

Saintsbury George

# A Letter Book



George Saintsbury

**A Letter Book**

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# Содержание

PREFACE	5
INTRODUCTION	7
I	7
II	13
III	16
IV	26
V	32
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

# George Saintsbury

## A Letter Book / Selected with an Introduction on the History and Art of Letter-Writing

### PREFACE

When my publishers were good enough to propose that I should undertake this book, they were also good enough to suggest that the Introduction should be of a character somewhat different from that of a school-anthology, and should attempt to deal with the Art of Letter-writing, and the nature of the Letter, as such. I formed a plan accordingly, by which the letters, and their separate Prefatory Notes, might be as it were illustrations to the Introduction, which was intended in turn to be a guide to them. Having done this with a proper *Pourvu que Dieu lui prête vie* referring to both book and author, I thought it well to look up next what had been done in the way before me, at least to the extent of what the London Library could provide me in circumstances of enforced abstinence from the Museum and from "Bodley." From its catalogue I selected a curious eighteenth-century *Art of Letter Writing*, and four nineteenth and earliest twentieth century books – Roberts's *History of Letter Writing* (1843) with Pickering's ever-beloved title-page and his beautiful clear print; the *Littérature Epistolaire* of Barbey d'Aurevilly – a critic never to be neglected though always to be consulted with eyes wide open and brain alert; finally, two Essays in Dr. Jessopp's *Studies by a Recluse* and in the *Men and Letters* of Mr. Herbert Paul, once a very frequent associate of mine. The title of the first mentioned book speaks it pretty thoroughly. "The Art of Letter Writing: Divided into Two Parts. The First: Containing Rules and Directions for writing letters on all sorts of subjects [*this line as well as several others is Rubricked*] with a variety of examples equally elegant and instructive. The Second: a Collection of Letters on the Most interesting occasions of life in which are inserted – The proper method of Addressing Persons of all ranks; some necessary orthographical directions, the right forms of message for cards; and thoughts upon a multiplicity of subjects; the whole composed upon an entirely new plan – chiefly calculated for the instruction of youth, but may be [*sic*] of singular service to Gentlemen, Ladies and all others who are desirous to attain the true style and manner of a polite epistolary intercourse." May our own little book have no worse fortune! Mr. Roberts's avowedly restricts itself to the fifth century as a *terminus ad quem*, though it professes to start "from the earliest times," and its seven hundred pages deal very honestly and fully with their subjects. The essays of Dr. Jessopp and Mr. Paul are of course merely Essays, of a score or two of pages: though the first is pretty wide in its scope. There would be nothing but good to be said of either, if both had not been, not perhaps blasphemous but parsimonious of praise, towards "Our Lady of the Rocks." It cannot be too often or too solemnly laid down that an adoration of Madame de Sévigné as a letter-writer is not crotchet or fashion or affectation – is no result of merely taking authority on trust. The more one reads her, and the more one reads others, the more convinced should one be of her absolute non-pareility in almost every kind of genuine letter (as apart from letters that are really pamphlets or speeches or sermons) except pure love-letters, of which we have none from her. As for *Littérature Epistolaire*, it is a collection of some two dozen reviews of various modern reprints of letters by distinguished writers – mostly but not all French. The author has throughout used the letters he is considering almost wholly as tell-tales of character, not as examples of art: and therefore he does not, except in possible glances, require further attention, though the book is full of interesting things. Its judgment of one of our greatest, and one of the greatest of all, letter-writers – Horace Walpole – is too severe, but not, like Macaulay's, superficially insistent on superficial defects, and ought not to be neglected by anyone who studies the subject.

If, however, there was no need to rely on any of these books, they did nothing to hinder in the peculiar way in which I had feared some hindrance. For it is a nuisance to find that somebody else has done something in the precise way in which you have planned doing it. I have not yet encountered that nuisance here. Dr. Jessopp's general plan is most like mine – indeed some similarity was unavoidable: but the two are not identical, and I had planned mine before I knew anything about his.

So with this prelude let us go to business, only premising further that the object, unlike that of the anonymous Augustan, is not to "give rules and instructions for writing good letters," except in the way (which far excels all rules and instructions) of showing how good letters have been written. Let us also modestly trust that the collection may deal with some "interesting occasions of life" and contain "thoughts on a [fair] multiplicity of subjects." Having been, as above observed, unable during the composition of this book to visit London or Oxford, I have had to rely occasionally on friendly assistance. I owe particular thanks (as indeed I have owed them at almost any time these forty years) to the Rev. William Hunt, D.Litt., Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford: and I am also indebted to Miss Elsie Hitchcock for some kind aid at the Museum given me through the intermediation of Professor Ker.

Besides the thanks given to Mr. Lloyd Osbourne, Mr. Kipling and Dr. Williamson in the text in reference to certain new or almost new letters, we owe very sincere gratitude for permission to reprint the following important matters:

*His Honour Judge Parry.* Two letters from "Letters from Dorothy Osborne to Sir William Temple."

*Messrs. Douglas & Foulis.* A letter to Joanna Baillie, from "Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott."

*Messrs. Longmans, Green & Co.* Two letters from Mrs. Carlyle's "Letters and Memorials," and one letter from Sir G. O. Trevelyan's "Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay."

*Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd.* Three letters from "The Letters of Charles Dickens"; one letter by FitzGerald and one by Thomas Carlyle, from "Letters and Literary Remains of Edward FitzGerald"; one letter from "Charles Kingsley: his Letters and Memories of his Life"; and two extracts from "Further Records, 1848-1883," by Frances Anne Kemble.

*Mr. John Murray.* One letter from "The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

*GEORGE SAINTSBURY.*

1 Royal Crescent, Bath,  
October, 1921.

# INTRODUCTION

## THE HISTORY AND ART OF LETTER WRITING

### I

#### ANCIENT HISTORY

On letter-writing, as on most things that can themselves be written and talked about, there are current many *clichés*—stock and banal sayings that express, or have at some time expressed, a certain amount of truth. The most familiar of these for a good many years past has been that the penny post has killed it. Whether revival of the twopenny has caused it to exhibit any kind of corresponding resurrectionary symptoms is a matter which cannot yet be pronounced upon. But it may be possible to avoid these *clichés*, or at any rate to make no more than necessary glances at them, in composing this little paper, which aims at being a discussion of the Letter as a branch of Literature, no less than an introduction to the specimens of the kind which follow.

If, according to a famous dictum, "Everything has been said," it follows that every definition must have been already made. Therefore, no doubt, somebody has, or many bodies have, before now defined or at least described the Letter as that kind of communication of thought or fact to another person which most immediately succeeds the oral, and supplies the claims of absence. You want to tell somebody something; but he or she is not, as they used to say "by," or perhaps there are circumstances (and *circumstanders*) which or who make speech undesirable; so you "write." At first no doubt, you used signs or symbols like the feather with which Wildrake let Cromwell's advent be known in *Woodstock*—a most ingenious device for which, by the way, the recipients were scanty grateful. But when reading and writing came by nature, you availed yourself of these Nature's gifts, not always, it is to be feared, regarding the interconnection of the two sufficiently. There is probably more than one person living who has received a reply beginning "Dear So-and-So, Thanks for your interesting and *partially legible* epistle," or words to that effect. But that is a part of the matter which lies outside our range.

On the probable general fact, however, some observations may be less frivolously based. If this were a sentimental age, as some ages in the past have been, one might assume that, as the first portrait is supposed to have been a silhouette of the present beloved, drawn on her shadow with a charcoaled stick, so the same, or another implement may have served (on what substitute for paper anybody pleases) to communicate with her when absent. But the silliness of this age — though far be it from us to dispute its possession of so prevailing a quality — does not take the form — at least *this* form — of sentiment.

#### THE BEGINNINGS

There is, moreover, nothing silly or sentimental, though of course there is something that may be controverted, in saying that except for purely "business" purposes (which are as such alien from Art and have nothing to do with any but a part, and a rather sophisticated part, of Nature) the less the letter-writer forgets that he is merely substituting pen for tongue the better. Of course, the instruments and the circumstances being different, the methods and canons of the proceedings will be different too. In the letter there is no interlocutor; and there is no possibility of what we may call accompanying

it with personal illustrations<sup>1</sup> and demonstrations, if necessary or agreeable. But still it may be laid down, with some confidence, that the more the spoken word is heard in a letter the better, and the less that word is heard – the more it gives way to "book" – talk – the worse. Indeed this is not likely to be denied, though there remain as usual almost infinite possibilities of differences in personal opinion as to what constitutes the desirable mixture of variation and similarity between a conversation and a letter. Let us, before discussing this or saying anything more about the principles, say something about the history of this, at best so delightful, at worst so undelightful art. For if History, in the transferred sense of particular books called "histories," is rather apt to be false: nothing but History in the wider and higher sense will ever lead us to truth. The Future is unknown and unknowable. The Present is turning to Past even as we are trying to know it. Only the Past itself abides our knowledge.

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Of the oldest existing examples of epistolary correspondence, except those contained in the Bible, the present writer knows little or nothing. For, except a vanished smattering of Hebrew, he "has" no Oriental tongue; he has never been much addicted to reading translations, and even if he had been so has had little occasion to draw him to such studies, and much to draw him away from them. There certainly appear to be some beautiful specimens of the more passionate letter writing in ancient if not exactly pre-Christian Chinese, and probably in other tongues – but it is ill talking of what one does not know. In the Scriptures themselves letters do not come early, and the "token" period probably lasted long. Isaac does not even send a token with Jacob to validate his suit for a daughter of Laban. But one would have enjoyed a letter from Ishmael to his half-brother, when his daughter was married to Esau, who was so much more like a son of Ishmael himself than of the amiable husband of Rebekah. She, by the way, had herself been fetched in an equally unlettered transaction. It would of course be impossible, and might be regarded as improper, to devote much space here to the sacred epistolographers. But one may wonder whether many people have appreciated the humour of the two epistles of the great King Ahasuerus-Artaxerxes, the first commanding and the second countermanding the massacre of the Jews – epistles contained in the Septuagint "Rest of the Book of Esther" (see our Apocrypha), instead of the mere dry summaries which had sufficed for "the Hebrew and the Chaldee." The exact authenticity of these fuller texts is a matter of no importance, but their substance, whether it was the work of a Persian civil servant or of a Greek-Jew rhetorician, is most curious. Whosoever it was, he knew King's Speeches and communications from "My lords" and such like things, very well indeed; and the contrast of the mention in the first letter of "Aman who excelled in wisdom among us and was approved for his constant good will and steadfast fidelity" with "the wicked wretch Aman – a stranger received of us ... his falsehood and cunning" – the whole of both letters being carefully attuned to the respective key-notes – is worthy of any one of the best ironists from Aristophanes to the late Mr. Traill.

Between these two extremes of the Pentateuch and the Apocrypha there is, as has been remarked by divers commentators, not much about letters in the Bible. It is not auspicious that among the exceptions come David's letter commanding the betrayal of Uriah, and a little later Jezebel's similar prescription for the judicial murder of Naboth. There is, however, some hint of that curious attractiveness which some have seen in "the King's daughter all glorious within – " and without (as the Higher Criticism interprets the Forty-Fifth Psalm) in the bland way with which she herself stipulates that the false witnesses shall be "sons of Belial."

There is a book (once much utilised as a school prize) entitled *The History of Inventions*. I do not know whether there is a "Dictionary of Attributed Inventors." If there were it would contain some queer examples. One of the queerest is fathered (for we only have it at second hand) on Hellanicus,

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<sup>1</sup> It may of course be "illustrated" in the other sense by a second use of the pen; and we shall have instances of this kind to notice.

a Greek writer of respectable antiquity – the Peloponnesian war-time – and respectable repute for book-making in history, chronology, etc. It attributes the invention of letters —*i. e.* "epistolary correspondence" – to Atossa – not Mr. Matthew Arnold's Persian cat but – the Persian Queen, daughter of Cyrus, wife of Cambyses and Darius, mother of Xerxes, and in more than her queenly status a sister to Jezebel. Atossa had not a wholly amiable reputation, but she was assuredly no fool: and if, to borrow a famous phrase, it had been necessary to invent letters, there is no known reason why she might not have done it. But it is perfectly certain that she did not, and no one who combines, as all true scholars should endeavour to combine, an unquenchable curiosity to know what can be known and is worth knowing with a placid resignation to ignorance of what cannot be known and would not be worth knowing – need in the least regret the fact that we do not know who did.

There are said to be Egyptian letters of immense antiquity and high development; but once more, I do not profess direct knowledge of them, and once more I hold that of what a man does not possess direct knowledge, of that he should not write. Besides, for practical purposes, all our literature begins with Greek: so to Greek let us turn. We have a fair bulk of letters in that language. Hercher's *Epistolographi Graeci* is a big volume, and would not be a small one, if you cut out the Latin translations. But it is unfortunate that nearly the whole, like the majority of later Greek literature, is the work of that special class called rhetoricians – a class for which, though our term "book-makers" may be a little too derogatory, "men of letters" is rarely (it is sometimes) applicable, as we use it when we mean to be complimentary. These letters are still close to "speech," thus meeting in a fashion our initial requirement, but they are close to the speech of the "orator" – of the sophisticated speaker to the public – not to that of genuine conversation. In fact in some cases it would require only the very slightest change to make those exercitations of the rhetors which are not called "epistles" definite letters in form, while some of the best known and characteristic of their works are so entitled.

