THE GOLDEN THREAD

by

Philo M. Buck, Jr.

Decorations by

NORMAN G. RUDOLPH

1931

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

Set up and printed. Published August, 1931.

• PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA •

NOTE

THE appreciative thanks of author and publisher are herewith given to the following publishers, who have generously consented to the reprinting of the material indicated, which they control as holders of the copyright, or authorized publishers, or both:

Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston: For selections from *The Misanthrope*, translated by W. F. Giese. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.

Oxford University Press, New York: For selections from "Agamemnon," "Eumenides," and Sophocles, "Oedipus Rex" as found in *Ten Greek Plays*, translated by Gilbert Murray; also for selections from Euripides' *Medea*, translated by Gilbert Murray. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, New York.

G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York: For selections from *Femmes Savantes*, *L'Avare*, and *Tartuffe* of Molière, translated by C. H. Page. Reprinted by permission of G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago: For selections from the *Bhagavat Gita*, translated by Arthur Ryder (1929). Reprinted by permission of The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Yale University Press, New Haven: For selections from *Divine Comedy*, translated by H. Johnson. Reprinted by permission of Yale University Press, New Haven.

PREFACE

"To SOME he is only a study in grammar," remarked Montaigne of one of his favorite authors whose books he found to be "the very anatomy of philosophy." Times have not altered. Caesar's battle orders, to a boy long ago, were a lesson in the use of the accusative and infinitive in indirect discourse, Dido a power-riveter to capture and clinch the vagaries of the Latin subjunctive, and Homer's Achilles a unique survival of the epic genitive. Is it not possible also that little boys in Athens took Homer's catalogue of the ships as a text-book in Greek geography and the Lotus Eaters as an essay in social anthropology? School-masters have a tradition as old, I fear, as that of literature, and its story is not always a romance.

Nor is a healthy imagination much aided if great literature is studied as a museum for poetic embroideries. One should build one's house, and with adequate walls and ceilings to keep out rain and frost, before one visits artists' studios for tapestries and pictures. Doubtless Homer chuckled with delight over the rightness of his 'rosy-fingered dawn,' and Virgil trembled before his own creature, that Cyclops, "*monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum*," for there is magic in the line that more than describes the horrid monster. The charm of poetic imagery—there is no wonder quite like it; and those had reason who would ascribe to it a supernatural potency. But to look only for these felicities is to substitute an easy

aesthetics for the main issue; such is the school-mistress' tradition, and its romance is lacking in dimension.

For great literature has ever been a search for a larger meaning in life as against the easy acceptance of life's routine and ready-made philosophies. Only in it may one readily discover the rich complexity of the living ideas that have made the tradition of humanity. Only it can reveal a rich and vital meaning for those quarrelsome words that ordinarily are as empty of significance as battle-cries or bludgeons—terms like optimism and pessimism, urbanity and nature, reason and instinct. It is there that the best search can be made for clues that may reveal all that is implied by character, moral discipline, and freedom. For in a manner far more vital than the speculation of philosopher or moralist, the vision of the poet discovers the stature of man and the secret of the good life.

Can a survey of this tradition of great literature be attempted, in a single volume, which shall tell the story of our chief heritage? Its pattern is far from simple, and its wise men come bearing gifts from the ends of the earth. The theme is fascinating, but its adequate interpreter must be a modern Briareus, with a hundred brains for the once hundred hands.

This attempt is more modest; but even within its arbitrary scope, now that the work is finished, the writer acknowledges his and its shortcomings. There is much left unsaid that he now wishes could have been said, and much said that might better have been left unsaid, or said more wisely. Each reader will be able to place a finger upon some manifest blemish. But the author's purpose was not to avoid the charge of being arbitrary and incomplete. If he has succeeded in a measure in revealing the charm and vitality of the humane tradition, with its com-

plexity and its power and renascent youth, he has done more than all he set out to do. It is in this hope that he now takes his farewell of a work that has been more than a labor of love.

Porquerolles en Iles d'Or, Var, France.

CONTENTS

I. THE GOLDEN THREAD

"Du gleichst dem Geist den du begreifst." GOETHE.

