



B O N I B O O K S



THE WORLD'S BEST ESSAYS



From Confucius to Mencken

Edited by

F. H. PRITCHARD



ALBERT & CHARLES BONI



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BEST ESSAYS

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★ ALBERT & CHARLES BONI ★

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PREFACE

IN THIS volume an attempt has been made, not to present a more or less haphazard collection of elegant extracts, but to illustrate the development of one of the most important forms that literature has assumed. The essay, because it is homely and unpretentious, has often been belittled and any special significance denied to it. That anybody can write essays sums up a view which is all too common. At best they are often held to be but the odds and ends that fall from the writer's table as he is engaged upon the larger matters that really count. The main purpose of the present collection is to show that, on the contrary, the essay is one of the oldest literary forms, and that its vitality and importance have increased with the years. It has played a part, indeed, in the spread of culture and common sense that could hardly have been filled by any of the more ambitious kinds of literature. This is believed to be the first attempt to illustrate the growth of the essay by a really comprehensive selection drawn from the principal literatures of the world.

In the work of selection the editor acknowledges with gratitude the help he has received from the many experts who have been good enough to show a keen interest in his project. Special mention must be made of the following, each of whom has given invaluable assistance with the section indicated: Dr. E. J. Thomas, of the University Library, Cambridge (Ancient India); Mr. Reuben Levy, Lecturer in Persian at Cambridge University (Persia and Arabia); Mr. Arthur Waley (China); Mr. Gonnoské Komai (Japan); Dr. Denis Saurat, of the Institut Français, London (France); Dr. Camillo Pellizzi, of University College, London (Italy); Dr. William Rose, of King's College, London (Germany); Dr. J. F. de Wilde, of Amsterdam (Holland); Mr. Eskil Sundström (Sweden); Mr. H. K. Lehmkühl and Mr. Johan Bojer (Norway); Mr. J. H. F. Byng, of University College, London (Denmark); Mme. Aino Kallas (Finland and Estonia); Prince D. S. Mirsky (Russia); Dr. Otakar Vočadlo (Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, and Jugo-Slavia); and M. Marcu Beza (Roumania).

In compiling the biographical notes and introductions many works have been consulted, including Botta's *Handbook of Universal Literature*, Moulton's *Modern Study of Literature*, *The Modern Readers' Bible*, and *The Literary Study of the Bible*, W. H. Hudson's *Introduction to the Study of Literature*, Chambers' *Biographical Dictionary*, Manly and Rickert's *Contemporary British Literature and Contemporary American Literature*, and Legouis and Cazamian's *History of English Literature*.

Wherever possible the source and authorship of translations have been indicated. Many of the essays have been specially translated for this volume and the editor wishes to express his indebtedness in this respect to Dr. E. J. Thomas; Mr. Reuben Levy, M.A.; Miss Dorothy Margaret Stuart; Mr. J. W. Jeaffreson, M.A.; Miss Ena Makin, M.A.; Dr. William Rose; Miss J. F. de Wilde, D.Litt.; Miss M. Guiterman; Mrs. Elizabeth Sprigge; Mrs. Ellen Lehmkühl; Mr. J. Krzyżanowski; Mr. F. P. Casey; Miss Dora Round; Mr. Josif Torbarina; and the Hon. Mrs. Lucy Byng.

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F. H. P.

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ANCIENT GREECE

Introductory Note

IN *The Classical Tradition in Poetry* Professor Gilbert Murray has shown how Greek Literature developed from the *Molpê*—a primitive ballad-dance in which speech, song, and action were combined. In course of time these elements became differentiated and the various literary forms separated out. So the epic—the recital of high deeds on an appropriately lofty plane—was evolved on the one side, and the drama—the presentation of action—was produced on the other. In addition there is the reflective element which is seen when a thoughtful mind muses on things as they are, and presents us with the conclusions formed as a result of thought and observation. They may at first be disjointed, and embedded with other matter of a different kind, but as time goes on the tendency is to collect these “sayings” and gradually to organize and weld them into units which are not far removed from essays as we now understand the term. Indeed there is nothing more striking than the modernity of some of these essays which were written so many hundreds of years ago. The Greeks were habitual philosophers, ceaselessly asking themselves “How?” and “Why?” with reference to man’s life and work on this earth. It was a habit of mind with them. It led them to discover that which was essential beneath all the trappings of a day, and that is why so much of their literature is as new to-day as when it was written.

