LANG ANDREW

LETTERS TO DEAD AUTHORS

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Lang A.

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PREFACE

Sixteen of these Letters, which were written at the suggestion of the Editor of the "St. James's Gazette," appeared in that journal, from which they are now reprinted, by the Editor's kind permission. They have been somewhat emended, and a few additions have been made. The Letters to Horace, Byron, Isaak Walton, Chapelain, Ronsard, and Theocritus have not been published before.

The gem on the title-page, now engraved for the first time, is a red cornelian in the British Museum, probably Græco-Roman, and treated in an archaistic style. It represents Hermes Psychagogos, with a Soul, and has some likeness to the Baptism of Our Lord, as usually shown in art. Perhaps it may be post-Christian. The gem was selected by Mr. A. S. Murray.

It is, perhaps, superfluous to add that some of the Letters are written rather to suit the Correspondent than to express the writer's own taste or opinions. The Epistle to Lord Byron, especially, is "writ in a manner which is my aversion."

I.
To W. M. Thackeray

Sir, – There are many things that stand in the way of the critic when he has a mind to praise the living. He may dread the charge of writing rather to vex a rival than to exalt the subject of his applause. He shuns the appearance of seeking the favour of the famous, and would not willingly be regarded as one of the many parasites who now advertise each movement and action of contemporary genius. "Such and such men of letters are passing their summer holidays in the Val d'Aosta," or the Mountains of the Moon, or the Suliman Range, as it may happen. So reports our literary "Court Circular," and all our *Précieuses* read the tidings with enthusiasm. Lastly, if the critic be quite new to the world of letters, he may superfluously fear to vex a poet or a novelist by the abundance of his eulogy. No such doubts perplex us when, with all our hearts, we would commend the departed; for they have passed almost beyond the reach even of envy; and to those pale cheeks of theirs no commendation can bring the red.

You, above all others, were and remain without a rival in your many-sided excellence, and praise of you strikes at none of those who have survived your day. The increase of time only mellows your renown, and each year that passes and brings you no successor does but sharpen the keenness of our sense of loss. In what other novelist, since Scott was worn down by the burden of a forlorn endeavour, and died for honour's sake, has the world found so many of the fairest gifts combined? If we may not call you a poet (for the first of English writers of light verse did not seek that crown), who that was less than a poet ever saw life with a glance so keen as yours, so steady, and so sane? Your pathos was never cheap, your laughter never forced; your sigh was never the pulpit trick of the preacher. Your funny people – your Costigans and Fokers – were not mere characters of trick and catch-word, were not empty comic masks. Behind each the human heart was beating; and ever and again we were allowed to see the features of the man.

Thus fiction in your hands was not simply a profession, like another, but a constant reflection of the whole surface of life: a repeated echo of its laughter and its complaint. Others have written, and not written badly, with the stolid professional regularity of the clerk at his desk; you, like the Scholar Gipsy, might have said that "it needs heaven-sent moments for this skill." There are, it will not surprise you, some honourable women and a few men who call you a cynic; who speak of "the withered world of Thackerayan satire;" who think your eyes were ever turned to the sordid aspects of life – to the mother-in-law who threatens to "take away her silver bread-basket;" to the intriguer, the sneak, the termagant; to the Beckys, and Barnes Newcomes, and Mrs. Mackenzies of this world. The quarrel of these sentimentalists is really with life, not with you; they might as wisely blame Monsieur Buffon because there are snakes in his Natural History. Had you not impaled certain noxious human insects, you would have better pleased Mr. Ruskin; had you confined yourself to such performances, you would have been more dear to the Neo-Balzacian school in fiction.

You are accused of never having drawn a good woman who was not a doll, but the ladies that bring this charge seldom remind us either of Lady Castlewood or of Theo or Hetty Lambert. The best women can pardon you Becky Sharp and Blanche Amory; they find it harder to forgive you Emmy Sedley and Helen Pendennis. Yet what man does not know in his heart that the best women – God bless them – lean, in their characters, either to the sweet passiveness of Emmy or to the sensitive and jealous affections of Helen? 'Tis Heaven, not you, that made them so; and they are easily pardoned, both for being a very little lower than the angels and for their gentle ambition to be painted, as by Guido or Guercino, with wings and harps and haloes. So ladies have occasionally seen their own faces in the glass of fancy, and, thus inspired, have drawn Romola and Consuelo. Yet when these

fair idealists, Mdme. Sand and George Eliot, designed Rosamund Vincy and Horace, was there not a spice of malice in the portraits which we miss in your least favourable studies?

That the creator of Colonel Newcome and of Henry Esmond was a snarling cynic; that he who designed Rachel Esmond could not draw a good woman: these are the chief charges (all indifferent now to you, who were once so sensitive) that your admirers have to contend against. A French critic, M. Taine, also protests that you do preach too much. Did any author but yourself so frequently break the thread (seldom a strong thread) of his plot to converse with his reader and moralise his tale, we also might be offended. But who that loves Montaigne and Pascal, who that likes the wise trifling of the one and can bear with the melancholy of the other, but prefers your preaching to another's playing!