TRADITION in literature—the long and varied record of man's effort to communicate his hopes and aspirations, his disillusionments and tragedies, his struggles and triumphs, the endless and paradoxical motives which give life a meaning and value—to trace this from the beginnings, when man's ways were relatively simple, to these later and richer times, is to reconstruct in imagination the inner biography of the human race. It is a story that goes far beyond the boundaries of any race, language, or continent, and in its earlier chapters had little need of the artificial device of writing and books. Some of its most significant episodes were sung by persons who to history are nameless and whose private lives are beyond the disillusioning pen of the magpie biographer; and the tradition was hoary long before the art of printing made books and public libraries a responsibility and newspapers and popular magazines a public nuisance. Nor are the later chapters, of times after the charge of illiteracy became a moral reproach, any more significant or interesting than those composed when the arts were in their infancy and science yet unborn. A vital thing is this tradition, a golden thread uniting the present and the past, and its story a veritable romance.

But it can well be asked, how can a tradition be found in things so widely separated as the prehistoric past and the

changing present, or the contemplative Orient and the scientific and changing West? What general vital motives shall we find in literature that can leap mountain ranges, bridge oceans, and like the spirit of immortal youth come down across the centuries and millenniums, and weave themselves into the very texture of our practical and progressive ideas on man and his destiny to-day? If this be possible then surely there is a rich meaning in the chance phrase of the French philosopher Auguste Comte, "Humanity is always made up of more dead than living." It may be something of a shock—but a thoughtful mind must ever be ready for shocks—to learn that a much prized philosophy of life, which we fancied had been won by us after much effort and experience, had three thousand years ago been expressed more fitly by Achilles, the headstrong hero of Homer; or that a balm for hurt minds, a comfort that comes as a blessed inspiration in a moment of grief, had ages ago been found to have the same healing in its wings for the distracted hero of Valmiki's Sanscrit epic. In truth, and we humbly acknowledge it here, and in the chapters that follow illustrate by citation and context, this thing we call the tradition of literature is no whit different from the tradition of humanity; different in age, race, language, and aspect, and yet under a Protean shape and in a Babel-like confusion of tongues, the essential thing that lives, struggles, aspires, is exalted or crucified, in this our twentieth century of science and progress. We cannot deny our nature or our heritage; mankind, in spite of varied language and culture, is at heart one, is bound together by a chain of gold.

It is also true, on the other hand, that each author is a child of his own age. "The real literature of an epoch", wrote Renan, " is that which paints and expresses it." Nor is his contemporary and fellow-countryman, Taine, entirely

misleading when he attempts to account for an author's genius as due to a threefold cause, to the race to which he belongs, the particular epoch in which he lives with its peculiar flavor, and the special interest of the moment when he comes to write. Thus Shakespeare is obviously a child of the stirring days in England after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, when the English imagination for the first time in more than a hundred years discovered a new freedom and a new world in which to exercise its powers. Milton as obviously looks at life from a different angle and for a different purpose; and though as clearly English in his tradition and background, has new interests and new problems to occupy his imagination.

To understand a poet aright it is necessary then to have some sympathetic and imaginative knowledge of his times; not the accurate knowledge of an historian, but a responsive imagination that can call up, in part at least, a picture of the past and its motives for living. Without the vital conviction that the age of Homer is a living reality, as real as our own, one cannot read Homer with sympathetic understanding. The archeologist and the philologist may labor with spade and lexicon, and bring to light treasures of art and linguistics, and thus be able to restore in scientific fullness the details of the life and language of those people dead these three millenniums and more. We may see their cities, learn their mode of life, and their art and culture, restore their language, and know to a precise detail their ethnic origins and the secret of their sudden eclipse. But all these facts, if they remain no more than antiquarian facts, are of value only for the museum of knowledge. They must be quickened with life and understanding, so that we, in this far later epoch, may without difficulty translate ourselves in imagination into their background, make

their past a present for us, feel the urge of life somehow as they felt it, fit into a pattern the complex of facts the historian, archeologist, and philologist have supplied us, and thus live their experience somehow as they lived it—we must do all this before we can fully understand the poems of Homer.