## THE RHETORICIANS

It was unfortunate for the Greeks, as it would seem, and for us more certainly, that letter-writing was so much affected by these "rhetoricians." This curious class of persons has perhaps been too much abused: and there is no doubt that very great writers came out of them – to mention one only in each division – Lucian among the extremely profane, and St. Augustine among the greatest and most intellectual of divines. But though their habitual defects are to be found abundantly enough in modern society, these defects are, with us, as a rule distributed among different classes; while anciently they were united in this one. We have our journalists, our book-makers (literary, not sporting), our platform and parliamentary palaverers, our popular entertainers; and we also have our pedagogues, scholastic and collegiate, our scientific and other lecturers, etc. But the Rhetorician of old was a Jack of all these trades; and he too frequently combined the triviality, unreality, sophistry and catch-pennyism of the one division with the priggishness, the lack of tact and humour, and above all the pseudo-scientific tendency to generalisation, classification and, to use a familiar word, "pottering" of the other. In particular he had a mania in his more serious moods for defining and sub-defining things and putting them into pigeon-holes under the sub-definitions. Thus the so-called Demetrius Phalereus, who (or a false namesake of his) has left us a capital *general* remark (to be given presently) on letter-writing, elaborately divides its kinds, with prescriptions for writing each, into "friendly," "commendatory," "reproving," "objurgatory," "consolatory," "castigatory," "admonishing," "threatening," "vituperatory," "laudatory," "persuasive," "begging," "questioning," "answering," "allegorical," "explanatory," "accusing," "defending," "congratulatory," "ironic" and "thankful," while the neo-Platonist, Proclus, is responsible for, or at least has attributed to him, a list of nearly double the length, including most of those given above and adding many. Of these last, "love-letters" is the most important, and "mixed" the *canniest*, for it practically lets in everything.

This way, of course, except for purely business purposes – where established forms save time, trouble and possible litigation – no possible good lies; and indeed the impossibility thereof is clearly enough indicated in the above-glanced-at general remark of Demetrius (or whoever it was) himself. In fact the principle of this remark and its context in the work called "Of Interpretation," which it is more usual now to call, perhaps a little rashly, "Of Style," is so different from the catalogue of types that they can hardly come from the same author. "You *can* from this, as well as from all other kinds of writing, discern the character of the writer; indeed from none other can you discern it so well." Those who know a little of the history of Criticism will see how this anticipates the most famous and best definitions of Style itself, as being "the very man," and they may perhaps also think worthy of notice another passage in the same context where the author finds fault with a rather "fine" piece of an epistle as "not the way a man would talk to his friend," and even goes on to use the most familiar Greek word for talking – λαλεῖν – in the same connection.

### ALCIPHRON. JULIAN

Of such "talking with a friend" we have unfortunately very few examples – hardly any at all – from older Greek. The greater collections – not much used in schools or colleges now but well enough known to those who really know Greek Literature – of Alciphron, Aristaenetus, Philostratus and (once most famous of all) Phalaris are – one must not perhaps say obvious, since men of no little worth were once taken in by them but – pretty easily discoverable counterfeits. They are sometimes, more particularly those of Philostratus, interesting and even beautiful;<sup>2</sup> they have been again sometimes at least supposed, particularly those of Alciphron, to give us, from the fact that they were largely based upon lost comedies, etc., information which we should otherwise lack; and in many instances (Aristaenetus is perhaps here the chief) they must have helped towards that late Greek creation of the Romance to which we owe so much. Nor have we here much if anything to do with such questions as the morality of personating dead authors, or that of laying traps for historians. It is enough that they do not give us, except very rarely, good letters: and that even these exceptions are not in any probability *real* letters, real written "confabulations of friends" at all. Almost the first we have deserving such a description are those of the Emperor Julian in the fourth century of that Christ for whom he had such an unfortunate hatred; the most copious and thoroughly genuine perhaps those of Bishop Synesius a little later. Of these Julian's are a good deal affected by the influence of Rhetoric, of which he was a great cultivator: and the peculiar later Platonism of Synesius fills a larger proportion of his than some frivolous persons might wish. Julian is even thought to have "written for publication," as Latin epistolers of distinction had undoubtedly done before him. Nevertheless it is pleasant to read the Apostate when he is not talking Imperial or anti-Christian "shop," but writing to his tutor, the famous sophist and rhetorician Libanius, about his travels and his books and what not, in a fashion by no means very unlike that in which a young Oxford graduate might write to an undonnish don. It is still pleasanter to find Synesius telling his friends about the very thin wine and very thick honey of Cyrenaica; making love ("camouflaged," as they say to-day, under philosophy) to Hypatia, and condescending to mention dogs, horses and hunting now and then. But it is unfortunately undeniable that the bulk of this department of Greek literature is spurious to begin with, and uninteresting, even if spuriousness be permitted to pass. The Letters of Phalaris – once famous in themselves, again so as furnishing one of the chief battle-grounds in the "Ancient and Modern" quarrel, and never to be forgotten because of their connection with Swift's *Battle of the Books*– are as dull as ditchwater in matter, and utterly destitute of literary distinction in style.

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<sup>2</sup> As has often been pointed out Ben Jonson's exquisite "Drink to me only with thine eyes" is a verse-paraphrase or mosaic from this writer's prose.

## ROMAN LETTER-WRITING

It is a rule, general and almost universal, that every branch of Latin literature is founded on, and more or less directly imitative of Greek. Even the Satire, which the Romans relied upon to prove that they could originate, is more apparently than really an invention. Also, though this may be more disputable, because much more a matter of personal taste, there were very few such branches in which the pupils equalled, much fewer in which they surpassed, their masters. But in both respects letter-writing may be said to be an exception. Unless we have been singularly unlucky in losing better Greek letters than we have, and extraordinarily fortunate in Fate's selection of the Latin letters that have come down to us, the Romans, though they were eager students of Rhetoric, and almost outwent their teachers in composing the empty things called Declamations, seem to have allowed this very practice to drain off mere verbosity, and to have written letters about matters which were worth pen, ink, paper and (as we should say) postage. We have in Greek absolutely no such letters from the flourishing time of the literature as those of Cicero, of Pliny<sup>3</sup> and even of Seneca – while as we approach the "Dark" Ages Julian and Synesius in the older language cannot touch Sidonius Apollinaris or perhaps Cassiodorus<sup>4</sup> in the younger. Of course all these are beyond reasonable doubt genuine, while the Greek letters attributed to Plato, Socrates and other great men are almost without doubt and without exception spurious. But there is very little likelihood that the Greeks of the great times wrote many "matter-ful" letters at all. They lived in small communities, where they saw each other daily and almost hourly; they took little interest in the affairs of other communities unless they were at war with them, and when they did travel there were very few means of international communication.

Women write the best letters, and get the best letters written to them: but it is doubtful whether Greek women, save persons of a certain class and other exceptions in different ways like Sappho and Diotima,<sup>5</sup> ever wrote at all. The Romans, after their early period, were not merely a larger and ever larger community full of the most various business, and constantly extending their presence and their sway; but, by their unique faculty of organisation, they put every part of their huge world in communication with every other part. Here also we lack women's letters; but we are, as above remarked, by no means badly off for those of men. There have even been some audacious heretics who have preferred Cicero's letters to his speeches and treatises; Seneca, the least attractive of those before mentioned, put well what the poet Wordsworth called in his own poems "extremely *valooable* thoughts"; one of the keenest of mathematicians and best of academic and general business men known to the present writer, the late Professor Chrystal of Edinburgh, made a special favourite of Pliny; and if people can find nothing worse to say against Sidonius than that he wrote in contemporary, and not in what was for his time archaic, Latin, his case will not look bad in the eyes of sensible men.

## SIDONIUS

Sidonius, like Synesius, was a Christian, and, though the observation may seem no more logical than Fluellen's about Macedon and Monmouth, besides being in more doubtful taste, there would

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<sup>3</sup> Pliny, if he did not always "write for publication," deliberately "published," as we should say, his letters. Indeed, he is one of the first to use the word in this sense, even if he uses it immediately of an oration not a letter. Some think Cicero meant publication; and he was very likely to do so.

<sup>4</sup> The Latin statesman, like the Greek bishop, condescends to write about wine and even more fully. One of the most interesting and informing things on the subject is his discourse on *vinum acinaticium*, a sort of Roman Imperial Tokay made from grapes kept till the frost had touched them.

<sup>5</sup> Genuine letters of Sappho would have been of the first interest to compare with those of Heloise, and the "Portuguese Nun" and Mademoiselle de Lespinasse. Diotima's might have been as disappointing as George Eliot's: but by no means must necessarily have been so. Aspasia's, sometimes counterfeited, ought to have been good.

seem to be some connection between the spread of Christianity and that of letter-writing. At any rate they synchronise, despite or perhaps because of the deficiency of formal literature during the "Dark" Ages. It is not really futile to point out that a very large part of the New Testament consists of "Epistles," and that by no means the whole of these epistles is occupied by doctrinal or hortatory matter. Even that which is so, often if not always, partakes of the character of a "live" letter to an extent which makes the so-called letters of the Greek Rhetoricians mere school exercises. And St. Paul's allusions to his journeys, his salutations, his acknowledgment of presents, his reference to the cloak and the books with its anxious "but especially the parchments," and his excellent advice to Timothy about beverages, are all the purest and most genuine matter for mail-bags. So is St. Peter's very gentleman-like (as it has been termed) retort to his brother Apostle; and so are both the Second and the Third of St. John. Indeed it is not fanciful to suggest that the account of the voyage which finishes the "Acts," and other parts of that very delightful book, are narratives much more of the kind one finds in letters than of the formally historical sort.

However this may be, it is worth pointing out that the distrust of other pagan kinds of literature which the Fathers manifested so strongly, and which was inherited from them by the clergy of the "Dark," and to some extent the Middle Ages, clearly could not extend to the practice of the Apostles. If from the Dark Ages themselves we have not very many, it must be remembered that from them we have little literature at all: while from the close of that period and the beginning of the next we have one of the most famous of all correspondences, the Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Of the intrinsic merit of these long-and far-famed compositions, as displaying character, there have been different opinions – one of the most damaging attacks on them may be found in Barbey d'Aurevilly's already mentioned book. But their influence has been lasting and enormous: and even if it were to turn out that they are forgeries, they are certainly early forgeries, and the person who forged them knew extremely well what he was about. There is no room here to survey, even in selection, the letter-crop of the Middle Ages; and from henceforward we must speak mainly, if not wholly (for some glances abroad may be permitted), of *English* letters.<sup>6</sup> But the ever-increasing bonds of union – even of such union in disunion as war – between different European nations, and the developments of more complex civilisation, of more general education and the like – all tended and wrought in the same direction.

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<sup>6</sup> It is part of the plan to give, as a sort of Appendix to the Introduction, and extension of it towards the main body of text, some specimens of Greek, Roman (classical and post-classical) and Early Mediaeval letter-writing, translated for the purpose by the present writer. The *continuity* of literary history is a thing which deserves to be attended to, especially when there is an ever-growing tendency to confine attention to things modern – albeit so soon to be antiquated! I owe the last of these specimens, in the Latin from which I translate it, to the kindness of my friend the Rev. W. Hunt, D.Litt., to whom I had recourse as not myself having access to a large library at the moment, and who has assisted me in other parts of this book.

## II

### LETTERS IN ENGLISH – BEFORE 1700

Exceptions have sometimes been taken to the earliest collection of genuine private letters, not official communications written in or inspired by Latin – which we possess in English. "The Paston Letters" have been, from opposite sides, accused of want of literary form and of not giving us interesting enough details in substance. The objections in either case<sup>7</sup> are untenable, and in both rather silly. In the first place "literary form" in the fifteenth century was exceedingly likely to be bad literary form, and we are much better off without it. Unless Sir Thomas Malory had happened to be chaplain at Oxnead, or Sir John Fortescue had occupied there something like the position of Mr. Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House*, we should not have got much "literature" from any known prose-writer of the period. Nor was it wanted. As for interestingness of matter, the people who expect newspaper-correspondent fine writing about the Wars of the Roses may be disappointed; but some of us who have had experience of that dialect from the Russells of the Crimea through the Forbeses of 1870 to the chroniclers of Armageddon the other day will probably not be very unhappy. The Paston Letters are simply genuine family correspondence – of a genuineness all the more certain because of their commonplaceness. It is impossible to conceive anything further from the initial type of the Greek rhetorical "letter" of which we have just been saying something. They are not, to any but an excessively "high-browed" and high-flying person, uninteresting: but the chief point about them is their solidity and their satisfaction, in their own straightforward unvarnished way, of the test we started with. When Margaret Paston and the rest write, it is because they have something to say to somebody who cannot be actually spoken to. And that something is said.

