

Z  
1003  
D16  
DANA

# HINTS ON READING

Hints on Reading.

AN

**ADDRESS**

DELIVERED IN THE

**IPSWICH FEMALE SEMINARY,**

**JANUARY 16, 1834.**

**BY DANIEL DANA, D. D.**

**MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL IN NEWBURYPORT.**

**NEWBURYPORT:  
PUBLISHED BY THE COMMITTEE**

**Printed at the Essex-North Register Office.**

**1834.**

IPSWICH, JANUARY 15, 1834.

In behalf of the teachers and young ladies of Ipswich Female Seminary, we respectfully request for publication, a copy of the Address on the choice of authors, which was delivered before the school, this morning. They wish for the privilege of reading and studying what they *heard* with so much pleasure.

C. WASHBURN, } Committee of  
S. C. FARLEY, } the Teachers.

REV. DR. DANA.

---

MY DEAR YOUNG FRIENDS,

It is gratifying to find that my views on subjects of the deepest interest, are honored with approbation in a Seminary in which *moral and religious improvement* holds the first and highest place. The request which you have so kindly communicated, I cannot decline. And with such a sanction, I shall feel an increased confidence in submitting my reflections to the public.

D. DANA.

Miss WASHBURN, and }  
Miss FARLEY, } Committee, &c.

## ADDRESS.\*

.....

It has been remarked, that men of superior intellectual power have generally appeared in our world, not solitarily, but in clusters. If, in this remark, there is something of fancy, there is likewise something of truth. It receives support from facts. Shakspeare, Bacon, Camden and Coke, were contemporaries. So were Tillotson, Boyle, Locke and Dryden. At a somewhat later age, a *galaxy* of British genius, science and literature was exhibited in the united rays of Newton, Clarke, Addison, Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, and many others. In the British parliament, Pitt, Burke, Fox, Sheridan, Windham, and others, formed such a constellation as has not appeared before or since their time.

Nor are these facts unsusceptible of a rational explanation. Genius is like the sun. It not only illuminates other bodies by its light, but where it finds a predisposition, it enkindles them by its heat. The generous mutual emulation, and not unfrequently, the occasional collision, of superior minds, elicits powers which would otherwise have remained latent. It is the prerogative of true greatness to reproduce and multiply itself. A single instance of pre-eminent mental energy has sometimes diffused its contagion, not only through a whole assembly, but through an extensive community.

Should the question be asked, whether our own country has as yet exhibited any of those luminous periods; any of those assemblages of contemporary mental superiority, to which allusion has been made, we need not blush to give the answer. The period of our Revolution was rich in men of pre-eminent talents, and of great resources. The papers emitted by Congress, in some of the earliest years of our struggle, were marked

---

\* This discussion was originally prepared for the Newburyport Lyceum. Nor has it since received any very material alterations. On this account, it may seem less appropriate than might be expected, to a literary seminary of females. The same circumstance, however, may possibly conduce to its more general usefulness.

with a depth and extent of thought, with a force of reasoning, and a fervor of eloquence, which would have disgraced no era of Greece, of Rome, or of Great Britain. The period of the formation and adoption of our Federal Constitution was scarcely less calculated to call forth the talents and energies of the nation. And it did effectually call them forth. In all parts of the Union, men were found, equal to the great occasion. Our national charter, the result of their concentrated wisdom and counsels, embodies the great principles of rational liberty, of well balanced government, and of social order, expressed with a felicity, a force, and a luminous conciseness of which it would be difficult to find a parallel. In the interpretation and defence of this wonderful instrument, the talents of our most distinguished citizens were again elicited and displayed. Light has gone forth to the whole civilized world ; and wherever nations, long oppressed, have roused to assert their rights, and to arrange the principles of a free government, they have spontaneously looked for information and guidance, to the American model.

Whether, so far as our country is concerned, the present age is to be deemed an age of great men, is a question of not perfectly easy solution. When it is considered that in cases of this kind, we are prone to reverse the ordinary laws of vision, and to attribute magnitude to objects, not according to their nearness, but their distance, our ultimate judgment, on the point, ought not, it should seem, to be unfavorable. Doubtless, in all the professions, and in all the departments of science and literature, we have many individuals of distinguished powers and attainments.

Should we turn our attention to the state of knowledge in the community at large, our judgment must be favorable in a high degree. Compared with the common people of nearly every nation in Europe, the common people of the United States, and especially of New-England, are in a cultivated and improved state. The means of knowledge are almost universally accessible ; and the disposition to employ them is almost universal too. Nor is the number small, even of those who do not lead a professional, or literary life, who aim at considerable attainments in knowledge.

