

LITERARY SYNTHESIS

By W. N. C. Carlton

AFTER the spectacular success of H. G. Wells's "Outline of History", the admirable "Outline of Science" appeared, and now comes an "Outline of Literature", edited by John Drinkwater. Literature, as a universal form of human expression, really needs just such a splendid synthesis and vivid, personal interpretation as Mr. Wells gave history. Ever since the mandarins of scholarship transformed the humanities into laboratory sciences, the products of their pens have been unintelligible to educated readers and hermetically sealed books to the man in the street. No wonder, then, that after forty years of wandering in a wilderness of monographs, legions of eager minds should find intellectual adventure and delight in "The Outline of History". And "The Outline of Science", under Professor Thomson's masterly direction, while lacking the unifying element of Wells's passionate purpose, revealed to them the meaning and wonder of that great field of human interest.

Under the influence of these triumphs a comprehensive survey of lit-

erature has been essayed by Mr. Drinkwater and a group of anonymous associates. In an all too brief introduction — which should have been an inspiring vision of the glorious country about to be entered upon — the author of "Abraham Lincoln" defines the purposes of the new "Outline": "It is to give the reader something like a representative summary of the work accomplished by the great creative minds of the world of letters", and to show that "from the beginning until now, from the nameless poets of the earliest scriptures down to Robert Browning, the spirit of man when most profoundly moved to creative utterance in literature has been and is, through countless manifestations, one and abiding." These high aims, the finest subject in the world, and Mr. Drinkwater at the helm, justified great expectations of the project. But it has proved an Icarian flight. The sun of literature melted the wax in the wings of the fliers. For, throughout the nine chapters which carry the story from "The First Books in the World" through "The Renaissance", it is impossible to feel that these representative summaries of great writings are adequate or the spiritual kinship of the great creative minds made clearly evident. As for grace of style, easy flow of narrative, unity of concept, or vivid dramatization of material, they are not here. The final impression is of beautiful themes clumsily handled, noble works mutilated in the depiction, and the high meaning of great writers but weakly indicated.

Some writers are treated so briefly, the uninitiated reader will completely fail to understand why they are included at all. And, while appreciating fully the selective principles necessary in a work of this character, there are

omissions difficult to forgive. As to the descriptive and critical qualities of the text, one or two quotations may explain my feeling that the book fails to rise to the height of its great theme.

In the list of Olympian deities Juno is thus catalogued: "She was queen of Heaven. Among her emblems were the peacock and the cuckoo. She distrusted her husband, and loved Greece."

The name of Pan suggests the following extraordinary reflection: "But Pan was also the dread of all who wandered through a trackless forest or near a gloomy cave. Sudden and unreasonable fear would seize them at the thought of Pan's presence. Hence our word 'panic'. It is a singular thought that a panic on the Stock Exchange recalls the eerie terrors of darkness felt by Arcadian peasants in ages remoter than any of which history tells."

On Jupiter's struggle for his throne against the Titans there is this comment: "This stupendous war for the control of all things is described by Hesiod in terms which make the brain reel — though whether, in the advance of destructive science, it will do so much longer is a solemn question."

Of Euripides we learn: "The poet's temper was probably made sorer by the fact that he had two wives, both of whom were unfaithful to him." How anyone could let that sentence stand after seeing it in page proof passes comprehension.

The description of "The Greek Anthology" gives not a glimmering of the true significance of that immortal work. Thucydides's "History" is referred to, but its great purple patch, Pericles's "Funeral Oration", which might well have been quoted in part at least, is unmentioned. Lucretius

is certainly one of the "creative minds of the world of letters", but would one learn why from this single sentence devoted to him? "There is the great philosophic poem of Lucretius, 'On the Nature of Things', written in the early part of the first century, B. C." The "citation" that admits Catullus to this company of the elect reads: "Catullus, not having to depend upon a patron, wrote to please himself and friends — especially his lady-friends, of whom the chief was Lesbia, upon whose pet sparrow he wrote poems which have been the envy and despair of light versifiers ever since his day."

In the chapter on the Middle Ages, no space is found for such outstanding literary monuments as the Icelandic eddas and sagas, the Welsh "Mabinogion", the Irish epics, the "Arabian Nights", or Persian poetry. But possibly these are reserved for later volumes. The "Canterbury Tales" deserved a more enthusiastic treatment than they receive, their place in English letters is so distinctive, their character so intensely human. To represent the Renaissance, Ariosto, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Montaigne, Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, and Spenser have been chosen, but the analysis and interpretation of their works and permanent significance leave much to be desired. Again and again the quality of the text drops to pitifully low levels. Such an observation as the following on Rabelais is, as a "columnist" would say, the nadir of something: "He anticipated the love of fine-sounding words of Mr. Wells's Mr. Polly."

Traces of secondary compilation are far too frequent. Only one chapter, "The Story of the Bible", bears the name of its author, Canon Barnes, of Westminster. It is the best in the

book in independent mastery of subject and stylistic quality. The others suggest the literary man of all work and evoke in memory the familiar odors of the British Museum Reading Room.

Excellent bibliographies accompany each chapter for further study of its subject matter. The writers appear to have used some of the books listed, but not always skilfully, and they occasionally betray a curious choice in the authorities selected for reference or quotation. It will surely extort a grim smile from Major George H. Putnam to find himself the sole authority extensively quoted in the summary of the works of Confucius!

Unless the succeeding volumes are much superior to the first, this work will in no way rank with its predecessors in the recent "Outline" class, and humble confession will have to be made that the historians and scientists have scored heavily over the devotees of literature in finding more gifted popular interpreters. Are there no knights errant to rescue belles lettres from lay dullards and academic Brahmins?

The Outline of Literature. Edited by John Drinkwater. Volume I. G. P. Putnam's Sons.