### ASCHAM

The next body of letters – Ascham's – which seems to call for notice here is of the next century. It has not a few points of appeal, more than one of which concern us very nearly. Most of the writers of the Paston Letters were, though in some cases of good rank and fairly educated, persons entirely unacademic in character, and their society was that of the last trouble and convulsion through which the Early Middle Ages struggled into the Renaissance, so long delayed with us. Ascham was one of our chief representatives of the Renaissance itself – that is to say, of a type at once scholarly and man-of-the-worldly, a courtier and a diplomatist as well as a "don" and a man of letters; a sportsman as well as a schoolmaster. And while from all these points of view his letters have interest, there is one thing about them which is perhaps more interesting to us than any other: and that is the fact that while he begins to write in Latin – the all but mother-tongue of all scholars of the time, and the universal language of the educated, even when not definitely scholarly, throughout Europe – he exchanges this for English latterly, in the same spirit which prompted his famous expression of reasons for writing the *Toxophilus* in our own and his own tongue. There is indeed a double attraction, which has not been always or often noticed, in this change of practice. Everybody has seen how important it is, not merely as resisting the general delusion of contemporary scholars that the vernaculars were things unsafe, "like to play the bankrupt with books," but as protesting by anticipation against the continuance of this error which affected Bacon and Hobbes, and was not entirely without hold even on such a magician in English as Browne. But perhaps everybody has not seen how by implication it acknowledges the peculiar character of the genuine letter – that, though it may be a work of art, it should not be one of artifice – that it is a matter of "business *or* bosoms," not of study or display.

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<sup>7</sup> Yet others, as to authenticity, have, I believe, been rejected by all competent scholarship.

Contemporary with these letters of Ascham, and going on to the end of the century and the closely coincident end of the reign of Elizabeth, we have a considerable bulk of letter-writing of more or less varied kinds. The greatest men of letters of the time – to the disgust of one, but not wholly so to that of another, class of "scholar" – give us little. Spenser is the most considerable exception: and his correspondence with Gabriel Harvey, though it is personal to a certain extent and on Gabriel's side sufficiently character-revealing, is really of the hybrid kind, partaking rather more of pamphlet or essay than of letter proper. Indeed a good part of that very remarkable pamphlet-literature of this time, which has perhaps scarcely yet received its due share of attention, takes the letter-form: but is mostly even farther from genuine letter-writing than the correspondence of "Immerito" and "Master G. H." We have of course more of Harvey's; we have laments from others, such as Lyly and Googe, about their disappointments as courtiers; we have a good deal of State correspondence. There are some, not very many, agreeable letters of strictly private character in whole or part, the pleasantest of all perhaps being some of Sir Philip Sydney's mother, Lady Mary Dudley. Others are from time to time being made public, such as those in Dr. Williamson's recent book on the Admiral-Earl of Cumberland. As far as mere bulk goes, Elizabethan epistolography would take no small place, just as it would claim no mean one in point of interest. But in an even greater degree than its successor (*v. inf.*) this *corpus* would expose itself to the criticism that the time for perfect letter-writing was not quite yet, in this day of so much that was perfect, that the style was not quite the right style, the knack not yet quite achieved. And if the present writer – who swore fealty to Elizabethan literature a full third of a century ago after informal allegiance for nearly as long a time earlier – admits some truth in this, there probably is some. The letters included in it attract us more for the matter they contain than for the manner in which they contain it: and when this is the case no branch of literature has perfected itself in art.

## THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The position of the seventeenth century in England with regard to letter-writing has been the subject of rather different opinions. The bulk of its contributions is of course very considerable: and some of the groups are of prominent importance, the most singular, if not the most excellent, being Cromwell's, again to be mentioned. As in other cases and departments this century offers a curious "split" between its earlier part which declines – not in goodness but like human life in vitality – from, but still preserves the character of, the pure Elizabethan, and its later, which grows up again – not in goodness but simply in the same vitality – towards the Augustan. This relationship is sufficiently illustrated in the actual letters. The great political importance of the Civil War of course reflects itself in them. Indeed it may almost be said that for some time letters are wholly concerned with such things, though of course there are partial exceptions, such as those of Dorothy Osborne – "mild Dorothea" as she afterwards became, though there is no mere mildness of the contemptuous meaning in her correspondence. In most remarkable contrast to these stand the somewhat earlier letters of James Howell – our first examples perhaps of letters "written for publication" in the fullest sense, very agreeably varied in subject and great favourites with a good many people, notably Thackeray – but only in part (if at all) genuine private correspondence.

Not a few men otherwise distinguished in literature wrote letters – sometimes in curious contrast with other productions of theirs. The most remarkable instance of this, but an instance easily comprehensible, is that of Samuel Pepys. Only a part of Pepys' immense correspondence has ever been printed, but there is no reason to expect from the remainder – whether actually extant, mislaid or lost – anything better than the examples which are now accessible, and which are for the most part the very opposite in every respect of the famous and delectable Diary. They are perfectly "proper," and for the most part extremely dull; while propriety is certainly not the most salient characteristic of the Diary; and the diarist manages, in the most eccentric manner, to communicate interest not merely to

things more specially regarded as "interesting," but to his accounts and his ailments, his business and his political history. His contemporary and rather patronising friend Evelyn keeps his performances less far apart from each other: but is certainly, though a representative, not a great letter-writer, and the few that we have of Pepys' patronised fellow-Cantabrigian Dryden are of no great mark, though not superfluous. In the earlier part of the century Latin had not wholly shaken off its control as the epistolary language; and it was not till quite the other end that English itself became supple and docile enough for the purposes of the letter-writer proper. It was excellent for such things as formal Dedications, semi-historical narratives, and the like. And it could, as in Sir Thomas Browne's, supply another contrast, much more pleasing than that referred to above, of domestic familiarity with a most poetical transcendence of style in published work. Yet, as was the case with the novel, the letter, to gain perfection, still wanted something easier than the grand style of the seventeenth century and more polished than its familiar style.

### III

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

### THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

But whatever may be the position of the seventeenth in respect of letter-writing it is impossible for anything but sheer ignorance, hopeless want of critical discernment, or idle paradox to mistake, in the direction of belittlement, that of the eighteenth. By common consent of all opinion worth attention that century was, in the two European literatures which were equally free from crudity and decadence – French and English – the very palmiest day of the art. Everybody wrote letters: and a surprising number of people wrote letters well. Our own three most famous epistolers of the male sex, Horace Walpole, Gray and Cowper – belong wholly to it; and "Lady Mary" – our most famous she-ditto – belongs to it by all but her childhood; as does Chesterfield, whom some not bad judges would put not far if at all below the three men just mentioned. The rise of the novel in this century is hardly more remarkable than the way in which that novel almost wedded itself – certainly joined itself in the most frequent friendship – to the letter-form. But perhaps the excellence of the choicer examples in this time is not really more important than the abundance, variety and popularity of its letters, whether good, indifferent, or bad. To use one of the informal superlatives sanctioned by familiar custom it was the "letterwritingest" of ages from almost every point of view. In its least as in its most dignified moods it even overflowed into verse if not into poetry as a medium. Serious epistles had – of course on classical models – been written in verse for a long time. But now in England more modern patterns, and especially Anstey's *New Bath Guide*, started the fashion of actual correspondence in doggerel verse with no thought of print – a practice in which persons as different as Madame d'Arblay's good-natured but rather foolish father, and a poet and historian like Southey indulged; and which did not become obsolete till Victorian times, if then. At the present moment one does not remember an exact equivalent in England to the story of two good writers in French if not French writers<sup>8</sup> living in the same house, meeting constantly during the day, yet exchanging letters, and not short ones, before breakfast. But very likely there is or was one, and more than one.

For those no doubt estimable persons who are not content with facts but must have some explanations of them, it is less difficult to supply such things than is sometimes the case. One – the attainment at last of a "middle" style neither grand nor vulgar – has already been glanced at. It has been often and quite truly observed that there are sentences, passages, paragraphs, almost whole letters in Horace Walpole and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, in Fanny Burney and in Cowper, which no one would think old-fashioned at the present day in any context where modern slang did not suggest itself as natural. But this was by no means the only predisposing cause, though perhaps most of the others were, in this way or that, connected with it. Both in France and in England literature and social matters generally were in something like what political economists call "the stationary state" till (as rather frequently happens with such apparently stationary states) the smoothness changed to the Niagara of the French Revolution, and the rapids of the quarter-century War. There were no great poets:<sup>9</sup> and even verse-writers were rarely grand: but there was a greater diffusion of competent writing faculty than had been seen before or perhaps – for all the time, talk, trouble, and money spent on "education," – has been since. New divisions and departments of interest were accumulating –

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Constant and Madame de Charrière.

<sup>9</sup> Some of us think Blake a great poet; but this is scarcely a general opinion, and he does not appear till the century was three parts over. Burns (whose own letters by the way do him little justice) hardly comes in.

not merely in Literature itself<sup>10</sup> (as to which, if people's ideas were rather limited, they *had* ideas), but in the arts which were in some cases practised almost for the first time and in all taken more seriously, in foreign and home politics, commerce, manufactures, all manner of things. People were by no means so apt to stay in the same place as they had been: and when friends were in different places they had much easier means of communicating with each other. Nor should it be forgotten that the more elaborate system of ceremonial manners which then prevailed, but which has been at first gradually, and latterly with a run, breaking down for the last hundred years, had an important influence on letter-writing. One does not of course refer merely to elaborate formulas of beginning and ending – such as make even the greatest praisers of times past among us smile a little when they find Dr. Johnson addressing his own step-daughter as "Dear Madam," and being her "most humble servant" though in the course of the letter he may use the most affectionate and intimate expressions. But the manners of yester-year made it obligatory to make your letters – unless they were merely what were called "cards" of invitation, message, etc. – to some extent *substantive*. You gave the news of the day, if your correspondent was not likely to know it; the news of the place, especially if you were living in a University town or a Cathedral city. If you had read a book you very often criticised it: if you had been to any kind of entertainment you reported on it, etc. etc. Of course all this is still done by people who really do write real letters: but it is certainly done by a much smaller proportion of letter-writers than was the case two hundred, one hundred, or even fifty years ago. The newspaper has probably done more to kill letters than any penny post, halfpenny postcard or even sixpenny telegram could do. Nor perhaps have we yet mentioned the most powerful destructive agent of all, and that is the ever increasing want of leisure. The dulness of modern Jack, in letters as elsewhere, arises from the fact that when he is not at work he is too desperately set on playing to have time for anything else. The Augustans are not usually thought God-like: but they have this of Gods, that they "lived *easily*."

There is perhaps still something to be said as to the apparently almost pre-established harmony between the eighteenth century and letter-writing. It concerns what has been called the "*Peace of the Augustans*"; the at least comparative freedom alike from the turmoil of passion and the most riotous kinds of fun. Tragedy may be very fine in letters, as it may be anywhere: but it is in them the most dangerous,<sup>11</sup> most rarely successful and most frequently failed-in of all motives – again as it is everywhere. Comedy in letters is good: but it should be fairly "genteel" comedy, such as this age excelled in – not roaring Farce. An "excruciatingly funny" letter runs the risk of being excruciating in a sadly literal sense. Now the men of good Queen Anne and the first three Georges were not given to excess, in these ways at any rate; and there are few better examples of the happy mean than the best of their letters. The person who is bored by any one of those sets which have been mentioned must bring the boredom with him – as, by the way, complainers of that state of suffering do much oftener than they wot of. Nor is much less to be said of scores of less famous epistolers of the time, from the generation of Berkeley and Byrom to that of Scott and Southey.

## SWIFT

To begin with Swift, it is a scarcely disputable fact that opinions about this giant of English literature – not merely as to his personal character, though perhaps this has had more to do with the matter than appears on the surface, but as to his exact literary value – have differed almost incomprehensibly. Johnson thought, or at least affected to think, that *A Tale of a Tub* could not be Swift's, because it was too good for him, and that "Tom Davies might have written *The Conduct of the Allies*": while on the other hand Thackeray, indulging in the most extravagant denunciation of

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<sup>10</sup> Especially the most popular and voluminous if not the most important of all – the periodical and the novel.

<sup>11</sup> The danger being of many sorts – usually in the direction of various kinds of *excess*. A *quietly* tragic letter may be a masterpiece: perhaps there is no finer example than one to be again referred to, of Mrs. Carlyle's.

