


ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FAMOUS WORLD LITERATURE



EDITED BY:

RICHARD GARNETT

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INTRODUCTION: THE USE AND VALUE OF ANTHOLOGIES

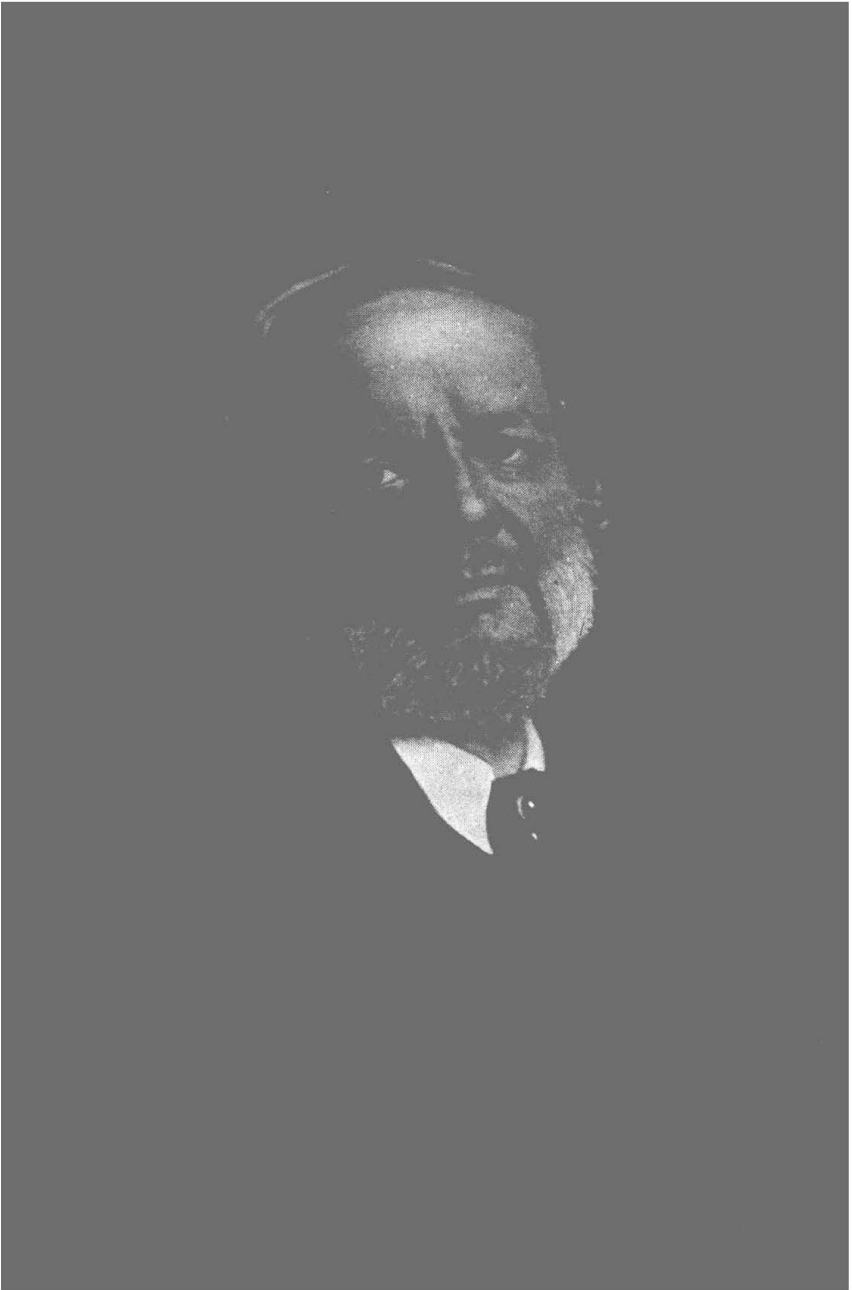
BY DR. RICHARD GARNETT, C.B.

