

LECTURE XVIII.

**METHODS OF LITERARY STUDY. — PRELIMINARIES. —
CRITICAL READING. — PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD. —
DIVISION OF LABOR.**

3d, HAVING thus far, in our discussion of a pastor's literary studies, considered the objects of the study and the selection of authors, we now proceed to observe the methods of literary study by a pastor.

It is necessary here, at the expense of repetition, to recall and re-apply the two preliminaries which were named at the outset of our discussion of the selection of authors; viz., that the principles bearing upon the subject must in practice qualify each other, any one of them by itself constituting an impracticable basis of culture; and that, even with this qualification, the principles collectively constitute at the best only a theoretic ideal of study.

These preliminaries are even more significantly true of methods of study than of the selection of authors. No one principle can have a monopoly. All combined give us only an ideal: the realization of it is a matter of degrees. A nearer approach to it is practicable in some cases than in others; but in all cases it is of value to have it as an ideal. It is worth much to know what *is* scholarly reading. If it is but partially practicable to a man, it is worth something to him to

know *that*; to be able, therefore, to adjust his plans to that. It is worth much to save time and force from useless struggles, and specially to save himself from the narrowness of underrating a high ideal, because *he* has tried it, and found it impracticable. I repeat, therefore, that these preliminaries are more necessary as qualifications of the principles we are now about to consider than of those named respecting the selection of authors.

1. Bearing them in mind, let us observe, that the ideal of scholarly reading is critical reading. Here, again, the distinction between reading and study is elemental. It lies at the foundation of the whole business. In mere reading the mind is passive: in study the mind works. In reading we drift: in study we row.

If Professor Stuart in his prime had been asked how many hours in a day he studied, he would have said, "Three and a half." But he spent at his study-table ten, often twelve, hours. Such was the difference in his estimate between study and reading. A young man wrote to me not long ago that he was studying fourteen hours a day. From my knowledge of his temperament and habits, and from the fact that he adds that he is "growing fat upon it," I doubt whether he is studying two hours in a day. A man does not grow fat upon fourteen hours of study in a day.

Critical reading establishes acquaintance with an author. It discloses also the very process of his literary work. Every author's work is a panorama of his mental processes to one who has the critical insight by which to discover them. They are more easily discovered in some than in others. Some writers are

secretive: they do not let themselves loose in their speech. But these are inferiors in literary power. The great minds liberate themselves; they move on winged utterances; they throw the whole force of their own being into their creations. Then, like other works of creation, the thing created bears the image of the creator. It is impossible, for instance, to read with scholarly care the sonnets of Shakspeare, or Byron's "Cain," without discovering somewhat of the personal life and character of the author. Even a heedless reader can not escape the discovery of the hidden character of the author's mind in reading Hawthorne's "Marble Faun" or "The Scarlet Letter." They present a still picture of the man which is more suggestive than an autobiography.

That is unscholarly reading for a professional man, reading for his own culture as a public speaker, which does not disclose somewhat of the process of authorship. Not the man only, but his work, needs to be made visible. To achieve this requires study, as distinct from reading. The majority of educated men read a vast deal more than they study. The old adage, "Commend me to the man of one book," was founded upon the invaluable worth of critical reading. We do a permanent evil to our own minds, if we read a valuable book as we skim the newspapers. It is impossible to appreciate an athletic literature without some degree of the strain of a mental athlete in the study of it. Specially is this true of that mastery of the process of authorship which a public speaker needs to acquire by his reading.

To illustrate this critical method in reading for professional discipline, we should observe such things as

the following. Respecting the materials of thought, Are they true? are they relevant? are they original? are they intense? are they the obvious outflow of a full mind? are they suggestive of reserved force? do they mark a candid thinker, a sympathetic thinker, a mind which puts itself *en rapport* with the reader? Respecting the style of the work, such points as these need attention: Is the style clear, concise, forcible, picturesque? Are the sentences involved? Does a Latin, or a German, or a Saxon model prevail in their structure? Do laconic sentences abound? interrogatives? antitheses? parentheses? rhythmic clauses? clauses in apposition? quotations? epithets? long words? short words? obsolete words? archaic words? euphonious words? synonyms? monosyllabic words? Is the vocabulary affluent, or stinted? Is the style as a whole that of oratory, or of the essay? Is it as a whole natural to the subject and the discussion? Is it as a whole peculiar to the author, or imitative of other authors? Does it indicate in the author the habit of weighing well the forces of language? Does it contain fragments void of thought? Robert Hall's well-known criticism of his own production, which a friend was reading to him for the purpose, illustrates critical study of style: "'Pierce' is the word: I never could have meant to say 'penetrate' in that connection."

