

JAMES BALDWIN

THE
BOOK-LOVER

James Baldwin

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The Book-lover / A Guide to the Best Reading

A Fore Word

The titlepage of this book explains its plan and purpose. The Courses of Reading and the Schemes for Practical Study, herein indicated, are the outgrowth of the Author's long experience as a lover of books and director of reading. They have been tested and found to be all that is claimed for them. As to the large number of quotations in the first part of the book, they are given in the belief that "in a multitude of counsels there is wisdom." And the Author finds consolation and encouragement in the following words of Emerson: "We are as much informed of a writer's genius by what he selects, as by what he originates. We read the quotation with his eyes, and find a new and fervent sense." As the value of the most useful inventions depends upon the ingenious placing of their parts, so the originality of this work may be found to lie chiefly in its arrangement. Yet the writer confidently believes that his readers will enjoy that which he has borrowed, and possibly find aid and encouragement in that which he claims as his own; and therefore this book is sent out with the hope that book-lovers will find in it a safe Guide to the Best Reading.

PRELUDE

In Praise of Books

LET us consider how great a commodity of doctrine exists in Books; how easily, how secretly, how safely they expose the nakedness of human ignorance without putting it to shame. These are the masters who instruct us without rods and ferules, without hard words and anger, without clothes or money. If you approach them, they are not asleep; if investigating you interrogate them, they conceal nothing; if you mistake them, they never grumble; if you are ignorant, they cannot laugh at you.

You only, O Books, are liberal and independent. You give to all who ask, and enfranchise all who serve you assiduously. Truly, you are the ears filled with most palatable grains. You are golden urns in which manna is laid up; rocks flowing with honey, or rather, indeed, honeycombs; udders most copiously yielding the milk of life; store-rooms ever full; the four-streamed river of Paradise, where the human mind is fed, and the arid intellect moistened and watered; fruitful olives; vines of Engaddi; fig-trees knowing no sterility; burning lamps to be ever held in the hand.

The library, therefore, of wisdom is more precious than all riches; and nothing that can be wished for is worthy to be compared with it. Whosoever acknowledges himself to be a zealous follower of truth, of happiness, of wisdom, of science, or even of the faith, must of necessity make himself a Lover of Books.

Richard de Bury, 1344.

Books are friends whose society is extremely agreeable to me; they are of all ages, and of every country. They have distinguished themselves both in the cabinet and in the field, and obtained high honors for their knowledge of the sciences. It is easy to gain access to them; for they are always at my service, and I admit them to my company, and dismiss them from it, whenever I please. They are never troublesome, but immediately answer every question I ask them. Some relate to me the events of past ages, while others reveal to me the secrets of Nature. Some teach me how to live, and others how to die. Some, by their vivacity, drive away my cares and exhilarate my spirits; while others give fortitude to my mind, and teach me the important lesson how to restrain my desires, and to depend wholly on myself. They open to me, in short, the various avenues of all the arts and sciences, and upon their information I safely rely in all emergencies. In return for all these services, they only ask me to accommodate them with a convenient chamber in some corner of my humble habitation, where they may repose in peace; for these friends are more delighted by the tranquility of retirement, than with the tumults of society.

Francesco Petrarca.

Books are the Glasse of Counsell to dress ourselves by. They are Life's best Business: Vocation to them hath more Emolument coming in, than all the other busie Termes of Life. They are Feelesse Counsellours, no delaying Patrons, of easie Accesses, and kind Expedition, never sending away any Client or Petitioner. They are for Company, the best Friends; in doubts, Counsellours; in Damp, Comforters; Time's Perspective; the home Traveller's Ship, or Horse; the busie Man's best Recreation; the Opiate of idle Wearinesse; the Mind's best Ordinary; Nature's Garden and Seed-plot of Immortality.

A Writer of the Sixteenth Century (quoted in "Allibone's Dictionary").

But how can I live here without my books? I really seem to myself crippled and only half myself; for if, as the great Orator used to say, arms are a soldier's members, surely books are the

limbs of scholars. Corasius says: "Of a truth, he who would deprive me of books, my old friends, would take away all the delight of my life; nay, I will even say, all desire of living."

Balthasar Bonifacius Rhodiginus, 1656.

For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve, as in a vial, the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively and as vigorously productive as those fabulous dragon's teeth, and, being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men... Many a man lives, a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose for a life beyond life.