THERE have been periods in human history when the action of the Turk, who picks up and preserves every stray piece of inscribed paper, "because it may contain the name of Allah," has been highly reasonable. Such, in fact, is the present attitude of the archæologist and explorer to the fragments of papyrus he encounters in the rubbish of buried Egyptian cities, precious because they are so scarce, because they are so old, and because nobody can tell what priceless syllables they may contain. But the demeanour which is right in the infancy of a young literature, or amid the vestiges of an antique one, is wholly uncalled for in an age where the difficulty is to keep out of print. Even without the printing press, the scholars of the Alexandrian period found literature getting too much for them. What must it be now, when every daily newspaper requires machinery capable of producing more literary matter in an hour than all the scribes of Alexandria could have turned out in a generation? As the existence of a great river in a civilised country involves that of dykes, and quays, and bridges, so the existence of a great literature implies the ministrations of literary officials engaged in winnowing the bad from the good, and helping the latter to permanence. In a rude, imperfect manner this function is discharged by the current criticism of the periodical press; but this criticism, produced in haste, and by persons of widely varying degrees of qualification, requires to be itself very carefully winnowed.

The appearance of a new book in ancient times must have elicited abundance of *viva voce* criticism, but the literary review can scarcely have existed. Every intellectual condition favoured, but material conditions forbade. The circulation of our most esteemed journals would be limited indeed, if they were produced by transcribers working with reed pens; nor, in fact, when the indispensable exigencies of ordinary life had been satisfied, did enough papyrus remain for the books and the comments also. Readers no doubt spoke their minds freely, but authors did not fall into the hands of the grammarians, corresponding to our reviewers, until they had passed this preliminary ordeal, and had established more or less claim to a permanent place in literature. The grammarian, sometimes, no doubt, somewhat of a pedant, but almost always endowed with the culture entitling him to act as literary expert and appraiser, proceeded by one of three methods. If he did not reject the aspirant altogether, he admitted him into his *canon*, or drew upon him for his anthology, or made him the subject of an epitome—

Flasked and fine,
And priced and saleable at last!

It can rarely be said now, as it often could of old, that a single book is the chief repertory of knowledge on any important subject. While, therefore, epitomes of information are more frequent than ever, epitomes of particular authors have become rare. The canon, also, is a classification difficult to maintain in presence of the extreme complexity of modern literature. In ancient times this beneficial system was comparatively easy to apply, when the world possessed but one literary language, and that one in which the standard of excellence was both lofty and well defined. It was not difficult for a Greek to decide, for instance, that but nine of the numerous lyric poets of Hellas deserved to be accounted canonical, and the conditions of literary composition had so greatly altered between the times of Simonides and those of Aristarchus, that there was but little prospect of the rekindling of a "Lost Pleiad," or of the intrusion of a tenth muse into the hallowed circle. The classification went farther; three tragic poets and three of the old



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comedy were picked out from the rest as pre-eminently worthy to be read; seven of the later Alexandrian dramatists were allowed to form a band of Epigoni, below the great but among the good; twenty-four of Menander's comedies were selected as eminently worthy of transcription, and hence survived for the perusal of Photius after a thousand years. Of the canon of Scripture, Old and New, and the weighty controversies connected with it, it is needless to speak. In the modern literature the principle of the canon is less easy of application, on account of the difficulty of establishing an absolute criterion of style, and also of its greater complexity and variety. The supreme perfection of prose style, the felicitous expression to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away, has, perhaps, hardly ever been attained but by those authors of the first rank with whom the modern world has least concern. Rousseau may be an exception, but to canonise Bossuet will not be to find him readers, and who is to discriminate the temporary from the permanent in the enormous production of Voltaire? We should, moreover, be confronted by the want of any standard of excellence universally agreed upon. Athens or Alexandria could prescribe the laws of taste to obedient antiquity, but Pascal's writ does not run in Britain, or Carlyle's in France. The age of literary canons, in the sense of select authors prescribed for imitation, is gone by, and apart from individual examples and the admonitions which we occasionally receive from men of taste sensitive to the literary failings of their times, such as Matthew Arnold, the best way to maintain a high standard of authorship is the method of anthology, of a selection from those pieces which have actually striven and prevailed in the great literary struggle for existence, and thus practically demonstrated the qualities that keep a writer's name green.