It is sometimes said that this critical reading is a pettifogging process,—the mind is contracted by it. Not so, if the volume in hand is one of great and enduring power. A great mind works as the great powers of nature do in producing a multitude of diminutive creations. We can not neglect these, and yet know that mind thoroughly in its best moods of

authorship. Lord Bacon says, "He that can not contract the sight of his mind, as well as disperse and dilate it, wanteth a great quality." Reading in this manner, one acquires not only a knowledge of an author's mental character and habits of thinking, but somewhat of the very process of production in the case in hand. Even a little of such acute reading will create a new perceptive power in all other reading. The knowledge gained will approach the accuracy and intricacy of self-knowledge.

Are there not some authors with whom already you have formed this kind of personal intimacy? If you should happen upon an anonymous extract from them which you had never seen before, you could pronounce confidently upon their origin. You know it by a word, a tone of thought, an idiomatic sentence or illustration, as you recognize a friend in the distance by his gait, or the swing of his arm. The authorship of the "Waverley Novels" was detected by readers of the "Scottish Ballads" and "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," long before Walter Scott acknowledged the authorship. This critical reading which makes it impossible for an author to secrete himself from readers is the basis of all mastery of books.

2. Scholarly reading is reading in the spirit of philosophical inquiry.

There is a difference between literary curiosity and literary inquiry. Curiosity contents itself with facts: inquiry seeks for the principles which underlie the facts. Curiosity asks "What?" inquiry asks "Why?" Why is one discussion masterly, and another feeble? Why does one volume suggest material for two? Why is one order of thought superior to another? Why

does one page require a second reading? Why does one structure of discourse excel another? Why is one style of illustration more vivid than another? Why is one construction, one length, one emphasis, of a sentence, more effective than another? Why is one word better than another? Why say "pierce," and not "penetrate"?

Some anomalies in literature force upon a critic the philosophical inquiry. Let us note an illustration of this. Has it never occurred to you what a singular violation of congruity occurs in the first stanza of one of the dearest hymns of the church, perhaps the hymn which above all others has won the affection of Christian hearts? On what principle can criticism justify such lines as these?—

"There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Immanuel's veins,
 And sinners plunged beneath that flood
 Lose all their guilty stains."

Do we ever fill a fountain? Is there no jar upon æsthetic feeling in the anatomical specification of veins? Would any thing but the necessities of rhyme induce a poet to prefer that image to the "heart"? Is the picture, when finished, an attractive or an impressive one to the imagination? Is there any congruity in an interchange of the images of "flood" and "fountain"?

These æsthetic difficulties have been submitted to several of the most accomplished Christian critics of the country. They were unanimous in condemning the incongruities on æsthetic grounds, yet as unanimous in saying that no art can improve the stanza on moral grounds. James Montgomery was so sensitive to these

imaginative defects of the hymn, that he once published it revised by his own hand, with this stanza adjusted to the demands of taste. But who has ever sung the revised edition? In what collections of psalmody has it ever found a place? It has fallen still-born. Christian worship clings to Cowper's original. Christian hearts will love it in all its æsthetic deformity; and more, Christian feeling denies the deformity, let criticism say what it will.

There is a reason for such an apparent anomaly as this. Genuine taste and Christian sensibility never conflict in reality. The following explanation has been suggested by a living scholar whose æsthetic taste and religious sensibility both entitle him to a hearing. He says substantially that the whole conception of the atoning work of our Lord is so august and so mysterious, that the mind does not demand in a lyric expression of it the sharpness of congruity which it would demand in the expression of a less solemn or a less obscure thought. The whole idea of the atonement is an anomaly. Æsthetic anomalies are in keeping with it. It overawes æsthetic feeling in its common forms. It exalts the moral sensibility in the place of that feeling. An Oriental confusion of metaphor, arising out of luxuriance of imagery, is therefore invited by the strange abnormal character of the thing expressed. The poetic mind declines to trace such a thing in imagery exact and finished, like that in which it would paint a rainbow, or fringe a cloud. In such a mind the Christian feeling which loves the stanza as it is, is more truthful than the æsthetic feeling which would condemn it. Whether or not this is a satisfactory explanation of this example, the example itself illus-

trates the working of philosophical criticism, and the necessity of it in the explanation of anomalies.

Again: philosophical inquiry gives dignity to criticism. By means of it criticism constantly makes incursions into mental science. The rhetorical force of one word may be attributable to a fundamental principle in philosophy. The words "power," "cause," "ought," are unanswerable arguments for certain philosophical truths. The existence of those words is a philosophical fact. The true philosophy of mind can not be evolved without them. Yet the proper use of them is one of the things with which rhetorical criticism concerns itself. This is but one of a multitude of ways in which criticism and mental science work into each other's domains.