Your thoughts come in, like the intervention of the Greek Chorus, as an ornament and source of fresh delight. Like the songs of the Chorus, they bid us pause a moment over the wider laws and actions of human fate and human life, and we turn from your persons to yourself, and again from yourself to your persons, as from the odes of Sophocles or Aristophanes to the action of their characters on the stage. Nor, to my taste, does the mere music and melancholy dignity of your style in these passages of meditation fall far below the highest efforts of poetry. I remember that scene where Clive, at Barnes Newcome's Lecture on the Poetry of the Affections, sees Ethel who is lost to him. "And the past and its dear histories, and youth and its hopes and passions, and tones and looks for ever echoing in the heart and present in the memory – these, no doubt, poor Clive saw and heard as he looked across the great gulf of time, and parting and grief, and beheld the woman he had loved for many years."

For ever echoing in the heart and present in the memory: who has not heard these tones, who does not hear them as he turns over your books that, for so many years, have been his companions and comforters? We have been young and old, we have been sad and merry with you, we have listened to the midnight chimes with Pen and Warrington, have stood with you beside the death-bed, have mourned at that yet more awful funeral of lost love, and with you have prayed in the inmost chapel sacred to our old and immortal affections, *à léal souvenir*! And whenever you speak for yourself, and speak in earnest, how magical, how rare, how lonely in our literature is the beauty of your sentences! "I can't express the charm of them" (so you write of George Sand; so we may write of you): "they seem to me like the sound of country bells, provoking I don't know what vein of music and meditation, and falling sweetly and sadly on the ear." Surely that style, so fresh, so rich, so full of surprises – that style which stamps as classical your fragments of slang, and perpetually astonishes and delights – would alone give immortality to an author, even had he little to say. But you, with your whole wide world of fops and fools, of good women and brave men, of honest absurdities and cheery adventurers: you who created the Steynes and Newcomes, the Beckys and Blanches, Captain Costigan and F. B., and the Chevalier Strong – all that host of friends imperishable – you must survive with Shakespeare and Cervantes in the memory and affection of men.

II.
To Charles Dickens

Sir, – It has been said that every man is born a Platonist or an Aristotelian, though the enormous majority of us, to be sure, live and die without being conscious of any invidious philosophic partiality whatever. With more truth (though that does not imply very much) every Englishman who reads may be said to be a partisan of yourself or of Mr. Thackeray. Why should there be any partisanship in the matter; and why, having two such good things as your novels and those of your contemporary, should we not be silently happy in the possession? Well, men are made so, and must needs fight and argue over their tastes in enjoyment. For myself, I may say that in this matter I am what the Americans do *not* call a "Mugwump," what English politicians dub a "superior person" – that is, I take no side, and attempt to enjoy the best of both.

It must be owned that this attitude is sometimes made a little difficult by the vigour of your special devotees. They have ceased, indeed, thank Heaven! to imitate you; and even in "descriptive articles" the touch of Mr. Gigadibs, of him whom "we almost took for the true Dickens," has disappeared. The young lions of the Press no longer mimic your less admirable mannerisms – do not strain so much after fantastic comparisons, do not (in your manner and Mr. Carlyle's) give people nick-names derived from their teeth, or their complexion; and, generally, we are spared second-hand copies of all that in your style was least to be commended. But, though improved by lapse of time in this respect, your devotees still put on little conscious airs of virtue, robust manliness, and so forth, which would have irritated you very much, and there survive some press men who seem to have read you a little (especially your later works), and never to have read anything else. Now familiarity with the pages of "Our Mutual Friend" and "Dombey and Son" does not precisely constitute a liberal education, and the assumption that it does is apt (quite unreasonably) to prejudice people against the greatest comic genius of modern times.

On the other hand, Time is at last beginning to sift the true admirers of Dickens from the false. Yours, Sir, in the best sense of the word, is a popular success, a popular reputation. For example, I know that, in a remote and even Pictish part of this kingdom, a rural household, humble and under the shadow of a sorrow inevitably approaching, has found in "David Copperfield" oblivion of winter, of sorrow, and of sickness. On the other hand, people are now picking up heart to say that "they cannot read Dickens," and that they particularly detest "Pickwick." I believe it was young ladies who first had the courage of their convictions in this respect. "Tout sied aux belles," and the fair, in the confidence of youth, often venture on remarkable confessions. In your "Natural History of Young Ladies" I do not remember that you describe the Humorous Young Lady. [1] She is a very rare bird indeed, and humour generally is at a deplorably low level in England.

Hence come all sorts of mischief, arisen since you left us; and it may be said that inordinate philanthropy, genteel sympathy with Irish murder and arson, Societies for Badgering the Poor, Esoteric Buddhism, and a score of other plagues, including what was once called Æstheticism, are all, primarily, due to want of humour. People discuss, with the gravest faces, matters which properly should only be stated as the wildest paradoxes. It naturally follows that, in a period almost destitute of humour, many respectable persons "cannot read Dickens," and are not ashamed to glory in their shame. We ought not to be angry with others for their misfortunes; and yet when one meets the *crétins* who boast that they cannot read Dickens, one certainly does feel much as Mr. Samuel Weller felt when he encountered Mr. Job Trotter.

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[1] I am informed that the *Natural History of Young Ladies* is attributed, by some writers, to another philosopher, the author of *The Art of Pluck*.