Swift as a man, did the very fullest, though not in the least too full, homage to his genius. But one does not know many things more surprising in the long list of contradictory criticisms of man and genius alike, than Mr. Herbert Paul's disapproval of the *Journal to Stella* as letters while admitting its excellence as "narrative."<sup>12</sup> To other judges these are some of the most perfect letters in existence, some of the most absolutely genuine and free from the slightest taint of writing for publication; some of the most extraordinarily blended of intense intimacy which is neither ridiculous nor productive of the shame-faced feeling that you ought not to have heard it; and full of that dealing with matters less intimate but still interesting to both correspondents which displays the "narrative" excellence conceded by this acute critic. It must of course be remembered that these "Journal-letters" are by no means Swift's only proofs of his epistolary expertness. The Vanessa ones perhaps display a little of the hopelessly enigmatic character which spreads like a mist over the whole of that ill-starred relationship: but they make all the more useful contrast to the "wholeheartedness" – one may even use that word in reference to the little bit of what we may call constructive deception as to "the other person" – of those to her rival.<sup>13</sup> Those to Pope (of which so shabby a use was made by their strangely constituted recipient), to Bolingbroke and others are among the best of friendly letters: and the curious batch to the Duchess of Queensberry might be classed with those "court-paying" letters of man to woman which are elsewhere more particularly noted. But the "Stella" or "Stella-cum-Dingley" division (if that most singular of value-completing zeros is to be brought in) is a thing by itself. Perhaps appreciating or not appreciating the "little language" is a matter very largely of personal constitution, and the failure to appreciate is (like colour-blindness or other physical deficiencies) a thing to be sorry for, not to condemn. But one might have thought that even if what we may call "feeling" of this were absent there would be an intellectual understanding of the way in which it completes the whole-heartedness just mentioned – the manner in which the writer deals with politics, society, letters, the common ways of life, and his own passion – this last sometimes in the fore-sometimes in the background, but never far off. Other letters, from Horace Walpole's downwards, may contain a panorama of life as brilliant as these give, or more brilliant. Yet it is too frequently a panorama or a puppet show, or at the best a marvellously acted but somewhat bloodless drama. On the other hand, the pure passion-letters lack as a rule this many-sidedness. With Swift we get both. Seldom has any collection shown us more varied interests. But through it all there is an anticipation of the knell of this commerce of his – "Only a woman's hair" – and that hair threads, in subtle fashion, the whole of the *Journal*, turning the panorama to something felt as well as seen, and the puppet-show to realities of flesh and blood.

That this magical transforming element is wanting in a most remarkable pair of contemporaries, Chesterfield and "Lady Mary," has been generally allowed; though a strong fight has been made by some of her sisters for "my lady" and though the soundest criticism allows that "my lord" did not so much lack as dissemble heart and even sometimes showed the heart he had. It would be out of our proper line to discuss such questions here at any length. It may be enough to warn readers who have not yet had time to look into the matter for themselves that Pope's coarse attacks on Lady Mary and Johnson's fine rhetorical rebuff of Chesterfield were unquestionably outbursts of hurt personal pride. Horace Walpole made hits at both for reasons which we may call personal at second-hand, because the one was a friend of his sister-in-law and the other an enemy of his father. As for Dickens' caricature of "Sir John Chester" in *Barnaby Rudge* it is not so much a caricature as a sheer and inexcusable libel. Anyhow, the letters of the Earl and the Lady are exceedingly good reading. Persons of no advanced

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. Paul thinks that "the baby language" is terribly out of character, and that there is "too much of it"; that Swift "would try to make love though he did not know what love meant"; and that the whole rings hollow and insincere. Others, women as well as men, have held that the "little language" is only less pathetic than it is charming; that Swift was one of the greatest, if one of the unhappiest lovers of the world; and that the thing is as sincere as if it had been written in the Palace of Truth and only hollow as is the space between Heaven and Hell.

<sup>13</sup> It should never be, but perhaps sometimes is, forgotten that "Stella" was a lady of unusual wits, and of what Swift's greatest decrier called in his own protégée Mrs. Williams "universal curiosity," that is to say not "inquisitiveness" but "intelligent interest." The politics etc. are not mere selfish attention to what interests the writer only.

years who have been introduced to them in the twentieth century have been known to find them positively captivating: and their attractions are, not merely as between the two but even in each case by itself, singularly various. Lady Mary's forte – perhaps in direct following of her great forerunner and part namesake, Marie de Sévigné, though she spoke inadvisedly of her – lies in description of places and manners, and in literary criticism.<sup>14</sup> Her accounts of her Turkish journey in earlier days, and of some scenes in Italy later, of her court and other experiences, etc., rank among the best things of the kind in English; and her critical acuteness, assisted as it was by no small possession of what might almost be called scholarship, was most remarkable for her time. Also, she does all these things naturally – with that naturalness at which – when they possess it at all – women are so much better than men. People say a lady can never pass a glass without looking at herself. (One thinks by the way one has seen men do that.) But after all what the glass gives is a reflection and record of nature: and women learn to see it in others as well as in themselves.

## CHESTERFIELD

Few English writers have suffered more injustice in popular estimation than Chesterfield. Even putting aside the abuse by which, as above mentioned, Johnson showed (on Fluellen's principles convincingly) that he had more in common with the Goddess Juno than the J in both their names – that is to say an *insanabile vulnus* of vanity – there remain sources of mistakes and prejudice which have been all too freely tapped. The miscellaneous letters – which show sides of him quite different from those most in evidence throughout the "Letters to his Son" – are rarely read: these latter have been, at least once and probably oftener, made into a schoolbook for translation into other languages – an office by no means likely to conciliate affection. And even when they are not suspected of positive immorality there is a too general idea that they are frivolously and trivially didactic – the sort of thing that Mr. Turveydrop the elder might have written on Deportment – if he had had brains enough. Yet again, unbiassed appreciation of them has been hampered by all sorts of idle controversies as to the kind of man that young Stanhope actually turned out to be – a point of merely gossiping importance in any case, and, whatever be the facts of this one, having no more to do with the merit of the letters than the other fact that some people make mistakes in their accounts after having learnt the multiplication table has to do with the value of that composition. As a matter of relevant fact the letters – except (and even here the accusations against them are much exaggerated) from the point of view of very severe morality in regard to one or two points – perhaps no more than one – are full of sound advice, clear common-sense, and ripe experience of the world. The manners they recommend are not those of any but a very exceptional "dancing master," they are those of a gentleman. The temper that they inculcate and that they exhibit in the inculcator is positively kindly and relatively correct. Both these and the other batch of "Letters to his Godson" and successor in the Earldom (the Lord Chesterfield for forging whose name Dr. Dodd was hanged) show the most curious and unusual pains on the part of a man admitted to be in the highest degree a man of the world, and sometimes accused of being nothing else, to make himself intelligible and agreeable to young – at first very young – boys. In his letters to older folk, both men and women, qualities for which there was no room in the others arise – the thoughts of a statesman and a philosopher, the feelings of a being quite different from the callous, frivolous, sometimes "insolent"<sup>15</sup> worldling who has been so often put in the place of the real Chesterfield. And independently of all this there is present in all these letters – though most attractively in those to his son – a power of literary expression which would have made

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<sup>14</sup> It must not be forgotten that she was Fielding's cousin. And after the remark above on Swift it is pleasant and may be fair to say that Mr. Paul is a hearty "Marian."

<sup>15</sup> Johnson is again the chief and by no means trustworthy witness for this "insolence." But in the same breath he admitted that Chesterfield was "dignified." Now dignity is almost as doubtfully compatible with insolence as with impudence.

the fortune of any professional writer of the time. If Chesterfield's literary taste was too often decided by the fashionable limitations of this time, it was, within those limitations, accomplished: and it was accompanied, as mere taste very often is not, by no small command of literary production. He could and did write admirable light verse; his wit in conversation is attested in the most final fashion by his enemy Horace Walpole, and some of the passages in the letters where he indulges in description or even dialogue are by no means unworthy of the best genteel comedy of the time. But he could also, as was said of someone else, be "nobly serious," as in his "character" writing and elsewhere. His few contributions to the half-developed periodical literature of his day show how valuable he would have been to the more advanced Review or Magazine of the nineteenth century: and if he had chosen to write Memoirs they would probably have been among the best in English.<sup>16</sup> Now the Memoir and the Letter are perhaps the most straitly and intimately connected forms of literature.

### HORACE WALPOLE

Horace Walpole – like his two contemporaries, fellow-members of English aristocratic society, acquaintances and objects of aversion just discussed – has been the subject of very various opinions. Johnson (of whom he himself spoke with ignorant contempt and who did not know his letters, but did know some of his now half-forgotten published works) dismissed him with good-natured belittlement. Macaulay made him the subject of some of the most unfortunately exaggerated of those antitheses of blame and praise which, in the long run, have done the writer more harm than his subjects. To take one example less likely to be known to English readers, the wayward and prejudiced, but often very acute French critic already mentioned, Barbey d'Aurevilly, though he admits Horace's *esprit* pronounces it *un fruit brillant, amer, et glacé*. There are undoubtedly many things to be said against him as a man – if you take the "Letters-a-telltale-of-character" view, especially so. He was certainly spiteful, and he had the particularly awkward – though from one point of view not wholly unamiable – peculiarity of being what may be called spiteful at second hand. To stand up for your friends at the proper time and in the proper place is the duty, and should be the pleasure, of every gentleman. But to bite and for the most part, if not almost always, to *back-bite* your friends' supposed enemies – often when they have done nothing adverse to those friends on the particular occasion – is the act at the best of an intempestively officious person, at the worst of a cur. And Horace was always doing this in regard to all sorts of people – his abuse of Johnson himself, of Chesterfield and Lady Mary, of Fielding and others, having no personal excuse or reason whatsoever.

His taste in collecting, building, etc., is not a matter in which men of other times should be too ready to throw stones, for taste in all such matters at almost all times, however sure a stronghold it may seem to those who occupy it, is the most brittle of glass-houses to others. He had also a considerable touch of almost original genius in important kinds of literature, as *The Mysterious Mother* and *The Castle of Otranto* showed – a touch which undoubtedly helped him in his letters. But of critical power he had nothing at all; and his knowledge (save, perhaps in Art) was anything but extensive and still less accurate. Politically he was a mere baby, all the eighty years of his life; though he passed many of them in the House of Commons and might have passed several in the House of Lords, had he chosen to attend it. When he was young he was a theoretical republican rejoicing in the execution of Charles I.: when he was old the French Revolution was to him anathema and he was horrified at the execution of Louis XVI. He was incapable of sustaining, perhaps of understanding, an argument: everything with him was a matter, as the defamers of women say it is with them, of personal and arbitrary fancy, prejudice, or whim.

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<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to think of anyone who has combined statesmanship (Chesterfield's accomplishments in which are constantly forgotten), social gifts and literary skill in an equal degree.

But all this does not prevent him from being one of the best letter-writers in the English language: and if you take bulk of work along with variety of subject; maintenance of interest and craftsmanship as well as bulk, perhaps the very best of all. The latest standard edition of his letters, to which additions are still being made, is in sixteen well-filled volumes, and there are probably few readers of good taste and fair knowledge who would object if it could be extended to sixty. There is perhaps no body of epistles except Madame de Sévigné's own – which Horace fervently admired and, assisted perhaps by the feminine element in his own nature, copied assiduously – exhibiting the possible charm of letter-writing more distinctly or more copiously.

To examine the nature of this charm a little cannot be irrelevant in such an Introduction as this: and from what has just been said it would seem that these letters will form as good a specimen for examination as any. They are not very much "mannerised": indeed, nobody but Thackeray, in the wonderful chapter of *The Virginians* where Horace is made to describe his first interview with one of the heroes, has ever quite imitated them. Their style, though recognisable at once, is not a matter so much of phrase as of attitude. His revelations of character – his own that is to say, for Horace was no conjuror with any one else's – are constant but not deeply drawn. He cannot, or at least does not, give a plot of any kind: every letter is a sort of *review* of the subject – larger or smaller – from the really masterly accounts of the trial of the Jacobite Lords after the "Forty-five" to the most trivial notices of people going to see "Strawberry"; of remarkable hands at cards; of Patty Blount (Pope's Patty) in her autumn years passing his windows with her gown tucked up because of the rain. Art and letters appear; travelling and visiting; friendship and society; curious belated love-making with the Miss Berrys; scandal (a great deal of it); charity (a little, but more than the popular conception of Horace allows for); the court-calendar, club life, almost all manner of things except religion (though it is said Horace had an early touch of Methodism) and really serious thought of any kind, form the budget of his letter-bag. And it is all handled with the most unexpected equality of success. There is of course nothing very "arresting." Cooking chickens in a sort of picnic with madcap ladies, and expecting "the dish to fly about our ears" is perhaps the most exciting incident<sup>17</sup> of the sixteen volumes and seven or eight thousand pages. But everywhere there is interest; and that of a kind that does not stale itself.

The fact would seem to be that the art of letter-writing is a sort of mosaic or macédoine of nearly all departments of the general Art of Literature. You want constant touches of the art narrative, and not very seldom some of the art dramatic. Always you want that of conversation – subtly differentiated. Occasionally, though in the ordinary letter not very often, you want argument: much oftener description. Pathos, tenderness, etc., are more exceptionally required: and it is, in modern times at least, generally accepted that in the letter consolatory, that almost greatest of Shakespearian magic phrases, "the rest is silence" should never be forgotten and very quickly applied. Wit is welcome, if it be well managed: but that is a pretty constant proviso in regard to the particular element. Perhaps the greatest negative caution of all is that the letter should not be *obviously* "written for publication."