Moreover, philosophical criticism often reverses our first judgment of authors. A search for the reason of an opinion will often lead a candid mind to give up the opinion. So our judgments of authors are often hereditary judgments. In our maturer culture we can not defend them; and we discover this by asking why we attribute to such authors the qualities we revere. Our first impressions of authors are also often our juvenile impressions. We find that our literary manhood does not support them; and we either discover this, or are confirmed in it, by raising the philosophical inquiry, Why? The glare of a false literature is often thus found out, when a more indolent criticism would be dazzled for a lifetime.

3. The most useful reading is done by a scholarly division of labor. By this I mean, that critical attention should be directed to one thing at a time. We can not wisely bring to critical reading the habits we form in

accumulative reading. Deep boring must be done in spots. The surface we cover with our reading should be dotted over with points at which we sink a shaft of critical inquiry. An inspection of your present habits of reading will probably disclose to you that they have thus far been almost wholly acquisitive and discursive in their character. You have read for information and entertainment, not for critical culture.

Acquisitive reading for critical purposes is wearisome, because it is unproductive of results. No man will long continue it. Did you ever attempt to drag a tree through a narrow gateway, with the branches headed to the front; and did you not discover a very convenient principle of mechanics when the bright thought occurred to you to turn it end for end? The single trunk obeyed you, and drew after it the supple branches which were so refractory before. Like such a juvenile error are attempts to carry a great diversity of critical processes along side by side in our reading. The diversity bewilders. The objects of our critical attention straggle out on this side and on that. Our thought seizes one and another at random, and drops each to attend to a third, till, by dint of tug and heat, we advance by inches to the discovery that we are losing all pleasure, and gaining no discipline but such as is the common lot of saints. At last, bruised and irritated, we give it up in despair. Reverse the process, fix attention on one thing at a time, and you advance with ease and with the consciousness of progress.

For the sake of definiteness in our conception of this method, let several applications of it be noticed. Thus division of labor may be applied to the study of diversities in kind of literature. For example, the essays

of our language form a department by themselves. Study them as such. Get a clear idea of the English essay, — what it is, what is its relation to other departments of our literature, when it originated, who are its chief masters, what are their peculiarities, and what is the control of the essay over modern opinion. Do not burden your study of the essay by trying to carry abreast with it in your reading English poetry, history, biography, philosophy. Let each of these monopolize your time in turn. One week, or its equivalent, devoted to a study of the essay alone, will give you a very valuable knowledge, even to some extent a critical knowledge of it, which will assist you in the studies of a lifetime.

Division of labor may be applied to criticism of single authors, if they deserve it. Study an author by installments. Study first the sentiment, then the construction, then the illustrative materials, then the style, and, finally, his place in the fraternity of authors and in the history of his times. The severest labor of such reading is near the beginning. One advances in it with accelerated speed. You are constantly taking side-glances, also, at other things which you can not help noticing, as you see things out of the corners of your eyes. This relieves the monotony of your work, without burdening your attention with unmanageable varieties.

This analytic method of study may be applied to the several parts of a discourse or of a poem. It is the method usually adopted in lectures on the structure and composition of a sermon. We study texts by themselves; introductions are considered alone; propositions, divisions, conclusions — each receives dis-

cussion in its place. The same division of labor may be applied to other species of composition,—to orations, to works of fiction, to histories. This principle of division of labor is the one on which we pursue all other intelligent courses of study: we study theology by topics; we read history by periods, by royal reigns and dynasties; medical science is studied by classification of diseases: why should not the criticism of literature be facilitated by the same principle? This method in the study of books tends to secure profound knowledge at the vital points of literary history. We can not otherwise discover the vital points; for we shall not otherwise study any one thing long enough to discover its relations to other literature. But, with a few things thus thoroughly mastered, we shall know that our culture is well anchored. We can trust ourselves: gales of false taste will not drag us from safe moorings. What we know, we know; and we know that we know it. If our judgments differ from those of others, we can afford to wait for the decisions of time.

By this method, ultimately, even the extent of our literary knowledge will be most effectually enlarged. The chief objection to this painstaking study is that the work is slow. But in truth it is the best method for acquisitive study in the end. Dr. Johnson, in his "Lives of the Poets," says that the reason why the ancients surpassed the moderns in literary acquisitions is, that they had a more truthful conception of the limitations of human powers, and confined themselves to one thing. The measure of our knowledge is not so much that of what we gain as of what we hold and use. In war, military policy is not to conquer a

strategic point till force enough is at command to hold it. So, in literary pursuits, conscious mastery at a few points will soon extend itself to others. The points of conquest will soon begin to communicate with each other. There are certain signals in a man's consciousness of knowledge by which mastery in one thing helps mastery in another. An interchange of tribute is carried on, by which knowledge assists all other knowledge. We are not conscious of that, except through profound and thorough scholarship: nothing less than that deserves the name of culture.