* * *

PLATO

AT THE age of nineteen Plato (429-347 B.C.) became one of the pupils of Socrates and remained with that great philosopher until his death. Socrates, a stonemason and sculptor, disclaimed any pretensions to knowledge. He merely asked questions in order to expose the ignorance of those popular teachers who used catchwords and phrases which they did not really understand. By his shrewd interrogations he sought first to get his listeners to see how inadequate their knowledge was and then to search for something deeper and more certain. He was put to death in obedience to the popular clamour. Plato was present at his trial and, after many years spent in travelling in various parts of Asia Minor, Egypt, Italy, and Sicily, he settled down as a public lecturer on philosophy. His lectures were delivered in the gardens of the Academia, one of the big Athenian parks, where young

athletes practised their games. Democratic government was responsible for the death of Socrates—a fact which Plato never forgot. All his distrust of democracy and his bitterness as he remembers that deed are shown in the following dialogue, the opening words of which are supposed to have been pronounced by Socrates.

This passage is taken from Jowett's translation of Plato's *Republic*, by permission of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

OF DEMOCRACY

NEXT then, I suppose, we must examine democracy and find out how it arises and what it is like, so that we may know what the democratic man is like and estimate his value.

That is the next step, I think.

Does not a city change from government by a small class to government by the people through uncontrolled pursuit of wealth as the ultimate object of life?

How?

I think that the governing class in such a city hold their position because of their wealth, and that therefore they will not pass laws to prevent the young men from living extravagantly and spending and wasting their goods; for they will want to increase their own wealth and importance by buying up what has to be sold and lending the young men money.

They will.

Now, it is quite clear, is it not, that it is impossible at one and the same time to worship money and keep a high standard of honesty among the citizens; one or the other will have to go?

That is clear enough.

Sometimes the governing class in a city has so neglected discipline that men of remarkable ability have been forced into poverty.

That is quite true.

Such men settle in the city, armed and ready to sting, some in debt, some having lost their citizenship, some both, hating and plotting against the men who have acquired their wealth, entirely set on revolution.

Yes.

But the money-makers fix their eyes on the ground and pretend not to see them; instead they go on poisoning with their wealth any of the other citizens who give up the struggle, and increase the number of drones and beggars in the city. While, as for themselves and their own sons, their young men are luxurious and useless both in mind and body, lazy and too soft to endure pain or resist pleasure.

Well?

When the ruling class and the ruled meet one another in the streets or at public meetings, at festivals or in the army, when they serve side by side either on board ship or in the ranks and see one another facing danger, the poor will not be despised by the rich. On the contrary, often a poor man, strong and brown, stands in the ranks next to a rich man, who has lived an indoor life and is far too fat; and, seeing his shortness of breath and general discomfort, will surely think that such men as these are rich simply because the poorer classes are cowards. And whenever he meets his friends the word will get passed round, "We can do what we like with these men; they are good for nothing."

I am quite sure that they will.

Well then, I suppose, democracy comes into existence when the poor have conquered the rich, killing some, banishing others, and sharing citizenship and office with the rest; and generally in such a city the offices are distributed by lot.

That is how democracy is established, whether it be through armed force or whether the opposite side give in at once through fear.

Well now, how will they live and what kind of a government will theirs be? First, of course, they are free, and the city is full of freedom and free speech and every one may do whatever he wishes.

So they say.

And where every one may do as he wishes it is quite clear that each man will order his own life in the way that pleases him best.

Yes.

So, I imagine, under this government we shall find men of all sorts and kinds.

Certainly.

Then this is likely to be a very beautiful form of government. It will be like a rainbow-coloured cloak of many shades, for it will have every type of character and so will be very beautiful to look at. And perhaps, just as children and women like the look of bright colours, many people will think this kind of government the most beautiful.

Indeed they will.

Then, my friend, it is a convenient city to look for a constitution in. Why?

Because it has all kinds of constitutions through every one being able to do what he likes. You can go to it as if it were a universal provider of constitutions, choose which you prefer, and found your city.

There will certainly be a good choice.