Two systems have been followed in the confection of anthologies, each of which has its advantages. The first, especially recommendable for poetical anthologies, is the system of fastidious severity, which can only be carried out by a compiler of exquisite taste and consummate judgment. Such was the system on which Meleager,

the first Greek anthologist, framed his collection, which, so far as can be determined in the mutilated condition in which it has reached our times, did not contain a single piece unacceptable on poetical grounds. Such was also the case with the first series of the late Mr. Palgrave's "Golden Treasury," which we are able to judge with more exactness than Meleager's, knowing not only what Mr. Palgrave admitted, but what he excluded. The same high standard, however, is incapable of application to selections of mixed verse and prose, since modern prose rarely attains the flawless perfection of much modern verse, nor, growing out of and leading up to other passages, can it usually possess the symmetrical unity of a complete poem. Another principle may here be invoked, and the selection may in a manner be entrusted to the public suffrage, those pieces being especially chosen which are known to have appealed with special force to the general heart and conscience. Such is the case with the selections which these remarks accompany. The great majority are here by universal suffrage, and the great extent of the collection, unparalleled in any similar undertaking, allows the general estimate to be reflected with a precision unattainable in an attempt to present "infinite riches in little room." The endeavour to indicate public feeling by a few favourite pieces would be like carrying a sample brick as a representative of a great city; it is otherwise where there is room for hundreds of such objects of general approval. If this character of echo of *vox populi, vox Dei* does not seem equally merited by all departments of this colossal gathering, the objector may reflect that the favourite literature of educated persons is not, like a plane surface, spread out everywhere and equally visible in every part, but, like the soil itself, a succession of strata through which the explorer must drive his shaft, and that the occurrence of Plato, for example, in the uppermost stratum, is a good reason for not expecting him lower down; that the lower strata have their indigenous products too; and that the business of a collection formed on this principle is to exhibit not one stratum but all, so long as all deserve the name of literature. This is assuredly the case; various as are the degrees of culture and the modifications of

taste here represented, not much will be found that does not incontestably belong to the world of literature, as distinguished from the world of bookmaking. While such a collection is especially profitable as a mirror of the nation's mental activity, and an echo of the general verdict, it might well have impressed an intelligent foreigner by the vigour, affluence, and variety of the Anglo-American intellect, and the splendour of the gifts bestowed upon the finer spirits of the mother country and her daughters, whether of Teutonic or of Celtic stock.

The large proportion allotted in this anthology to American literature is not without significance at the present crisis in the history of our race. We in Britain have learned to acknowledge a Greater Britain, greater actually in extent, potentially in world-wide importance, than our own. So frankly has the admission been made that the phrase recording it has become a household word, as famous and universally accepted as John Bull. But we are now beginning to see that the phrase cannot be limited to our colonial dependencies. Let any one ask himself the question: Supposing that Australia, for instance, were to assert political independence of Great Britain, would she therefore be excluded from Greater Britain? Assuredly not; for one tie that would have been snapped, twenty would remain—kinship, language, literature, religion, institutions substantially identical, commercial and social intercourse—after a short interval at most, the same affection as of old. But if this is true of the new colony, it must be equally true of the old. The rupture of political connections and the change of political institutions have made no breach between England and America. In reading the specimens of American literature in this collection we are at once aware that we are reading our own. They do not differ from us as do the specimens of the literature of France or Germany. They are racy of the soil, of course, and that soil is not the soil of England, but neither is it the soil of Scotland or Ireland. It is not two great literatures regarding each other across the Atlantic, but one colossal literature bestriding that vast ocean. What hope and encouragement this fact affords it is need-

less to say, both as a revelation of the indefinite possibilities of the development of our literature in the future, and as an assurance of the mutual understanding of the two moieties of this great English-speaking nation which present circumstances do, and future circumstances will, so urgently require. A virtual identity of literary expression and literary sentiment which has grown up by the force of circumstances without encouragement, sometimes with discouragement, from statesmen and organs of public opinion, clearly points to affinities too deep to be unsettled by transitory circumstances, and which will, indeed, impress such circumstances into its service.

Apart from the great actual merits of American writers, the successful transplantation of English literature to the United States and "Greater Britain" is almost the most important event that has ever befallen it, indefinitely extending the chances of the one thing absolutely essential to its existence. There is, after all, no glory of British literature equal to that which is all but unique with it—its continuity. Shelley, who was not only a great poet but a great intellect, notes this when he says—

Poesy's unfailing river
Which through Albion winds *for ever*.