How very singular has been the history of the decline of humour! Is there any profound psychological truth to be gathered from consideration of the fact that humour has gone out with cruelty? A hundred years ago, eighty years ago – nay, fifty years ago – we were a cruel but also a humorous people. We had bull-baitings, and badger-drawings, and hustings, and prize-fights, and cock-fights; we went to see men hanged; the pillory and the stocks were no empty "terrors unto evil-doers," for there was commonly a malefactor occupying each of these institutions. With all this we had a broad-blown comic sense. We had Hogarth, and Bunbury, and George Cruikshank, and Gilray; we had Leech and Surtees, and the creator of Tittlebat Titmouse; we had the Shepherd of the "Noctes," and, above all, we had *you*.

From the old giants of English fun – burly persons delighting in broad caricature, in decided colours, in cockney jokes, in swashing blows at the more prominent and obvious human follies – from these you derived the splendid high spirits and unhesitating mirth of your earlier works. Mr. Squeers, and Sam Weller, and Mrs. Gamp, and all the Pickwickians, and Mr. Dowler, and John Browdie – these and their immortal companions were reared, so to speak, on the beef and beer of that naughty, fox-hunting, badger-baiting old England, which we have improved out of existence. And these characters, assuredly, are your best; by them, though stupid people cannot read about them, you will live while there is a laugh left among us. Perhaps that does not assure you a very prolonged existence, but only the future can show.

The dismal seriousness of the time cannot, let us hope, last for ever and a day. Honest old Laughter, the true *lutin* of your inspiration, must have life left in him yet, and cannot die; though it is true that the taste for your pathos, and your melodrama, and plots constructed after your favourite fashion ("Great Expectations" and the "Tale of Two Cities" are exceptions) may go by and never be regretted. Were people simpler, or only less clear-sighted, as far as your pathos is concerned, a generation ago? Jeffrey, the hard-headed shallow critic, who declared that Wordsworth "would never do," cried, "wept like anything," over your Little Nell. One still laughs as heartily as ever with Dick Swiveller; but who can cry over Little Nell?

Ah, Sir, how could you – who knew so intimately, who remembered so strangely well the fancies, the dreams, the sufferings of childhood – how could you "wallow naked in the pathetic," and massacre holocausts of the Innocents? To draw tears by gloating over a child's death-bed, was it worthy of you? Was it the kind of work over which our hearts should melt? I confess that Little Nell might die a dozen times, and be welcomed by whole legions of Angels, and I (like the bereaved fowl mentioned by Pet Marjory) would remain unmoved.

She was more than usual calm,
She did not give a single dam,

wrote the astonishing child who diverted the leisure of Scott. Over your Little Nell and your Little Dombey I remain more than usual calm; and probably so do thousands of your most sincere admirers. But about matter of this kind, and the unseating of the fountains of tears, who can argue? Where is taste? where is truth? What tears are "manly, Sir, manly," as Fred Bayham has it; and of what lamentations ought we rather to be ashamed? *Sunt lacrymæ rerum*; one has been moved in the cell where Socrates tasted the hemlock; or by the river-banks where Syracusan arrows slew the parched Athenians among the mire and blood; or, in fiction, when Colonel Newcome says *Adsum*, or over the diary of Clare Doria Forey, or where Aramis laments, with strange tears, the death of Porthos. But over Dombey (the Son), or Little Nell, one declines to snivel.

When an author deliberately sits down and says, "Now, let us have a good cry," he poisons the wells of sensibility and chokes, at least in many breasts, the fountain of tears. Out of "Dombey and Son" there is little we care to remember except the deathless Mr. Toots; just as we forget the melodramatics of "Martin Chuzzlewit." I have read in that book a score of times; I never see it but

I revel in it – in Pecksniff, and Mrs. Gamp, and the Americans. But what the plot is all about, what Jonas did, what Montagu Tigg had to make in the matter, what all the pictures with plenty of shading illustrate, I have never been able to comprehend. In the same way, one of your most thorough-going admirers has allowed (in the licence of private conversation) that "Ralph Nickleby and Monk are too steep;" and probably a cultivated taste will always find them a little precipitous.

"Too steep:" – the slang expresses that defect of an ardent genius, carried above itself, and out of the air we breathe, both in its grotesque and in its gloomy imaginations. To force the note, to press fantasy too hard, to deepen the gloom with black over the indigo, that was the failing which proved you mortal. To take an instance in little: when Pip went to Mr. Pumblechook's, the boy thought the seedsman "a very happy man to have so many little drawers in his shop." The reflection is thoroughly boyish; but then you add, "I wondered whether the flower-seeds and bulbs ever wanted of a fine day to break out of those jails and bloom." That is not boyish at all; that is the hard-driven, jaded literary fancy at work.

"So we arraign her; but she," the Genius of Charles Dickens, how brilliant, how kindly, how beneficent she is! dwelling by a fountain of laughter imperishable; though there is something of an alien salt in the neighbouring fountain of tears. How poor the world of fancy would be, how "dispeopled of her dreams," if, in some ruin of the social system, the books of Dickens were lost; and if The Dodger, and Charley Bates, and Mr. Crinkle, and Miss Squeers and Sam Weller, and Mrs. Gamp, and Dick Swiveller were to perish, or to vanish with Menander's men and women! We cannot think of our world without them; and, children of dreams as they are, they seem more essential than great statesmen, artists, soldiers, who have actually worn flesh and blood, ribbons and orders, gowns and uniforms. May we not almost welcome "Free Education"? for every Englishman who can read, unless he be an Ass, is a reader the more for you.