Still there are discouragements and obstructions. Within the last half century, the field of human knowledge has enlarged its

boundaries, and the subjects of investigation have been vastly multiplied. Many new branches of science have been absolutely invented. Many long received systems have been exploded; many new theories established; and still others put into a train of experiment. In short, the field of knowledge is boundless, while the human mind is finite; and the objects of human inquiry being thus multiplied, it has become absolutely impossible that each should receive a minute and thorough attention. If these difficulties obstruct the path of the man of leisure, and the professed student, how much more discouraging must they be to those who are mainly occupied with secular duties; and with whom study, though a delightful, is still but an occasional employment.

The advantages of *Reviews*, when candidly conducted, and judiciously used, will not readily be questioned. But they have their *disadvantages* too. When permitted to take the judgment of the reader into their keeping; and to relieve him from the burden of thinking, they become injuries, rather than helps; a torpedo, rather than a stimulus to the mind.

Other obstructions there are to science, which appear in the shape of facilities and aids. I now refer to those *abstracts*, *abridgments* and *epitomes*, which meet us at every turn; which promise so much, and perform so little. Once they modestly claimed to be mere precursors and pioneers to the regular systems of science; and there were cases in which they performed this humble office to advantage. Of late, they threaten to become their *substitutes*; and unless these proud pretensions be resisted, they will turn our students into mere sciolists, and our scenes of education into nurseries of ignorance and self-conceit.

In short, it may be doubted whether, at the present day, a principal obstruction to real knowledge is not found (paradoxical as it may seem) in the immense *multiplication of books*. It was once remarked by the celebrated Hobbes, who, with all his lamentable eccentricities, was a man of genius, that if he had read as much as most other men, he should have been as ignorant as they. Doubtless, there is an extravagance couched in the sentiment. Let us then appeal, on the point, to a much safer guide; to a genuine philosopher. "Nothing," says Dugald Stewart, "has such a tendency to weaken, not only the powers of invention, but the intellectual powers in general, as a

*habit of extensive and various reading, without reflection.* Here it is, that the danger lies. Mere reading loads, oppresses, enfeebles, instead of stimulating and strengthening the mind. With multitudes, converse with books, instead of being an incentive and aid to thought, is a substitute for thinking, and a refuge from its burden.

It is generally admitted that the ancient writers of Greece and Rome, (the classics, as they are called) carried the art of composition to a perfection which it has never attained in modern days. Their productions never satiate, nor tire; but on each new perusal, unfold new beauties, and impart increasing wonder and delight. In tracing their surpassing excellence to its source, is it unnatural to ascribe it in part to the fact, that their authors must have read comparatively little? A volume was a serious affair in those days; and a very moderate library would absorb a large estate. Of course, those great writers were not, like the writers of modern times, continually burdened, and seduced, and distracted by thousands of volumes. They retired inward. They drew from their own resources; and by continual reflection and self-chastening, they prepared their minds for their best and loftiest exertions; and poured upon the world those productions whose solid worth has commanded the admiration of ages, and whose lustre is unobscured by the lapse of time.

“In casting our eyes,” say the Eclectic Reviewers, “over a large library, we would wish more than half of the volumes to be committed to the flames, because they are *pernicious*; the half of what remain, to be torn up for waste paper, because they contain *harmless falsehoods*; a moiety of the residue, to grace the library unopened, because they contain *useless truths*; and the small remnant, after all these deductions, to form the regular food of the understanding.” It is not needful to adopt this sentence in all its unsparing severity. But we may at least borrow a hint from it. Without a breach of candor, we may pronounce that more than one half of the books with which the press is deluging the community, are utterly unworthy to be opened and read.

The present age, far more than any which has preceded it, may be pronounced a *reading* age; and ours, probably more than any other community, a reading community. The press is

prolific, beyond all former example. Books, on a great variety of subjects, find their way, not only to the parlors of the rich, but to their kitchens too; and to the humblest abodes of the poor. Yet it will scarcely be asserted that there is a general diffusion of real knowledge; of mental cultivation and taste, which at all corresponds with these advantages. If, as is highly probable, the cause of this is found in the fact, that the reading of most is indiscriminate and injudicious; determined by no fixed principles, and directed to no definite objects; it will follow, of course, that the remedy, the revolution, must begin here. *Our reading, to be profitable, must be select.* It is to this point, that I propose to direct a few observations, which, I doubt not, will receive a candid attention from the young ladies whom I have the pleasure to address. They are likewise submitted, with much deference to the teachers; to whom, as I conceive, it belongs, not only to prescribe and direct the studies of their pupils while under their eye; but to superintend the whole course of their reading.

