



GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD

The Author-to-Author Index

Great Books of the Western World was first published in 1952, the product of eight years of editorial work on the selection of the authors and titles to be included and in the construction of the *Syntopicon*. At that time, Robert M. Hutchins, then President of the University of Chicago, was the Editor in Chief, and I, a professor at the university, was his Associate Editor.

The first volume of the set contained an introductory essay written by Mr. Hutchins, entitled *The Great Conversation*.

The conception of a great conversation across the centuries was the controlling principle that governed both the composition and the use of this set of books. It gives the set a unity and continuity that distinguishes it from all others.

What binds the authors together in an intellectual community is the great conversation in which they are engaged. In the works that come later in the sequence of years, we find authors listening to what their predecessors have had to say about this idea or that, this topic or that. They not only harken to the thought of their predecessors, they also respond to it by commenting on it in a variety of ways.

To say that this set of books represents a great conversation in which many voices participate from the beginning of Western thought to the present day is not a fanciful conceit. It is a statement of historical fact. Two things give ample evidence of its reality.

(1) One is the *Syntopicon* itself, in which, topic by topic, we find passages from many different authors speaking on the theme proposed by that

topic—a question, an issue, or an aspect of the great idea under consideration.


It is possible to imagine the authors sitting around a table in the same room at the present time—totally oblivious to the circumstances of their own time and place and their diversity of tongues—confronting each other in agreement, disagreement, or otherwise differing about what they have to say on the subject. The sessions of the conference thus imagined would take many days, months, perhaps even years, for it would cover the whole range of ideas and issues that are the objects and concerns of human understanding, always and everywhere.

(2) The second clear evidence of the existence of the great conversation is a tabulation called the Author-to-Author Index.

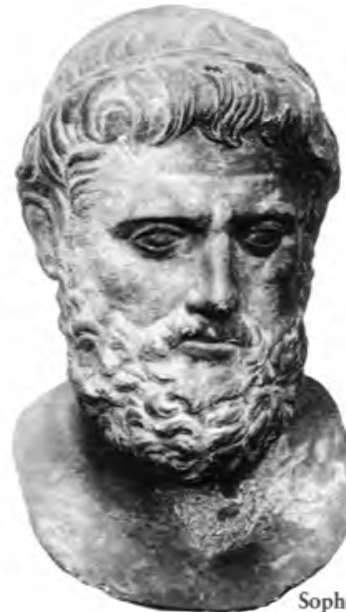
To the name of each of the authors listed chronologically in the Author-to-Author Index, readers will find the names of the author's predecessors to which he or she refers. The one exception is, of course, Homer, the first author in the chronological series. But the Greek playwrights, who come second, refer to Homer; Herodotus, who comes next, refers to Homer and Aeschylus; and Aristotle, who comes a little later, refers to virtually all of his predecessors; and so on, right down to the 20th-century authors whose works appear in the last six volumes of the set.

It is generally the case that the nearer we get to our own time, the larger the number of names of earlier authors we find affixed to the names of later authors. For one reason or another, there are a few glaring exceptions to this generalization, but they are not to be explained by the century in which the authors wrote or by the kinds of books that they wrote. Karl Marx, Herman Melville, William James, and Sigmund Freud, at the end of the 19th century, refer to a multitude of predecessors; so, too, do Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, R. H. Tawney, Max Weber, and James Joyce in the 20th century.

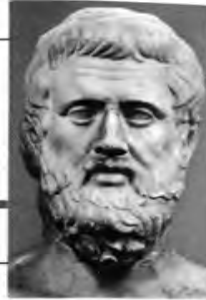
The paucity of named predecessors for some of the 20th-century authors, especially the writers of fiction, can be explained by the fact that these writers generally are represented by shorter rather than longer works. This also partially accounts for the fact that certain 20th-century authors (*e.g.*, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Anton Chekhov, Franz Kafka, and D. H. Lawrence) do not appear in the Author-to-Author Index at all. Another point to be made is that often narrative writers, while not naming their predecessors, build upon these earlier authors and works or are deeply influenced by them, as Henry James, for example, was influenced by Balzac.

With the exceptions noted, it is still a safe generalization that the great authors appear to be those who have read widely in the literary tradition that was their heritage, and that they are also those who have been read most widely by their successors in that tradition. 

AUTHOR-TO-AUTHOR INDEX



Sophocles



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14	Tacitus	Euripides Homer	Lucretius Plato	Sophocles Virgil
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19	Dante	The Bible Aquinas Aristotle Augustine Euclid	Euripides Galen Hippocrates Homer Plato	Ptolemy Sophocles Virgil
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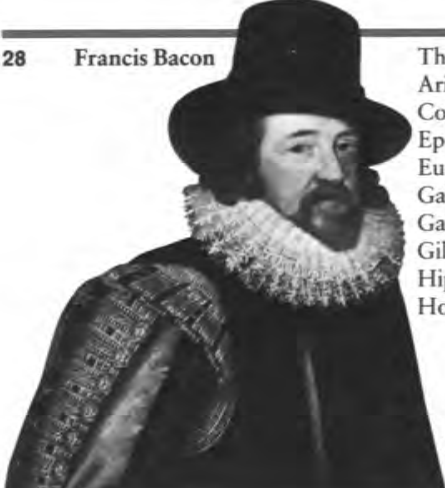
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27	Cervantes	The Bible Aquinas Aristotle	Hippocrates Homer Plato Plutarch	Ptolemy Virgil
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Rabelais

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Bacon

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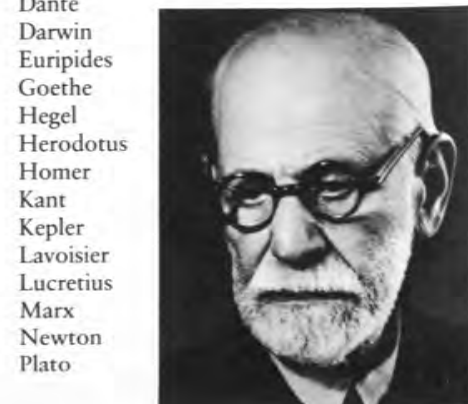
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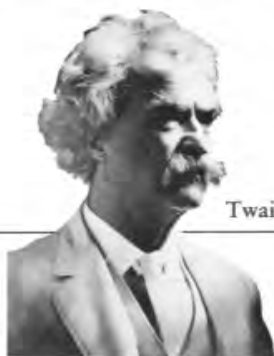
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Planck



Heisenberg

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Woolf



Weber