

Golden Treasury Series

SELECTIONS

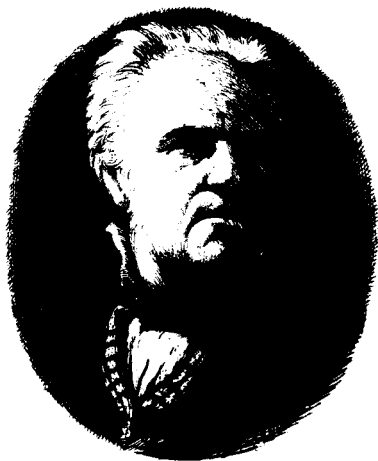
FROM THE WRITINGS OF

WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR



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PREFACE.

WHEN lately it was my privilege to contribute a sketch of Landor's life to Mr. Morley's justly popular series of *English Men of Letters*, I could not but be conscious that hardly by one in ten or twenty among my readers was very much likely to be known of him beyond his name. Warmly as his writings have always been praised by a few, with the main body of the reading public they have failed hitherto to make their way. There exists, however, a curiosity about Landor, and a desire to know him better : even the reception of the sketch in question, following as it did within a few years on the second edition of Mr. Forster's detailed *Life*, helps, if I may say as much, to prove it. Who, indeed, would not be curious? Who, that had once had his attention called towards it, could fail to be interested in so original and so imposing a figure? But strong as is the interest which Landor's personality is calculated to excite, the interest excited by his work in literature should be stronger still. The virtues of the writer, indeed, like those of the man, are far from being unobstructed or complete, and with his best work not a little that is unacceptable is mixed up. But what most distinguishes Landor from other English writers is not his incompleteness ; it is not his combination of high excellences with disconcerting faults : it is the character of those excellences themselves that most distinguishes him ; it is the exceptional aim and direction of his art.

Landor's position may in general terms be best defined by saying that he was a classic writing in a romantic age. In calling him a classic, I do not of course refer merely to his scholarship, or to the fact that a considerable part of his work deals with subjects of ancient Greece and Rome. It is true that Landor was a scholar, and in Latin especially a scholar of unusual power and attainments. The acquisitions of his Rugby days, vivified by imagination and strengthened by after-study, remained with him always; and he wrote and thought in Latin as naturally and as willingly as in English. Probably no other writer has illuminated with stronger flashes of poetical insight a more familiar book-knowledge of Rome. And certainly no other writer so trained on thoughts of Rome, none so steeped in Latinity, has had an equally just appreciation of the genius and the charm of Hellas. Both in style and sentiment Landor's writing was vitally influenced by Latin models; but from the first he realised for himself, what the classical scholarship of his age was only then beginning to realise, the essential inferiority of the Roman genius to the Greek. He put Greece in her right place; and if his Athenian statesmen and orators, if the Pericles and Phocion and Demosthenes of his creation are apt, by a certain self-conscious and set dignity of attitude, to recall Roman rather than Greek originals, yet when it comes to the true enchanted world of Hellas, to scenes or narratives from the beautiful undecaying Greek mythology, here Landor is perfectly at home; with admirable grace, freedom, and fitness he creates figures that move and act, and suffer and are consoled, in the "gravely-glad some light" of that imaginary world:

"And through the trumpet of a child of Rome
Rang the pure music of the flutes of Greece."

Concerning this part of Landor's work, taken at its best, Mr. Swinburne has in those two felicitous lines said the last word.

It is not scholarship, however, it is not a predilection

for classic subjects, nor even a happy art in handling them, that can make a writer that which we understand by the word classical as distinguished from that which we understand by the word romantic. The distinction lies deeper, and is a distinction much less of subject than of treatment, although to some subjects the one mode of treatment may be more appropriate, and to some the other. And here let us listen to Landor himself. "The classical, like the heroic age," writes he in his epistle to the author of *Pestus*,

"Is past; but poetry may re-assume
That glorious name with Tartar and with Turk,
With Goth or Arab, Sheik or Paladin,
And not with Roman or with Greek alone.
The name is graven on the workmanship."