In suggesting the principles of the selection in view, I would remark, first, that our choice should fall principally, not on books of mere amusement, but those of solid and permanent utility. The imagination, it is admitted, is a most important faculty. It claims, and justly, both food and cultivation. Well nourished, and well regulated, it is the source of no small portion of our delight and improvement, our activity and usefulness. But why should this faculty have a totally disproportionate share of attention? Especially, why should it be stimulated to a preternatural action; or medicined into a morbid sensibility, equally incompatible with the sober duties, and the best enjoyments of life? Such is too probably the effect of the greater part of the reading which has become common and fashionable. We do not wish, indeed, that our citizens at large should range the fields of classic knowledge, or plunge into the depths of mathematics, of metaphysics, or antiquities. But what should hinder our respectable mechanics, or manufacturers, or farmers, from gaining such a knowledge of the principles of philosophy, or chemistry, or botany, as may not only afford them materials of ceaseless thought, but turn to the most important practical account? And why should not every human being seek some acquaintance with the rules of investigating truth, and of detecting and refuting error; with



the philosophy of the mind ; with the structure of the frame ; with the causes and the cures of the maladies to which it is liable ? Living in a world framed and supported for our use, and richly decorated for our delight, shall we not ceaselessly explore its beauties and wonders ? Shall we not ceaselessly explore the laws, the order, the harmony of the numberless worlds with which we are surrounded ? And shall we not in all behold and admire the transcendent excellencies of HIM who is the FIRST FAIR, and the FIRST GOOD ? Shall history unfold to us her ample pages in vain ? Shall we be inattentive to the destinies of those countless millions of fellow-beings who have occupied, before us, their little moment on the stage of time, and have been successively summoned away to their long home ? Believing that there is an immortality of bliss awaiting the pious, beyond the grave, shall we not daily meditate that divine Book which can guide us to it ; and intensely study whatever of human composition may help us to understand its meaning, and feel its force ? Surely with these considerations before us, it must be admitted, that for a rational, immortal being to read only, or even principally, for purposes of amusement, is the most egregious and unworthy trifling.

My next remark is on the importance of selecting as the principal subjects of perusal, authors of high rank ; I mean, great, standard, original writers. There is a certain class of authors who give us great thoughts ; and in a manner too, which shows that great thoughts are familiar, and not the fruit of mere pains-taking. Not content to beat the vulgar path, they can divert, at will, into new and unusual tracts of contemplation. Or perhaps, without departing from truth and nature, they can impart the force and attractions of novelty to common and familiar subjects. Such are the writers who not only inform, but expand and invigorate the mind ; who not only impart an affluence of ideas, but wake up new trains of thought in our own breasts. These are the writers who chiefly claim our perusal. Others may be our occasional companions. These should be our favorite and familiar friends. And they are easily distinguished.

Who can open the volumes of Milton, and not perceive at once that he is taken into the company of a great and elevated mind ; a mind familiar with grand conceptions ; and expatiating at its ease, in a beautiful and magnificent world of its own creation ?

Shakspeare was formed on a still superior scale. He was far behind Milton in learning. But, as Dryden beautifully and justly remarks: "Those who accuse him of wanting learning, give him the greatest commendation. He was naturally learned. He needed not the spectacles of books to read nature. He looked inward, and found her there." What is there, of sublime and beautiful in the natural world, which he has not described? What nook or corner of the human heart has he not ransacked? What passion, or sentiment.—I had almost said, what thought ever found its way to the mind, which he has not clothed in its aptest and most forcible expressions?—O that he had been *less familiar* with what is dark and impure in human nature; or that he had exhibited with less distinctness of coloring, what is either loathsome, or contaminating.\*

With pleasure we turn from an author so great in his beauties, and his faults, to another who was great, and almost *without* a fault; I mean the Earl of Chatham. That he was really a man of uncommon and transcendent mind, there is unequivocal evidence. He was great among his familiar acquaintance and friends. His speeches frequently overpowered and confounded his every-day companions. Mansfield himself, with all his acknowledged powers, sometimes trembled before him. Indeed, it has been said that his presence sometimes overawed majesty itself; and that one of his Sovereigns, impatient of his superiority, adopted measures to remove him from his presence, and his counsels. And when we read his speeches, we perceive a mind pouring out lofty sentiments, and uttering maxims of profound wisdom, apparently without study or effort. Do we inquire for the sources of his commanding eloquence? They are found in a mind conscious of its own rectitude; in an ardent love of country; in a fixed and fearless pursuit of noble ends, by noble means; and an unconquerable aversion from every thing flagitious and base. Nowhere, perhaps, have we, so much as in his speeches, an exemplification of the remark of a fine writer. "The *heart*," says he, "is the true source of intellectual power. All great thoughts come from the heart."

