

LECTURE IX.

SELECTION OF AUTHORS FOR PASTORAL STUDY.— PRELIMINARY HINTS. — CONTROLLING MINDS IN LITERARY HISTORY.

2d, WE have thus far considered the objects of a pastor's study of literature. The second thing to be regarded in that study is the selection of authors.

Rogers the essayist remarks that "a very useful book might be written on the art of reading books, if we could get a Leibnitz or a Gibbon to compose it." True: yet the reading of the majority of educated men must be governed so much by circumstances which can not be controlled by any theory of scholarship, that I think the hints which are necessary on the subject must be susceptible of very flexible application. Scarcely any subject of professional inquiry is less capable of rule. Of the principles which concern it, two preliminaries need to be first remarked. The first is, that in practice these principles will cross and qualify each other. Any one of them alone would be one-sided and impracticable. They must be considered singly, yet applied collectively; and each must be subjected to limitations by the others. Otherwise, as literary advice, they would be nonsense.

The second preliminary is a repetition, for the sake of emphasis, of a remark already made in the preface of

this volume, and which will be treated more at length in the sequel, — that, at the best, scholarly principles of selection can suggest only an ideal of a pastor's use of books, which must be in many cases theoretic, but out of which each man may obtain the elements for forming his own. Some can use more of it than others.

I have hesitated whether to venture at all upon the question of a pastor's *selection* of books, I am so well aware that practically that selection can seldom, if ever, satisfy a scholarly ideal. But to make any selection wisely, of even a few volumes, a pastor must *have* a scholar's ideal in mind : therefore I attempt it, trusting to your good sense to see the limitations and qualifications which the conditions of your life's work render necessary. One book which deserves a scholar's reading is worth for a pastor's discipline a dozen of inferior quality.

(1) With these preliminaries in mind, let it be first observed that we must put out of our account of literature vicious and worthless books. A book may be vicious in literary influence, which is not immoral. It may foster false principles of taste, and minister to degraded conceptions of scholarship. A book may be worthless, which has no positive power for evil. A book which is a negative quantity in the sum total of our acquisitions is a worthless book. Menzel, in his history of German literature, says, "Bad books have their season, as vermin have. They come in swarms, and perish before we are aware. How many thousands of books have gone the way of all paper, or are now moldering in our libraries!"

We make a stride of advance into the heart of a seemingly unconquerable library when we have accus-

tomed our minds to the reality of bad books in that which goes by the name of literature. Books false in principle, corrupt in taste, effeminate in influence, or negative in all that respects high culture, are to be found in all our large collections. There are books which once had some force for good or ill, but which the world has outlived. A man has no more use for them now than for an Arabic work on alchemy or magic. Hundreds of such volumes are to be reckoned in all libraries which are reckoned by thousands. There are folios of commentary on the Scriptures, works in criticism, works in philosophy, which have been displaced bodily in the living thought of mankind, and which will never be resuscitated except by antiquarian curiosity.

That which De Quincey calls the "knowledge-literature" of the world, as distinct from the "power-literature," is incessantly changing: it is constantly retiring to the attics and lofts and inaccessible shelves of libraries, unread and forgotten. Later knowledge must for ever crowd back into oblivion the earlier. Such is the law of progress. If a displaced literature is restored by antiquarian research, it is of no use; for, as Horace Walpole says, "What signifies raising the dead so often, when they die again the next minute?"

We need, then, to begin our studies with an agile effort of good sense to distinguish between books which are living literature, and books which are dead. Do not revere every thing which appears between two muslin covers. Remember Charles Lamb's demand for "books which are books." It is a partial relief from the nightmare which one feels in the vision of a huge library, to remember that there is a vast multitude of volumes, as

comely as any to the eye, and as tempting to the bibliographer, which are not living literature in any scholarly sense of the term or for any scholarly use in real life. We can no more use them for the purposes of a living civilization than we can use mastodons and ichthyosauri as beasts of burden.