"The name is graven on the workmanship," and to define for our present purpose the difference between the classical and the romantic modes of workmanship: in classical writing every idea is called up to the mind as nakedly as possible, and at the same time as distinctly; it is exhibited in white light, and left to produce its effect by its own unaided power. In romantic writing, on the other hand, all objects are exhibited as it were through a coloured and iridescent atmosphere. Round about every central idea the romantic writer summons up a cloud of accessory and subordinate ideas for the sake of enhancing its effect, if at the risk of confusing its outlines. The temper, again, of the romantic writer is one of excitement, while the temper of the classical writer is one of self-possession. No matter what the power of his subject, the classical writer does not fail to assert his mastery over it and over himself, while the romantic writer seems as though his subject were ever on the point of dazzling and carrying him away. On the one hand there is calm, on the other hand enthusiasm: the virtues of the one style are strength of grasp, with clearness and justice of presentment: the virtues of the other style are glow of spirit, with magic and richness of suggestion. Of

imaginative literature in England the main effort has from the first been romantic. The Elizabethans were essentially romantic, some of them extravagantly so : Shakespeare, who could write in all manners, was in a preponderating degree romantic, and never more so than in his treatment of Greek and Roman themes. To quote again the same critical epistle of Landor's own,

"Shakespeare with majesty benign called up
The obedient classics from their marble seat,
And led them through dim glen and sheeny glade.
And over precipices, over seas
Unknown by mariner, to palaces
High-arch'd, to festival, to dance, to joust,
And gave them golden spur and vizor barred,
And steeds that Pheidias had turned pale to see."

Of the great English poets, Milton was the most classical, beholding the vast images that filled his mind's eye in steady rather than in iridescent light, defining them when they are capable of definition, and maintaining a majestic self-possession in their presence. In *Paradise Lost* the images indeed are often such as no power could define : the perfection of the classical style in Milton's work is to be found rather in *Samson Agonistes* and in some of the sonnets ; while in *Paradise Regained* the characteristics of the style are pushed to excess. Then followed an age, the age of Anne and the first Georges, of which the literature claimed for itself the title of classical, and was indeed marked by uncommon qualities of clearness, calmness, and precision. But then it was not a literature of imagination ; it was only a literature of the understanding and fancy. In the regions of the imagination, of poetry in the higher sense, the literature of that age rarely laid hold of the object at all ; it dealt, not in realities, but in literary counters and catchwords bearing a merely conventional value to the mind. By the time when Landor began to write, people were getting tired of this conventional literary currency, and learning to crave for something real in poetry. His immediate contemporaries were Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Southey, Lamb ;

spirits born to unlock again for the English race the sealed treasure-houses of the poetical imagination.

Neither in choice of subject nor in treatment was the work of these men, nor that of the yet more fervid spirits who soon followed them, of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, deliberately or consistently romantic in the same sense as that of a certain group of contemporary writers in Germany was romantic, and still more that of the brilliant and acutely self-conscious group who assumed the title a generation afterwards in France. In the work of the English writers of this age, the romantic and the classical modes of treatment are mixed. The romantic mode, however, prevails ; as in an age of re-awakening, an age of imaginative conquest and discovery, enthusiasm is the temper to be expected, and the light wherein objects naturally appear is the vibrating or coloured light, the halo, as it is commonly called, of romance. Scott and Coleridge in their early days both copied the romantic models of Germany. A few years later Scott was to figure in the eyes of all Europe as the great master of the romance of Scottish scenery and of the mediæval past, and a few later again, Byron as the great master of the romance of travel, and of social and religious revolt. Meanwhile Coleridge had already written, in the *Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, examples of a romantic poetry more highly wrought and more magical in suggestion than any work either of Scott or Byron. Lamb, in alliance with Coleridge, had made himself the apostle of the romantic spirit as it is exhibited in the old English drama and lyric. Southey, whose natural gifts and instincts were for the classical manner of writing, tried hard to write romantically, and did so in a few ballads, but in epics like *Thalaba* and *Kehama* compassed little of the true romantic beyond remoteness of subject and irregularity of form. Wordsworth, the most determined enemy of false classicism, was in much of his writing truly classical. The qualities of Wordsworth's work on which Mr. Matthew Arnold with so much justice insists, when he