---

\* Editions of Shakspeare have been published in England, from which the passages offensive to delicacy are expunged. It is impossible not to wish that editions of this character might alone prevail in our own country. The interests of virtue and good taste equally demand it.

Another writer of great and uncommon power, is Edmund Burke. His speeches, indeed, and some of his other works, seem to contain too much of almost every thing that goes to constitute excellence; too much genius, and too much learning; too much matter, and too much ornament. It has been remarked of him, and probably with as much justice as it could have been remarked of any man who was so much a politician; that "we rise from the perusal of his writings, satisfied that we have not spent our time in discussions merely applicable to temporary or party interests. There is a conviction of knowing what we did not know before; of feeling something which we did not before feel, like permanent enlargement of mind; and this probably arises from the influence of that combination of qualities which constitute his peculiar greatness, by finding genius blended with knowledge; elegance of exposition with depth of thought; principles with facts; philosophy with practical politics; maxims of abstract wisdom with those of his own experience, serving to bear upon, to illustrate, and to explain each other."

Should it be asked whether, among American statesmen, there can be found a worthy companion of Chatham and Burke, I would reply without hesitation, Yes—Daniel Webster. And unless I mistake, we shall find, in almost all the productions of this distinguished statesman and orator, which have been given to the public, not only decisive indications of genius, but some of its best and choicest attributes. With little of refined speculation, of affected novelty, or artificial embellishment, we have much extensive and profound thought, much accurate discrimination, much powerful and conclusive reasoning. In short, Mr. Webster's eloquence is the eloquence of good sense, mingled with just as much of ornament as we would expect from a highly cultivated intellect, and a brilliant, but chastened imagination. In all his productions, there is a kind of crystalline clearness. The labor which a second-rate orator employs to embellish a subject, or perhaps to shroud it in mystery, Mr. Webster employs to bring it into the broad light of day. Above all, and better than all, he is almost always in the right. In perusing him, we give him a voluntary surrender of our minds; and this, in the full conviction that we are not captivated by the art of the orator, but subdued by the power of truth.—If to any, these re-

marks appear extravagant, let them peruse his discourses delivered at Plymouth, and at Bunker Hill. Let them peruse his speeches in the Convention for altering the Constitution of Massachusetts—a venerable assembly, in which, more than any other man, he was the actuating and presiding genius. Let them peruse his speeches in Congress on the Greek Revolution, on the Panama Mission; and the speech in 1830, in which he so triumphantly refuted the Southern heresy; and with a kind of mathematical accuracy, though apparently without premeditation or effort, marked out the boundaries of federal and state power. In fine, let them peruse his discourse in Faneuil Hall, in commemoration of the two Presidents, in which, while describing the characteristics of genuine eloquence, he has unconsciously described his own. “Nothing,” says he, “is valuable in speech, farther than it is connected with high intellectual and moral endowments. Clearness, force and earnestness, are the qualities which produce conviction. True eloquence does not consist in speech. It cannot be brought from far. \*\*\*\* It must exist in the man, in the subject, and in the occasion. Affected passion, intense expression, the pomp of declamation, all may aspire after it—they cannot reach it. It comes, if it come at all, like the outbursting of a fountain from the earth; or the bursting forth of volcanic fires, with spontaneous, original, native force.”

Of original writers, I will mention but one more; Dr. Goldsmith. And few have better claims to the character, than he. He wrote on a considerable variety of subjects; and on almost every subject which came under his pen, he poured the light, not only of a fine taste, and a splendid, though chastened imagination, but of a creative genius. Even his abridgments of history, (though sometimes they bear the marks of haste) instead of being the tame and spiritless things which such writings are often found, rise to the dignity of beautiful and instructive originals. If his prose writings have their rare excellencies, his poetry is still superior. The “Deserted Village,” had it stood alone, would have given him ample claims to immortality. Who has not read that inimitable poem? And who that has read it, will not often recur with delight, to the *village preacher*, and the *village school-master*, and to the *village ale-house* with its

white-wash'd wall, its nicely sanded floor,  
And varnish'd clock, that click'd behind the door.