Further : we need not adopt any very limited range of the term "literature" in order to rid ourselves of them. We need not be so chary of the title as to withhold it, as Professor Henry Reed does, from professional and technical and sectarian books. A much more liberal policy than this will serve the purpose ; for the works to which I refer, as related to scholarly culture, are useless to us in any way whatever. No profession, or art, or sect is served by them. They are not models of any thing but ignorance, or vicious taste, or self-conceit, or puerile fiction, or exploded and superannuated science. They are the paralytic literature of the world. It mumbles to us in thickened speech, and with distorted visage. Let us cover up its deformity compassionately, and pass on.

I do not pause to specify more narrowly what these volumes are, because practically our exclusion of them is necessitated by other principles of selection, even more imperatively. It is essential, however, that this principle be firmly lodged in our minds at the threshold of our advance, — that we must not read, even in a cursory way, every book we happen to lay our hands on, nor look with awe upon every volume we have to strain our eyes to see in our libraries.

(2) A second principle of selection is, that we must abandon the idea of universal scholarship. The Hon. Mr. Toombs of Georgia is reported to have once said

that he could carry the treasury of the Confederate States of America in his hat. Probably it could have been put into less space than that. So, I suppose, the time must have been when all extant literature could have been committed to memory, and covered by one hat. But it is a truism which we often seem to forget, that no man can perform that achievement now.

The idea of literary omniscience long ago became a fable. It was true when foxes talked with hares, and frogs were erudite philosophers. Comparatively speaking, no very large portion of the literature now stored in the world's libraries can be known to any one mind. It is the cant of literature which makes pretensions to the contrary. Division of labor is nowhere more imperatively demanded than in scholarly reading. The wisest scholar of the age must be content to die in ignorance of the greater part of what other men have known, and to possess an equal proportion of that which he does know only at second-hand.

It is the right of every pupil in any branch of learning to receive cautiously the oracles which professors are apt to give, I must confess, more authoritatively than their own acquisitions justly warrant. A single fact speaks more than a homily on this point: it is, that the mechanical process of reading those books which are or have been the standard literature of their times would require more than three thousand years. Such is the estimate of a respectable English critic. If Homer had begun the labor at twenty years of age, and read till this time, he would still have had two hundred and fifty years of it before him. If Plato had been set to the task by the immortal gods of Greece, he would not by this time have got beyond the discovery of America.

Dante and Racine and Goethe and Shakspeare would still be unknown to him; and Wordsworth and Bryant and Longfellow he would never have heard of.

It is evident, then, how little of the wisdom of the past any living man can know within the limits of one lifetime. This conviction forces itself upon extensive readers sooner or later. It is well to admit it "sooner" rather than "later." Robert Southey, one of the most voluminous readers that England has ever produced, at the age of fifty years writes: "After all, knowledge is not the one thing needful. Provided that we can get contentedly through the world, and to heaven at last, the sum of all the knowledge which we can collect by the way is infinitely more insignificant than I like to acknowledge in my own heart."

What, then, should be the influence of this impossibility of universal scholarship upon our literary plans? I answer in three particulars. One effect of it should be to prevent our wasting ourselves in impracticable plans of study. Every young man should take the measure of his time, his physical health, his degree of independence of other avocations, and specially his power of mental appropriation. Then his plans of reading should be adjusted accordingly. No other one habit is so unproductive to a student as that of omnivorous reading. The space which such a reader traverses in libraries is no evidence of his culture. The most useless men living are the bookworms who are nothing more. There are men who devour books because they are books. They read as if they fancied that the mechanical process of trotting doggedly through libraries were the great business of a life of culture. Such men can not possess sound learning.

A writer in "The Edinburgh Review" very justly satirizes them as "entitled only to the praise of being very artificially and elaborately ignorant. They differ from the utterly uncultivated, only as a parrot who talks without understanding what he says differs from a parrot who can not talk at all" You have made a great discovery when you have found out what is and what is not practicable to yourself. Carlyle, addressing the students of the University of Edinburgh, said to them: "It is the first of all problems for a man to find out what kind of work he is to do in this universe." So is it the first of problems in the details of a scholar's life to find out what he *can* do. To attempt impracticable plans of reading is one of the most discouraging of literary mistakes. It leads many young men every year to abandon all hope of a scholarly life.