P.S. – Alas, how strangely are we tempered, and how strong is the national bias! I have been saying things of you that I would not hear an enemy say. When I read, in the criticism of an American novelist, about your "hysterical emotionality" (for he writes in American), and your "waste of verbiage," I am almost tempted to deny that our Dickens has a single fault, to deem you impeccable!

III.
To Pierre de Ronsard

(PRINCE OF POETS)

Master And Prince of Poets, – As we know what choice thou madest of a sepulchre (a choice how ill fulfilled by the jealousy of Fate), so we know well the manner of thy chosen immortality. In the Plains Elysian, among the heroes and the ladies of old song, there was thy Love with thee to enjoy her paradise in an eternal spring.

Là du plaisant Avril la saison immortelle
  Sans eschange le suit,
La terre sans labour, de sa grasse mamelle,
  Toute chose y produit;
D'enbas la troupe sainte autrefois amoureuse,
  Nous honorant sur tous,
Viendra nous saluer, s'estimant bien-heureuse
  De s'accointer de nous.

There thou dwellest, with the learned lovers of old days, with Belleau, and Du Bellay, and Baïf, and the flower of the maidens of Anjou. Surely no rumour reaches thee, in that happy place of reconciled affections, no rumour of the rudeness of Time, the despite of men, and the change which stole from thy locks, so early grey, the crown of laurels and of thine own roses. How different from thy choice of a sepulchre have been the fortunes of thy tomb!

I will that none should break
The marble for my sake,
Wishful to make more fair
My sepulchre!

So didst thou sing, or so thy sweet numbers run in my rude English. Wearied of Courts and of priories, thou didst desire a grave beside thine own Loire, not remote from

The caves, the founts that fall
From the high mountain wall,
That fall and flash and fleet,
With silver feet.

Only a laurel tree
Shall guard the grave of me;
Only Apollo's bough
Shall shade me now!

Far other has been thy sepulchre: not in the free air, among the field flowers, but in thy priory of Saint Cosme, with marble for a monument, and no green grass to cover thee. Restless wert thou

in thy life; thy dust was not to be restful in thy death. The Huguenots, *ces nouveaux Chrétiens qui la France ont pillée*, destroyed thy tomb, and the warning of the later monument,

ABI, NEFASTE, QUAM CALCUS HUMUM SACRA EST,

has not scared away malicious men. The storm that passed over France a hundred years ago, more terrible than the religious wars that thou didst weep for, has swept the column from the tomb. The marble was broken by violent hands, and the shattered sepulchre of the Prince of Poets gained a dusty hospitality from the museum of a country town. Better had been the laurel of thy desire, the creeping vine, and the ivy tree.

Scarce more fortunate, for long, than thy monument was thy memory. Thou hast not encountered, Master, in the Paradise of Poets, Messieurs Malherbe, De Balzac, and Boileau – Boileau who spoke of thee as *Ce poète orgueilleux trébuché de si haut*!

These gallant gentlemen, I make no doubt, are happy after their own fashion, backbiting each other and thee in the Paradise of Critics. In their time they wrought thee much evil, grumbling that thou wrotest in Greek and Latin (of which tongues certain of them had but little skill), and blaming thy many lyric melodies and the free flow of thy lines. What said M. de Balzac to M. Chapelain? “M. de Malherbe, M. de Grasse, and yourself must be very little poets, if Ronsard be a great one.” Time has brought in his revenges, and Messieurs Chapelain and De Grasse are as well forgotten as thou art well remembered. Men could not always be deaf to thy sweet old songs, nor blind to the beauty of thy roses and thy loves. When they took the wax out of their ears that M. Boileau had given them lest they should hear the singing of thy Sirens, then they were deaf no longer, then they heard the old deaf poet singing and made answer to his lays. Hast thou not heard these sounds? have they not reached thee, the voices and the lyres of Théophile Gautier and Alfred de Musset? Methinks thou hast marked them, and been glad that the old notes were ringing again and the old French lyric measures tripping to thine ancient harmonies, echoing and replying to the Muses of Horace and Catullus. Returning to Nature, poets returned to thee. Thy monument has perished, but not thy music, and the Prince of Poets has returned to his own again in a glorious Restoration.

Through the dust and smoke of ages, and through the centuries of wars we strain our eyes and try to gain a glimpse of thee, Master, in thy good days, when the Muses walked with thee. We seem to mark thee wandering silent through some little village, or dreaming in the woods, or loitering among thy lonely places, or in gardens where the roses blossom among wilder flowers, or on river banks where the whispering poplars and sighing reeds make answer to the murmur of the waters. Such a picture hast thou drawn of thyself in the summer afternoons.

Je m’en vais pourmener tantost parmy la plaine,
Tantost en un village, et tantost en un bois,
Et tantost par les lieux solitaires et cois.
J’aime fort les jardins qui sentent le sauvage,
J’aime le flot de l’eau qui gazoüille au rivage.

Still, methinks, there was a book in the hand of the grave and learned poet; still thou wouldst carry thy Horace, thy Catullus, thy Theocritus, through the gem-like weather of the *Renouveau*, when the woods were enamelled with flowers, and the young Spring was lodged, like a wandering prince, in his great palaces hung with green:

Orgueilleux de ses fleurs, enflé de sa jeunesse,
Logé comme un grand Prince en ses vertes maisons!