But these themes are somewhat too seductive. I close the present topic with a single remark. If, as is undoubtedly the fact, the greater portion of books are mere copies; and indeed copies of copies, through many successive generations; the obvious and only way to spare ourselves endless trouble and vexation, is to repair to the originals. If, as has been ludicrously, but with too much justice remarked, the art of book-making is but the affair of pouring out of one bottle into another, let us go to the flask which is the prime repository of the liquid; and thus receive it with its best flavor, and free from the thousand contaminations it contracts in its progress from vessel to vessel. Suffer me to remark,

Thirdly. Our attention should be much confined to those authors to whom we can give our *confidence*; and with whom the love of *truth* is superior to the love of theory, and of every thing else. Even in the sciences, prejudice and prepossession have done incalculable mischief. We are told of a certain Florentine philosopher, that he never could be persuaded to look through one of Galileo's telescopes, lest he should see something in the heavens which might disturb his belief in the Aristotelian philosophy. Other philosophers, ancient and modern, in their attachment to long established and long cherished theories, have closed their eyes against the light of truth; and thus have passed through lives of much study and labor, in a kind of learned ignorance. Another class of philosophers have vibrated to the opposite extreme. A restless love of novelty; an insatiable fondness for theorizing, has been the *ignis fatuus* which has seduced and betrayed them. Dr. Priestley was confessedly a man of no mean powers; and had his judgment and common sense borne any proportion to his learning, he might have proved both a great philosopher, and a great divine. But his excessive and unbridled love of theory spoiled him for a philosopher, and more than spoiled him for a theologian. It would be truly amusing, were it not still more humiliating and painful, to see a man of talents and learning, embracing almost every different theory of religion, in rapid succession; undoubtingly confident that every newly adopted opinion was right; and even unsparingly condemning others who differed from him less, perhaps, than he had repeatedly differed from himself. His *History of early opinions concerning Jesus Christ* abounds with the opposite, and yet allied

extremes of bigotry and credulity. While his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* has been pronounced by an able, and not uncandid judge, to deserve much better to be entitled, *Corruptions of the history of Christianity*.

Other histories, which have acquired no small celebrity, have their value much impaired by the prejudices of their authors; prejudices which have more than neutralized their talents, and rendered their learning more injurious to the cause of truth, than almost any degree of ignorance could have been. Can any one suppose that Hume's elaborate and admired *History of England*, gives a fair and lucid exposition, either of the course of public events, or of the distinguishing excellencies and defects of private character? Far from this; wherever the author's bigoted principles in government, or prepossessions against genuine religion, come into operation, they distort and pervert every thing, and render him one of the most dangerous of guides. His history may be useful to those who have the judgment and the leisure to compare it with others, and by the comparison to correct its eccentricities. But to follow him with any degree of implicit confidence, is utterly unsafe.

Similar remarks may be made on Gibbon's *History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. In this splendid and imposing work, it is impossible for the intelligent reader not to see, beneath a transparent veil of affected liberality, a systematic and malignant hostility to religion. When he undertakes to account for the early progress and success of Christianity, and its triumph over the established religions of the earth, he does indeed coldly acknowledge that these effects are attributable to the evidence of the doctrine itself, and the providence of its Author. But in farther developing the subject, he obviously attempts to retract his own acknowledgment, and to leave the impression that Christianity was indebted for its prevalence to the same causes which have aided the progress of other religions, of mere *human* origin. It is scarcely necessary to add, that in pursuing this object, the author has succeeded in deceiving only himself, and the most unwary of his readers. The very arguments by which he has aimed to prove that the Christian religion, and the means of its advancement, were merely human, prove decisively to every enlightened and candid mind, that both the one and the other were divine. Still, he is a dangerous and seductive writer; and

to be read, if read at all, with the same suspicion with which we listen to a witness not merely suspected, but discredited.

With what delight do we turn from a writer of this character, to the fair-minded and virtuous Rollin. With no object or guide, but truth; with no prejudices, but in favor of virtue and goodness, he leads us in a plain path. We converse with him, as a friend; and we listen to him, as a kind and faithful counsellor. We can trust him in the dark, if needful; fully assured that our confidence will not be disappointed.

If candor, and an unshaken adherence to truth are inestimable qualities in a historian, America may well value herself upon her Marshall. On this great man was devolved the duty of writing the life of the Father of his country; embracing not only the stormy period of the revolutionary war, but the scarcely less tempestuous scenes which attended the commencement and the early progress of our Federal Republic. The highest party and political excitements were to be described, by one who was himself no neutral character; and at a period when the great multitude of those concerned, were still living. The task was executed; fearlessly, thoroughly executed; yet with such incontestible truth and accuracy, such scrupulous and delicate impartiality, as commanded a tribute of almost universal praise. The British Reviewers have done little justice to this highly meritorious work. But it neither needs their praise, nor fears their censure. It stands self-sustained, and sustained by the approbation of the most disinterested and competent judges. I pass to