John Milton.

Books are a guide in youth, and an entertainment for age. They support us under solitude, and keep us from being a burden to ourselves. They help us to forget the crossness of men and things, compose our cares and our passions, and lay our disappointments asleep. When we are weary of the living, we may repair to the dead, who have nothing of peevishness, pride, or design in their conversation.

Jeremy Collier.

God be thanked for books! They are the voices of the distant and the dead, and make us heirs of the spiritual life of past ages. Books are the true levellers. They give to all who will faithfully use them, the society, the spiritual presence, of the best and greatest of our race. No matter how poor I am; no matter though the prosperous of my own time will not enter my obscure dwelling; if the sacred writers will enter and take up their abode under my roof, – if Milton will cross my threshold to sing to me of Paradise; and Shakspeare to open to me the worlds of imagination and the workings of the human heart; and Franklin to enrich me with his practical wisdom, – I shall not pine for want of intellectual companionship, and I may become a cultivated man, though excluded from what is called the best society in the place where I live.

William Ellery Channing.

In a corner of my house I have books, – the miracle of all my possessions, more wonderful than the wishing-cap of the Arabian tales; for they transport me instantly, not only to all places, but to all times. By my books I can conjure up before me to a momentary existence many of the great and good men of past ages, and for my individual satisfaction they seem to act again the most renowned of their achievements; the orators declaim for me, the historians recite, the poets sing.

Dr. Arnott.

Wondrous, indeed, is the virtue of a true book! Not like a dead city of stones, yearly crumbling, yearly needing repair; more like a tilled field, but then a spiritual field; like a spiritual tree, let me rather say, it stands from year to year and from age to age (we have books that already number some hundred and fifty human ages); and yearly comes its new produce of leaves (commentaries, deductions, philosophical, political systems; or were it only sermons, pamphlets, journalistic essays), every one of which is talismanic and thaumaturgic, for it can persuade man. O thou who art able to write a book, which once in two centuries or oftener there is a man gifted to do, envy not him whom they name city-builder, and inexpressibly pity him whom they name conqueror or city-burner! Thou, too, art a conqueror and victor; but of the true sort, namely, over the Devil. Thou, too, hast built what will outlast all marble and metal, and be a wonder-bringing city of mind, a temple and seminary and prophetic mount, whereto all kindreds of the earth will pilgrim.

Thomas Carlyle.

Good books, like good friends, are few and chosen; the more select, the more enjoyable; and like these are approached with diffidence, nor sought too familiarly nor too often, having the precedence only when friends tire. The most mannerly of companions, accessible at all times, in all moods, they frankly declare the author's mind, without giving offence. Like living friends, they too have their voice and physiognomies, and their company is prized as old acquaintances. We seek them in our need of counsel or of amusement, without impertinence or apology, sure of having our claims allowed. A good book justifies our theory of personal supremacy, keeping this fresh in the memory and perennial. What were days without such fellowship? We were alone in the world without it.

A. Bronson Alcott.

Consider what you have in the smallest chosen library. A company of the wisest and wittiest men that could be picked out of all civil countries, in a thousand years, have set in best order the results of their learning and wisdom. The men themselves were hid and inaccessible, solitary, impatient of interruption, fenced by etiquette; but the thought which they did not uncover to their bosom friend is here written out in transparent words to us, the strangers of another age. We owe to books those general benefits which come from high intellectual action. Thus, I think, we often owe to them the perception of immortality. They impart sympathetic activity to the moral power. Go with mean people, and you think life is mean. Then read Plutarch, and the world is a proud place, peopled with men of positive quality, with heroes and demi-gods standing around us, who will not let us sleep. Then they address the imagination: only poetry inspires poetry. They become the organic culture of the time. College education is the reading of certain books which the common sense of all scholars agrees will represent the science already accumulated... In the highest civilization the book is still the highest delight.

Ralph Waldo Emerson.

A great book that comes from a great thinker, – it is a ship of thought, deep-freighted with truth, with beauty too. It sails the ocean, driven by the winds of heaven, breaking the level sea of life into beauty where it goes, leaving behind it a train of sparkling loveliness, widening as the ship goes on. And what a treasure it brings to every land, scattering the seeds of truth, justice, love, and piety, to bless the world in ages yet to come!

Theodore Parker.

