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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

The World, not published in the original Work

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The WORLD*.

By ADAM FITZ-ADAM.

"I cannot but think we should have more learning, if we had fewer books."

Preface to Baker's Reflections.

THE lovers of literature, whose passion for books is at least as great as it is laudable, lament the loss of the Alexandrian library, which is said to have contained seven hundred thousand volumes. Immeasurable as this loss was, time and industry have prodigiously repaired it; and if I might escape being thought an absolute Goth, I should humbly be of opinion, that the destruction of that library was rather a blessing than a detriment to the common-wealth of letters. What may we suppose those so many thousand volumes contained? Were seven hundred thousand volumes all worth reading? If they were, who would have leisure to read them? If they were not, at least as many as were good for nothing have happily met with a proper fate. These books, we may suppose, contained great treasures of philosophy, astronomy, geography, history, poetry, oratory, mathematics, &c. mighty entertaining novels, and a wonderful mass of knowledge relating to, and explanatory of, or perhaps more beautifully perplexing, the theory of Egyptian divinity and hieroglyphics. One can hardly believe, though it contained greater quantities of ancient science and eloquence than what have reached our days, that this library was replenished with authors of superior knowledge, or with greater discoveries than we have received from our other venerable predecessors. And do we wish for more fabulous history, for more fantastic philosophy, for more imperfect astronomy, for more blunder-

* The two following papers were not published, the plan not having been completed.

ing geography, than we already possess under ancient names? I speak not in derogation of the ancients; but as their discoveries were very incomplete, and their traditions very inaccurate, why do we wish they were multiplied? When we reflect that half our present knowledge has sprung from discovering the errors of what had formerly been called by that name, we may comfort ourselves that the investigation of truth is at least as easy without so many false lights to misguide us, as if we knew how many more wrong conjectures had been made by our forefathers.

Not to mention how enormously this library would have procreated other libraries! What translations, commentaries, explanations, scholias, various readings, paraphrases—nay, what controversies would have been engendered by almost every volume in this capacious repository! Aristotle alone, whose works, or at least such as are called his, are happily extant, was in so great repute about two centuries ago, that no less than twelve thousand authors are computed to have commented or written upon his works: and though the Alexandrian authors might none of them have founded such numerous sects, yet considering the veneration paid to whatever is ancient, or to whatever is called learning, there can be no doubt but the existence of that departed library would have multiplied books to a degree, which even the hardest students might have beheld with regret; as few are masters of such strength of eyes and constitution, or of such extended lives, as to be able to satiate their curiosity in such an ocean of literature, let in upon the already immense deluge of science. Some men indeed have been such giants in study, as to conquer Greece, Rome, Arabia, Persia, and even those impracticable strangers, the Cophti: some are renowned for reading sixteen or eighteen hours a day; and one great * hero of the republic of letters boasted that he had so entirely exhausted all knowledge, that he was now reduced to read the History of the Highwaymen. But few are there now, alas, of such vigour! Few resemble the great Accursius, who boasted that he had corrected seven hundred errors in Claudian as he rode post through Germany.

To say the truth, we have not only enough of ancient books, but are far overstocked with both ancient and modern, considering either how little is read, or how impossible it is to read all that has already been written. In

* Dr. Bentley.