Another effect of the fact before us should be to prevent our minds from acting feverishly under the necessary limitations of our reading. We should submit to the literary privations of our lot gracefully. No man will do his best in literary effort till he can work contentedly. Our early efforts are often inflamed by a certain heat of blood which indicates a chafing of the spirit against the restrictions of time and sense and finite faculties. That is a bad absorbent of literary energy. We must rid ourselves of it. We must abandon the ambition, which Fontenelle says he indulged in early life, "of driving all the sciences abreast." At the basis of our culture, in this respect as in others, we should lay our religious principle. By prayer, if need be, bring your mind into a state of contentment with the limitations of human knowledge, and of your own in particular. You have made some progress in the culture

of a manly habit of study, if, with an earnest sense of the dignity of an educated life, you can spend an hour alone in a large library, and can come out of it with a perfectly equable and happy resolution in your own life's work.

Says the late Professor Reed of Philadelphia, "It is a bewildering thing to stand in the midst of a vast concourse of books. It is oppressive to conceive what a world of human thought and human passion is dwelling on the silent paper, how much of wisdom is ready to make its entrance into the mind that is prepared to welcome it. It is mournful to think that the multitudinous oracles should be dumb to us." Who of us does not understand this mourning over inaccessible knowledge? Yet we have no reason to mourn. The restrictions upon our knowledge are a part of our discipline; and, as we have seen, discipline, not accumulation, is the great object of a scholarly life, as it is of every life.

Gibbon was one of the most laborious of readers; yet he says, "We should attend, not so much to the order of our books as of our thoughts. The perusal of a work gives birth to ideas. I pursue those ideas, and quit my plan of reading." Gibbon in this remark hits the vital point. A book is valuable for the ideas it starts *in* the mind, rather than for those it puts there. The book depends more on what you bring to it than on any thing you take from it. No knowledge is of vital moment to a man, which is not thus reproductive within him, which does not, in some sense, work itself into character. Of knowledge we need so much, and only so much, as we can assimilate to ourselves in some form of character. If to possess less than that is a misfortune, to possess more is no blessing. The mind's

capacities can be no more than full. We have no more reason to mourn over unconquerable departments of knowledge than over inaccessible planets and angelic travels. Contented with our literary limits, we can advance to our life's work buoyantly.

The third effect of the view we have taken should be, that we should regard a choice selection of volumes as the first step to success. This is obvious. We should make an elaborate selection of the best only. If we can read but one volume in a year, let that one be worthy of a scholar's ideal of good reading, all the more so because it is but one. Our chief peril is that of allowing ourselves to be impelled by the pressure of our professional avocations down an inclined plane, from the scholarly upland to which our collegiate training lifted us, to a level so low that no scholarly eye can recognize us fraternally. Read only the best, therefore. Then the whole remaining literature of the world should be as irrelevant to any purpose of ours as the cinders of the library of Alexandria.

(3) The third principle of selection should be, that we rank first in our estimate those authors who have been controlling powers in literature; not necessarily first in the order of time in our reading; not, indeed, that we must read all of them at any time; not, as we shall see in the sequel, that all of us must read any of them outside of our own vernacular, but that we should mentally give them the first rank, in point of intrinsic worth, as models of the noblest culture. What we do read we should select and read under the elevating influence of this recognition of what *is* the best.

In stating this principle, I purposely speak of our *estimate* of literature, rather than of our personal study

of it, because the exigencies of professional life will not permit every pastor to read largely in this regal literature of all the ages. Because Homer was in one sense the father of all poetry, it does not follow that every pastor in Oregon, and every missionary in Africa, should read Homer. We shall return to this qualification again in a future lecture: at present it is sufficient to note that we should rank the authors in question as the first in our scholarly judgment.

Taking the standard literatures of the world together, there is a group of names which all scholarly judgment has placed at the fountain-head of the streams of thought which those literatures represent. They are the originals of all that cultivated mind has revered in letters. They have been powers of control. The world of mind has recognized them as such. Their names, therefore, float on the current of all times. In any enlightened age and country they become known to schoolboys. Several suggestions respecting them deserve notice.