What is a great love of books? It is something like a personal introduction to the great and good men of all past times. Books, it is true, are silent as you see them on their shelves; but, silent as they are, when I enter a library I feel as if almost the dead were present, and I know if I put questions to these books they will answer me with all the faithfulness and fulness which has been left in them by the great men who have left the books with us.

John Bright.

I love my books as drinkers love their wine;
The more I drink, the more they seem divine;
With joy elate my soul in love runs o'er,
And each fresh draught is sweeter than before!
Books bring me friends where'er on earth I be, —
Solace of solitude, bonds of society.

I love my books! they are companions dear,
Sterling in worth, in friendship most sincere;
Here talk I with the wise in ages gone,

And with the nobly gifted in our own:
If love, joy, laughter, sorrow please my mind,
Love, joy, grief, laughter in my books I find.

Francis Bennoch.

Books are the windows through which the soul looks out.

Henry Ward Beecher.

Books are our household gods; and we cannot prize them too highly. They are the only gods in all the mythologies that are beautiful and unchangeable; for they betray no man, and love their lovers. I confess myself an idolater of this literary religion, and am grateful for the blessed ministry of books. It is a kind of heathenism which needs no missionary funds, no Bible even, to abolish it; for the Bible itself caps the peak of this new Olympus, and crowns it with sublimity and glory. Amongst the many things we have to be thankful for, as the result of modern discoveries, surely this of printed books is the highest of all; and I, for one, am so sensible of its merits that I never think of the name of Gutenberg without feelings of veneration and homage.

January Searle.

The only true equalizers in the world are books; the only treasure-house open to all comers is a library; the only wealth which will not decay is knowledge; the only jewel which you can carry beyond the grave is wisdom. To live in this equality, to share in these treasures, to possess this wealth, and to secure this jewel may be the happy lot of every one. All that is needed for the acquisition of these inestimable treasures is the love of books.

J. A. Langford.

Let us thank God for books. When I consider what some books have done for the world, and what they are doing; how they keep up our hope, awaken new courage and faith, soothe pain, give an ideal life to those whose homes are hard and cold, bind together distant ages and foreign lands, create new worlds of beauty, bring down truths from heaven, – I give eternal blessings for this gift, and pray that we may use it aright, and abuse it not.

James Freeman Clarke.

Books, we know, Are a substantial world, both pure and good; Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood, Our pastime and our happiness will grow.

William Wordsworth.

Precious and priceless are the blessings which books scatter around our daily paths. We walk, in imagination, with the noblest spirits, through the most sublime and enchanting regions, – regions which, to all that is lovely in the forms and colors of earth,

“Add the gleam,
The light that never was on sea or land,
The consecration and the poet’s dream.”

A motion of the hand brings all Arcadia to sight. The war of Troy can, at our bidding, rage in the narrowest chamber. Without stirring from our firesides, we may roam to the most remote regions of the earth, or soar into realms where Spenser’s shapes of unearthly beauty flock to meet us, where Milton’s angels peal in our ears the choral hymns of Paradise. Science, art, literature, philosophy, – all that man has thought, all that man has done, – the experience that has been bought with the sufferings of a hundred generations, – all are garnered up for us in the world of books. There, among realities, in a “substantial world,” we move with the crowned kings of thought. There our minds have a free

range, our hearts a free utterance. Reason is confined within none of the partitions which trammel it in life. In that world, no divinity hedges a king, no accident of rank or fashion ennobles a dunce or shields a knave. We can select our companions from among the most richly gifted of the sons of God; and they are companions who will not desert us in poverty, or sickness, or disgrace.

Edwin P. Whipple.

My latest passion shall be for books.

Friedrich II. of Prussia.

For what a world of books offers itself, in all subjects, arts, and sciences, to the sweet content and capacity of the reader? In arithmetic, geometry, perspective, optics, astronomy, architecture, *sculptura, pictura*, of which so many and such elaborate treatises are of late written; in mechanics and their mysteries, military matters, navigation, riding of horses, fencing, swimming, gardening, planting, etc... What so sure, what so pleasant? What vast tomes are extant in law, physic, and divinity, for profit, pleasure, practice, speculation, in verse or prose! Their names alone are the subject of whole volumes; we have thousands of authors of all sorts, many great libraries, full well furnished, like so many dishes of meat, served out for several palates, and he is a very block that is affected with none of them.

Robert Burton.