the latter respect, modern authors are far more excusable than modern readers. The authors write for the present hour, because they are not sure that to-morrow they shall be read: but as to readers, who are continually demanding new books, I should humbly suggest, that all books, however long ago they were written, are, to all intents and purposes, new books to such as never read them. People do not generally know what reservoirs of knowledge and pleasure are actually in being: there is no subject, on which there are not already extant books enough to employ all the idle hours of those idle people who are in daily want of something new: perhaps it may not be exaggeration to say, that the only old books are such as are published every day. The mere catalogue of the Bodleian library composes four volumes in folio: the Vatican is still larger. The single Bangorian controversy, at one, two shillings, or half a crown a pamphlet, cost upwards of thirty pounds: but these pieces, with others of the like nature, have I believe long ago been gathered to their forefathers, the Alexandrians. The journals of the war between the most serene princess Canning, and the Egyptian sultana, Mary Squires, make no inconsiderable figure in modern libraries; and the important point of the restoration of Judaism added considerable recruits to the classes of history and polemic divinity. One Ferri wrote eleven hundred sermons on the epistle to the Hebrews. Other laborious authors have been so puzzled to find out new subjects, or at least so determined to write new books, that they have composed catalogues of the different denominations of authors, or of such as have written under particular circumstances*. Baillet not only published an account of *Anti's*, that is, of such books as were written against others, but he undertook a work, in which he proposed to give a description of such books as had been intended to be written. Naudé collected a list of authors who had disguised their names; and another of great men who had been accused of magic. Decker composed an account of anonymous writings: Pierius Valerianus gave one catalogue of unfortunate learned men, and another of physicians who were poets: Kortholt, of bishops who had been poets; and Menage, of ecclesiastics who had written bawdy poems. Ancillon was still more curious, for he made a catalogue of learned men who had written nothing at all. Hottinger, another grave trifler, has two whole pages filled only with names of those who corresponded with him; and some years ago there was a

* The latest work of this kind is the Catalogue of Royal and Noble Authors.

French *abbé who commenced author upon a very new stock; by writing an account of such authors as had presented him with their writings. The greatest wonder is, that none of these laborious compilers should have pretended to give a relation of such books as have long since perished, though their authors had, like Horace and Ovid, assured the world and themselves, that their works would be immortal. But it is not necessary to go an hundred years back to give instances of the excessive increase of authors. The gazettes, novels, lives, dying speeches, magazines, dictionaries of our own days, are flagrant proofs of my assertion. Indeed if the rage of publication continues in the same proportion, I do not see but all the world must be books; and that it will become as necessary to burn a field of books, as a field of furze or stubble. The very means employed to lessen the abuse, is an increase of it: I mean, all sciences are so over-written, that the very abridgements are an additional evil.

I can easily conceive that a Chinese or Indian, hereafter visiting Europe, may acquaint one of his correspondents, in the hyperbolic style of the East, "That it is exceeding difficult to travel in these countries, by reason of vast waste tracts of land, which they call *libraries*, which being very little frequented, and lying uncultivated, occasion a stagnation of bad and unwholesome air; that nevertheless, the inhabitants, so far from destroying or rooting out what they so little either use or esteem, are continually extending these deserts; that even some of the natives, who have waded farther than ordinary into these forests, are fond and proud of transplanting out of one part into another; and though they are sure that their own labours will be choked up the next day by some of their neighbours, they go on in their idle toil, and flatter themselves with the hopes of immortality for having contributed to extend a wilderness, into which nobody thinks it worth his while to penetrate. There are indeed some, who, for fear of losing their way in the vast forest of learning, where it is pretended that every tree is a tree of knowledge, have endeavoured to persuade their countrymen to pluck up all, root and branch, except one or two favourite trunks, from which they pretend all knowledge may be gathered, in which all arts and sciences are included. Indeed they do not totally agree upon which are the authors who thus contain all erudition. One party pretend it is their Alcoran; the other,

* Abbé de Marolles.

an ancient poet called Homer: the former seem to study their religion with a poetic imagination; the latter are as ready to fight for their opinion, as if it was a religious enthusiasm."——But not to dwell too long in the person of an imaginary future satirist, I shall revert to my first proposition, that there are already books enough, if the world is really disposed to read; and that both regret for old perished authors, which we do not know whether they were good or bad, and appetite for new books, which we do not care whether they are good or bad, are equally marks of a false and vitiated taste. The former lamentations were agreeable to the pedantry of the last age, when, provided a man did but write pure classic Latin, it mattered not how trifling and ridiculous were the topics. Scaliger and Cardan, two great potentates in the empire of learning, had a profound dispute whether parrots were ugly creatures or not; and both used in great abundance those annoying weapons of abuse, which were so much in vogue with the literati of that age. I may perhaps have occasion in another paper to give some account of the scurrilous wars which were formerly waged by the gravest professors in most of the universities and schools from Siena to Leyden. The fondness of the moderns for books, books, new books, puts me in mind of certain country gentlemen, neighbours of Balzac, who made him a visit, and, after a thousand speeches, assured him that it was incredible how great a veneration they had for him and *Messieurs ses Livres*.

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