SWEET ARE THE USES OF ANTHOLOGY

By ALBERTO MANGUEL

Every reader is an anthologist, but few carry the mania for selecting to the extreme of compiling a book. Memory keeps records for us, chooses this story and drops that one, builds odd manticores out of authors who happen to have met at our bedside. As readers, we change what writers write, cut it to fit our daily quotas, give it the tone of that particular moment in which something was read, mirror it in other texts of similar plot or style - in a word, make the writing ours.

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page. The line, used to describe one of my more colorful uncles, had thrilled me. When, years later, I came across these same words in France's romance "The Gods Are Thirsty," they seemed unbearably trite.

The best anthologies are marked by this all-encompassing reader-become-writer. The ideal anthologist's coat of arms should show a pair of eyeglasses, couchant, to symbolize the act of reading; a pencil, rampant, representing the passion for scribbling on margins; and the motto de gustibus non disputandum - there's no accounting for taste. These are the things that annoy anyone not willing to read an anthology: the fact that the stories or poems come to us second-hand, through someone else's vision; and that there can be no quarrel with the anthologist's personal whims. What this reluctant reader does not realize is that someone else's whim can become his or her own taste, and that the second-hand quality of an anthology is really one of second sight.

LIKE almost any keen reader, the anthologist sees in a story or poem patterns and plots that are not immediately obvious. In a collection on the theme of terror such as "Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural," edited by Herbert A. Wise and Phyllis Fraser (1944), Hemingway's story "The Killers" may seem a likely choice. Under the canopy of "Best American Short Stories, 1933" "The Killers" becomes a landmark in the evolution of the genre in North America. But read in Ellery Queen's "Literature of Crime" (1952), "The Killers" is a first-rate thriller. The anthologist's intention as stated on the title page proposes a certain angle from which the new reader can observe the story in question. An anthologist is a reader with a purpose.

Perhaps the simplest guiding purpose in an anthology is the desire to gather that which lies scattered, collecting, as Shakespeare's Ulysses has it, "alms for oblivion." The first book printed in England - by William Caxton in 1477 - is, in fact, an anthology, "The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres," and consists of more or less moral meditations, from various sources, that the anthologist thought fit to be preserved.

Few remember the "Dictes" today, but not all anthologies compiled in an effort to prevent something from being forgotten are forgotten. Some vast and imaginative soul took it upon himself to gather the stories that now form "The Arabian Nights," providing at the same time the framework of

Scheherazade's plot in order to string the stories together. The anonymous anthologist spanned hundreds of years: the final collection was not established until the 18th century in Egypt, and included stories written in some cases 800 years earlier. To the collecting passion of this reader we owe one of the cornerstones of our literary imagination; to Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm we owe another - the collection of fairy tales that W. H. Auden called one of "the few indispensable books upon which Western culture can be founded." Anthologists can be useful creatures.

It is interesting to note that every literature has these "museum anthologies," intended to preserve the best of a kind, the flowers of its writing. (This cliche has its justification: the word "anthology" derives from the Greek anthologos meaning "flower-gathering.") "The Greek Anthology," a collection of some 6,000 short elegiac poems by more than 300 authors, covers Greek literature from the seventh century B.C. to the 10th century A.D., and is the only record we have of certain Greek and Byzantine poets. "The Han Dynasty History" records at least 10 anthologies of poetry and prose, destroyed in the third century B.C. by Shi Huangdi, the Emperor who also ordered the construction of the Great Wall. Nearer to home, the gems of little magazines, hidden to most readers, are preserved in several yearly anthologies, such as "The Pushcart Prize" and "Best Canadian Stories," allowing us to discover work that otherwise would go unnoticed by most of us.

These collections often contain at least one startling piece, one unforgettable story or poem. I remember reading Dorothy L. Sayers' two-volume anthology, "Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror" (1928), and discovering in Volume Two "How Love Came to Professor Guildea" by Robert Hichens. In most of his fiction, Hichens is a sentimental and sloppy writer; his novels are less interesting than his long life, during which he befriended Oscar Wilde and Marlene Dietrich. No one reading Hichens' "Garden of Allah" or "The Paradine Case" can suspect the subtle terror and originality of the plot in "Professor Guildea," and its discovery by Sayers assures her, I am certain, a brighter heaven than the one she deserved for Peter Wimsey.