Except a living man, there is nothing more wonderful than a book! – a message to us from the dead, – from human souls whom we never saw, who lived perhaps thousands of miles away; and yet these, on those little sheets of paper, speak to us, amuse us, vivify us, teach us, comfort us, open their hearts to us as brothers. We ought to reverence books, to look at them as useful and mighty things. If they are good and true, ... they are the message of Christ, the maker of all things, the teacher of all truth.

Charles Kingsley.

Golden volumes! richest treasures!
Objects of delicious pleasures!
You my eyes rejoicing please,
You my hands in rapture seize.
Brilliant wits and musing sages,
Lights who beamed through many ages,
Left to your conscious leaves their story,
And dared to trust you with their glory;
And now their hope of fame achieved,
Dear volumes! – you have not deceived.

Henry Rantzaau.

CHAPTER I

On the Choice of Books

The choice of books is not the least part of the duty of a scholar. If he would become a man, and worthy to deal with manlike things, he must read only the bravest and noblest books, – books forged at the heart and fashioned by the intellect of a godlike man. – January Searle.

THE most important question for you to ask yourself, be you teacher or scholar, is this: What books shall I read? For him who has inclination to read, there is no dearth of reading matter, and it is obtainable almost for the asking. Books are in a manner thrust upon you almost daily. Shall you read without discrimination whatever comes most readily to hand? As well say that you will accept as a friend and companion every man whom you meet on the street. Shall you read even every good book that comes in your way, simply because it is harmless and interesting? It is not every harmless book, nor indeed every good book, that will make your mind the richer for the reading of it. Never, perhaps, has the right choice of books been more difficult than at present; and never did it behoove more strongly both teachers and scholars to look well to the character of that which they read.

First, then, let us consider what books we are to avoid. All will agree that those which are really and absolutely bad should be shunned as we shun a pestilence. In these last years of the nineteenth century there is no more prolific cause of evil than bad books. There are many books so utterly vile that there is no mistaking their character, and no question as to whether they should be avoided. There are others which are a thousand-fold more dangerous because they come to us disguised, – “wolves in sheep’s clothing,” – affecting a character of harmlessness, if not of sanctity. I have heard those who ought to know better, laugh at the silly jokes of a very silly book, and offer by way of excuse that there was nothing *very* bad in it. I have heard teachers recommend to their pupils reading matter which, to say the least, was of a very doubtful character. Now, the only excuse that can be offered in such cases is ignorance, – “I didn’t know there was any harm in the book.” But the teacher who through ignorance poisons the moral character and checks the mental growth of his pupils is as guilty of criminal carelessness as the druggist’s clerk who by mistake sells arsenic for quinine. Step down and out of that responsible position which you are in no wise qualified to fill! The direction of the pupils’ habits of reading, the choice of reading matter for them, is by no means the least of the teacher’s duties.

The elder Pliny, eighteen hundred years ago, was accustomed to say that no book was so bad but that some part of it might be read with profit. This may have been true in Pliny’s time; but it is very far from correct now-a-days. A large number of books, and many which attain an immense circulation, are but the embodiment of evil from beginning to end; others, although not absolutely and aggressively bad, contain not a single line that can be read with profit.

What are the sure criterions of a bad book? There is no better authority on this subject than the Rev. Robert Collyer. He says: “If when I read a book about God, I find that it has put Him farther from me; or about man, that it has put me farther from him; or about this universe, that it has shaken down upon it a new look of desolation, turning a green field into a wild moor; or about life, that it has made it seem a little less worth living, on all accounts, than it was; or about moral principles, that they are not quite so clear and strong as they were when this author began to talk; – then I know that on any of these five cardinal things in the life of man, – his relations to God, to his fellows, to the world about him, and the world within him, and the great principles on which all things stable centre, —*that*, for me, is a bad book. It may chime in with some lurking appetite in my own nature, and so seem to be as sweet as honey to my taste; but it comes to bitter, bad results. It may be food for

another; I can say nothing to that. He may be a pine while I am a palm. I only know this, that in these great first things, if the book I read shall touch them at all, it shall touch them to my profit or I will not read it. Right and wrong shall grow more clear; life in and about me more divine; I shall come nearer to my fellows, and God nearer to me, or the thing is a poison. Faust, or Calvin, or Carlyle, if any one of these cardinal things is the grain and the grist of the book, and that is what it comes to when I read it, I am being drugged and poisoned; and the sooner I know it the better. I want bread, and meat, and milk, not brandy, or opium, or hasheesh.”¹