First, They are not numerous. In any one of the standard literatures of the race you can number this order of imperial minds on the fingers of one hand. In the Hebrew literature, not more than three; in the classic Greek, not more than three; in the Hellenistic Greek, only two; in the Roman, possibly two; in the Italian, only one; in the French, less than that; in the Arabic, the Spanish, the Scandinavian literatures, none; in the German, only three; and in the English, but four.

Of course, opinions would differ in the assignment of individuals to groups so small as these; but they would not differ as to the main assertion. I do not assume to speak *ex cathedra* on this matter. I have sought to

enlighten my own judgment by correspondence with scholarly readers in several departments in which they are acknowledged experts. I discard, also, as I have remarked before, the technical restriction of the term "literature" by which philosophy and science are excluded. That restriction is not germane to the purpose now in view. An original philosopher, for instance, may give character to a nation's thought for centuries with such authority that no technically "literary" author shall equal or approach him as a national power. It is the great *powers* over national thought that we seek to discover in such an estimate as the one now before us. As the result, therefore, of the means of judgment which I possess, I should reckon the world's royal names in literature as follows; viz., in the Hebrew tongue, Moses, David, and Isaiah; in the classic Greek, Homer, Plato, and Aristotle; in the Hellenistic Greek, St. Paul and St. John; in the Roman, Cicero and Virgil; in the Italian, Dante.

In the French I have said, "less than one," because no mind among French scholars has, so far as I can discover, exerted a formative and permanent influence outside of France itself. Some critics would name Voltaire among the first class of authorship; but his influence outside of France has been short-lived. Even among his own countrymen, I am informed that few French authors of equal eminence are so little read to-day. Scarcely any works of solid French literature find so poor a sale as those of Voltaire. His fame and his influence were at their height among his contemporaries, and have been steadily declining ever since his last triumphant entrance into Paris, shortly before his decease. The ruling influence of France in modern

civilization has been in politics more than in literature. If Descartes deserves a place in so select a group as I have in mind, I confess that my imperfect knowledge of his writings and of the opinion of experts about them does not qualify me to affirm it, and perhaps I ought not therefore to deny it. Let my impression pass for what it is worth.

The Arabic, the Spanish, and the Scandinavian literatures have all of them fallen into the second and third ranks of authorship. In the German I should follow the general voice of German critics in selecting the names of Goethe, Schiller, and Kant. In the English, after much hesitation, I assign the first rank to Chaucer, Shakspeare, Bacon, and Wordsworth, — to Chaucer as the historic head of English poetry, to Bacon for his influence on the national mind of England in all departments of thought, to Wordsworth as having revolutionized English poetic tastes, and to Shakspeare as the “myriad-minded,” the poet of all times and nations. I hesitate in excluding the name of Milton; and many would dissent from the position which I assign to Wordsworth. But for this I have the authority of Coleridge. It may interest you to know that one of the most accomplished critics in our own country, to whom this classification has been submitted, added to the English quadrilateral the name of Hawthorne as being an absolute and solitary original in English letters.

The main point, however, to be noted, is that all scholarly opinion would limit the authors of the first rank in literary influence upon national mind to very few in number. The marvels of genius are like century-plants. Ages of mediocrity often separate them. They are elect spirits, and generally they are given only to elect nations.

This suggests, further, that these authors of the first class claim their rank by virtue of their power over other literature. They have given to national literatures their great impulses of development. Their names mark epochs of growth. They have been awakening powers. Multitudes of other great minds, who but for these would never have been great, have been aroused by these the greater. We can not appreciate the other literature of the world without knowing the creative power of these few originals. No man knows well the Greek development of mind, who does not know Homer and Plato. No man knows the Italian graft upon the Latin stock, who does not know Dante. No man knows the ripening of Christian civilization in the English mind, who does not know Chaucer and Bacon. And no man can judge profoundly of all the existing drifts of culture, who does not know, or who refuses to recognize as literature, the writings of David and Isaiah and St. Paul. This historic position of a very few names along the line of the world's advancement would be sufficient to attract attention to them, as the first in rank of representatives of what the mind of the race has thought and felt and expressed in literary forms.