A fourth remark. To entitle an author to be a favorite, he should certainly possess a presiding spirit of benevolence. We are prone to catch the air, the manner, the spirit of those friends with whom we familiarly associate. Why should not the case be the same, as it regards the writers with whom we frequently converse? The literary world has abounded, from age to age, with satirists who have lashed the vices of the times with unfeeling, unsparing severity. But neither the literary, nor any other world, has abounded with the good fruits of this species of reforming process. Are not the effects of intimacy with such writings, at least questionable, even as they regard virtuous minds? Do they not repress the sentiments of compassion for the miserable; that is, the vicious,

who are the eminently miserable? Do they not cherish feelings of harshness, and contempt for our species; perhaps too, of pride and self-preference? How must Pope have felt, when he was writing his *Dunciad*? Was he prepared to adopt the language of his own prayer?

That mercy I to others show,  
That mercy show to me.

It is true, that on another occasion, he could say, and with strong symptoms of self-satisfaction :

Ask you what provocation I have had?  
—The strong antipathy of *good* to *bad*.

But could this have been the prompting motive, when he contemplated giving a place in the *Dunciad* to Dr. Watts; and was prevented only by the expostulations of a friend who urged him first to read the writings of that excellent man, which, it should seem, he had not read before.

In perusing the celebrated letters of the British Junius, we are instructed by the writer's luminous views of liberty and government; we are delighted with his fine taste, and frequent classic allusions; we are amused with his details of political intrigue and tergiversation; we are sometimes enkindled by the ardor of his patriotism. Still, from the acknowledged merits of this wonderful Unknown, there are great and serious deductions. His cold-blooded, merciless attacks on private character are, to the benevolent mind, painful and disgusting. His severity is not only extreme, but partial and capricious. Not a few of its objects were persons of real worth. Others had their follies, and their vices too. But probably few or none were those monsters of depravity and crime which he has represented. Unless, therefore, we would expunge from the code of criticism, its best maxim; *that nothing is beautiful, which is not true*; we must divest this distinguished writer of a portion of that admiration which he has not been backward to arrogate, nor the reading public backward to bestow.

There are few works which the literary world could so ill spare, as Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. Yet who does not wish a work on many accounts so valuable, divested of its extreme severity? It cannot, indeed, be sufficiently regretted, that this ungracious attribute so thoroughly pervades the piece, that to remove it, would be to destroy the whole tex-



ture, and leave only a collection of fragments. So avariciously stinted is the measure of praise ; so abundant the distribution of censure ; so sparing the illustration of beauties ; so keen the detection, and so merciless, often, the exhibition of faults ; that we can neither witness the scene without pain, nor quit it without a degree of disgust. Yet Dr. Johnson was indisputably a great man ; and when not misled by prejudice or partiality, a most instructive critic.

What a striking and delightful reverse do we find, in passing to the pages of Addison. Would we acquaint ourselves with the distinguishing qualities of this excellent man, we must peruse the Spectator. It is his writings principally, which give character and interest to that inimitable work.\* Here we see a great, original, independent thinker. We perceive a highly cultivated intellect, a brilliant and active imagination, a judgment delicately correct, a mind rich in the stores of ancient and modern literature, and a heart still richer in the kindest and best sensibilities. With him, nothing is odious, but vice ; nothing ridiculous, but folly. And even vice and folly, are constrained to blush at their own deformity, and to kiss the hand that would so gently chastise them into wisdom and goodness.

My fifth remark is more important than any which have preceded it. In selecting authors for frequent and familiar perusal, we should have a primary regard to their *moral purity*. Were we angels, we might converse with infected air, without inhaling it ; and return uncontaminated, from objects and scenes of pollution. But such is not the lot of mortality. To creatures imperfect and depraved as we, the very vicinity of vice is dangerous ; its touch, almost certainly fatal. The process of mental contamination is described by Pope with his usual felicity and accuracy.

Vice is a monster of so frightful mein,  
As to be hated, needs but to be seen.  
But seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

It is the grand approbrium of polite literature, ancient and modern, that it has so often been the vehicle of sentiments

---

\* It cannot, indeed, be denied, that the remarks made on the writings of Shakspeare, apply, in a degree, to some portions of the Spectator. But the papers of Addison are generally the least infested with these exceptionable things.

polluting to the imagination, and subversive of every religious and moral principle. With this flagitious character we are compelled to brand, almost without distinction, the mass of productions prepared for the stage. No small portion of their authors must be acknowledged as the enemies and pests of their species; if to have poisoned thousands of minds, and to have destroyed thousands of souls, can entitle them to this guilty pre-eminence. Who can deny, that throughout the great mass of English dramatic writings, libertinism, impurity, profaneness, and other flagitious vices and crimes are frequently attached to characters held up to admiration and applause? While all that is lovely in virtue, or venerable in piety, is as frequently disgraced by the most degrading associations. The same sentence of condemnation applies with almost equal force, to a great portion of English romances and novels. The admired novels of Fielding and Smollett, stamped as they confessedly are, with the signatures of genius, cannot be justly exempted from the general censure. And Sterne, whose exquisite touches of nature lifted up his writings, notwithstanding their disgusting indelicacy, to a temporary popularity, seems at length, by the force of gravitation, and by general consent, to have sunk to his proper level of ignominy.