And Robert Southey, the poet, expresses nearly the same thing: “Young readers, – you whose hearts are open, whose understandings are not yet hardened, and whose feelings are not yet exhausted nor encrusted with the world, – take from me a better rule than any professors of criticism will teach you! Would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil, examine in what state of mind you lay it down. Has it induced you to suspect that what you have been accustomed to think unlawful may after all be innocent, and that may be harmless which you have hitherto been taught to think dangerous? Has it tended to make you dissatisfied and impatient under the control of others, and disposed you to relax in that self-government without which both the laws of God and man tell us there can be no virtue, and, consequently, no happiness? Has it attempted to abate your admiration and reverence for what is great and good, and to diminish in you the love of your country and your fellow-creatures? Has it addressed itself to your pride, your vanity, your selfishness, or any other of your evil propensities? Has it defiled the imagination with what is loathsome, and shocked the heart with what is monstrous? Has it disturbed the sense of right and wrong which the Creator has implanted in the human soul? If so, if you are conscious of any or all of these effects, or if, having escaped from all, you have felt that such were the effects it was intended to produce, throw the book in the fire, whatever name it may bear in the titlepage! Throw it in the fire, young man, though it should have been the gift of a friend; young lady, away with the whole set, though it should be the prominent furniture of a rosewood bookcase.”²

“It is the case with literature as with life,” says Arthur Schopenhauer, the German philosopher. “Wherever we turn we come upon the incorrigible mob of humankind, whose name is Legion, swarming everywhere, damaging everything, as flies in summer. Hence the multiplicity of bad books, those exuberant weeds of literature which choke the true corn. Such books rob the public of time, money, and attention, which ought properly to belong to good literature and noble aims; and they are written with a view merely to make money or occupation. They are therefore not merely useless, but injurious. Nine tenths of our current literature has no other end but to inveigle a thaler or two out of the public pocket, for which purpose author, publisher, and printer are leagued together... Of bad books we can never read too little; of the good, never too much. The bad are intellectual poison, and undermine the understanding.”³

From Thomas Carlyle’s inaugural address at Edinburgh on the occasion of his installation as rector of the University in 1866, I quote the following potent passage: “I do not know whether it has been sufficiently brought home to you that there are two kinds of books. When a man is reading on any kind of subject, in most departments of books, – in all books, if you take it in a wide sense, – he will find that there is a division into good books and bad books: everywhere a good kind of a book and a bad kind of a book. I am not to assume that you are unacquainted or ill-acquainted with this plain fact; but I may remind you that it is becoming a very important consideration in our day... There is a number, a frightfully increasing number, of books that are decidedly, to the readers of them, not useful. But an ingenious reader will learn, also, that a certain number of books were written by a supremely noble kind of people; not a very great number of books, but still a number fit to occupy

¹ Robert Collyer: *Addresses and Sermons*.

² *The Doctor*, Interchapter V., 1856.

³ Arthur Schopenhauer: *Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851.

all your reading industry, do adhere more or less to that side of things. In short, as I have written it down somewhere else, I conceive that books are like men's souls, divided into sheep and goats. Some few are going up, and carrying us up, heavenward; calculated, I mean, to be of priceless advantage in teaching, – in forwarding the teaching of all generations. Others, a frightful multitude, are going down, down; doing ever the more and the wider and the wilder mischief. Keep a strict eye on that latter class of books, my young friends!”

Speaking of those books whose inward character and influence it is hard at first to discern, John Ruskin says: “Avoid especially that class of literature which has a knowing tone; it is the most poisonous of all. Every good book, or piece of book, is full of admiration and awe: it may contain firm assertion or stern satire, but it never sneers coldly, nor asserts haughtily; and it always leads you to reverence or love something with your whole heart. It is not always easy to distinguish the satire of the venomous race of books from the satire of the noble and pure ones; but, in general, you may notice that the cold-blooded Crustacean and Batrachian books will sneer at sentiment, and the warm-blooded, human books at sin... Much of the literature of the present day, though good to be read by persons of ripe age, has a tendency to agitate rather than confirm, and leaves its readers too frequently in a helpless or hopeless indignation, the worst possible state into which the mind of youth can be thrown. It may, indeed, become necessary for you, as you advance in life, to set your hand to things that need to be altered in the world, or apply your heart chiefly to what must be pitied in it, or condemned; but for a young person the safest temper is one of reverence, and the safest place one of obscurity. Certainly at present, and perhaps through all your life, your teachers are wisest when they make you content in quiet virtue; and that literature and art are best for you which point out, in common life and familiar things, the objects for hopeful labor and for humble love.”⁴