Again: these authors of the first order claim their position by reason of the perpetuity of their influence. They live while others die. All poetry feels to this day the impulse of Homer: all philosophy feels the impulse of Plato. German literature abounds with commentaries on Shakspeare, and calls him inspired. No Italian scholar becomes eminent in any department of thought, without paying tribute to Dante. No modern thinker in Europe or America climbs to pre-

eminence as a power with his contemporaries, except on the ladder which Bacon has erected. Everywhere those minds which represent most prophetically the literature of the future are those which are most profoundly imbued with the literature of the Hebrews. Wordsworth, speaking of the ancient classic literatures, says, "We have appropriated them all;" and of Milton he says, "He was a Hebrew in soul."

This immortality of the few royal minds of the past is the ultimate test of their authority. Nothing else *proves* a thing as time does. Nothing else gives authority like the unanimity of ages. It is not safe for a young man to dissent from such authority as this. It is virtually the voice of the common sense of mankind. Says Coleridge, "Presume those to be the best the reputation of which has been matured into fame by the consent of ages." If there is any truth in universal convictions, every mind that is intent on scholarly culture will sooner or later seek its most enduring impulses, directly or indirectly, from those few ideals which the common consent has pronounced the grandest, the most symmetrical, and the most intense. That is a foolish waste in one's policy of study which leads one needlessly to sacrifice those ideals by expending one's enthusiasm on their inferiors.

Yet it should be observed that in the study of this class of authors, with the exception of the inspired writers, we do not seek direct contributions to our professional labors. We do not seek to appropriate their contents bodily, but their scholarly influence. We are not ferreting out examples for imitation. We are not preparing to quote Homer in our sermons, nor to preach Lord Bacon or Shakspeare. The weakest possible

preaching may be that in which our study of these authors is visible. They are to exist in our own work only by the transfusion of their genius into our own mental character. We seek to be mentally uplifted by them. The least significant part of their usefulness to us will appear in the form of quotation. Indeed, one of the perils of extensive reading, to be watched and shunned, is that of excessive extract from other authors. Avoid a mania for quotation: a great deal of literary cant appears in that form. You will soon note in your reading two classes of authors who quote little. They are those who are the most original, and those who are the most profoundly sincere.

Further: the study of this first class of authors has a special tendency to promote independence of provincial narrowness in our culture. The secret of the perpetuity of their power is, that they are universal in their adaptations. They appeal to and they represent elements which are innate in human nature. They are independent of sect, or class, or school. Hence comes their literary autocracy. Schools may have grown out of them, but they were never schoolmen. They did not aim to found schools. No man was ever less of a Platonist, in the sense of a Platonic partisan, than Plato himself; no man was ever less of a Baconian, in the scholastic sense, than Bacon himself. What schools of poetry did Homer and Shakspeare found? Schools grow up with smaller minds. They would be as offensive to those whose names they bear as the apostolic sects were to Cephas and St. Paul.

A preacher, therefore, by drinking in the spirit of such authors, imbibes a constitutional antidote to contracted tastes, to narrow opinions, and to cramped

methods of working. Let a young scholar drink deep at these fountain-heads of power, or absorb their influence from the atmosphere around him, and he must do violence to his whole scholarly nature if he becomes a bigot or a cynic. You will discover, if you take pains to observe it, that often purely theological extremes and distortions of opinion are corrected or forestalled by a purely literary culture. Such are the affinities of all truth with all truth, that breadth of culture anywhere tends to produce breadth of culture everywhere. Who, as a rule, are the most liberal thinkers in theology? In whom do you find the most evenly balanced faith? Are they not the men of profound and enlarged literary sympathies? On the other hand, if you find a preacher who holds and tries to preach an impracticable dogma which outrages the common sense of men, can you not affirm safely beforehand that he is a man of contracted reading? He knows little or nothing of the great creators of the world's thought in libraries. When, for example, I hear that a celebrated English preacher has been heard to say that the reason why God permits the wicked to live is that "He knows they are to be damned, and is willing to let them have a little pleasure first," I know without inquiry that that preacher is not a man of books. I venture to affirm that he has never read Spenser's "Faerie Queene." It is doubtful whether he could with a clear conscience read Shakspeare. Such a ferocious notion in theology never could survive contact with the regal order of minds in literature, even the most remote from theological thought. It is the property of a little mind, fed by little minds, and sympathetic with no other.

