

LECTURE XIX.

METHODS OF STUDY, CONTINUED. — LITERARY COMPARISONS. — CULTURE OF WEAK TASTES. — COLLATERAL READING.

4. CONTINUING the discussion of the scholarly ideal of reading, I remark that it involves studious comparison of authors with each other.

Literary comparisons are often involuntary. One can not read, even cursorily, two such authors as Adam Smith and John Ruskin, or two such as Jeremy Taylor and Robert South, without unconsciously instituting comparisons between them. We obtain a more definite conception of each by contrast with the other. From time immemorial the two great orators of antiquity have lived in literary criticism chiefly by means of such comparison. We know Cicero and Demosthenes to-day mainly in the fact that each was what the other was not. The literary mind of to-day would never have known Plato as it does but for the existence of Aristotle.

This law of comparison rules even our judgment of national literatures. We have a conception of the Greek literature which we never could have had, if the Roman literature had not been superinduced upon it. The Greek idea of beauty is more vivid in our thoughts than it could have been but for the Roman

idea of law. The German and the English and the French literatures are thus illuminating each other in modern critical judgment. Is the allegory of the three artists, illustrative of the differences in the three national minds, too well known to deserve rehearsal? The legend reads that three painters—an Englishman, a Frenchman, and a German—were commissioned to paint a picture of a lion. The Frenchman started the next day for Africa, and there drew his picture of a lion from the life. The Englishman went to the British Museum, and painted his picture from the authorities he found in the library of natural science. The German shut himself up in his own library, and evolved a lion from the depths of his own consciousness. The caricature will live a long time as a representative of the three literatures and the national minds which they express.

Comparisons connect different departments of literature. We see the structure of Edmund Burke's mind the more clearly for our knowing his early passion for the poetry of Milton. The eloquence of Massillon is the more intelligible to us when we learn his predilection for the poetry of Homer. The dramatic power of Whitefield we understand when we are told of his youthful studies of Shakspeare. Criticism would be deprived of one of its most powerful auxiliaries, if it were dis severed from this study of resemblances and contrasts by comparison of authors.

The value of this expedient is seen, also, in the fact that comparisons have associated certain names in literature with certain names in art, in current literary opinion. Criticism often expresses its most profound judgment of an author by saying, that, if he had not

been an author, he would have been equally eminent in painting or in sculpture. Canova's remark respecting Pitt and Fox was founded on the law of mental resemblances. To the Athenian mind, Pericles and Phidias were of the same stock of mental character; though it is not known that the one ever handled a chisel, or the other ever spoke in public. "Paradise Lost" has suggested to more than one reader the frescos of Michael Angelo. Disraeli observes that Milton, Michael Angelo, and Handel are parallels to each other in their respective arts. Each represents the same epoch in the history of his art. Dante's "Inferno" and the painting of "The Last Judgment" have a deeper ground of reciprocal suggestion than similarity of theme. One of the keenest of modern critics has characterized the poetry of Shelley by likening it to the coloring of Titian. The relics we have of the speeches of several great generals to their armies confirm the criticism which their military exploits alone have suggested, that they might have been great orators. Many lovers of eloquence have regretted that Cæsar and Napoleon were not restricted by force of circumstances to the senates of nations, rather than to their battlefields. Mr. Everett, characterizing Daniel Webster, compares him to the Prince of Condé, on the eve of the battle of Rocroi, and to Alexander before the battle of Arbela. These are not fanciful suggestions: they are founded on real similitudes of genius. They illustrate the value of literary comparisons as auxiliaries to critical knowledge of authors.

The most delicate qualities of authors are scarcely discoverable without the aid of comparisons. Delicate distinctions of color you can not discern, except by

placing them side by side. So it is in the study of books. Wholesale criticisms of authors, either in praise or censure, are almost sure to be false, because they overlook the refinements of criticism. They would be corrected often by more patient comparisons. Criticism is often like color-blindness, by reason of its inability to see the lights and shadows of literary character.

This was the defect in Jeffrey's criticism of Wordsworth. One must have accustomed one's taste to enjoy serene and lunar models of beauty before one can come to a poet like Wordsworth with an appreciative spirit. This can not be gained without a considerable range of comparative criticism.