There would be fewer bad books in the world if readers were properly informed and warned of their character; and we may believe that the really vicious books would soon cease to exist if their makers and publishers were popularly regarded with the same detestation as other corrupters of the public morals. “He who has published an injurious book,” says Robert South, “sins, as it were in his very grave; corrupts others while he is rotting himself.” Addison says much the same thing: “Writers of great talents, who employ their parts in propagating immorality, and seasoning vicious sentiments with wit and humor, are to be looked upon as the pests of society and the enemies of mankind. They leave books behind them to scatter infection and destroy their posterity. They act the counterparts of a Confucius or a Socrates, and seem to have been sent into the world to deprave human nature, and sink it into the condition of brutality.”⁵

And William Cobbett is still more severe in his denunciation. In his “Advice to Young Men,” he says: “I hope that your taste will keep you aloof from the writings of those detestable villains who employ the powers of their mind in debauching the minds of others, or in endeavors to do it. They present their poison in such captivating forms that it requires great virtue and resolution to withstand their temptations; and they have, perhaps, done a thousand times as much mischief in the world as all the infidels and atheists put together. These men ought to be held in universal abhorrence, and never spoken of but with execration.”

But the shunning of bad books is only one of the problems presented to us in the choice of our reading. In the great multitude of really good and valuable books, how shall we choose those which are of the most vital importance to us to know? The universal habit of desultory reading – reading simply to be entertained – is a habit not to be indulged in, nor encouraged, by scholars or by those who aspire to the station of teachers. There are perhaps a score of books which should be read and studied by every one who claims the title of reader; but, aside from these, each person should determine, through a process of rigid self-examination, what course of reading and what books are

⁴ *The Elements of Drawing, in Three Letters to Beginners*, 1857.

⁵ *The Spectator*, No. 166.

likely to produce the most profitable results to him. Find out, if possible, what is your special bent of mind. What line of inquiry or investigation is the most congenial to your taste or mental capacity? Having determined this question, let your reading all centre upon that topic of study which you have made your own, – let it be Literature, Science, History, Art, or any of the innumerable subdivisions of these subjects. In other words, choose a specialty, and follow it with an eye single to it alone.

Says Frederic Harrison: “Every book that we take up without a purpose is an opportunity lost of taking up a book with a purpose; every bit of stray information which we cram into our heads without any sense of its importance is for the most part a bit of the most useful information driven out of our heads and choked off from our minds... We know that books differ in value as much as diamonds differ from the sand on the sea-shore, as much as our living friend differs from a dead rat. We know that much in the myriad-peopled world of books – very much in all kinds – is trivial, enervating, inane, even noxious. And thus, where we have infinite opportunities of wasting our effort to no end, of fatiguing our minds without enriching them, of clogging the spirit without satisfying it, there, I cannot but think, the very infinity of opportunities is robbing us of the actual power of using them... To know anything that turns up is, in the infinity of knowledge, to know nothing. To read the first book we come across, in the wilderness of books, is to learn nothing. To turn over the pages of ten thousand volumes is to be practically indifferent to all that is good.”⁶

“It is of paramount importance,” says Schopenhauer, “to acquire the art *not* to read; in other words, of not reading such books as occupy the public mind, or even those which make a noise in the world, and reach several editions in their first and last year of existence. We should recollect that he who writes for fools finds an enormous audience, and we should devote the ever scant leisure of our circumscribed existence to the master-spirits of all ages and nations, those who tower over humanity, and whom the voice of Fame proclaims: only such writers cultivate and instruct us.”⁷

And John Ruskin offers the following pertinent advice to beginners: “It is of the greatest importance to you, not only for art’s sake, but for all kinds of sake, in these days of book deluge, to keep out of the salt swamps of literature, and live on a little rocky island of your own, with a spring and a lake in it, pure and good. I cannot, of course, suggest the choice of your library to you, for every several mind needs different books; but there are some books which we all need, and assuredly, if you read Homer, Plato, Æschylus, Herodotus, Dante, Shakspeare, and Spenser as much as you ought, you will not require wide enlargement of your shelves to right and left of them for purposes of perpetual study. Among modern books, avoid generally magazine and review literature. Sometimes it may contain a useful abridgment or a wholesome piece of criticism; but the chances are ten to one it will either waste your time or mislead you. If you want to understand any subject whatever, read the best book upon it you can hear of; not a review of the book... A common book will often give you much amusement, but it is only a noble book which will give you dear friends.”