Now the curious thing about Walpole is that his letters were, pretty certainly in some cases (those to Mann) and not improbably in nearly all, written with some view to publication if only of a limited sort, and yet that the intention is rarely prominent to an offensive degree. Even if we did not know the curious and disgusting tricks that Pope played with his, we should be certain that he was always thinking of the possibility of somebody else than the reader to whom they were addressed reading them. With nearly an equal presumption as to the fact in the case of Horace (though to do him justice he did not indulge in any ignoble tricks with them) this fact rarely occurs and never offends. An unkind critic with a turn for rather obvious epigram might say that the man's nature was so artificial that his artifice seems natural. If so, all the more credit to him as an artificer. And another feather in his cap is that, although you can hardly ever mistake the writer, his letters take a

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<sup>17</sup> Excluding of course purely historical and public things like the trials of the '45 and the riots of '80.

slight but sufficient colour of difference according to the personality of the recipient. He does not write to Montagu exactly as he writes to Mann; to Gray as to Mason; to Lady Upper-Ossory as to earlier she-correspondents. So once more, though there are large and important possible subjects for letters on which "Horry" does not write at all, it is questionable whether, everything being counted in that he has, and no unfair offsets allowed for what he does not attempt, we have in English any superior to him as a letter-writer.

## GRAY

The case of another famous eighteenth-century epistoler – Walpole's schoolfellow and except for the time of a quarrel (the blame of which Horace rather generously took upon himself but in which there were doubtless faults on both sides)<sup>18</sup> life-long friend – is curiously different. Gray was a poet, while Walpole, save for a touch of fantastic imagination, had nothing of poetry in him and could not, as some who are not poets can, even appreciate it. In more than one other intellectual gift he soared above Horace. He was essentially a scholar, while his friend was as essentially a sciolist. He even combined the scientific with the literary temperament to a considerable extent: and thus was enabled to display an orderliness of thought by no means universal in men of letters, and (at least according to common estimation) positively rare in poets. His tastes were as various as his friend's: but instead of being a mere bundle of casual likings and dislikings, they were aesthetically conceived and connected. He was not exactly an amiable person: indeed, though there was less spitefulness in him than in Horace there was, perhaps, more positive "bad blood." As for the feature in his character, or at least conduct, that impressed itself so much on Mr. Matthew Arnold – that he "never spoke out" – it might be thought, if it really existed, to have been rather fatal to letter-writing, in which a sense of constraint and "keeping back" is one of the very last things to be desired. And some of the positive characteristics and accomplishments above enumerated (not the poetry – poets have usually been good epistolers) might not seem much more suitable.

As a matter of fact, however, Gray *is* a good letter-writer – a very good letter-writer indeed. His letters, as might be expected from what has been said, carry much heavier metal than Horace's; but in another sense they are not in the least heavy. They are very much less in bulk than those of the longer lived and more "scriblative" though hardly more leisured writer:<sup>19</sup> and – as not a defect but a consequence of the quality just attributed to them – they do not quite carry the reader along with them in that singular fashion which distinguishes the others. But no one save a dunce can find them dull: and their variety is astonishing when one remembers that the writer was, for great part of his life, a kind of recluse. He touches almost everything except love (one wonders whether there were any unpublished, and feels pretty sure that there must have been some unwritten, letters to Miss Speed which would have filled the gap) and with a result of artistic success even more decided than that assigned to Goldsmith's versatility by Gray's enemy or at least "incompatible" Johnson.<sup>20</sup> His letters of travel are admirable: his accounts of public affairs, though sometimes extremely prejudiced, very clever; those of University society and squabbles among the very best that we have in English; those touching "the picturesque" extremely early and remarkably clear-sighted; those touching literature

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<sup>18</sup> They were travelling together (always rather a test of friendship) in Italy, and Horace, as he confesses, no doubt gave himself airs. But it is pretty certain that Gray had not at this time, if he ever had, that fortunate combination of good (or at least well-commanded) temper and good breeding which enables a gentleman to meet such conduct with conduct on his own side as free from petulant "touchiness" as from ignoble parasitism.

<sup>19</sup> Gray was not, like Walpole, a richly endowed sinecurist. But to use a familiar "bull" he seems never to have had anything to do, and never to have done it when he had. His poems are a mere handful; his excellent *Metrum* is a fragment; and as Professor of History at Cambridge he never did anything at all.

<sup>20</sup> They do not seem to have known each other personally. But (for reasons not difficult to assign but here irrelevant) Johnson was on the whole, though not wholly, unjust to Gray, and Gray seems to have disliked and spoken rudely of Johnson.

among the least one-sided of their time. If there are, as observed or hinted above, some unamiable touches, his persistent protection of the poor creature Mason; his general attitude to his friends the Whartons; and his communications with younger men like Norton Nicholls and Bonstetten, go far to remove, or, at least, to counterbalance, the impression.

This last division indeed, and the letters to Mason, emphasize what is evident enough in almost all, a freedom on his part (which from some things in his character and history we might not altogether have expected) from a fault than which hardly any is more disagreeable in letters. This is the manifestation of what is called, in various more or less familiar terms, "giving oneself airs," "side," "patronising," etc. He may sometimes come near this pitfall of "intellectuals," but he never quite slips into it, being probably preserved by that sense of humour which he certainly possessed, though he seldom gave vent to it in verse and not very often in prose. Taking them altogether, Gray's letters may be said to have few superiors in the combination of intellectual weight and force with "pastime" interest. To some of course they may be chiefly or additionally interesting because of such light as they throw or withhold on a rather problematic character, but this, like the allegory in Spenser according to Hazlitt, "won't bite" anyone who lets it alone. They are extremely good letters to read: and the more points of interest they provide for any reader the better for that reader himself. Once more too, they illustrate the principle laid down at the beginning of this paper. They are good letters because they are, with the usual subtle difference necessary, like very good talk, recorded.<sup>21</sup>

## COWPER

Nor is there any more doubt about the qualifications of the fifth of our selected eighteenth-century letter-writers. Cowper's poetry has gone through not very strongly marked but rather curious variations of critical estimate. Like all transition writers he was a little too much in front of the prevailing taste of his own time, and a little too much behind that of the time immediately succeeding. There may have been a very brief period, before the great romantic poets of the early nineteenth century became known, when he "drove" young persons like Marianne Dashwood "wild": but Marianne Dashwoods and their periods succeed and do not resemble each other.<sup>22</sup> He had probably less hold on this time – when he had the best chance of popularity – than Crabbe, one of his own group, while he was destitute of the extraordinary appeals – which might be altogether unrecognised for a time but when felt are unmistakable – of the other two, Burns and Blake, of the poets of the seventeen-eighties. His religiosity was a doubtful "asset" as people say nowadays: and even his pathetic personal history had its awkward side. But as to his letters there has hardly at any time, since they became known, existed a difference of opinion among competent judges. There may be some unfortunates for whom they are too "mild": but we hardly reckon as arbiters of taste the people for whom even brandy is too mild unless you empty the cayenne cruet into it. Moreover the "tea-pot pieties" (as a poet-critic who ought to have known better once scornfully called them) make no importunate appearance in the bulk of the correspondence: while as regards the madness this supplies one of the most puzzling and perhaps not the least disquieting of "human documents." A reader may say – by no means in his haste, but after consideration – not merely "Where is the slightest sign of insanity in these?" but "How on earth did it happen that the writer of these *ever* went mad?" even with the assistance of Newton, and Teedon, and, one has to say, Mrs. Unwin.

For among the characteristics of Cowper's letters at their frequent and pretty voluminous best, are some that seem not merely inconsistent with insanity, but likely to be positive antidotes to and

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<sup>21</sup> The varieties of what may be called literary *exercise* which have been utilised for educational or recreative purposes, are almost innumerable. Has anyone ever tried "breaking up" a letter (such as those to be given hereafter) into a conversation by interlarded comment, questions, etc.?

<sup>22</sup> As far as the accidents are concerned. The essentials vary not. Marianne is eternal, whether she faints and blushes, or jazes and – does not blush.

preservatives from it. There is a quiet humour – not of the fantastic kind which, as in Charles Lamb, forces us to admit the possibility of near alliance to *over*-balance of mind – but *counter*-balancing, antiseptic, *salt*. There is abundant if not exactly omnipresent common-sense; excellent manners; an almost total absence in that part of the letters which we are now considering of selfishness, and a total absence of ill-nature.<sup>23</sup> It is no business of ours here to embark on the problem, "What was the dram of eale" that ruined all this and more "noble substance" in Cowper? though there is not much doubt about the agency and little about the principal agents that effected the mischief. But it is quite relevant to point out that all the good things noticed are things distinctly and definitely good for letter-writing. And sometimes one cannot help regretfully wondering whether, if he – who dealt so admirably with such interests as were open to him – had had more and wider ones to deal with, *we* should not have had still more varied and still more delightful letters, and *he* would have escaped the terrible fate that fell on him. For although Cowper was the reverse of selfish in the ordinary sense, he was intensely self-centred, and his life gave too much opportunity for that excessive self-concentration which is the very hotbed of mental disease.

It is not a little surprising from this point of view, and it perhaps shows how imperative the letter-writing faculty is when it is possessed – that Cowper's letters are as good as they are: while that point of view also helps us to understand why they are sometimes not so good.

Of all the floating thoughts we find  
Upon the surface of the mind,

as he himself very happily sums up the subjects of letter-writing, there are few in his case which are of more unequal value than his criticisms. Cowper had more than one of the makings of a critic, and a very important critic. He was, or at any rate had been once, something of a scholar; he helped to effect and (which is not always or perhaps even often the case) helped *knowingly* to effect, one of the most epoch-making changes in English literature. But for the greater part of his life he read very little; he had little chance of anything like literary discussion with his peers; and accordingly his critical remarks are random, uncoordinated, and mostly a record of what struck him at the moment in the way of like and dislike, agreement or disagreement.

But then there is nothing that we go for to Cowper as a letter-writer so little as for things of this kind: and even things of this kind take the benefit of what Coleridge happily called – and what everybody has since wisely followed Coleridge in calling – his "divine chit-chat." As with Walpole – though with that difference of idiosyncrasy which all the best things have from one another – it does not in the least matter what, among mundane affairs at least, Cowper was talking about. If his conversation – and some of the few *habitués* of Olney say it was – was anything like his letter-writing, it is no wonder that people sat over even breakfast for an hour to "satisfy sentiment not appetite" as they said with that slight touch of priggishness which has been visited upon them heavily, but which perhaps had more to do with their merits than more mannerless periods will allow.

And not even Walpole's show to quite the same degree, that extraordinary power of making anything interesting – of entirely transcending the subject – which belongs to the letter-writer in probably a greater measure than to any man-of-letters in the other sense, except the poet. The matter which these letters have to chronicle is often the very smallest of small beer. The price, conveyance and condition of the fish his correspondents buy for him or give him (Cowper was very fond of fish and lived, before railways, in the heart of the Midlands); one of the most uneventful of picnics; hares and hair (one of his most characteristic pieces of quietly ironic humour is a brief descant on wigs with a suggestion that fashion should decree the cutting off of people's own legs and the substitution

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<sup>23</sup> One unfortunate exception, the *ex-post facto* references to the split with Lady Austin, may be urged by a relentless prosecutor. But when William has to choose between Mary and Anna it will go hard but he will *have* to be unfair to one of them.

of artificial ones); the height of chairs and candlesticks – anything will do. He remarks gravely somewhere, "What nature expressly designed me for, I have never been able to conjecture; I seem to myself so universally disqualified for the common and customary occupations and amusements of mankind." Perhaps poetry – at least poetry of the calibre of "Yardley Oak," and "The Castaway," of "Boadicea" and the "Royal George" in one division; of "John Gilpin" in the other, may not be quite properly classed among the "common and customary occupations of mankind." But letter-writing might without great impropriety be so classed: and there cannot be the slightest doubt that Nature intended Cowper for a letter-writer. Whether he writes "The passages and events of the day as well as of the night are little better than dreams" or "An almost general cessation of egg-laying among the hens has made it impossible for Mrs. Unwin to enterprise a cake" one has (but perhaps a little more vividly) that agreeable sensation which at one time visited Tennyson's Northern Farmer. One "thinks he's said what he ought to 'a said" in the exact manner in which he ought to have said it.