Comparison of authors assists us to a true estimate of the relative value of different qualities in literature. Not all the qualities of good writing are equally valuable. Mr. Webster owed much of his success in oratory to the justness of his estimate of strength as superior to beauty in argumentative debate. Men of the first order in senatorial discussion often choose abruptness of speech, so that their power shall not be inwreathed, and therefore entangled and impeded, by appendages of beauty. Edmund Burke failed in public speech, because of his failure to appreciate the qualities of oral as compared with those of written address. Burke's speeches are essays. His friend Sheridan was a more powerful debater in his day; yet Lord Brougham says that he played to the galleries, and indulged in clap-trap. If Burke had brought the solidity of his genius to a fair expression by those qualities which Sheridan exaggerated, he would have been to the English Parliament what Demosthenes was to the Greek republics. Yet such balancing of opposite virtues in composition

is not gained otherwise than by critical and candid comparison of authors distinguished for each.

5. As far as possible, our reading should be made tributary to the correction of our own known deficiencies in literary production.

Variety in selection of authors is not sufficient to insure symmetry of culture. Our existing tastes may tyrannize over our reading so far as to defeat the object of that variety. Let your mind swing loose in the act of reading, and you will inevitably be swayed by your tastes in appropriating what you read. You will appropriate only those elements which are kindred to your present tastes. An imaginative mind will coin fancy out of metaphysical definitions, if it reads passively. A prosaic mind will fashion a creed out of poetic imagery, if it exercises no control of itself in reading. It requires often self-denial to restrain our ruling tastes, and to seek, by dint of patient criticism, for those things which we most need, but do not want. Few scholars achieve this self-conquest whose literary enthusiasm is not largely pervaded by religious principle.

Observe an illustration of the need of the principle before us to remedy one of the most common defects of preachers; viz., the want of illustrative power. There is a class of preachers who are men of good sense, who have read extensively, who are well-informed as men of the world, whose discourses are clear, consecutive, well-aimed, and enforced by an earnest spirit. Yet they do not preach breathing sermons. They can not make truth vivid; they can not freshen stale truths. They are not live men in the pulpit: therefore their preaching is humdrum. Pious hearers who carry in their own souls a coal from a burning altar will call

it "good preaching;" but they are not really moved by that preaching any more than the wicked and the indifferent are, who call it stupid. They are self-moved.

Such a preacher has no right to quiet his conscience by the self-assurance that he has done his duty because he has preached the truth. He has not preached the truth truthfully; he has not preached it scripturally. In the Scriptures truth is alive. It is all aglow with vitality made to appear vital by the dramatic resources and the quickened sensibilities of the writer. Our friend the preacher has a new process of culture to go through. The imaginative element in him needs to be aroused, and his reading needs to be so directed as to achieve this. He needs to study the great poets, the dramatic masters, the picturesque historians, biographers, essayists, of our language, and the most dramatic orators and preachers. By such a process of self-discipline the most prosaic mind may acquire somewhat of the genius of an orator. Every man has that genius in his nature: every man will show it, if his house takes fire. The elements of eloquence, of dramatic power, of painting, of whatever is vivid in conception, and forcible in utterance, are in the germ in every human soul. They need development in every preacher to make the pulpit a throne of power.

This principle is sometimes needful to remedy a defect the opposite to that just named; viz., an inability to preach logical, direct, and severe discourses. This, though a less frequent defect, is by no means uncommon. It often results from a neglect to cultivate dormant tastes. I can best develop this by an instance which came under my own observation. A young man began his ministry with me who possessed some of the

choicest elements of character which it has ever been my lot to witness in one of his years. He was passionately attached to the ministry as his life's work. The only lamentation he uttered on his death-bed was that his disease would cost him his profession.

The chief defect of his character was a beauty developed into a deformity. He was by nature a poet, and by culture he had made himself nothing more. All truth to his mind assumed imaginative forms, and expressed itself in rhythm. The sternest truths of religion dissolved into images of beauty. Law, predestination, sin, retribution, put on a roseate hue. On themes kindred to his overgrown tastes he could preach, to a solitary and dreaming hearer here and there, with the voice of a charmer. But the majority of his hearers were not moved even to a cold admiration of sermons into which he poured his whole soul. His materials, his methods of division, his style, his indirect, imaginative, shrinking appeals, were too ethereal for this homespun and corrupt world. To the masses his was an unknown tongue.

Some subjects he could not discuss at all: it was not in him. Retribution, depravity, decrees, he would never have preached upon definitely to the end of time. He probably never made a direct appeal to a hearer's conscience. For robust talk in the pulpit he seemed to have no heart. Yet, strange as it may seem, he had by no means an effeminate nature. In defense of an unpopular opinion he was lion-hearted. In times of persecution he would have been sure to be in the minority and a martyr. He could never have been Luther, but he would have been Melancthon: Luther would have loved and leaned upon him. His few

friends revered him for his purity of character. Men who experienced none of the difficulty which he had in obtaining a pulpit felt self-reproached when they communed with him.

