

ART. XI.—CRITICAL NOTICES.

- 1.—*Roman Nights; or the Tomb of the Scipios*. By ALESSANDRO VERRI. Translated from the Italian by a Lady. New York. 1825. 2 vols. 12mo. pp. 180. 178.

THE composition of dialogues of the dead has always been a favorite and successful species of writing in every age of European literature. From the satiric and witty Lucian, who aimed the keen shafts of his ridicule at the weaknesses of all the great characters of antiquity, sparing neither gods nor men from the severe attacks of his impartial irony, down to the times of the lively and attic Fontenelle, and of the English Lyttelton, examples of these imaginary conversations are continually occurring. Modern ingenuity has frequently improved upon the simplicity of the ancient models, by weaving the discourse of departed shades into a narration of connected incidents, as in the *Divina Commedia*. Verri's *Notti Romane* is a work of this latter kind; and with something of singularity, and almost of grotesqueness, in its plan, is nevertheless distinguished by beauties of the highest order.

The book consists of fictitious conferences between the author and the spirits of eminent Romans, and between these Romans themselves in the author's presence. These conferences take place at the outset, in the tomb of the Scipios. Attracted by the fame of this recently discovered monument of a family so illustrious, Verri is supposed to repair to the catacombs in the night, for the purpose of exploring them undisturbed. Whilst there, his torch was extinguished by a gust of wind rushing through the cavern; and the gloomy 'domains of the dead' gradually became peopled with myriads of spectres, whose dress and language bespoke them to be the *gens togata*, the proud citizens of the queen and conqueror of nations, of imperial Rome. The apparitions at length crowd around one whose majestic mien and lofty presence command respect; and who appears to be addressing the silent and attentive multitude. This individual is Cicero. When he had ceased speaking to the assembled phantoms, he is accosted by Verri, and becomes a kind of guide, a *cicerone*, explaining to our author the names and situation of the persons, who act a part in the subsequent incidents; filling, indeed, precisely the same place as Virgil in the *Inferno*;

Tu duca, tu signore, tu maestro.

Brutus and Cæsar, the Gracchi, Scipio Æmilianus, and others, then arise in succession, and discuss the most important events of their times. The first night is thus consumed, and on the two following nights we are introduced to Marius, Sylla, Atticus, Lucretia, Junius Brutus, Virginus, Cato the Censor, Pompey, Antony and Cleopatra, Cato Uticensis, Octavius, and the poet Horace. All this is represented as happening at the tomb of the Scipios; but during the three remaining nights the spirits leave the sepulchre, and pass to the examination of modern Rome, continuing their discussions upon the leading facts in Roman history, and upon subjects, which the sight of the monuments of Roman grandeur suggest. Of the new characters now brought on the stage, the most prominent are Romulus, Numa, and the vestal Flornia.

These are the Roman Nights, in which the national policy of the republic, the acts and motives of her celebrated citizens, her laws, religion, and military achievements, are critically scrutinized, and dissected with the skill of a master. The ground work of the whole is authentic history; and we know not any book, which exhibits, in the same compass, a more graphic and vivid picture of the politics of the republic. The style of Verri is very happy. His diction is nervous, and his taste correct and manly. The besetting sin of his countrymen, a vice into which they are easily betrayed by the copiousness and melody of their beautiful tongue, is a tendency to diffuseness, prolixity, and effeminacy of style. These defects are by no means essential to the language, which is capable of being moulded to the utmost dignity and energy of expression. What poetry is more terse, more instinct with vigor, more the opposite of careless ease and familiar diffuseness than Alfieri's? What prose is more expressive, pointed, and energetic, than Ugo Foscolo's? And Verri has imitated, with great felicity, the noble and stately, yet simple and unambitious style, which we should consider appropriate to the *dramatis personæ* of the Nights. His felicitous imitation, or we should rather say adoption, of the genuine Roman turn of expression, is one of the charms of his work; and shows how nearly allied are the Latin and the Italian, the latter, indeed, being scarcely more than a softened dialect of its venerable parent tongue.

We have not compared the translation before us with its original carefully enough to express an unqualified opinion of its fidelity. The style of it is good; and the work is creditable to its fair authoress, who deserves praise for contributing her efforts to render Americans familiar with the riches of Italian literature. We could wish, however, that it preserved a greater share of Verri's

latinity of diction than it does ; for this property is essential to the *keeping* of the dialogue, and is peculiarly efficacious in giving it an air of perfect reality and truth.

2.—1. *Anniversary Address on the Progress of the Natural Sciences in the United States ; delivered before the Lyceum of Natural History of New York, February, 1826.* By JAMES E. DE KAY. New York. G. & C. Carvill. 8vo. pp. 78.

2. *Report of a Committee of the Trustees of the Boston Athenæum, made to the Proprietors, May 25, 1826.*

THE principal object of this Address is thus stated by the author.

‘ On the present occasion it is proposed to give a brief outline of the progress and present state of the Natural Sciences in the United States. Such occasional exhibitions are something more than mere appeals to national vanity. They are consonant with the usages of other nations, and if faithfully executed, are not always flattering to national pride. They become useful records of the labors of our contemporaries, may indicate sources of information, which might be overlooked by the inquirer, and often serve as an incitement to greater exertion with the rising generation.’ p. 6.

Of the usefulness of such undertakings there can be no question ; and the one before us seems to be executed with care and correctness. The votaries of Natural Science will be gratified to perceive how much has been done by Americans, in this department, during the last eight or ten years, compared with any former period. The amount, indeed, is not great in itself, but it gives promise of more ; for men seldom stop, who have once entered on this career. The natural curiosity of man is sharpened, and his intellectual activity increased, by every new attainment in these pursuits. In science we can never reach a height, from which another more commanding cannot be observed ; we are drawn on from step to step, the prospect is continually expanding, and our appetite for knowledge ‘ doth make the meat it feeds on.’ Among the sources of happiness, the pursuit of science holds one of the first places ; since the principal employment of those engaged in it, is the successful invention of new pleasures. We are rejoiced, then, at everything that may turn the attention of our countrymen towards this occupation, which will continually present worthy objects for that activity, which is too often wasted in useless or hurtful undertakings.