I say fully, for this complete knowledge of the past can be reserved only for the specialist. But even the most meagre background of historical knowledge can go a ways in this imaginative excursion into the living record of the tradition of humanity that is great literature. For Homer, like any other great author of prose or poetry, carries much of his comment in his own pages. Better even than the archeologist or philologist, Homer in the scenes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, consciously or unconsciously, reconstructs the life of his own times. The very first lines of his poems begin the living panorama of men and manners and the ideas by which peoples are moved. These the reader, if to him be given the gift of sympathetic insight, can reconstruct into an adequate pattern. Homer was primarily telling a good story to an interested audience. But in the telling he permitted his hearers to reconstruct the fitting background for the story, otherwise it had lacked its full power. Though Greeks of the ninth century B.C. lived in a scene not essentially different from the one Homer reconstructs, and followed the story doubtless with more ease than can we, yet our task to-day is by no means a difficult one or one that should dismay even a relatively untrained reader.

Nor is the reason for this apparent paradox far to seek. Homer, Valmiki, Shakespeare, Milton composed under the limitations and inspiration each of his own age, and yet left poems that all ages have found acceptable, because human

nature, in spite of differences in age and background, has remained essentially the same. Rama, the hero of Valmiki's *Ramayana* in appearance and prowess may be a foreign and godlike creature with abilities to marshal powers and deal blows quite out of the range of human experience; but in his desolation when his wife Sita had been carried off by the monster demon Ravana, he is a compelling human figure as real in his grief as the most frail. Likewise Ravana, the villain of the epic, a monstrosity in form and power whom even the Greek gods would shrink from, so bizarre are his lineaments, has yet, like Zeus and Apollo, some human attributes and at the crisis of the story, after his son has been slain and he is going forth to certain destruction, is wistful in his tragic futility.

In this last poem we have poetical characters as different from the classical standards of orthodox Europe as anything that can be devised; yet even the most orthodox of later European epics have characters that for sheer unreality, so far as superficial lineaments go, are bold inventions. Dante in his picture of the damned revels in a region sown with figures that a modern imagination might well shrink from. The thief Vanni Fucci, begirt with serpents, raising his hands with an obscene gesture and blaspheming the Almighty; Ugolino frozen in the ice, yet bending over his mortal enemy and gnawing at the base of his skull; these are modes of torment and pictures of human degradation congenial to the Middle Ages perhaps, but beyond the power of any save the supreme artist to make humanly convincing. Likewise Milton, with his heroic figure of the arch-rebel and contriver of all evil, Satan, than whom no figure should be more repulsive—as the Puritan conceived him—has achieved the impossible, and made of him who durst defy the Omnipotent to arms

almost a tragic hero. And this feat is achieved by Dante and Milton by the simple device, unachievable except by genius, of making the characters universally human. It is this essential quality, ever presenting itself in new and compelling guise, and yet ever the same, that is the vital power of the tradition of great literature.

How different this from those lesser forms of letters that are concerned only with their own age. A poet-king in India, whose name only is known to us, wrote a long poetic drama in Sanscrit something over twelve hundred years ago. It dealt with the society of a little feudal state that long since has been forgotten, and even the names are as foreign to our ears as the formulas by which scientists obscure our commonest flowers. A thousand years before him Aristophanes, the Greek dramatist, wrote a comedy in which he pilloried some of the faults of an Athenian democracy engaged then in a pitiless war. The local allusions and the contemporary institutions in both these plays are things that require the assistance of specialists in history and philology. Yet translations of both of these plays (the *Little Clay Cart* and the *Lysistrata*), adapted slightly for purposes of our stage, were tremendously successful in twentieth century America.