In the case of Sayers' book, survival of the best is not the anthologist's main purpose. She had something more difficult in mind: to build with

those stories a definition of the genres announced in the title. But anthologies can go yet farther. Not only can an anthology define a genre: it can also create it.

In 1937 Andre Breton published in Paris a small book, "De l'Humour Noir" ("On Black Humor") which later became the "Anthologie de l'Humour Noir," still available in Livres de Poche. Among the authors included were many of the surrealists - Breton himself, Aragon, Eluard - but also Nietzsche and Lewis Carroll. Two aspects strike the reader today, as they must have struck him 50 years ago: first, that these authors don't have an obviously common ground, and that their brotherhood results from the anthology itself; second, that the notion of black humor, even though it may seem as old as literature itself, receives a name for the first time in Breton's book. Seen through his eyes, Lewis Carroll for instance, represented by the Mock Turtle scene in "Alice in Wonderland," seems as exquisitely cruel as, say, Charles Baudelaire, whom Breton also included. With the "Anthologie de l'Humour Noir" Breton gave black humor a long and venerable history, leading up to surrealism itself; in doing so, he also provided the surrealists with a fine host of predecessors.

"Black humor" is a term that has become common enough; "fantastic," used to define a particular type of supernatural fiction, has not yet become established in English. A wide variety of terms - weird, Gothic, uncanny, strange, dark - compete to define a genre that ranges from Nathaniel Hawthorne to the "Twilight Zone" stories, and which the French critic Roger Caillois explored in his "Anthologie du Fantastique" (1966). Again, the anthology defines the genre. In his introduction, Caillois points out the distinction between "fantastique" and "feerique," between what in English we should call "the fantastic," and "fantasy" or "faerie." "The feerique," says Caillois, "is a universe of marvels which joins the real world without affecting it or destroying its coherence. The fantastique, on the contrary, reveals itself as a scandal, a rupture, an almost unbearable and unexpected bursting into the real world."

Caillois excludes from his anthology (and therefore from his definition of the fantastic) the easy terrors of Gothic literature, the dragons and dungeons of J. R. R. Tolkien's school, the fairy tales. The stories he selected (divided into nationalities) walk the ambiguous border between the im-

possible and the improbable. It was here that "Luvina," a story by the great Mexican writer Juan Rulfo, which I had always read as the naturalistic depiction of a Mexican family establishing itself in a sand-swept town, became a subtle ghost story I had not recognized before.

Caillois is not alone in his efforts to define this particular genre through anthologies. In 1940 there appeared in Buenos Aires an "Antologia de la Literatura Fantastica," which became for many writers (and their readers) a discovery of the style in which they had, sometimes unknowingly, been working. Around 1930, Jorge Luis Borges, who in his early 30's was already an established writer, met Adolfo Bioy Casares, then 17, and their friendship lasted until Borges's death last year. In the summer of 1940 Mr. Bioy Casares married the poet Silvina Ocampo, and Borges was the best man. From then on the three formed a group that delighted in discovering and sharing literature, which, says the novelist Jose Bianco, "was for the three the most intoxicating of drugs: they were exalted by it, moved, became thoughtful. It also made them laugh." These are the qualities readers recognized in Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares' "Antologia de la Literatura Fantastica." The selections were far more eclectic than those made later by Caillois: they ranged from Rabelais to Kafka and Joyce, from Chinese literature and "The Arabian Nights" to H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling and a number of Argentine contemporaries. The anthologies Borges compiled, with Mr. Bioy Casares and with others, are always marked by his voice and can only be read in his style. Sometimes he would invent apocryphal pieces to complete a collection, or change a quote to make it more Borgesian. He believed that literature was common property, and that faithfulness to the original was unfaithfulness to the heart of the text itself.