The thing which he needed to make him a preacher was more hardihood. He should have forced it. He ought to have studied Edwards on the Will. He should have read Dr. South, and the prose of Milton, and Cromwell's speeches. He ought to have taken as his models John Knox and Richard Baxter and President Finney. He should have gone upon the wharves, and talked to sailors. His brethren in the ministry felt relieved, for his sake, when God removed him: we thought, in reverent remembrance of him, of that feature in the felicity of the redeemed which seems in the Scriptures to represent them as instructors of angels. He appeared to be better fitted to that service than to any demanded in a world like this.

By the views here expressed, it is not meant that natural tastes are to be suppressed. Symmetry is not worth the loss of vitality. A motionless equilibrium of tastes is more fatal than a vivacious distortion of them. No fault is greater than a tame faultlessness. But there is a practicable regulation of one-sided proclivities, which is not the extinction or the enslavement of them. Within reasonable limits let the natural tastes have their way, but develop the dormant tastes: that is the point, and it is practicable. Defects can be so far corrected, that, while you will always do some things better than others, you can still do the others well. No man of common sense in the pulpit needs to be dumb on some subjects, and imbecile to some hearers, for the want of the tastes requisite to "become

all things to all men." Still less need any man who is called of God to the ministry be such a deformed man that he *must* make a one-sided preacher. Put your culture into the weak points of your intellect, as you put your principle into the weak points of your character. You are in no danger in either case of landing upon a dead level.

6. A scholarly ideal of reading includes a study of the biographies of authors and the history of their times. A book is part of an author's life. In itself it is incomplete; by itself it may be false: we need to see it as a part of the man. It is, therefore, a good general rule not to read an anonymous book. Now and then an exception occurs, like "Ecce Homo;" but exceptions are rare. Still more significantly is an author a fixture of his age. He is set in the age like a stone in an arch. It is never true literally that men write for future times. They write for their own times: they are made by their own times. The avenue to immortality for any man's influence lies through the life-blood of a living generation. Matthew Arnold means just this when he says, that, "for the creation of a master-work of literature, two powers must concur,—the power of the *moment* and the power of the man: the man is not enough without the moment." The law of nature is inexorable in this conjunction of the man with the time. Even the literature of inspiration is not free from its working. The Bible is intensely a local book: it is historic in its structure. To be understood, and still more to be felt as a power, it must be studied in its historic surroundings. Isolate it from those surroundings, and you have one of the most unintelligible of volumes.

So it is with uninspired authorship: it can not shoot

over its own age. Every author is the growth of his own times: the roots of his thinking are there. If we would know him well, we must see him there in his natural birthplace, in the very homestead of his literary being. We must first see him as his contemporaries saw him; then we are prepared to see him with eyes which they had not.

One or two illustrations of this principle will indicate the importance of it in the history of the pulpit. In the age of the Reformation and that next succeeding, few preachers, so far as I know, preserved strictly what, in modern homiletics, would be regarded as unity of discourse. Often the whole system of grace was presented in one sermon. A preacher would have subjected his evangelical spirit to suspicion, if he often discoursed without introducing the doctrine of justification by faith. It was then that the old homiletic rule was originated, that a man should never preach without saying so much of the gospel, that if a hearer should never hear, and had never heard, another sermon, he should not be ignorant of the way of salvation.

* Modern homiletic science has abrogated that rule. The taste of modern congregations would soon weary of the sameness of the preaching which that rule would create. But how does such preaching appear when seen in the times which created it? Set it, like a picture, in the frame of its age, and it seems the most becoming, because the most necessary, style of preaching. The people were emerging from Romanism. The doctrines of grace were a novelty. Preaching itself had — become a rare accomplishment. Elementary views of doctrines, and those often reiterated, were demanded by the intellectual knowledge and the religious culture of

* **Ed. Note:** This is not entirely true. All sermons can have the gospel included in the invitation. As being appended to the main sermon or included as an application of it or at least a part of the application. And this can be done in a way that will be acceptable to even those hearers who are quite knowledgeable in the way of Salvation.

the times. It was more than pardonable, therefore, if Luther and his contemporaries repeated and reiterated the doctrine of justification by faith, and preached it by remote connection with other themes, and dragged it without connections into their conclusions. The emergencies of the times demanded this homiletic lawlessness, and the rude taste of the people did not condemn it. To have forced upon the pulpit of that age, with Athenian severity of taste, the homiletic canons of later times, would have been neither good preaching nor good sense. The people of the age were not Athenians.