This is the simple fact, save for the dull period of the fifteenth century, when literature all over Europe was mainly restricted to commentary and compilation, England has never wanted a successor to Chaucer, and the least superficially attractive ages of her literature have frequently produced the works of most sterling value. The same may be said of French literature as regards prose, not as regards poetry, which, unless versified logic and rhetoric be poetry, slept in France for two hundred and fifty years. Elsewhere, in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Greece, we everywhere behold the same phenomena of epochs of extreme brilliancy followed by long periods of silence or of the productiveness of perverted taste. England alone is always active to good purpose, and if some eras of her literary history are less exemplary than others, there is not one with which the nation or the world could

dispense. The prospect of her continued activity is obviously brightened by the new Englands she has created in the regions of the newly-discovered world, whether American, African, or Australian, most favourable to intellectual as well as to physical activity. Like the banyan tree, she has sent down shoots rooted in the earth, any of which may rival the massiveness and surpass the durability of the parent. Something like this has happened of old, when Roman literature, effete at home, was long preserved and cultivated by Spaniards, Gauls, Africans, and Egyptians, who were either descended from Roman colonists, or had imbibed the spirit of Latin letters. The barbarian deluge, however, overwhelmed the colonies and dependencies as well as the mother country—a catastrophe little likely to befall the widely-disseminated lands where English is the language of letters and of life. American and colonial literature, therefore, deserve profound attention from Britain, as the certain perpetuators of her own, as, even in their present undeveloped condition, redeeming this from the reproach of insularity, and as indefinitely enlarging its prospects both of permanence and of influence upon mankind. It would be rash to predict that the next English-speaking genius of the first rank will be born in America or Australia, but it would be equally rash to predict that he will not.

In one of the charming letters which Emerson wrote to Carlyle the philosopher is found telling his friend of his vain but strenuous endeavour to get through the whole of Goethe's work. "Thirty-five I have read," he writes blithely, "but compass the other thirty-five I cannot." Seventy volumes in all from one man! Little wonder that the Concord sage could find time for perhaps only twice as many as the present day finds time to remember.

For a moment this thought may seem discouraging, and derogatory to modern literature, especially when we consider the care taken to preserve, and the pains spent in interpreting, every scrap that has come down to us from antiquity. But this is not really the case, for what is the larger part of antique literature itself but a co-operative alliance for the performance of tasks too

extensive for any single man? Ancient authors, like moderns, fell to a certain extent into oblivion, but revived again in those whom they had influenced, and by whom the best part of their writings were preserved, though mainly as ingredients in the works of others, often in an altered form. The Bible and the Talmud, the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Avesta, the Sagas, and the Eddas are not the work of one man but of many men. They are full of fragments of older writings, frequently recognisable as such. Granting the personality of Homer and the unity of his epics, who can doubt that he must have worked upon abundant stores of material furnished by more primitive minstrels? The dramatists prey upon him in their turn. Æschylus declared that his tragedies were but scraps stolen from the great Homeric banquet. Take even a comparatively recent, a highly finished, and a perfectly artistic production like the *Æneid*, what would remain even of this national epic of Rome if Virgil were deprived of everything that he had borrowed from Greece? He was a great anthologist, and his English rival Milton even a greater; naturally so, for he had wider fields to gather in. Ancient history, with one or two remarkable exceptions to be noticed, is more than an anthology; it is a composite, a *breccia*. As historical facts became more numerous and less manageable throughout the lengthening ages, the standard histories of Ephorus, Theopompus, and the like, become a quarry for later compilers of the order of Diodorus and Trogus, who sometimes transcribe their predecessor, sometimes abridge him, but always fuse his identity into their own. The exception is in the case of writers like Herodotus and Thucydides, rendered by perfect style or consummate political wisdom a possession for ever, as one of them said. If a man can write like Herodotus or Thucydides he need not fear the compiler or the anthologist, and many moderns, such as the very Goethe whom we have cited as an instance of the impermanence of great authors, have attained this standard in their best works. For their inferior writings and the general mass of authors there remains but the alternatives—to be absorbed, to be excerpted, or to be virtually forgotten.