Borges's approach would have horrified the compiler of what is probably the most famous anthology in the English language, "The Golden Treasury" of Francis Turner Palgrave, which in 1861 professed to include "all the best original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language by writers not living - and none beside the best." A friend of Tennyson, who helped him in his choice, Palgrave set out to collect what he thought would provide a standard against which the poetry of his time might compare its offerings.

John Donne and William Blake were excluded: the best were those who, in Palgrave's opinion, suited the Victorian temperament and, one is

tempted to add, defined it. The popularity of Palgrave's anthology was immense; it became, together with Shakespeare and the Bible, the indispensable literary volume in most English households, and for years the notion of what was "good" in poetry was equivalent to what was found in Palgrave. Palgrave himself revised the "Treasury" in 1896, but changed little. A hundred years after the original edition, the American poet Oscar Williams enlarged "The Golden Treasury" by adding not only poets Palgrave had omitted, but also poets he could not have known without committing an anachronism, poets of our century.

Being included in "The Golden Treasury" represents for the poets in the English language a dull form of immortality. There is much to be enjoyed in Palgrave's selection, but a certain formality mars the enjoyment. Before my high school days, I remember discovering poems in the "Treasury" that astounded me then (and many astound me still), poems that intimate the knowledge of something never fully revealed. But when the book became a textbook, the glamour faded and, perhaps through no fault of Palgrave's, the anthology became merely academic. Palgrave was scrupulously attentive to the taste of his contemporaries, which is a sure-fire way of becoming old-fashioned. Once, tired at his own task, he wrote that "anthologies are sickly things," but he never diagnosed the nature of the sickness. "The Golden Treasury" is not only a collection of classics. It has become itself a classic, in the worst sense of the word, and today resembles, in spite of Williams's additions, a graveyard more than a garden.

"The Golden Treasury," itself an imitation of the Elizabethan miscellanies, spawned innumerable imitators, some with more personal voices than Palgrave's. "The Albatross Book of Verse," first published in 1933 and several times revised, contains many of the poems found in the "Treasury," but their assembly presents a very different picture: that of an eclectic, sometimes daring, frequently shrewd compiler, Louis Untermeyer. Untermeyer was that rare thing, a professional anthologist, who in the course of his life edited countless collections of every kind: poetry, short stores, mysteries, essays.

In the preface to the 1960 edition of the "Albatross," Untermeyer declares that "in general my tests have been Palgrave's," but also quotes Robert Frost: "The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him

that he has taken an immortal wound - that he will never get over it." Untermeyer has an uncanny ability for sharing this pain, even though at times a sense of historical propriety gets the better of the wounded reader, as when the anthology includes Milton's poem "L'Allegro" just to balance off "Il Penseroso." It is on occasions such as these that the anthologist becomes hoarse and the reader can no longer recognize an "author's" voice.

In general, the fear of forgetting the obvious plagues the anthologist who wants to achieve a tidy sense of completeness. Many anthologies of "-national" short stories (English, Canadian, Spanish, etc.) sin out of respect for the past, and include either sacred cows grown tough with age or little-known and less interesting "early" examples of the genre. Maybe the only way an anthologist can overcome this danger is by responding simply to the questions, "Do I really like this? Do I want to make this piece my own?"

ON rare occasions an anthologist lets himself be drawn not by a feeling of debt to the past, but by a feeling of debt to the future. He uses his second sight to foresee the shape of future writing in an anthology that, in the best of cases, gives the reader a sense of things to come. Some of these collections, like the Penguin New Writing series in the 60's and Granta magazine today, achieve that improbable purpose.

In his introduction to "The Golden Treasury," Palgrave quotes Shelley, saying that the poems of every age are "episodes of that great Poem which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world." The anthologist is, in a small way, the author of such a poem or short story. By combining the best of his readings,by reorganizing that which chance and curiosity have set before him, the anthologist becomes an omniscient and omnivorous creator, a reader for readers, someone for whom the original writer is only one side of that beast with two backs that makes a book.