To these suggestions it should be added, that, to

these authors of the first rank, inferior literature should be largely sacrificed. The chief peril of a preacher in his reading is suggested by this remark: it is that he will devote a disproportionate amount of time to ephemeral books. We are apt to sacrifice the great powers of literature, not of design, but by neglect. The reading of the majority of educated men, I think, is wasteful. We read newspapers and magazines indiscriminately. What do we want to know of the murder in North Street last night, or the forgery in State Street last week? William Prescott the historian used to instruct his secretary, in reading to him the morning newspaper, never to read about an accident or a crime. He applied to his newspaper the same eclectic economy of time which he practised in exploring the Spanish archives.

Stern self-discipline should adjust the proportion of our reading. It is well to read such an author as Carlyle; but by what right do we neglect for his sake such writers as Bacon and Milton? It is well enough to know Byron as the representative of a certain phase of English poetry; but what principle of scholarly policy justifies our sacrifice to him of such an author as Dante? What axiom of economy leads a preacher to buy Hood's poems, when he is too poor to own a copy of Shakspeare? or to purchase the works of Thomas Moore, when he can not afford to own Wordsworth? Who can, without a twinge of scholarly conscience, spend an hour a day over the newspapers of the week, when he has never opened even a translation of Schiller? If I am rightly informed, merchants in active business do not feel able to spare half of that time for their morning paper. Is the accumulation of money

of so much more value than the accumulation of brains? In these suggestions, however, I have in mind the habits of a healthy scholar, not those which disease has demoralized.

I once took up from a student's table a book of three hundred duodecimo pages on the culture of poultry. I took occasion to ascertain from him afterwards that he had never read a page of Spenser's "Faerie Queene," and he did not know who wrote the "Canterbury Tales." On another occasion I took from the shelf of a young pastor's library a book of nearly equal dimensions with the other, on the breeding and training of horses. Possibly a cramped salary may compel a pastor to own such a book, as his wife must own a cookery-book; yet in the case in question there was no such economic necessity, and I learned from that pastor that he had never been able to "wade through," as he expressed it, a history of the Reformation. What business has an educated man, not pressed by the necessities of poverty, to be plodding through the literature of the farmyard when three-quarters of Westminster Abbey are unknown to him?

An earnest scholar will sacrifice much that is useful in inferior literature, if his knowledge of it must be purchased at the cost of acquaintance with names which must outlive it a hundred years. Dr. Arnold says, "As a general rule, never read the works of any ordinary man except on scientific matters, or when they contain simple matters of fact. Even on matters of fact, silly and ignorant men, however honest, require to be read with constant suspicion; whereas great men are always instructive, even amidst much of error. In general, I hold it to be certain that the truth is to be

found in the great men, and the error in the little ones." Pascal said that he had left off reading the Jesuits, because, if he had continued it, he must have "read a great many indifferent books."

Once more: not merely worthless literature should be sacrificed, but, for the sake of the best, we must sacrifice much which would be very valuable to us if we had not the best: Pliny said that no book had ever been written which did not contain something profitable to a reader. Leibnitz and Gibbon, both of them voracious readers, expressed the same opinion. One of the most rapid and voluminous readers and writers of our own day once told me that he had never read a book which did not give him some new thought.

These judgments, with qualifications, are true; yet they do not justify that bibliomania which leads a man to seize upon the book which lies nearest to him, because it is a book, and because something or other can be got from it. We must sacrifice a great many good books. We must let go our hold upon much which would be a model to us if we had no better. We must force our way grimly through the heaps of them which bestrew our path in order to reach the smaller but weightier heap which lies beyond. Otherwise we shall be very large readers of comparatively small thought. Our culture will suffer from a plethora of little books. The after-clap of their reading will be more distressing than that of the little book in the Apocalypse.

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Test is open book.