## IV.

SHOULD you ask me how to read, I can do little more than repeat rules that I have learned elsewhere, many of which you already know. Bacon seems to me to have summed up all the rules for reading in his own terse style. "Read not," he says, "to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously;* and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."† This says everything. I am only putting into other words the counsel of the great sage when I repeat to you:

I. Read with attention. Attention is the fundamental condition of all reading, of all study, of all work properly done. What is its nature? It is a concentration of the mind upon an object of thought to the exclusion of all others. It is a habit, and, like all habits, to be acquired only by practice. One may live in a state of habitual distraction as well as in a state of habitual attentiveness. The habit of perfect attention—the habit that we all of us should seek to acquire as best befitting social beings who cannot shirk the claims and requirements of social life—is the attention that can, without strain or effort, break off from one subject, pass on to another, and

* That is, *attentively.*

† *Essays*—"Of Studies."



resume at once the thread of one's readings or thoughts. How may such an attention be acquired? Where the reading-matter is congenial to the reader there is no difficulty; the attention becomes naturally and unconsciously absorbed in the subject. But where one is unaccustomed to reading, or where the reading-matter has no special interest, it is with an effort that one learns to control one's attention. I conceive a reader may in the following manner acquire this control:

(1) Set aside daily, according to leisure or occupation, a given portion of time for reading. The daily recurrence to a subject at precisely the same hour may be irksome, but it soon creates a habit which finally becomes a pleasure.

(2) Keep up the practice of using that time for the one purpose and nothing else. This induces the habit all the sooner, and renders it all the more profitable. The principle of recurrence pervades nature. The seasons make their rounds within their appointed times. The grasses spring up, and ripen, and decay, and in their pre-ordained seasons become renewed. It is the rhythmic recurrence of sound that makes poetry cling so easily to the memory. It is the rhythmic recurrence of a primary note that gives tone to the melody. It is the rhythmic recurrence of wave-vibration—for such is light—that tints the flower, and reveals the beauties of earth, and air, and starry sky. See the waterfall glint in the sun's rays, there also is rhythmic wave-motion. In a recurrence of good or bad actions is the soul made beautiful or ugly,

for virtue and vice are habits. And so it is in the daily recurrence of attention concentrated upon thoughtful reading that intellectual labor is rendered fruitful.

(3) Focus the attention during the time of reading in such manner that the mind becomes wholly occupied with the reading matter. Better is a daily reading of half an hour made with sustained attention than a reading of two hours made in an indolent, half-dreamy fashion.

(4) Read with method. Absence of method in one's reading is a source of great distraction. Give yourself the habit while reading of making a mental catalogue of your impressions. Distinguish between the statements that are doubtful, and probable, and certain; between those that are of opinion, and credence, and presumption. You will find this practice of great aid in sustaining attention.

(5) When, in spite of all these precautions, you begin to find your thoughts wandering away from the page upon which your eyes are set, leave the book aside for the time being, and take up the reading of another subject that is more likely to fix your attention. We are told that Mr. Gladstone—that grand old man of such great physical endurance, and such wonderful intellectual activity—is wont to keep three distinct volumes on three distinct subjects open before him, and when he finds attention beginning to flag in the reading of one, he immediately turns to another. The practice is admirable for the trained intellect. The change brings rest to the



mind and keeps it from growing wearied. Men who are constant brain-workers generally keep before them a favorite volume, in which they from time to time refresh their minds when fatigued, or when they find the train of thought they would pursue exhausted. I have known men to find mental stimulation in the study of a Greek or Sanskrit verb; others, again, are wont to discipline their minds into activity by going over a theorem in geometry or calculus. Mere revery or listlessness is a hopeless scattering of brain-force. It were well for us all to understand that mental inaction is not resting; it is rusting. It is a corrosion of the faculties, and renders them less efficient for future action. In this respect, the law of intellectual, is different from that of physical, repose. Our soul is spirit, and must needs be active; and a wholesome, moderate, well-directed activity best satisfies the laws of our being. Brain-work has never injured anybody. It is excitement, or taking trouble to heart, or disregarding the primary hygienic conditions of our physical nature, that breaks down the health, and we are too prone to attribute it to mental exertion.* In the natural course of things every great author and great thinker should live to a ripe old age: witness the length of days to which have lived, or are still living,

* Since writing the above I find the same view maintained as regards insanity. Mr. W. H. Burnham writes: "Griesinger, the great German alienist, says that purely intellectual over-pressure seldom leads to insanity, but among the most frequent causes is over-strain of the emotions." (*Scribner's Magazine*, March, 1889., p. 314.)

Kant and Ranke and Dœllinger; Gladstone and Manning and Newman; Brownson and Bancroft and President Woolsey and Dr. McCosh. These men have all known what intense brain-work means.