If any of us could recall the time which we have spent in desultory and profitless reading, and devote it now faithfully to the prosecution of that special line of study which ought, long ago, to have been chosen, how largely we might add to our fund of useful knowledge, and how grandly we might increase our intellectual stature! “And again,” remarks James Herbert Morse, “if I could recover the hours idly given to the newspaper, not for my own gratification, but solely for my neighbor at the breakfast-table, I could compass a solid course of English and American history, get at the antecedents of political parties in the two countries, and give the reasons for the existence of Gladstone and Parnell, of Blaine and Edmunds, in modern politics – and there is undoubtedly a reason for them all. Two columns a day in the newspapers – which I could easily have spared, for they were given mainly to murder-trials and the search for corpses, or to the romance of the reporter concerning the same – have during the last ten years absorbed just about the time I might have spent in reading a

⁶ *Fortnightly Review* (April, 1879), – “On the Choice of Books.”

⁷ *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1851).

very respectable course in history, – one embracing, say, Curtius and Grote for Greece, Mommsen, Merivale, and Gibbon for Rome, Macaulay and Green for my roots in Saxondom, Bancroft, Hildreth, and Palfrey for the ancestral tree in America, together with a very notable excursion into Spain and Holland with Motley and Prescott, – a course which I consider very desirable, and one which should set up a man of middle age very fairly in historical knowledge. I am sure I could have saved this amount out of any ten years of my newspaper reading alone, without cutting off any portion of that really valuable contribution for which the daily paper is to be honored, and which would be needed to make me an intelligent man in the history of my own times.”⁸

It is not necessary that, in selecting a library or in choosing what you will read, you should have many books at your disposal. A few books, well chosen and carefully read, will be of infinitely more value to you than any miscellaneous collection, however large. It is possible for “the man of one book” to be better equipped in knowledge and literary attainments than he whose shelves are loaded with all the fashionable literature of the day. If your means will not permit you the luxury of a library, buy one book, or a few books, chosen with special reference to the line of reading which you have determined upon. Let no honey-mouthed book-agent persuade you to buy of his wares, unless they bear exactly upon your specialty. You cannot afford to waste money on mere catchpenny or machine publications, whose only recommendation is that they are harmless and that they sell well. That man is to be envied who can say, “I have a library of fifty or of a hundred volumes, all relating to my chosen line of thought, and not a single inferior or worthless volume among them.”

I have before me a list of books, – “books fashioned by the intellect of godlike men,” – books which every person who aspires to the rank of teacher or scholar should regard as his inheritance from the master-minds of the ages. If you know these books – or some of them – you know much of that which is best in the great world of letters. You cannot afford to live in ignorance of them.

Plato’s Dialogues (Jowett’s translation).
The Orations of Demosthenes on the Crown.
Bacon’s Essays.
Burke’s Orations and Political Essays.
Macaulay’s Essays.
Carlyle’s Essays.
Webster’s Select Speeches.
Emerson’s Essays.
The Essays of Elia, by Charles Lamb.
Ivanhoe, by Sir Walter Scott.
David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens.
Vanity Fair, by William Makepeace Thackeray.
Hypatia, by Charles Kingsley.
The Mill on the Floss, by George Eliot.
The Marble Faun, by Nathaniel Hawthorne.
The Sketch Book, by Washington Irving.
Les Miserables, by Victor Hugo.
Wilhelm Meister, by Goethe (Carlyle’s trans.).
Don Quixote, by Cervantes.
Homer’s Iliad (Derby’s or Chapman’s translation).
Homer’s Odyssey (Bryant’s translation).
Dante’s Divina Commedia (Longfellow’s trans.).
Milton’s Paradise Lost.
Shakspeare’s Works.

⁸ *The Critic* (July 5, 1884), – “Leisure Reading.”

Mrs. Browning's Poems.
Longfellow's Poetical Works.
Goethe's Faust (Bayard Taylor's translation).

