

thousand dead or dying, we shall not err in giving prominence to those that are built on the foundation of human passion, appeal to human sentiments, and so kindle human sympathy, and in using all else mainly as helps to these. This principle of choice will vastly reduce the number to be read.

Still further reduction must be made. Let it be by a vigorous rejection of works that do not possess beauty of style and due proportion of parts. The final sifting must leave us polite literature alone, *belles-lettres*. Each shall be a model of excellence, worthy to be reckoned a triumph of art. The intrinsic worth must be embodied in a graceful form.

And among these, for there may still be hundreds, we must again select. Life is too short and too precious to permit us to feed the soul on any but the most nutritious diet.

Who shall separate for us the little that is really everlasting from the much that is fleeting, the little that is really universal from the much that is partial, the little that is supremely graceful from the much that is unsymmetrical? Great men fail us here. The best critics cannot be depended upon. They disagree, or are even blind: "There is something touching" says Emerson, "in the madness with which the passing age mischooses the object on which all candles shine and all eyes are turned. . . . A popular player, nobody supposed that Shakespeare was the poet of the human race. . . . Bacon, who took the inventory of the human understanding for his time, never mentioned his name. . . . If it need wit to know wit, according to the proverb, Shakespeare's time should be capable of recognizing it. . . . Since the constellation of great men who appeared in Greece in the time of Pericles, there was never any such society; yet their genius failed them to find

out the best head in the universe. The poet's mask was impenetrable. You cannot see the mountain near."*

Says Mrs. Browning:—

We'll suppose
Mount Athos carved, as Persian Xerxes
schemed,

To some colossal statue of a man.
The peasants gathering brushwood in his ear,
Had guessed as little of any human form
Up there, as would a flock of browsing goats.
They'd have, in fact, to travel ten miles off
Or ere the giant image broke on them.

Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, declares, in regard to Wordsworth's first appearance as an author, that never was the emergence of a great genius above the horizon more manifest, if they had but eyes to see. "This will never do!" said a great critic, of Wordsworth's first attempts. "The poesy of this young lord belongs to the class which neither gods nor men are said to permit," said Lord Jeffrey of Byron. So rated Coleridge himself at first, and Shelley and Collins and Gray and Browning, at the hands of the critics.

The difficulty of selection of the fittest works is further increased by the fact that some are in the border-region between the two literatures and partake of the qualities of both. Lowell speaks of "the desolate no-man's land of a religious epic." *Paradise Lost*, however, and perhaps *The Light of Asia*, should their phases of religious belief turn out to be transient,—limited, say, to another thousand years,—have yet in them so much of human interest, of heroism, of tenderness, and of renunciation, appealing to universal man, by Abdiel, by Satan, by Siddartha, and by the Messiah, that they might last for many ages, though the special theology of Protestantism or Buddhism were to pass away. That "desolate no-man's land," as Lowell terms *Paradise Lost*, has indeed but two human

* Emerson's Representative Men.