It is readily admitted, that in Great Britain, the style of fictitious history has, within the last half century, been greatly improved; that, both in a moral and intellectual view, it has assumed an altered and superior character. But it admits of much improvement still; and loudly demands it. Many of the most admired productions of this class, are not only wretchedly wasting the time, but powerfully perverting the taste, and depraving the morals of our youth. There is one writer in this department, to whom the public suffrage seems to have assigned a high and undisputed pre-eminence. And most unquestionably, Sir Walter Scott possessed a portion of real genius; a mind of large resources; uncommon powers of description; a fruitfulness of thought, and versatility of pen, almost beyond example. Nor can it be denied that the *moral* tendency of his writings is far less exceptionable than that of most productions of the same class. If there is any thing to regret, it is, that moral effect is not a more decisive and prominent object; that the morality

presented is often equivocal; that the virtues exhibited are almost exclusively those of the constitutional and good-humored kind; that vice itself is too frequently allied with great and splendid qualities; and that those characters which will be almost inevitably and universally admired, are often such as cannot with safety be imitated. Is there not, indeed, reason to complain, that while characters of questionable virtue are so frequently clothed in the most attractive dress, piety itself should so often be disfigured and degraded by a fictitious alliance with weakness, enthusiasm, superstition, or hypocrisy?

The remark which has been made respecting fictitious writings, applies in a degree to British poetry at large. It has acquired a chaster, purer character. The grossnesses frequently found in Dryden and Swift, and sometimes even in Pope, would in our day, be scarcely tolerated. Indeed, it is a delightful fact; it is a maxim of indisputable truth; that no writer will retain a lasting hold on the public mind, who does not pay homage to virtue. Accidental circumstances may give him a temporary elevation; but time, the great leveler; the test of truth, and of merit; will bring him down. Who does not remember the period when the public gaze was irresistibly attracted to Byron; and when a new work of his, long before it could escape from the press, was awaited with a breathless kind of impatience? And now, when his ashes are scarcely cold, his writings, with all their unquestionable power, their meretricious beauties, and unpardonable faults, are rapidly on the way to the gulf of oblivion. While Cowper, whose modest merit made its way so slowly to the public notice, has, after having been more than thirty years in his grave, a cherished remembrance in a million hearts, and a fame which extends and brightens with the lapse of ages.

I feel myself strongly tempted to offer, in this connection, a few thoughts on the poetry and poets of our own growth. But it is a temptation which I shall resist. To speak of living characters, especially those at home, is a task of great delicacy. And it can hardly be questioned that our best poetry is, with a few exceptions, the growth of the last twenty or thirty years. But this is not the only difficulty. Where considerable numbers have claims to notice, it might seem invidious to distinguish. Without descending to particulars, I may be permitted to re-

mark, that though our country has produced, as yet, no lengthened poem of the higher order, and of universally acknowledged excellence, it has given birth to a variety of minor poems which claim no small share of praise. Indeed, without assuming the character of the judge, or the eulogist, I will venture the opinion, that in this department, America has contributed its full proportion with the mother country, to the stores of English polite literature; and still further, that while our own poetry of this description equals that of Great Britain in point of genius, it even exceeds it in purity, and moral effect.

Though I have already made large use of your patience, there is one additional remark which I cannot suppress. While writers hostile to *religion*, deserve nothing from us but our reprobation, those have eminent claims to our preference and love, who obviously derive their inspiration from that sacred and divine source. "I light my lamp at the sun," said an eminent French writer, when signifying to a friend, that he prepared himself for the task of composition, by first sitting down to a page of Homer. Other great men have enkindled their genius at an *infinitely brighter sun*; while another class still, have employed all their powers in the impious and abortive attempt to blot it out of the firmament. In all the creation of God, there is not a more horrible anomaly, than a man of brilliant mind, and a dark, cold, infidel, atheistic heart; of great powers, and those powers directed in impious hostility against the throne of God, and the happiness of man. Such a guilty and wretched being was Voltaire. And when it is considered that he devoted his life to a virulent, systematic, incessant attack on the Christian religion; that he was an author for more than half a century; that he had no small share of genius and learning, with uncommon powers of wit and sarcasm; that he wrote on a great variety of subjects, and diffused his poison through all; that he wrote prose and poetry—ponderous volumes and fugitive tracts; that he wrote in a language which was not only the language of France, but of Europe, and the civilized world; and finally, that he was admired almost as extensively as he was read—when all this is considered, who can calculate the immense number of minds which he perverted, or of souls which he destroyed?