Thou sawest, in these woods by Loire side, the fair shapes of old religion, Fauns, Nymphs, and Satyrs, and heard'st in the nightingale's music the plaint of Philomel. The ancient poets came back in the train of thyself and of the Spring, and learning was scarce less dear to thee than love; and thy ladies seemed fairer for the names they borrowed from the beauties of forgotten days, Helen and Cassandra. How sweetly didst thou sing to them thine old morality, and how gravely didst thou teach the lesson of the Roses! Well didst thou know it, well didst thou love the Rose, since thy nurse, carrying thee, an infant, to the holy font, let fall on thee the sacred water brimmed with floating blossoms of the Rose!

Mignonne, allons voir si la Rose,
Qui ce matin avoit desclose
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,
A point perdu ceste vespree
Les plis de sa robe pourpree,
Et son teint au votre pareil.

And again,

La belle Rose du Printemps,
Aubert, admoneste les hommes
Passer joyeusement le temps,
Et pendant que jeunes nous sommes,
Esbattre la fleur de nos ans.

In the same mood, looking far down the future, thou sangest of thy lady's age, the most sad, the most beautiful of thy sad and beautiful lays; for if thy bees gathered much honey 'twas somewhat bitter to taste, like that of the Sardinian yews. How clearly we see the great hall, the grey lady spinning and humming among her drowsy maids, and how they waken at the word, and she sees her spring in their eyes, and they forecast their winter in her face, when she murmurs "'Twas Ronsard sang of me."

Winter, and summer, and spring, how swiftly they pass, and how early time brought thee his sorrows, and grief cast her dust upon thy head.

Adieu ma Lyre, adieu fillettes,
Jadis mes douces amourettes,
Adieu, je sens venir ma fin,
Nul passetemps de ma jeunesse
Ne m'accompagne en la vieillesse,
Que le feu, le lict et le vin.

Wine, and a soft bed, and a bright fire: to this trinity of poor pleasures we come soon, if, indeed, wine be left to us. Poetry herself deserts us; is it not said that Bacchus never forgives a renegade? and most of us turn recreants to Bacchus. Even the bright fire, I fear, was not always there to warm thine old blood, Master, or, if fire there were, the wood was not bought with thy book-seller's money. When autumn was drawing in during thine early old age, in 1584, didst thou not write that thou hadst never received a sou at the hands of all the publishers who vended thy books? And as thou wert about putting forth thy folio edition of 1584, thou didst pray Buon, the bookseller, to give thee sixty crowns to buy wood withal, and make thee a bright fire in winter weather, and comfort thine old age with thy friend Gallandius. And if Buon will not pay, then to try the other booksellers, "that wish to take everything and give nothing."

Was it knowledge of this passage, Master, or ignorance of everything else, that made certain of the common steadfast dunces of our days speak of thee as if thou hadst been a starveling, neglected poetaster, jealous forsooth of Maître Françoys Rabelais? See how ignorantly M. Fleury writes, who teaches French literature withal to them of Muscovy, and hath indited a Life of Rabelais. “Rabelais était revêtu d’un emploi honorable; Ronsard était traité en subalterne,” quoth this wondrous professor. What! Pierre de Ronsard, a gentleman of a noble house, holding the revenue of many abbeys, the friend of Mary Stuart, of the Duc d’Orléans, of Charles IX., *he* is *traité en subalterne*, and is jealous of a frocked or unfrocked *manant* like Maître Françoys! And then this amazing Fleury falls foul of thine epitaph on Maître Françoys and cries, “Ronsard a voulu faire des vers méchants; il n’a fait que de méchants vers.” More truly saith M. Sainte-Beuve, “If the good Rabelais had returned to Meudon on the day when this epitaph was made over the wine, he would, methinks, have laughed heartily.” But what shall be said of a Professor like the egregious M. Fleury, who holds that Ronsard was despised at Court? Was there a party at tennis when the king would not fain have had thee on his side, declaring that he ever won when Ronsard was his partner? Did he not give thee benefices, and many priories, and call thee his father in Apollo, and even, so they say, bid thee sit down beside him on his throne? Away, ye scandalous folk, who tell us that there was strife between the Prince of Poets and the King of Mirth. Naught have ye by way of proof of your slander but the talk of Jean Bernier, a scurrilous, starveling apothecary, who put forth his fables in 1697, a century and a half after Maître Françoys died. Bayle quoted this fellow in a note, and ye all steal the tattle one from another in your dull manner, and know not whence it comes, nor even that Bayle would none of it and mocked its author. With so little knowledge is history written, and thus doth each chattering brook of a “Life” swell with its tribute “that great Mississippi of falsehood,” Biography.

IV.
To Herodotus

To Herodotus of Halicarnassus, greeting. – Concerning the matters set forth in your histories, and the tales you tell about both Greeks and Barbarians, whether they be true, or whether they be false, men dispute not little but a great deal. Wherefore I, being concerned to know the verity, did set forth to make search in every manner, and came in my quest even unto the ends of the earth. For there is an island of the Cimmerians beyond the Straits of Heracles, some three days' voyage to a ship that hath a fair following wind in her sails; and there it is said that men know many things from of old: thither, then, I came in my inquiry. Now, the island is not small, but large, greater than the whole of Hellas; and they call it Britain. In that island the east wind blows for ten parts of the year, and the people know not how to cover themselves from the cold. But for the other two months of the year the sun shines fiercely, so that some of them die thereof, and others die of the frozen mixed drinks; for they have ice even in the summer, and this ice they put to their liquor. Through the whole of this island, from the west even to the east, there flows a river called Thames: a great river and a laborious, but not to be likened to the River of Egypt.