There is no need to hold office in this city, if you are not equal to it, nor to obey the government, if you don't want to, nor go to war because the city is at war, nor to keep the peace because the city is at peace,

if you personally don't want peace. Is not this a gloriously pleasant kind of life for the moment?

Perhaps, for the moment.

And how considerate such a city is! No nonsense there about trifles. They think nothing there of all the things we mentioned with surprise when we were founding our city; we said then that no one could become a good man if his childhood were not passed in beautiful surroundings and in the practice of beautiful deeds. This city sublimely tramples all this down and does not care from what sort of a life a man comes when he enters politics, but honours him if he only just says that he is friendly to the masses.

It is wonderful.

Then these and similar characteristics would be the features of a democracy; it seems to be a pleasant form of government, varied and without rulers, dealing out its own special brand of equality to equal and unequal alike.

* * *

ARISTOTLE

CALLED the Stagyrite because he was a native of Stagyra, in Macedonia, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) went to Athens and became Plato's most promising pupil. For three years he had charge of the education of Alexander, the son of Philip of Macedon. On returning to Athens he founded a school called the Lyceum and composed most of the works which we now have. He was accused of blasphemy after the death of Alexander and went to Chalcis, where he stayed until his death. The encyclopædic range of Aristotle's knowledge is amazing. He was styled by Dante "the Master of those who know," and although he was the devoted pupil of Plato for nearly twenty years, his teaching differs from that of his master in a striking way. Plato was the visionary interested in the speculative side of knowledge: Aristotle's mind ran along practical lines and made him keenly observant of the facts of life that were near and could be verified. His writings are by no means easy to read for they are merely lecture notes, more or less fragmentary.

The following passage is taken from the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* by R. W. Browne, M.A., Ph.D., by permission of Messrs. G. Bell and Sons, Ltd.

OF HAPPINESS

A QUESTION is raised, whether happiness is acquired by learning, by habit, or by exercise of any other kind; or whether it is produced in a man by some heavenly dispensation, or even by chance.

Now, if there is any other thing which is the gift of God to men, it is reasonable to suppose that happiness is a divine gift, and more than anything else, inasmuch as it is the best of human things. But this, perhaps, would more fitly belong to another kind of investigation: but, even if it be not sent from heaven, but is acquired by means of virtue, and of some kind of teaching or exercise, it appears to be one of the most divine of things; for the prize and end of virtue seems to be something which is best, godlike, and blessed. It must also be common to many; for it is possible, that by means of some teaching and care, it should exist in every person who is not incapacitated for virtue. But if it is better that people should be happy by these means, than by chance, it is reasonable to suppose it is so, since natural productions are produced in the best way in which it is possible for them to be produced; and likewise the productions of art, and of every efficient cause, and especially of the best cause. But to commit the greatest and the noblest of things to chance would be very inconsistent. Now the thing we are at present in search of receives additional clearness from the definition; for happiness has been said to be a kind of energy of the soul according to virtue; but of the remaining goods it is necessary that some exist in it, and that others should be naturally assistant and useful, instrumentally. But this will agree with what we stated in the beginning; for we set down the end of the political science as the good; and this devotes its principal attention to form the characters of the citizens, to make them good, and dispose them to honourable actions.

It is with reason, then, that we do not call an ox, a horse, or any other beast, happy; for none of them are able to participate in this kind of energy. For this cause, also, a child cannot be called happy; for from his time of life he is not yet able to perform such actions; but those who are so called, are called happy from hope; for, as we said, there is need of perfect virtue, and of perfect life. For the changes of life are numerous, and the accidents of fortune various; and it is possible for the man in the enjoyment of the greatest prosperity to become involved in great calamities in the time of his old age, as is related in the story of Priam, in the *Iliad*; and no man will call him happy, who has experienced such misfortunes, and died miserably.

Are we, then, to call no other man happy as long as he lives, but is it necessary, as Solon says, to look to the end? But if we must lay down this rule, is he then happy when he is dead? Or is this altogether absurd, especially in us who assert happiness to be a kind of energy? But if we do not call the dead man happy, and even Solon does not mean this, but that a person might then securely call a man happy, as beyond the reach of evils and misfortunes, even this assertion admits of some dispute. For if there is some good and evil to the man who is alive, and who is not aware of it, there may be supposed