And now, where is the reader who would not turn in disgust

from the seductive, but detestable writings of such a foe of God and man? And where is the reader who would not delight to give days and nights to the pages of a Pascal, bending his great mind, with the simplicity of a child, to the eternal word of God—of a Fenelon, distilling the truths of Inspiration from “lips wet with Castalian dews”—of a Young, celebrating, in the sublimest strains, the mysteries of Redemption—of a Cowper, chanting the love of his Savior in the sweetest tones of simplicity and grace—of a Wilberforce, with classic, but unstudied eloquence, alternately vindicating the claims of Christianity, and the rights of an injured race?

It would be unpardonable, young ladies, not to call your attention emphatically to a distinguished individual of your own sex, who has lately taken her upward flight; I mean the venerable Hannah More. Rarely has such an assemblage of intellectual and moral excellence appeared. The native vigor of her mind; the amplitude and variety of her knowledge; the versatility of her pen; her exemplary virtue; her uniform piety; her long life, efficiently devoted to the service of God and man—all combined to place her almost alone in the world. Her writings embrace a great variety of the most interesting topics. And generally speaking, they deserve not only to be read, but studied. Nor will their repeated perusal fail to furnish a rich reward; for they are instinct with the sublime truths, and the heavenly spirit of Christianity. Their style is likewise eminently elegant and rich; and with a few exceptions, deserves to be recommended as a model for imitation.\*

We owe much to those philosophic writers who, while unfolding the laws and the phenomena of nature, have traced them to the power and wisdom of the ETERNAL; and thus have caused philosophy to pay a direct tribute to Christianity. Such writers are Ray and Derham. And such, in more recent time, is Dr. Paley.

Among the poets, Thompson claims the same distinguished praise. How delightfully has he looked, and caused his readers to “look, through nature, up to nature’s God.” We may safely

---

\* The principal error of Mrs. More’s style seems to be, that it is somewhat too learned and *Johnsonian*.

challenge all the boasted writers of antiquity ; all the distinguished orators and poets of Greece and Rome, to furnish us with strains which approach in beauty and sublimity, those lines in the Hymn on the Seasons.

These, as they change, Almighty Father, these  
Are but the *varied* God. The rolling year  
Is full of THREE. Forth in the pleasing Spring,  
Thy beauty walks, Thy tenderness and love.

Then comes thy glory in the Summer months,  
With light and heat refulgent. \* \* \* \*

Thy bounty shines in Autumn, unconfined,  
And spreads a common feast for all that lives.  
In Winter, awful Thou ! with clouds and storms  
Around thee thrown \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \* thou bidst the world adore,  
And humblest nature with thy northern blast.

I am not willing to close this discussion without warmly recommending to all who hear me, the incessant study of ONE BOOK, which infinitely more than all others, tends at once to enlarge the understanding, to sublimate the sentiments, to purify the soul, and thus prepare it for the everlasting presence and communion of its God. The Bible, my friends, may be undervalued by the prosperous and the gay ; but to the afflicted, it is the balm of every woe. It may be neglected in health ; but it is the only friend to the dying pillow. It may be despised by the vain, and hated by the impious ; but with all the wise, and great, and excellent of the race, it has been an object of unmingled admiration and love. "Every sentence of the Bible," says Bishop Horsley, "is from God ; and every man is interested in the meaning of it." "We account," says Sir Isaac Newton, "the Scriptures of God, the most sublime philosophy." "Those passages," says Boyle, "which are so obscure, that they teach us nothing else, may at least teach us humility." "In the first page of this sacred Book," says Horne, "a child may learn more in an hour, than all the philosophers in the world learned *without* it, in a thousand years." "Study," says Locke, "the Holy Scriptures. Therein are contained the words of eternal life. It has God for its Author ; salvation for its end ; and truth without any mixture of error, for its matter." "This book," says Mrs. Huntington, "has done more for me, than all the men on

earth, and all the angels in heaven could have done." "By the Scriptures," says Jay, "we can associate with Paul and Isaiah; with Moses and the Patriarchs; and can sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of God."

---

[COPY-RIGHT SECURED]

---

Cornell University Library  
**Z1003 .D16**

**Hints on reading : an address delivered**



3 1924 029 541 681

olin