The mouth of this river, where I stepped out from my ship, is exceedingly foul and of an evil savour by reason of the city on the banks. Now this city is several hundred parasangs in circumference. Yet a man that needed not to breathe the air might go round it in one hour, in chariots that run under the earth; and these chariots are drawn by creatures that breathe smoke and sulphur, such as Orpheus mentions in his "Argonautica," if it be by Orpheus. The people of the town, when I inquired of them concerning Herodotus of Halicarnassus, looked on me with amazement, and went straightway about their business – namely, to seek out whatsoever new thing is coming to pass all over the whole inhabited world, and as for things old, they take no keep of them.

Nevertheless, by diligence I learned that he who in this land knew most concerning Herodotus was a priest, and dwelt in the priests' city on the river which is called the City of the Ford of the Ox. But whether Io, when she wore a cow's shape, had passed by that way in her wanderings, and thence comes the name of that city, I could not (though I asked all men I met) learn aught with certainty. But to me, considering this, it seemed that Io must have come thither. And now farewell to Io.

To the City of the Priests there are two roads: one by land; and one by water, following the river. To a well-girdled man, the land journey is but one day's travel; by the river it is longer but more pleasant. Now that river flows, as I said, from the west to the east. And there is in it a fish called chub, which they catch; but they do not eat it, for a certain sacred reason. Also there is a fish called trout, and this is the manner of his catching. They build for this purpose great dams of wood, which they call weirs. Having built the weir they sit upon it with rods in their hands, and a line on the rod, and at the end of the line a little fish. There then they "sit and spin in the sun," as one of their poets says, not for a short time but for many days, having rods in their hands and eating and drinking. In this wise they angle for the fish called trout; but whether they ever catch him or not, not having seen it, I cannot say; for it is not pleasant to me to speak things concerning which I know not the truth.

Now, after sailing and rowing against the stream for certain days, I came to the City of the Ford of the Ox. Here the river changes his name, and is called Isis, after the name of the goddess of the Egyptians. But whether the Britons brought the name from Egypt or whether the Egyptians took it from the Britons, not knowing I prefer not to say. But to me it seems that the Britons are a colony of the Egyptians, or the Egyptians a colony of the Britons. Moreover, when I was in Egypt I saw certain soldiers in white helmets, who were certainly British. But what they did there (as Egypt neither belongs to Britain nor Britain to Egypt) I know not, neither could they tell me. But one of them replied to me in that line of Homer (if the Odyssey be Homer's), "We have come to a sorry

Cyprus, and a sad Egypt." Others told me that they once marched against the Ethiopians, and having defeated them several times, then came back again, leaving their property to the Ethiopians. But as to the truth of this I leave it to every man to form his own opinion.

Having come into the City of the Priests, I went forth into the street, and found a priest of the baser sort, who for a piece of silver led me hither and thither among the temples, discoursing of many things.

Now it seemed to me a strange thing that the city was empty, and no man dwelling therein, save a few priests only, and their wives, and their children, who are drawn to and fro in little carriages dragged by women. But the priest told me that during half the year the city was desolate, for that there came somewhat called "The Long," or "The Vac," and drave out the young priests. And he said that these did no other thing but row boats, and throw balls from one to the other, and this they were made to do, he said, that the young priests might learn to be humble, for they are the proudest of men. But whether he spoke truth or not I know not, only I set down what he told me. But to anyone considering it, this appears rather to jump with his story – namely, that the young priests have houses on the river, painted of divers colours, all of them empty.

Then the priest, at my desire, brought me to one of the temples, that I might seek out all things concerning Herodotus the Halicarnassian, from one who knew. Now this temple is not the fairest in the city, but less fair and goodly than the old temples, yet goodlier and more fair than the new temples; and over the roof there is the image of an eagle made of stone – no small marvel, but a great one, how men came to fashion him; and that temple is called the House of Queens. Here they sacrifice a boar once every year; and concerning this they tell a certain sacred story which I know but will not utter.

Then I was brought to the priest who had a name for knowing most about Egypt, and the Egyptians, and the Assyrians, and the Cappadocians, and all the kingdoms of the Great King. He came out to me, being attired in a black robe, and wearing on his head a square cap. But why the priests have square caps I know, and he who has been initiated into the mysteries which they call "Matric" knows, but I prefer not to tell. Concerning the square cap, then, let this be sufficient. Now, the priest received me courteously, and when I asked him, concerning Herodotus, whether he were a true man or not, he smiled and answered "Abu Goosh," which, in the tongue of the Arabians, means "The Father of Liars." Then he went on to speak concerning Herodotus, and he said in his discourse that Herodotus not only told the thing which was not, but that he did so wilfully, as one knowing the truth but concealing it. For example, quoth he, "Solon never went to see Croesus, as Herodotus avers; nor did those about Xerxes ever dream dreams; but Herodotus, out of his abundant wickedness, invented these things."