Take an illustration from the English pulpit of the seventeenth century. A certain preacher in the reign of the first king James selected for a text the words: "There are spots in your feasts of charity." He announced his subject thus, "*Maculæ in Epulis.*" He proceeded to divide his discourse as follows: 1. "*Mensa Sybaritica;*" 2. "*Mensa Centaurica;*" 3. "*Mensa Thyestea.*" Then, by way of contrast, he considered, 1. "*Convivium spirituale;*" 2. "*Convivium sacramentale;*" 3. "*Convivium cæleste;*" which last division is amplified as being "*επουρανός-εωχλα*," which is still more magnificently developed by the subdivisions of "*visio divinarum*," "*societas angelorum*," and "*consortium sanctorum.*"

True, he translated this gibberish. But our modern criticism, in its impatience, says that he must have been a fool. Perhaps not. Turn to Bishop Latimer, whose power in the pulpit was such that his enemies did not know what to do about it, except to burn the man to ashes. Yet we find him guilty of the same pedantry. The text of his famous "Sermon of the Card," he announces in Latin, "*Quis es?*" Turn to Jeremy

Taylor, — no fool surely, — and you find, that in sermons which he artlessly tells us were preached to “the family and domestics of his patron, with a few cottagers of the neighborhood,” there occurs a profusion of classical allusion, which seems like the echo of an Oxford lecture-room. Quotations from Plautus and Homer occur in a singular medley with others from Cicero and Seneca.

As sensible men, we must condemn all this; and we marvel that he had not the good sense to condemn it also. But we do him great injustice, if we judge him by the tastes of this age. One of the most curious inlets to the character of the English pulpit of those times is located just here. Not only is it true that this pedantry accorded with the scholastic taste of that age, but the popular taste refused to respect preaching which was not sprinkled with it. I open almost at random the sermons of a contemporary of Jeremy Taylor, and I find the text quoted in Latin, two Greek quotations on one page, and four Latin extracts on another. Reverence for the classic languages had descended to the seventeenth century from a century earlier, when there was no literature to speak of in the vernacular tongues of Europe. Erasmus risked his life in a mob, because he would not talk Italian. He abandoned a benefice offered to him in England, because he would not stoop to learn the English language. He often refused to converse in German, though he knew the language expertly. He thought the Reformation degraded by Luther's preaching and writing in German. This was the general taste of the scholars of his age. Erasmus was the most liberal of them all. They looked upon the classic tongues as the only tongues in which a scholarly literature could ever exist.

The common people, therefore, did their best to ape the folly of their betters. Through that whole period, down to a time long after Jeremy Taylor, this was the inherited taste of the people. They could not read or understand Latin and Greek; but they could hear it, and their ears were elongated by that. The relics of that taste remained to our own day. So lately as in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Clarkson published a pamphlet in England against the slave-trade, which he thought it politic to publish in Latin, lest he should not attract the attention of the learned men of Europe. It is within the remembrance of men now living that German scholars began generally to think it respectable to write commentaries in German.

In the time of Jeremy Taylor this taste for pedantry was, in one aspect of it, a virtue in the people, whatever it was in the scholars of the age. In the people it was, in part, the natural expression of their respect for learning. They objected to the learned Edward Pocock, professor of Arabic at Oxford, that he was "a plain, honest man, but no Latiner." Even modest George Herbert, when he began to preach, thought it necessary to awe the people by preaching to them a prodigiously learned sermon, in which he showed them that he was equal to the best as a "Latiner;" but in his pious simplicity he informed them that he should not generally preach to them so learnedly as that, but henceforth he should try to save their souls.

These illustrations show the practical necessity of the principle before us to a sound judgment of literature. To know an author well, we must know the man; and, to know the man well, we must know the times of which, by an irrevocable law of nature, he was the representative and the child.

Collateral reading will often disclose to us the secret of otherwise inexplicable effects of literature in the age when it was written. Contemporary influence is often the mystery of the next age. Our American pulpit already contains remarkable illustrations of this. President Edwards's sermons, as we read them, do not explain to us the astonishing effects of some of them. His elocution had almost no concern with them, except to moderate their fiery pungency. No audience of to-day could be plunged into an incontrollable fit of weeping by the sermon on the text, "Their feet shall slide in due time." An eye-witness testifies that Mr. Spurgeon's audiences listen to sermons from him which resemble that one from President Edwards, not only without a tear, but with signs of the most stolid indifference. To explain the experience of the church at Enfield, we must take note of the idiosyncrasies of that age as they are pictured in the history of the "Great Awakening."