

EPOCHS OF LITERATURE

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Epochs of Literature by Condé B. Pallen

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CONDÉ B. PALLEN

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Epochs of Literature

BY

CONDÉ B. PALLÉN, Ph. D., LL. D.

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AUTHOR OF

"THE PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE,"

"NEW RUBAIYAT," ETC.



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PREFACE.

I make no attempt in the following pages to set forth a history of literature. I have, on the contrary, eschewed any approach to a historical setting of these brief studies. Histories of literature are plentiful—good, bad and indifferent—and I have no desire to multiply superfluities. My purpose is to give in large outline the spirit of the literature of the Western world, to trace its *motif* in its various phases and developments. The prospects I wish to point out are bird's-eye views, not detailed researches into data, biographies and chronologies. A fair acquaintance with the history of literature is presumed in the reader, as also some understanding of the philosophical principles underlying the manifestations of mankind's literary activities. I have treated these abstract principles in a preceding volume under the title: "The Philosophy

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of Literature." The present studies are designed to be supplementary to "The Philosophy," by way of concrete application and illustration.

As there is much danger of misapprehension from my method, I take precaution to forestall the trouble. The judgments given in the studies here presented are categorical; they are rendered with a view to the entire perspective under reach of the eye. We stand upon a central summit, from whose point of survey the literary landscape of the Western world lies in its farthest and widest and largest prospect. From this height the regions under ken take the proportions of the whole. The experience of such a general survey saves us from the mistakes of an exaggerated perspective in particular regions, which is a not uncommon danger with those who traverse the fields of literature under the disadvantage of having no point of pre-eminence whence to orient their own position and to discover the just proportions of plain and valley, hill and mountain, in the wide sweep of the whole. When, therefore, we stand upon some elevation in a particular locality,

we will have learned that this is not necessarily the loftiest peak in the wide tract of human time, though from that point no loftier may then be visible ; or when we thread our way through certain valleys or deserts, we will have learned to remember that the soil may be more abundant or more barren in other regions. In this wise we establish two necessary points of the literary compass. We enjoy an eminence whence we may safely make our own observations and at the same time learn to appreciate the value of true perspective. This establishment of the compass will teach us to avoid unworthy exaltation of what is only relatively high or undue depreciation of what is only relatively low, while we measure the heights and sound the depths by the law of that ideal, which encompasses the whole and defines the parts.

Keeping the altitude of this point of view in mind, the reader will more readily appreciate the absolute estimates of the various regions and epochs brought under his eye. He will the more readily understand how flat and low the perspective of Roman literature lies against the lofty elevation of Greek genius on

the one hand and against the sublime heights of Christian thought and art on the other. At the same time he should not allow himself to fall into the counter-notion that a literature, such as the Roman, which falls far short of the greatest and the loftiest, is therefore of no merit and value. The plain and the valley possess their peculiar and lesser beauties in a narrower and more restricted range, though indeed not the wide vision, the noble prospect and the sublime elevation of the mountain heights.

CONDÉ B. PALLEN.

St. Louis, May, 1898.

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