"Now behold," he went on, "how the curse of the Gods falls upon Herodotus. For he pretends that he saw Cadmeian inscriptions at Thebes. Now I do not believe there were any Cadmeian inscriptions there: therefore Herodotus is most manifestly lying. Moreover, this Herodotus never speaks of Sophocles the Athenian, and why not? Because he, being a child at school, did not learn Sophocles by heart: for the tragedies of Sophocles could not have been learned at school before they were written, nor can any man quote a poet whom he never learned at school. Moreover, as all those about Herodotus knew Sophocles well, he could not appear to them to be learned by showing that he knew what they knew also." Then I thought the priest was making game and sport, saying first that Herodotus could know no poet whom he had not learned at school, and then saying that all the men of his time well knew this poet, "about whom everyone was talking." But the priest seemed not to know that Herodotus and Sophocles were friends, which is proved by this, that Sophocles wrote an ode in praise of Herodotus.

Then he went on, and though I were to write with a hundred hands (like Briareus, of whom Homer makes mention) I could not tell you all the things that the priest said against Herodotus, speaking truly, or not truly, or sometimes correctly and sometimes not, as often befalls mortal men. For Herodotus, he said, was chiefly concerned to steal the lore of those who came before him, such as

Hecatæus, and then to escape notice as having stolen it. Also he said that, being himself cunning and deceitful, Herodotus was easily beguiled by the cunning of others, and believed in things manifestly false, such as the story of the Phoenix-bird.

Then I spoke, and said that Herodotus himself declared that he could not believe that story; but the priest regarded me not. And he said that Herodotus had never caught a crocodile with cold pig, nor did he ever visit Assyria, nor Babylon, nor Elephantine; but, saying that he had been in these lands, said that which was not true. He also declared that Herodotus, when he travelled, knew none of the Fat Ones of the Egyptians, but only those of the baser sort. And he called Herodotus a thief and a beguiler, and "the same with intent to deceive," as one of their own poets writes. And, to be short, Herodotus, I could not tell you in one day all the charges which are now brought against you; but concerning the truth of these things, *you* know, not least, but most, as to yourself being guilty or innocent. Wherefore, if you have anything to show or set forth whereby you may be relieved from the burden of these accusations, now is the time. Be no longer silent; but, whether through the Oracle of the Dead, or the Oracle of Branchidæ, or that in Delphi, or Dodona, or of Amphiaraus at Oropus, speak to your friends and lovers (whereof I am one from of old) and let men know the very truth.

Now, concerning the priests in the City of the Ford of the Ox, it is to be said that of all men whom we know they receive strangers most gladly, feasting them all day. Moreover, they have many drinks, cunningly mixed, and of these the best is that they call Archdeacon, naming it from one of the priests' offices. Truly, as Homer says (if the Odyssey be Homer's), "when that draught is poured into the bowl then it is no pleasure to refrain."

Drinking of this wine, or nectar, Herodotus, I pledge you, and pour forth some deal on the ground, to Herodotus of Halicarnassus, in the House of Hades.

And I wish you farewell, and good be with you. Whether the priest spoke truly, or not truly, even so may such good things betide you as befall dead men.

V.
Epistle to Mr. Alexander Pope

From mortal Gratitude, decide, my Pope,
Have Wits Immortal more to fear or hope?
Wits toil and travail round the Plant of Fame,
Their Works its Garden, and its Growth their Aim,
Then Commentators, in unwieldy Dance,
Break down the Barriers of the trim Pleasance,
Pursue the Poet, like Actæon's Hounds,
Beyond the fences of his Garden Grounds,
Rend from the singing Robes each borrowed Gem,
Rend from the laurel'd Brows the Diadem,
And, if one Rag of Character they spare,
Comes the Biographer, and strips it bare!

Such, Pope, has been thy Fortune, such thy Doom.
Swift the Ghouls gathered at the Poet's Tomb,
With Dust of Notes to clog each lordly Line,
Warburton, Warton, Croker, Bowles, combine!
Collecting Cackle, Johnson condescends
To *interview* the Drudges of your Friends.
Thus though your Courthope holds your merits high,
And still proclaims your Poems *Poetry*,
Biographers, un-Boswell-like, have sneered,
And Dunces edit him whom Dunces feared!

They say, "what say they?" Not in vain You ask;
To tell you what they say, behold my Task!
"Methinks already I your Tears survey"
As I repeat "the horrid Things they say." [2]

Comes El-n first: I fancy you'll agree
Not frenzied Dennis smote so fell as he;
For El-n's Introduction, crabbed and dry,
Like Churchill's Cudgel's [3] marked with *Lie*, and *Lie*!

"Too dull to know what his own System meant,
Pope yet was skilled new Treasons to invent;
A Snake that puffed himself and stung his Friends,
Few Lied so frequent, for such little Ends;
His mind, like Flesh inflamed, [4] was raw and sore,

[2] Rape of the Lock.
[3] In Mr. Hogarth's Caricatura.
[4] Elwin's Pope, ii. 15.

And still, the more he writhed, he stung the more!
Oft in a Quarrel, never in the Right,
His Spirit sank when he was called to fight.
Pope, in the Darkness mining like a Mole,
Forged on Himself, as from Himself he stole,
And what for Caryll once he feigned to feel,
Transferred, in Letters never sent, to Steele!
Still he denied the Letters he had writ,
And still mistook Indecency for Wit.
His very Grammar, so De Quincey cries,
'Detains the Reader, and at times defies!'"