## MINORS

It is however most important to remember that these Five are only, as it were, commanding officers of the great Army, representative of the very numerous constituents, who do the service and enjoy the franchise of letter-writing in the eighteenth century. There is hardly a writer of distinction in any other kind whose letters are not noteworthy; and there are very numerous letter-writers of interest who are scarcely distinguished in any other way. Perhaps Fielding disappoints us most in this section by the absence of correspondence, all the more so that the "Voyage to Lisbon" is practically letter-stuff of the best. From Smollett also we might have more – especially more like his letter to Wilkes on the subject of the supposed impressment of Johnson's negro servant Frank, which we hope to give here. Sterne's character would certainly be better if his astonishing daughter had suppressed some of his epistles, but it would be much less distinct, and they are often, if sometimes discreditably so, amusing if not edifying. The vast mass of Richardson's correspondence would correspond in another sense to the volume of his novels. We have letters from Berkeley at the beginning and others from Gibbon at the end – these last peculiarly valuable, because, as sometimes but not perhaps very often happens, they do not merely illustrate but supplement and complete the published work. From ladies, courtly, domestic, literary and others, we have shelves – and cases – and almost libraries full; from the lively chat of the Lepels and Bellendens and Howards of the early Georgian time to those copious and unstudied but never dull, compositions which Fanny Burney poured forth to "Susan and Fredy," to Maria Allen and to "Daddy Crisp" and a score of others; those of the Montagu circle; the documents upon which some have based aspersion and others defence of Mrs. Thrale; and the prose utterances of the "Swan of Lichfield," otherwise Miss Seward.<sup>24</sup> There are Shenstone's letters for samples of one kind and those of the Revd. Mr. Warner (the supposed original of Thackeray's Parson Sampson) for another and very different one. Even outside the proper and real "mail-bag" letter all sorts of writings – travels, pamphlets, philosophical and theological arguments, almost everything – throw themselves into the letter form. To come back to that with which we began there is no doubt that the eighteenth century is the century of the letter with us.

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<sup>24</sup> This "swan's" utterances in poetry were quite unlike those of Tennyson's dying bird: and her taste in it was appalling. She tells Scott that the Border Ballads were totally destitute of any right to the name.

## IV NINETEENTH CENTURY LETTERS. EARLY

### EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY GROUPS

There is, however, not the slightest intention of suggesting here that the art of letter-writing died with the century in which it flourished so greatly. In the first place, periods of literary art seldom or never "die" in a moment like a tropical sunset; and, in the second, the notion that centennial years necessarily divide such periods, as well as the centuries in which they appear, is an unhistorical delusion. There have been dates in our history – 1400 was one of them – where something of the kind seems to have happened: but they are very rare. Most ships of literature at such times are fortunately what is called in actual ships "clinker-built" – that is to say overlappingly – and except at 1600 this has never been so much the case as two hundred years later and one hundred ago. When the eighteenth century closed, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and Southey were men approaching more or less closely, thirty years of age. Landor, Hazlitt, Lamb and Moore were at least, and some of them well, past the conventional "coming of age"; De Quincey, Byron and Shelley were boys and even Keats was more than an infant. In the first mentioned of these groups there was still very marked eighteenth-century idiosyncrasy; in the second some; and it was by no means absent from Byron though hardly present at all in most respects as regards Shelley and Keats. Certainly in none of the groups, and only in one or two individuals, is there much if any shortcoming as concerns letter-writing. Wordsworth indeed makes no figure as a letter-writer, and nobody who has appreciated his other work would expect him to do so. The first requisite of the letter-writer is "freedom" – in a rather peculiar sense of that word, closest to the way in which it has been employed by some religious sects. Wordsworth could *preach* – nearly always in a manner deserving respect and sometimes in one commanding almost infinite admiration; but when the letter-writer begins to preach he is in danger of the waste-paper basket or the fire. Coleridge's letters are fairly numerous and sometimes very good: but more than one of his weaknesses appears in them.

The excellence of Scott's, though always discoverable in Lockhart, was perhaps never easily appreciable till they were separately collected and published not very many years ago. It may indeed be suggested that the "Life and Letters" system, though very valuable as regards the "Life" is apt a little to obscure the excellence of the "Letters" themselves. Of this particular collection it is not too much to say that while it threw not the least stain on the character of one of the most faultless (one singular and heavily punished lapse excepted) of men of letters, it positively enhanced our knowledge of the variety of his literary powers.

Perhaps however the best of letter-writers amongst these four protagonists of the great Romantic Revival in England (the inevitable attempt sometimes made now to quarrel with that term is as inevitably silly) is the least good poet. Southey's letters, never yet fully but very voluminously published, have not been altogether fortunate in their fashion of publication. There have been questionings about the propriety of "Selected" Works; but there surely can be little doubt that in the case of Letters a certain amount of selection is not only justifiable but almost imperative. Everyone at all addicted to correspondence must know that in writing to different people on the same or closely adjacent days, if "anything has" in the common phrase "happened" he is bound to repeat himself. He may, if he has the sense of art, take care to vary his phrase even though he knows that no two letters will have the same reader; but he cannot vary his matter much. Southey's letters, in the two collections by his son and his son-in-law, were edited without due regard to this: and the third – those to Caroline Bowles, his second wife – might have been "thinned" in a different way. But the bulk of

interesting matter is still very large and the quality of the presentation is excellent. If anyone fears to plunge into some dozen volumes let him look at the "Cats" and the "Statues" of Greta Hall, printed at the end of the *Doctor*, but both in form and nature letters. He will not hesitate much longer, if he knows good letter-stuff when he sees it.<sup>25</sup>

## LANDOR

Most of the second group wrote letters worth reading, but only one of them reaches the first rank in the art; it is true that he is among the first *of* the first. The letters of Landor supply not the least part of that curious problem which is presented by his whole work. They naturally give less room than the *apices* of his regular prose and of his poetry for that marvellous perfection of style and phrase which is allowed even by those who complain of a want of substance in him. And another complaint of his "aloofness" affects them in two ways rather damagingly. When it is present it cuts at the root of one of the chief interests of letters, which is intimacy. When it is absent, and Landor presents himself in his well-known character of an angry baby (as for instance when he remarked of the Bishop who did not do something he wanted, that "God alone is great enough for him [Walter Savage Landor] to ask anything of *twice*") he becomes merely – or perhaps to very amiable folk rather painfully – ridiculous. De Quincey and Hazlitt diverted a good deal of what might have been utilised as mere letter-writing faculty into their very miscellaneous work for publication. Moore could write very good letters himself: but is perhaps most noted and notable in connection with the subject as being one of the earliest and best "Life-and-Letters" craftsmen in regard to Byron.

But none of these restrictions or provisos is requisite, or could for a moment be thought of, in reference to Charles Lamb. Of him, as of hardly any other writer of great excellence (perhaps Thackeray is most like him in this way) it can be said that if we had nothing but his letters we should almost be able to detect the qualities which he shows in his regular works. Some of the *Essays of Elia* and his other miscellanies are or pretend to be actual letters. Certainly not a few of his letters would seem not at all strange and by no means unable to hold up their heads, if they had appeared as Essays of that singularly fortunate Italian who had his name taken, *not* in vain but in order to be titular author of some of the choicest things in literature.

Indeed that unique combination of bookishness and native fancy which makes the "Eliesque" quality is obviously as well suited to the letter as to the essay, and would require but a stroke or two of the pen, in addition or deletion, to produce examples of either. One often feels as if it must have been, as the saying goes, a toss-up whether the *London Magazine* or some personal friend got a particular composition; whether it was issued to the public direct or waited for Serjeant Talfourd to collect and edit it. The two English writers whom, on very different sides of course, Lamb most resembles, and whom he may be said to have copied (of course as genius copies) most, are Sterne and Sir Thomas Browne. But between the actual letters and the actual works of these two, themselves, there is a great difference, while (as has just been noted) in Lamb's case there is none. The reason of course is that though Sir Thomas is one of our very greatest authors and the Reverend Yorick not by any means unplaced in the running for greatness, both are in the highest degree artificial: while Lamb's way of writing, complex as it is, necessitating as it must have done not a little reading and (as would seem almost necessary) not a little practice, seems to run as naturally as a child's babble. The very tricks – mechanical dots, dashes, aposiopeses – which offend us now and then in Sterne; the unfamiliar Latinisms which frighten some and disgust others in Browne, drop from Lamb's lips or pen like the pearls of the Fairy story. Unless you are born out of sympathy with Elia, you never think about them as tricks at all. Now this naturalness – it can hardly be said too often here – is the one thing needful

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<sup>25</sup> For a singular misjudgment on this point see Prefatory Note *infra*.

in letters. The different forms of it may be as various and as far apart from each other as those of the other Nature in flora or fauna, on mountain and sea, in field and town. But if it is there, all is right.

## BYRON

There are few more interesting groups in the population of our subject than that formed by the three poets whom we mentioned last when classifying the epistolers of the early nineteenth century. There is hardly one of them who has not been ranked by some far from contemptible judgments among our greatest as poets; and merely as letter-writers they have been put correspondingly high by others or the same. It is rather curious that the most contested as to his place as a poet has been, as a rule, allowed it most easily as a letter-writer. The enormous vogue which Byron's verse at once attained both at home and abroad – has at home if not abroad (where reputations of poets often depend upon extra-poetical causes) long ceased to be undisputed: indeed has chiefly been sustained by spasmodic and not too successful exertions of individuals. It was never, of course, paralleled in regard to his letters. But these letters early obtained high repute and have never, in the general estimate, lost it. Some good judges even among those who do not care very much for the poems, have gone so far as to put him among our very best epistolers; and few have put him very much lower. Acceptance of the former estimate certainly – perhaps even of the latter – depends however upon the extent to which people can also accept recognition in Byron of the qualities of "Sincerity and Strength." That he was always a great though often a careless craftsman, and sometimes a great artist in literature, nobody possessed of the slightest critical ability can deny or doubt. But there are some who shake their heads over the attribution of anything like "sincerity" to him, except very occasionally: and who if they had to translate his "strength" into Greek would select the word *Bia* ("violence") and not the word *Kratos* (simple "strength") from the *dramatis personae* of the *Prometheus Vincit*. Now "sincerity" of a kind – even of that kind which we found in Walpole and did not find in Pope – has been contended for here as a necessity in the best, if not in all good, letters; and "violence" is almost fatal to them. Of a certain kind of letter Byron was no doubt a skilful practitioner.<sup>26</sup> But to some it will or may always seem that the vital principle of his correspondence is to that of the real "Best" as stage life to life off the stage. These two can sometimes approach each other marvellously: but they are never the same thing.

## SHELLEY

When Mr. Matthew Arnold expressed the opinion that Shelley's letters were more valuable than his poetry it was, of course, as Lamb said of Coleridge "only his fun." In the words of another classic, he "did it to annoy, because he knew it teased" some people. The absurdity is perhaps best antagonised by the perfectly true remark that it only shows that Mr. Arnold understood the letters and did not understand the poetry. But it was a little unfortunate, not for the poetry but for the letters, against which it might create a prejudice. They are so good that they ought not to have been made victims of what in another person the same judge would have called, and rightly, a *saugrenu*<sup>27</sup> judgment. Like all good letters – perhaps all without exception according to Demetrius and Newman – they carry with them much of their author's idiosyncrasy, but in a fashion which should help to correct certain misjudgments of that idiosyncrasy itself. Shelley is "unearthly," but it is an entire mistake to suppose that his unearthliness can never become earthly to such an extent as is required. The beginning of *The Recollection* ("We wandered to the pine forest") is as vivid a picture of actual scenery as ever appeared on the walls of any Academy: and *The Witch of Atlas* itself, not to mention the portrait-

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<sup>26</sup> Particularly when he is able to apply the *Don Juan* mood of sarcastic if rather superficial life-criticism in which he was a real master.

<sup>27</sup> *I.e.* "violently and vulgarly absurd."

frescoes in *Adonais*, is quite a *waking* dream. The quality of liveness is naturally still more prominent in the letters, because poetical transcendence of fact is not there required to accompany it. But it *does* accompany now and then; and the result is a blend or brand of letter-writing almost as unlike anything else as the writer's poetry, and in its own (doubtless lower) kind hardly less perfect. To prefer the letters to the poems is merely foolish, and to say that they are as good as the poems is perhaps excessive. But they comment and complete the Shelley of the Poems themselves in a manner for which we cannot be too thankful.

## KEATS

The letters of Keats did not attract much notice till long after those of Byron, and no short time after those of Shelley, had secured it. This was by no means wholly, though it may have been to some extent indirectly, due to the partly stupid and partly malevolent attempts to smother his poetical reputation in its cradle. The letters were inaccessible till the late Lord Houghton practically resuscitated Keats; and till other persons – rather in the "Codlin not Short" manner – rushed in to correct and supplement Mr. Milnes as he then was. And it was even much later still before two very different editors, Sir Sidney Colvin and the late Mr. Buxton Forman, completed, or nearly so, the publication. Something must be said and may be touched on later in connection with a very important division of our subject in general, as to the publication by the last-named, of the letters to Fanny Brawne: but nothing in detail need be written, and it is almost needless to say that none of these letters will appear here. No one but a brute who is also something of a fool will think any the worse of Keats for writing them. A thought of *sunt lacrimae rerum* is all the price that need be paid by any one who chooses to read them, nor is it our business to characterise at length the taste and wits of the person who could publish them.<sup>28</sup>

But putting this question aside, it is unquestionable that for some years past there has been a tendency to value the Letters as a whole very highly. Not only has unusual critical power been claimed for Keats on the strength of them, but general epistolary merit; and though nobody, so far as one knows, has yet paralleled the absurdity above mentioned in the case of Shelley, Keats has been taken by some credit-worthy judges as an unusually strong witness to the truth of the proposition already adopted here, that poets are good letter-writers.