I have named but twenty-five authors; but each of these, in his own line of thought and endeavor, stands first in the long roll of immortals. When you have the opportunity to make the acquaintance of such as these, will you waste your time with writers whom you would be ashamed to number among your personal friends? "Will you go and gossip with your housemaid or your stable boy, when you may talk with kings and queens, while this eternal court is open to you, with its society wide as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen, the mighty, of every place and time? Into that you may enter always; in that you may take fellowship and rank according to your wish; from that, once entered into it, you can never be outcast but by your own fault; by your aristocracy of companionship there, your inherent aristocracy will be assuredly tested, and the motives with which you strive to take high place in the society of the living, measured, as to all the truth and sincerity that are in them, by the place you desire to take in this company of the dead."⁹

⁹ John Ruskin: *Sesame and Lilies*.

CHAPTER II

How to Read

And as for me, though I con but lite,
On bookes for to rede I me delite,
And to hem yeve I faith and credence,
And in my herte have hem in reverence
So hertely, that there is game none,
That from my bookes maketh me to gone,
But it be seldome on the holy daie,
Save certainly, whan that the month of May
Is comen, and that I heare the foules sing,
And that the floures ginnan for to spring,
Farwell my booke, and my devotion.

Geoffrey Chaucer.

HAVING chosen the books which are to be our friends and counsellors, the next question to be considered is, How shall we use them? Shall we read them through as hastily as possible, believing that the more we read, the more learned we are? Or shall we not derive more profit by reading slowly, and by making the subject-matter of each book *thoroughly our own*? I do not believe that any general rule can be given with reference to this matter. Some readers will take in a page at a glance, and will more thoroughly master a book in a week than others could possibly master it in six months. It required Frederick W. Robertson half a year to read a small manual of chemistry, and thoroughly to digest its contents. Miss Martineau and Auguste Comte were remarkably slow readers; but then, that which they read “lay fructifying, and came out a living tree with leaves and fruit.” Yet it does not follow that the same rule should apply to readers of every grade of genius.

It is generally better to read by subjects, to learn what different writers have thought and said concerning that matter of which you are making a special study. Not many books are to be read hastily through. “A person who was a very great reader and hard thinker,” says Bishop Thirlwall, “once told me that he never took up a book except with the view of making himself master of some subject which he was studying, and that while he was so engaged he made all his reading converge to that point. In this way he might read parts of many books, but not a single one from ‘end to end.’ This I take to be an excellent method of study, but one which implies the command of many books as well as of much leisure.”

Seneca, the old Roman teacher, says: “Definite reading is profitable; miscellaneous reading is pleasant... The reading of many authors and of all kinds of works has in it something vague and unstable.”

Says Quintilian: “Every good writer is to be read, and diligently; and when the volume is finished, it is to be gone through again from the beginning.”

Martin Luther, in his “Table Talk,” says: “All who would study with advantage in any art whatsoever ought to betake themselves to the reading of some sure and certain books oftentimes over; for to read many books produceth confusion rather than learning, like as those who dwell everywhere are not anywhere at home.”

“Reading,” says Locke the philosopher, “furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what are read over. We are of the ruminating kind, and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections; unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment.”

“Much reading,” says Dr. Robert South, “is like much eating, – wholly useless without digestion.”

“Desultory reading,” writes Julius C. Hare, “is indeed very mischievous, by fostering habits of loose, discontinuous thought, by turning the memory into a common sewer for rubbish of all thoughts to flow through, and by relaxing the power of attention, which of all our faculties most needs care, and is most improved by it. But a well-regulated course of study will no more weaken the mind than hard exercise will weaken the body; nor will a strong understanding be weighed down by its knowledge, any more than oak is by its leaves or than Samson was by his locks. He whose sinews are drained by his hair must already be a weakling.”¹⁰

Says Thomas Carlyle: “Learn to be good readers, – which is perhaps a more difficult thing than you imagine. Learn to be discriminative in your reading; to read faithfully, and with your best attention, all kinds of things which you have a real interest in, – a real, not an imaginary, – and which you find to be really fit for what you are engaged in. The most unhappy of all men is the man who cannot tell what he is going to do, who has got no work cut out for him in the world, and does not go into it. For work is the grand cure of all the maladies and miseries that ever beset mankind, – honest work, which you intend getting done.”

¹⁰ *Guesses at Truth, by Two Brothers*, 1848.

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