Against these plays that rescue the tradition of human nature out of a social background long since dead, let us place two plays of almost our own times, Hauptmann's *Weavers* and Ibsen's *Doll's House*. Both are by dramatists of recognized ability who took Europe and America by storm, and both have made amazingly successful studies of almost contemporary problems. But both seem now to have had their day, and are read with something of the languid interest of yesterday's newspaper. For both are dated, they deal with problems that have a definite and possible

solution, and, except in stray corners of the world, a solution that has been found. No one is shocked now by Nora's obstreperous outbreak against a sequestered home and a husband who refuses to take her seriously. Husbands have learned a thing or two in fifty years. Nor is the lot of the poor Silesian weavers any longer the form that the age-old problem of capital and labor now assumes, and their plight has for us now only an antiquarian interest. The moral is easy to draw—these characters of the *Doll's House* and the *Weavers* are entirely expressed in the situations in which we find them, they nowhere rise above them and compel us to recognize their universal interest, as do the characters in the two comedies so many centuries their elder. When the interest in their situations flags, the characters, like the puppets in a Punch and Judy show whose strings are released, become suddenly dull and lifeless. The tradition of literature is not woven with such perishable materials.

It is not a static or unchanging tradition, the pattern it weaves is as variable as human nature itself, and its end no man can predict. In this it is like nature itself, subject to its own inner laws, and modifying itself constantly to meet every new occasion. Into this web are woven the buoyancy of the Homeric heroism, the rigid moral discipline of the Hebrew, the mystic transcendentalism of the Orient, the grim terror and ironic pity of Sophocles and Shakespeare, the humanism and mild scepticism of Montaigne, the romantic urge of Rousseau worshipping at its own shrine, the cultured balance and optimism of Goethe—the pattern is in truth a complex one, changing its texture with age and clime.

It is always full of the most unexpected surprises, and yet as one passes its long bead-roll in review, most genuinely

appropriate in its fitness to the demands and manifestations of human nature. In this again it is like living nature itself, ever modifying itself to new conditions and each modification unpredictable and most appropriate. There was a cosmic surprise, had there been a witness, on that day in the remote past when under appropriate conditions of light, warmth, and moisture the proper chemical ingredients gathered together to produce the living cell. A novelty, strange and utterly unpredictable, had appeared. A scientist with the appropriate equipment may trace the process backward and render an accurate account of all the varied elements that entered upon this marvelous cosmic adventure. But the process itself, the fact that such and such atoms and molecules, none of which separately or in the aggregate remotely resemble the novel creation, should under such and such conditions produce the suddenly dramatic result—this no scientific intelligence armed with any remotely conceivable instrument could predict. There was another episode in the story of living nature equally revolutionary in its significance, when on a certain day certain cells of living tissue, gathered together somehow in an aggregate which had certain curious organic relationships, exhibited the phenomenon we call consciousness. The physiologist and psychologist to-day with their refined instruments and technique can probe this faculty which nature sometimes has the habit of exhibiting. But who of them, even the most ingenious, could predict that out of such and such fortuitous confluences of old and recognized members would emerge something so utterly and amazingly new? The whole story of nature, the thing we call evolution in our carelessness, is the continuous account of just such fortuitous combinations or adaptations of well known materials which, when they come together, produce results

beyond the power of science to anticipate. Philosophers and scientists who have a way of giving a name to things beyond their understanding describe this mysteriously creative and unpredictable power of nature by the phrase "emergent evolution".

The story of the tradition of human thought is likewise filled with similarly unexpected meetings of old and familiar forces to create the startingly new. The background of Homeric Greece, judged by our standards, was doubtless as drab in its petty realism as any lost fishing and pirate village in an undiscovered sea. There were, to be sure, the remains all about it of a preceding civilization that the invading Greek from the north had partly assimilated or laid waste. There were the flashes of light from the eastern and southern horizon that beckoned daring imaginations to explore the cultures of Asia Minor, Babylonia, Phoenicia and Egypt. There in the older cultures was true refinement and poetry to be discovered, for there they had a literate people, a settled community and the arts of peace. What of creative gift could there be among these restless Greeks, living between mountain and sea, their wealth, their sea-born commerce and their flocks and herds, and their pastimes piracy and war? But it was not Lydia or Phoenicia, or Egypt or Babylonia, that was to produce the world poet. That peculiar soil in which genius was to discover itself, that fortuitous combination of circumstances and genius was to come to the hitherto unmentioned Greeks. So came Homer utterly unpredictable into a Greek world ready to receive him, a cosmic surprise. And we living after, can trace backward and pronounce on the utter appropriateness of his coming.

Similarly the England of Shakespeare's youth held little of promise. About the time the future dramatist came to