Absorption may be defined as the process undergone by valuable

literary matter which has not received due artistic form and polish. It is not thrown away; it does not, properly speaking, cease to exist, but it exists only as an element in the compositions of later authors. The truly artistic production, on the other hand, though equally liable to be laid under contribution as a source of information, may well outlast the inferior work into whose service it is thus pressed, as the diamond survives the glass which it engraves. Almost every word, for example, which Arrian has written about Alexander, is very probably coloured by the authoritative biography of Ptolemy Lagus, Alexander's companion in arms, but of Ptolemy's work itself, deficient in style and arrangement, not a word is preserved except those which may be embedded in Arrian's narrative. Cæsar's Commentaries, on the other hand, have been equally used as historical authorities, but the works of those who have thus employed them have mostly passed away, while the Commentaries remain as fresh as of old. Yet, though terse brevity is among their most conspicuous merits, the modern reader, unless a professional scholar or historian, cannot find time for them, not from their prolixity, but from the immensity of the mass of even more valuable literature. He must therefore make their acquaintance through general Roman histories like Mommsen's, or special biographies like Froude's, or else through the medium of excerpt or anthology. This is but another way of saying that only the best literature of its respective description, be that description elevated or familiar, is proper for anthology. Such a collection should take no cognisance of the literature destined to absorption, but only of that which is isolated from the mass by its superior symmetry and polish. It follows that it will be more concerned with poetry and fiction than with the graver departments of intellectual labour, since these can be profitably cultivated without the art which in poetry and fiction is absolutely indispensable, and also that in dealing with serious literature it will concern itself chiefly with what approximates most closely to art: in disquisition seeking for what is most cogent, in narrative for what is most dramatic. The very law of its existence, then, should keep it at a high level.

Modern literature, yet more decisively nineteenth-century literature, possesses a richness, a range, and a variety to which the classics of the past can lay no claim; and if something of the perfection of form which belongs to classical times is lacking to the present day, this loss is compensated in many ways. Nothing is more characteristic of the literary activity of the last hundred and fifty years than its amazing fertility. To such a point indeed has the production of books now attained, that the danger lies not in a paucity of genius, but in the fact that the works of genius may be lost in a surging and ever-increasing flood. Every nation contributes. In England and America alone upwards of 10,000 new books are printed every year. Were we to take twice Dr. Johnson's prescription of five hours a day and read as fast as could Scott or Macaulay, it would still be impossible to compass a tithe of this mass. Sifting and selection, once a slow and orderly process, has become an imperative necessity. The dilemma is clear. We shall either read aimlessly, catching up bits of what is good and great amid much chaff and trash, or else we shall neglect the greater literature altogether.

The time seems ripe for a reversion to the principle which gave to classical literature its glory and its life—the sentiment that the highest excellence should be aimed at, and hence for a revival of the Greek idea of an anthology—a “gathering of flowers,” which is after all, translated into broader scientific language, but Darwin's formula of the survival of the fittest. It is out of this idea that the present work has sprung. If the execution corresponds to the idea, if it is a true gathering of flowers, it should aid in protecting our literature on both sides of the Atlantic from its chief actual danger—debasement to suit the taste of half-educated readers. The perils which it has already encountered and escaped—the Euphuistic affectation of the Elizabethan age, the Gallicism of the Restoration period, the frigidity of the eighteenth century—were maladies caught from the refined and intelligent society of those epochs. All these it has surmounted, but it is now confronted with an entirely novel danger in the dependence of the most popular, and therefore the most influential, authors upon a wide general public

neither refined nor intelligent, who now, as dispensers of the substantial rewards of literature, occupy the place formerly held by the Court, the patron, and the university. Hence a serious apprehension of a general lowering of the standard of literature, far more pernicious than any temporary aberration of taste. The evil may be combated in many ways, and not least effectively by anthologies, which, if skilfully adapted to meet the needs of the general reader, and not themselves unduly tolerant of inferior work, may do much good by familiarising the reader with what is excellent in the present, and reminding the writer of the conditions on which alone fame may be won in the future.

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