He certainly is no exception to the rule; but to what exact extent he exemplifies it may not be a matter to be settled quite off hand. There is no doubt that at his best Keats is excellent in this way, and that best is perhaps to be found with greatest certainty, by anyone who wants to dip before plunging, in the letters to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana. Those to his little sister Fanny are also charming in their way, though the peculiar and very happy mixture of life and literature to be found in the others does not, of course, occur in them. His letters of description, to whomsoever written, are, as one might expect, first-rate; and the very late specimen – one of his very last to anyone – to *Mrs.* not Miss Brawne is as brave as it is touching. As for the criticism, there are undoubtedly (as again we should expect from the author of the wonderful preface to *Endymion*) invaluable remarks – the inspiration of poetical practice turned into formulas of poetical theory. On the other hand, the famous advice to Shelley to "be more of an artist and load every rift with ore" – Shelley whose art transcends artistry and whose substance is as the unbroken nugget gold, so that there are no rifts in it to load – is, even when one remembers how often poets misunderstand each other,<sup>29</sup> rather "cold water to the back" of admiration.

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<sup>28</sup> It may, however, be suggested that the extraordinary *bluntness* (to use no stronger word) of both is almost sufficiently evidenced in the fact that in his last edition of Keats Mr. Forman committed the additional outrage of distributing these letters according to their dates among the rest. The isolation of the agony gives almost the only possible excuse for revealing it.

<sup>29</sup> It is of course true that Shelley himself did not at first quite appreciate Keats. But *Adonais* cancels the deficit and leaves an almost infinite balance in favour. One can only hope that, had the circumstances been reversed, Keats would have set the account

It may, however, not unfairly introduce a very few considerations on the side of Keats's letters which is not so good. All but idolaters acknowledge a certain boyishness in him – a boyishness which is in fact no mean source contributory of his charm in verse. It is perhaps not always quite so charming in prose, and especially in letters. You do not want self-criticism of an obviously second-thought kind in them. But you do want that less obtrusive variety which prevents them from appearing unkempt, "down-at-heel" etc. Perhaps there is, at any rate in the earlier letters, something of this unkemptness in Keats as an epistoler.

A hasty person may say "What! do you venture to quarrel with letters where, side by side with agreeable miscellaneous details, you may suddenly come upon the original and virgin text of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'?" Most certainly not. Such a find, or one ten times less precious, would make one put up with accompaniments much more than ten times worse than the worst of Keats's letters. But it may be observed that the objection is only a fresh example of the unfortunate tendency<sup>30</sup> of mankind to "ignore elenchs" as the logicians say, or, as less pedantic phraseology has it, to talk beside the question. A man might put a thousand pound note (and you might spend many thousand pound notes without buying anything like the poem just mentioned) in a coarse, vulgar, trivial or in other ways objectionable letter. The note would be most welcome in itself, but it would not improve the quality of its covering epistle. Not, of course, that Keats's letters are coarse or vulgar, though they are sometimes rather trivial. But the point is that their excellency, *as* letters, does not depend on their enclosures (as we may call them) or even directly on their importance as biography which is certainly consummate. Are they good letters as such, and of how much goodness? Have they been presented as letters should be presented for reading? These are points on which, considering the title and range of this Introduction, it may not be improper to offer a few observations. We have already ventured to suggest that, if not the "be all and end all," at any rate the quality to be first enquired into as to its presence or its absence in letters, is "naturalness." And we have said something as to the propriety or impropriety of different modes of editing and publishing them. The present division of the subject seems to afford a specially good text for adding something more on both these matters.

As to the first point, the text is specially good because of the position of Keats in the most remarkable group in which we have rather found than placed him. To the present writer, as a reader, it seems, as has been already said whether justly or unjustly, that the element of "naturalness" – it is an ugly word, and French has no better, in fact none at all: though German is a little luckier with *natürlichkeit* and Spanish much with *naturaleza* – is rather conspicuously deficient in Byron. In Shelley it is pre-eminent, and can only be missed by those who have no kindred touch of the nature which it reflects. Shelley could be vague, unpractical, mystical; he could sometimes be just a little silly; but it was no more possible for him to be affected, or to make those slips of taste which are a sort of *minus* corresponding to the *plus* of affectation, than it was (after *Queen Mab* at least) to write anything that was not poetry. Thus in addition to the literary perfection of his letters, they have the *sine qua non* of naturalness in perfection also.

But with Keats things are different. Opinions differ as to whether he ever quite reached maturity even in poetry to the extent into which Shelley struck straight with *Alastor*, never losing it afterwards, and leaving us only to wonder what conceivable accomplishment might have even transcended *Adonais* and its successors. That with all his marvellous promise and hardly less marvellous achievement, Keats was only reaching maturity when he died has been generally allowed by the saner judgments.<sup>31</sup> Now *immaturity* has perhaps its own naturalness which is sometimes, and in a way, very charming, but is not the naturalness pure and simple of maturity. Children are sometimes, nay often, very pretty, agreeable and amusing things: but there comes a time when we rather wish

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right as triumphantly.

<sup>30</sup> This tendency makes it perhaps desirable to observe that in the *particular* context of the *Belle Dame* there is nothing whatever to cavil at.

<sup>31</sup> The recent centenary saw, as usual, with much welcome appreciation some uncritical excesses.

they would go to the nursery. Perhaps the "sometimes" occurs with Keats's earlier letters if not with his later.

## EDITING OF LETTERS

He is thus also a text for the second part of our sermon – the duty of editors and publishers of correspondence. There is much to be said for the view that publication, as it has been put, "is an unpardonable sin," that is to say, that no author (or rather no author's ghost) can justly complain if what he once deliberately published is, when all but the control of the dead hand is off, republished. *Il l'a voulu*, as the famous tag from Molière has it. But letters in the stricter sense – that is to say, pieces of private correspondence – are in very different case. Not only were they, save in very few instances, never *meant* for publication: but, which is of even more importance, they were never *prepared* for publication.<sup>32</sup> Not only, again, did the writer never see them in "proof," much less in "revise," as the technical terms go, but he never, so far as we know, exercised on them even the revision which all but the most careless authors give before sending their manuscripts to the printer. Some people of course do read over their letters before sending them: but it must be very rarely and in special, not to say dubious, cases that they do this with a view to the thing being seen by any other eyes than those of the intended recipient. It is therefore to the last degree unfair to plump letters on the market unselected and uncastigated. To what length the castigation should proceed is of course matter for individual taste and judgment. Nothing must be put in – that is clear; but as to what may or should be left out, "there's the rub." Perhaps the best criterion, though it may be admitted to be not very easy of application, is "Would the author, in publishing, have left it out or not?" Sometimes this will pass very violent expressions of opinion and even sentiments of doubtful morality and wisdom. But that it should invariably exclude mere trivialities, faults of taste, slovenlinesses of expression, etc., is at least the opinion of the present writer. And a "safety razor" of such things might perhaps with advantage have been used on Keats's, though he has written nothing which is in the least discreditable to him.

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<sup>32</sup> In not a few cases they may be said to have been deliberately *unprepared* – intended though not labelled as "private and confidential."

## V NINETEENTH CENTURY LETTERS. LATER

### A NINETEENTH CENTURY GROUP

Part at least of these general remarks has a very special relevance to the rest of our story. There may be differences of respectable opinion as to the system of editing just advocated; but they will hardly concern one point – that the susceptibilities of living persons must be considered. To some extent indeed this is a mere counsel of selfish prudence: for an editor who neglects it may get himself into serious difficulties. Even where such danger does not exist, or might perhaps be disregarded, it is impossible for any decent person to run the risk of needlessly offending others. It will be seen at once that this introduces a new matter for consideration in regard to most – practically all – of the correspondences which we have still to survey. Even those just discussed have only recently passed from under its range. Shelley's son died not so very long ago: grandchildren of Byron much more recently; and if Keats had lived to the ordinary age of man and had, as he very likely would have done, married not Fanny Brawne, but somebody else later, a son or daughter of his (daughters are particularly and sometimes inconveniently loyal to their deceased parents) might be alive and flourishing now. As this constraint extends not merely to the families of the writers but to those of persons mentioned by them (not to speak of these persons themselves in the most recent cases), it exercises, as will at once be seen, a most wide-ranging cramp and brake upon publication. Blunders are occasionally made of course: the most remarkable in recent times was probably an oversight of the editor of Edward FitzGerald's letters, than which hardly any more interesting exist among those yet to be noticed. FitzGerald, quite innocently and without the slightest personal malevolence but thinking only of Mrs. Browning's work, had expressed himself (as anybody might in a private letter) to the effect that perhaps we need not be sorry for her death. Unfortunately the letter was published while her husband was still alive: and many people must remember the very natural and excusable, but somewhat excessive and undignified, explosion which followed on his part.

Such things must of course be avoided at all costs; and the consequence is that nineteenth century letters must frequently – in fact with rare if any exceptions – have appeared in a condition of expurgation which cannot but have affected their spirit and savour to a very considerable extent. It is for instance understood that Mr. Matthew Arnold's were very severely censored; and, while readily believing this and acquiescing in its probable propriety, the old Adam in some readers may be unable to refrain from regret.

Again, there is something to be said about the less good effects of that "Life-and-Letters" system which has been quite rightly welcomed and praised for its better ones. Drawing on the Letters – with good material to work on and good skill in the worker – improves the Life enormously; but it is by no means certain – indeed it has been hinted already – that the Letters themselves do not to a certain extent lose by it. Indeed from one point of view, the word "loss" may be used in its most literal meaning. The compiler of one very famous biography was said, for instance, to have – with a disregard of the value of letters as autographs which was magnificent perhaps in one way but far from "the game" in others – cut up the actual sheets and pasted the pieces on his manuscript, sending the whole to the printers and chancing the survival even of what was sent, when it came back with the proofs.

But there is another sense of "loss" which has also to be reckoned. The framework of biography is, or at least ought to be, something more than a mere frame: and it distracts attention from the letters themselves, breaks up their continuous effect, and in many cases necessitates at least occasional

omission of parts which an editor of them by themselves would not think of excluding. Of course this is no argument against the plan as such: but it has, together with what was said recently, to be taken into account when we compare the epistolary position of the last century with that of its immediate predecessor.<sup>33</sup>

These remarks are made not in the least by way of depreciating or even making an apology for nineteenth century letters, but only in order to put the reader in a proper state for critical estimation of them. Nor is it necessary to repeat – still less to discuss – the more general lamentations with some reference to which we started as to any decay of letter-writing. Provisos and warnings may be taken as having been made sufficiently: and we pass to the actual survey.

It may have been noticed in reference to the principal group of letter-writers in the eighteenth that, with the exception of Cowper, they were all acquainted with each other. Walpole knew Lady Mary, Chesterfield and Gray; while Gray, if he did not know the other two, knew Walpole very well indeed. Something of the same sort might be contended for among those whom we have selected on the bridge of the eighteenth and nineteenth. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Lamb were of course intimately connected: Southey knew Landor and Shelley, Keats knew Shelley, Wordsworth and Lamb; while Byron and Shelley, however unequally, were pretty closely yoked together. It is not meant that in all these groups everybody wrote to each other; but that the writing faculty was curiously prominent – diffused like a kind of atmosphere – in all. Now if we look in the nineteenth for such a group it will be found perhaps less readily. But one such at least certainly exists, to wit that which includes Tennyson, Thackeray, Edward FitzGerald, Carlyle and his wife, Fanny Kemble, Sterling and one or two more. There are of course numerous others outside this group, and even in it Tennyson himself is not a very remarkable letter-writer, any more than his great rival, Browning, was. But there was the same diffusion of the letter-writing spirit which has been noticed above, and Thackeray, FitzGerald, the Carlyles, and perhaps Fanny Kemble are quite of the greater clans among our peculiar people.

The most remarkable of all these – and as it seems to the present writer, one of the most remarkable of all English letter-writers is one whose letters have never been collected,<sup>34</sup> and from whom, until comparatively lately, we had only few and as it were accidental specimens. It is hoped that, notwithstanding the great changes of taste recently as to reticence or indiscretion, there are still many people who can not only understand but thoroughly sympathise with Thackeray's disgust at the idea of having his "Life" written; and the even greater reluctance which he would certainly have felt at that of having his letters published. But, as has been suggested on a former occasion, when things *are* published there is nothing disgraceful in reading them: and it may be frankly admitted that lovers of English literature would have missed much pleasure and the opportunity of much admiration if the "Brookfield" letters, those to the Baxter family and others in America, those finally included in the "Biographical" edition, and yet others which have turned up sporadically had remained unknown. It may be doubted whether there is anything like them in our literature – if indeed there is in any other – for the double, treble or even more complicated gift of view into character, matter of interest, positive literary satisfaction, and (perhaps most remarkable of all) resemblance to and explanation of the author's "regular literature," as it has been called. In some respects they resemble the letters of Keats; but there is absent from them the immaturity which was noted in those, and which extended to both matter and style. They are more various in subject and tone than Shelley's. They are not deliberately quaint like Lamb's; and they naturally lack (whether this is wholly an advantage or not, may admit, though not here, of dispute) the restraint<sup>35</sup> which, in greater or less degree and in varied kind, characterizes the great eighteenth century epistolers.