Fierce El-n thus: no Line escapes his Rage,
And furious Foot-notes growl 'neath every Page:
See St-ph-n next take up the woful Tale,
Prolong the Preaching, and protract the Wail!
"Some forage Falsehoods from the North and South,
But Pope, poor D-l, lied from Hand to Mouth; [5]
Affected, hypocritical, and vain,
A Book in Breeches, and a Fop in Grain;
A Fox that found not the high Clusters sour,
The Fanfaron of Vice beyond his power,
Pope yet possessed" – (the Praise will make you start) —
"Mean, morbid, vain, he yet possessed a Heart!
And still we marvel at the Man, and still
Admire his Finish, and applaud his Skill:
Though, as that fabled Barque, a phantom Form,
Eternal strains, nor rounds the Cape of Storm,
Even so Pope strove, nor ever crossed the Line
That from the Noble separates the Fine!"

The Learned thus, and who can quite reply,
Reverse the Judgment, and Retort the Lie?
You reap, in armèd Hates that haunt your Name,
Reap what you sowed, the Dragon's Teeth of Fame:
You could not write, and from unenvious Time
Expect the Wreath that crowns the lofty Rhyme,
You still must fight, retreat, attack, defend,
And oft, to snatch a Laurel, lose a Friend!

The Pity of it! And the changing Taste
Of changing Time leaves half your Work a Waste!
My Childhood fled your Couplet's clarion tone,
And sought for Homer in the Prose of Bohn.
Still through the Dust of that dim Prose appears
The Flight of Arrows and the Sheen of Spears;
Still we may trace what Hearts heroic feel,

[5] "Poor Pope was always a hand-to-mouth liar." —*Pope*, by Leslie Stephen, 139.

And hear the Bronze that hurtles on the Steel!
But, ah, your Iliad seems a half-pretence,
Where Wits, not Heroes, prove their Skill in Fence,
And great Achilles' Eloquence doth show
As if no Centaur trained him, but Boileau!

Again, your Verse is orderly, – and more, —
"The Waves behind impel the Waves before;"
Monotonously musical they glide,
Till Couplet unto Couplet hath replied.
But turn to Homer! How his Verses sweep!
Surge answers Surge and Deep doth call on Deep;
This Line in Foam and Thunder issues forth,
Spurred by the West or smitten by the North,
Sombre in all its sullen Deeps, and all
Clear at the Crest, and foaming to the Fall,
The next with silver Murmur dies away,
Like Tides that falter to Calypso's Bay!

Thus Time, with sordid Alchemy and dread,
Turns half the Glory of your Gold to Lead;
Thus Time, – at Ronsard's wreath that vainly bit, —
Has marred the Poet to preserve the Wit,
Who almost left on Addison a stain,
Whose Knife cut cleanest with a poisoned pain, —
Yet Thou (strange Fate that clings to all of Thine!)
When most a Wit dost most a Poet shine.
In Poetry thy Dunciad expires,
When Wit has shot "her momentary Fires."
'Tis Tragedy that watches by the Bed
"Where tawdry Yellow strove with dirty Red,"
And Men, remembering all, can scarce deny
To lay the Laurel where thine Ashes lie!

VI.
To Lucian of Samosata

In what bower, oh Lucian, of your rediscovered Islands Fortunate are you now reclining; the delight of the fair, the learned, the witty, and the brave? In that clear and tranquil climate, whose air breathes of "violet and lily, myrtle, and the flower of the vine,"

> Where the daisies are rose-scented,
> And the Rose herself has got
> Perfume which on earth is not,

among the music of all birds, and the wind-blown notes of flutes hanging on the trees, methinks that your laughter sounds most silvery sweet, and that Helen and fair Charmides are still of your company. Master of mirth, and Soul the best contented of all that have seen the world's ways clearly, most clear-sighted of all that have made tranquillity their bride, what other laughers dwell with you, where the crystal and fragrant waters wander round the shining palaces and the temples of amethyst?

Heine surely is with you; if, indeed, it was not one Syrian soul that dwelt among alien men, Germans and Romans, in the bodily tabernacles of Heine and of Lucian. But he was fallen on evil times and evil tongues; while Lucian, as witty as he, as bitter in mockery, as happily dowered with the magic of words, lived long and happily and honoured, imprisoned in no "mattress-grave." Without Rabelais, without Voltaire, without Heine, you would find, methinks, even the joys of your Happy Islands lacking in zest; and, unless Plato came by your way, none of the ancients could meet you in the lists of sportive dialogue.

There, among the vines that bear twelve times in the year, more excellent than all the vineyards of Touraine, while the song-birds bring you flowers from vales enchanted, and the shapes of the Blessed come and go, beautiful in wind-woven raiment of sunset hues; there, in a land that knows not age, nor winter, midnight, nor autumn, nor noon, where the silver twilight of summer-dawn is perennial, where youth does not wax spectre-pale and die; there, my Lucian, you are crowned the Prince of the Paradise of Mirth.

Who would bring you, if he had the power, from the banquet where Homer sings: Homer, who, in mockery of commentators, past and to come, German and Greek, informed you that he was by birth a Babylonian? Yet, if you, who first wrote Dialogues of the Dead, could hear the prayer of an epistle wafted to "lands indiscoverable in the unheard-of West," you might visit once more a world so worthy of such a mocker, so like the world you knew so well of old.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.