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<sup>33</sup> In which, be it remembered, the "Life-and-Letters" system only came in quite late.

<sup>34</sup> At the very moment when this is being written a considerable new body of them is announced for sale.

<sup>35</sup> The word "restraint" may be misunderstood: but it is intended to indicate something of the general difference between "classical"

## THACKERAY

One additional charm which many of them possess may be regarded by extreme precisians as of doubtful legitimacy as far as comment here is concerned: but this may be ruled out as a superfluous scruple. It is the illumination of the text "by the author's own candles" as he himself says in a well-known Introduction: the actual "illustration" by insertion in the script, of little pen-drawings. The shortcomings of Thackeray's draughtsmanship have always been admitted: and by nobody more frankly than by himself. But they hardly affect this sort of "picturing" at all. The unfortunate inability to depict a pretty face which he deplored need do no harm whatever: and his lack of "composition" not much. A spice of caricature is almost invariably admissible in such things: and the same tricky spirit which prompted the hundreds of initials, *culs-de-lampe* etc. contributed by him to *Punch* and to be found collected in the "Oxford" edition of his works, was most happily at hand for use in letters. Some years ago there appeared, in a catalogue of autographs for sale, an extract of text and cut which was irresistibly funny. The author and designer had had a mishap by slipping on that peculiarly treacherous suddenly frozen rain for which (though we are liable enough to it in England and though some living have seen the entire Strand turned into one huge pantomime scene, roars of laughter included, as people came out of theatres) we have no special name. (The French, in whose capital it is said to be even more frequent, call it *verglas*.) In telling it he had drawn himself sitting (as involuntarily though one hopes not so eternally as *infelix Theseus*) with arms, legs, hat, etcetera in disorder suitable to the occasion and with a facial expression of the most ludicrous dismay. It can hardly have taken a dozen strokes of the pen: but they simply glorified the letter.

In no sense, however, can the value and delight of Thackeray's letters be said to depend upon this *bonus* of illustration. Without it they would be among the most noteworthy and the most delectable of their kind. One sees in them the "first state" of that extraordinary glancing at all sorts of side-views, possible objections and comments on "what the other fellow thinks," which is the main secret in his published writings. If the view of him as a "sentimentalist" (which nobody, unless it is taken offensively, need refuse to accept) is strengthened by them, that absurd other view, which strangely prevailed so long, of his "cynicism" is utterly destroyed. We see the variety of his interests; the keenness of his sensations; the strange and kaleidoscopic rapidity of the changes in his mood and thought. And through the whole there runs the wonderful style which was so long unrecognised – nay, which those who go by the trumpery machine-made rules of "composition books" used gravely to stigmatise as "incorrect." Time lifts a great many (though not perhaps all) the restraints upon publication which have been discussed and advocated above: and it will probably be possible some day for posterity to possess, not only a collected body of the now scattered Thackeray letters, but a considerably larger one than has ever appeared even in extracts and catalogues. It will be an addition to our Epistolary Library which can bear comparison with any previous occupant of those shelves: and one of the books which deserve, in a very peculiar sense, the hackneyed praise of being "as good as a novel." For it will be almost the equivalent of an additional novel of its author's own – a *William Makepeace Thackeray* in the familiar novel-form of title, and in the old Richardsonian form of contents – but oh! how different from anything of Richardson's save that it might possibly make you hang yourself, not because you could not get to the story, but because you had come to the end of it.

## FITZGERALD

If, however, anyone insists on a formal and more or less complete presentation, already existing, of nineteenth century "Letters" in a body by a single writer, the palm must probably be given to those

(already referred to) of the translator or paraphrast of Omar Khayyâm. Besides their great intrinsic interest and peculiar idiosyncrasy, they have, for anyone studying the subject as we are endeavouring to do, a curious attraction of comparison. Letter-writing, though by no means exclusively, would appear to be specially and peculiarly the *forte* of men who live somewhat special and peculiar lives – men without the ordinary family ties of wife and children – sometimes though by no means always, recluses; possibly to some extent "originals," "humourists," "eccentrics," as they have been called at different times and from different points of view. Even Walpole, fond as he was of society, belongs to the class after a fashion, as do also Chesterfield<sup>36</sup> and Lady Mary, while Gray, Cowper, and at a later period Lamb, are eminently of it. But hardly anyone so unquestionably comes under the classification as Edward FitzGerald. He certainly was for a time married, but that marriage as certainly was not made in Heaven, if it was not conspicuously of the other origin: and actual cohabitation lasted but a short time. He had no children, and though he frequently foregathered with the family from which he sprang, he was essentially a "solitary." Such solitaries, even if they do not ticket and advertise themselves as such after the fashion of Rousseau and Senancour and the author of *Jacopo Ortis*, naturally enough find in letters the outlet for communication with their fellows<sup>37</sup> which others find in conversation, and the occupation which those others have ready-made, in society, business of all kinds etc. That some copious and excellent letter-writers, such as for instance Southey, have been extremely busy, and "family men" of the most unblemished character, merely shows that the rule is not universal. But it may be observed that their letters usually have less intense idiosyncrasy than those of the others.

Of such idiosyncrasy, both in letters and in other work, few men have had more than the author of *Euphranor* and (as we have had to say before) the "translator or paraphrast" not merely of Persian but of Spanish and Greek masterpieces. It is indeed notorious that it was in this latter capacity that he showed the individuality of his genius most strongly. It is a frequently but perhaps idly<sup>38</sup> disputed question how much is Omar and how much FitzGerald, while the problem might certainly be extended by asking how much is Aeschylus and how much Calderon in his versions of those masters: but it does not concern us here. What does concern us is the fact that he has contrived to make his most famous exercise in translation signally, and the others to some extent, not dead "versions," but as it were reincarnations of the original, the spirit or the flesh (whichever anyone pleases) being his own, or both being blended of his and the author's. To do this requires a "strong nativity" though not in the equivocal sense in which another great translator of FitzGerald's own type<sup>39</sup> used that term. It shows in his scanty "original" work: but it shows also and perhaps more strongly in his letters. Everyone who has studied the history of the English Universities in connection with that of English literature knows, even if he has not been fortunate enough to experience it, the remarkable fashion in which, at certain times, colleges and coteries at Oxford and Cambridge have seemed to throw a strange and almost magical influence over a generation (hardly more) of undergraduates. There was unmistakably such an *aura* or atmosphere about in Trinity College, Cambridge, during the last of the twenties and the first of the thirties of the nineteenth century – a spirit of literature and humour, of seriousness and jest, of prose sense and half mystical poetry – which produced things as diverse as *The Dying Swan* and Clarke's *Library of Useless Knowledge*, *Vanity Fair* and the English *Rubaiyât*.

Of this curiously blended mood-combination – of which in their different ways Tennyson and Thackeray, as universally known, Brookfield, W. B. Donne, G. S. Venables, as less known, but noteworthy instances suggest themselves as examples – FitzGerald was certainly not the least remarkable. He had, as eccentrics usually and almost necessarily have, not a few limitations, some of

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<sup>36</sup> Chesterfield's deafness might, without frivolity, be brought in. It is a hindrance to conversation, but none to letter-writing.

<sup>37</sup> Or at least expression of themselves.

<sup>38</sup> Idly: because he himself expressly and repeatedly disclaims *mere* "translation."

<sup>39</sup> Dryden, in reference to Shadwell.

which possibly were, though others certainly were not, deliberately assumed or accepted. He would not allow that Tennyson had ever in his later work (not latest by any means) done anything so good as his earlier. In that unlucky though quite blameless observation on Mrs. Browning which was referred to above, he ignored or showed himself unable to appreciate the fact that the poetess had never done anything better than, if anything so good as, some of her very latest work.<sup>40</sup> It cannot be considered an entirely adequate cause for ceasing to live with your wife,<sup>41</sup> that her dresses rustle; and many other instances of what may be called practical and literary *non-sequiturs* might be alleged against him. But all these "queernesses" are evidence of a temperament and a mode of thinking which are likely to produce very satisfactory letters. They are sure not to be dull: and when the queerness is accompanied by such literary power as "Fitz" possessed they are not likely to be merely silly, as some things are which attempt not to be dull. As a matter of fact they are delightful: and their variety is astonishing. Odd stories and odd experiences seem, despite his almost claustral life, to have had a habit of flying to FitzGerald like filings to a magnet – as for instance the irresistible anecdote of the parish clerk who insisted on giving out for singing casual remarks of the parson above him as if they were verses of a hymn, and who was duly echoed by the congregation. Even when he does not make you laugh he satisfies you: even when you do not agree with him you are obliged to him for having expressed his heresy.

### FANNY KEMBLE

One of FitzGerald's special correspondents was, for reasons then imperative, not a member of the Cambridge group itself, but as closely connected with it as possible: being the sister of one of its actual members. John M. Kemble, one of our earliest and best Anglo-Saxon scholars in modern times, was, like others of his famous family (so far as is generally known) a person of varied talents, though he showed these neither in letter writing nor in the direction which Tennyson incorrectly augured in the "Sonnet to J. M. K." His sister Frances (invariably, like most though by no means all ladies of her name, called "Fanny"<sup>42</sup>) was a very remarkable person indeed. After taking early and with brilliant success to the stage which might almost be said to be hers by inheritance,<sup>43</sup> she married an American planter with even worse results (they were actually divorced) than her friend FitzGerald's marriage brought about later: and for many years returned to public life, not as an actress but as a reader. She wrote and published both prose and verse of various kinds: but her best known work and that which places her here, is a voluminous series of "Records," etc., much of which is composed of actual letters, while practically the whole of it is what we have called "letter-stuff." It has perhaps been published *too* voluminously: and it is certain that, as indeed one might expect, its parts are not equal in interest. But experienced and balanced judgment must always sum up in her favour as possessing, in letter- and even other writing, more than ordinary talent, perhaps never quite happily or fully developed. Merely as a person she seems to have exercised an extraordinary attraction without

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<sup>40</sup> "The Great God Pan" piece ("A Musical Instrument"), one of the last, was perhaps her *very* best. But he may have been thinking of *Poems before Congress*, which are poor enough.

<sup>41</sup> Lucy, daughter of that curious Quaker banker's clerk Bernard Barton, whose poetry is negligible, but who must have had some strong personal attraction. For he was a favourite correspondent of two of the greatest of contemporary letter-writers, Lamb and FitzGerald, though he constantly misunderstood their letters; he received from Byron – on an occasion likely to provoke one of the "noble poet's" outbursts of pseudo-aristocratic insolence – a singularly wise and kindly answer; and having as a perfect stranger lectured Sir Robert Peel he was – invited to dinner!

<sup>42</sup> Some have attempted to make a distinction, alleging that there are Franceses who can be called "Fanny" and others who can not. But it is doubtful whether this holds. Of two great proficientes of "letter-stuff" in overlapping generations Fanny Burney was eminently a "Fanny." Fanny Kemble, though always called so, was not.

<sup>43</sup> She was the niece of Mrs. Siddons and of John Kemble, generally considered the greatest tragic actor and actress we have had; the daughter of Charles Kemble, a player and manager of long practice and great ability; while she had yet another uncle and any number of more distant relations in the profession.

being exactly amiable<sup>44</sup>: and from the intellectual and artistic sides as a writer (we have nothing here to do with her histrionic powers) to have been what has sometimes in others been called "inorganic," "ill-regulated," "not brought off," etc., but of extraordinary capacity.

This may have had something to do with her sudden and exceptional success, when at barely twenty, and with no training except what heredity might give her, she "took the town [and the country] by storm" as Juliet, and very soon afterwards "carried" America likewise. But her "records" of these and other things are of almost the first quality: and this power of "recording" continued and was perhaps stimulated by the less as well as the more fortunate events of her life. It may be said indeed that in her time a young woman of full age (she was five and twenty), unusual experience of the world, and still more unusual wits, had no business to marry a planter in the Southern States, knowing that she was to live there, unless she had reconciled herself to the institution of slavery. Nor can anybody without prejudice deny this. But the inconsistency and the troubles it developed gave occasion to some very remarkable "recording," and the same had been the case earlier with her life, whether at home, on the stage, or in society, and was the case later whether she lived in England, in the Northern States, or on the Continent of Europe. Perhaps you never exactly like her: an unusual experience in the reading of letters, which for the most part are singularly reconciling from the mere fact of their explanatory quality. There is indeed no better confirmation of the well-known French saying *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*

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<sup>44</sup> See Prefatory Note on her letters *infra*, for an illustration of what is said of her here and of Mrs. Carlyle a little further.

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