II. Another rule is to take notes while reading. The very fact of reading with pen or pencil in hand stimulates thought. Remember that reading is useful only in proportion as it aids our intellectual development; it aids intellectual development only in proportion as it supplies food for reflection; and that portion of one's reading alone avails which the mind has been enabled to assimilate to itself, and make its own by meditation. Now, note-taking with running comments is a great means of making clear to one's self how much one does or does not know about the subject-matter of one's reading. Hence its value. But note-taking may be overestimated, and it actually becomes so when it is reduced to a mere mechanical copying and cataloguing of extracts, without any effort to make these extracts the seeds from which to cultivate native thoughts.

III. Consult your dictionary. Do not give yourself the habit of passing over words of whose scope and meaning you are ignorant. Such habit begets a slovenly mode of thinking. The ablest writers and thinkers can but ill dispense with their dictionary. It is a friend that steads them in many a mental perplexity. All assimilation of thought is a process of translation. Every intellect has a certain limited vocabulary of words in which it thinks,



and it fully grasps an idea only when it has translated that idea into its own familiar forms of expression. If a great aim of reading be mental growth, and if mental growth depend upon accuracy of conception, then it is of primary importance to know, beyond mere guess-work, the precise meaning of the words one reads.

IV. Read with a purpose. Lay out for yourself a definite object, and let all your reading converge upon that object until your purpose is attained. This is the only reading that will be remembered. Books perused in an aimless manner are soon forgotten; indeed, are seldom remembered. The mind becomes a mere passive instrument, receiving one set of impressions, which are in a little while obliterated by another set no less temporary. Now this is an abuse. Reason, imagination, all the faculties of man's intellect, were given him that he might exercise them and develop them to the full compass of their activity. He who lets them lie dormant is in the position of him who buried the one talent that he had been entrusted with. Dante very justly places all such, though living without blame and without praise, in the first circle of hell. * Madam Mohl, that oddest of little women, who for so many years ruled over all that was distinguished socially or politically in Paris, in her impatience of gossiping women once asked: "Why don't they talk about interesting things? Why don't they use their brains? . . . Everybody but a born idiot has brains

* *Inferno*, canto iii., 31–51.

enough not to be a fool. Why don't they exercise their brains as they do their fingers and their legs, sewing and playing, and dancing? Why don't they read?"* Of those who read to no purpose might we also ask: Why don't they use their brains? Furthermore, reading with a purpose helps to economize time and brain-energy. We soon learn that there are many things we had better leave unread, as so many distractions from the main line of our readings. Then we begin to find out that, after we know all that a book has to tell us bearing directly on our subject, we would be losing time in reading farther, and so we put the book aside. With practice we soon discover the short cuts to our subject, and save ourselves the reading of all irrelevant matters. We become practised in the rare art of knowing when and what not to read.

But there are works which to be properly appreciated cannot be partially read. They are all works of art—whether of prosaic art, as the novel, or of poetic art, as the epic or lyric or dramatic poem. Such works must be read as a complete whole. As well may you mutilate a picture or a statue or a musical sonata as skip portions of a great poem or a standard novel. Every work of art is one—breathing one ideal, speaking one thought. You cannot reduce the thought to fragments; you cannot break up the ideal. This is a primary law of criticism, and every reader should take it to heart.

* *Madam Mohl*, by Kathleen O'Meara, p. 133.



Critics have compared Milton with Dante; but in what manner? They have taken one-third—a mere fragment—of Dante's great poem—the *Inferno*—and set it beside the whole of the *Paradise Lost*. These critics never understood Dante. His poem is one. Its parts cannot be separated. The *Paradiso* contains the solution to the *Purgatorio* and the *Inferno*. It is simply and literally the keystone to the arch. So also a work of genuine art is not to be run through post-haste and then set aside for ever afterwards. If you would grasp the underlying idea you should read the work slowly, read it thoughtfully, read it frequently. A piece of composition so read and so mastered is to you a great gain. It is an element in the formation of true culture. You are thereby learning how to penetrate the veil of appearances and to look essences full in the face.

You complain of the impossibility of remembering all you read. That comes of your reading over-hastily or of your reading aimlessly. When you read with a purpose, and take notes, and make running comments, and mark passages or chapters which you re-read, your memory will be retentive of all essential points.*

* Since writing the above I find the following pertinent and practical remarks from the pen of Dr. Thomas Hill, late president of Harvard: "The books which have helped me most, and which I believe would be most valuable to any reader, are those which are very clear and intelligible in their style, but which, nevertheless, from their largeness and breadth of view and from their range of thought, lying somewhat above the commonplace, demand close attention and patient study in the reader. The book is none the worse, but rather the better, if it has come down to us, with a high reputation, for Campbell's period of sixty years, or even for many

A memory equally strong upon every subject is rare. I have met only one instance approaching such a memory in all my experience. It is that of a great churchman, who stands foremost as a theologian, a canonist, a scholar, and a critic. He is familiar with several of the oriental languages; he speaks or reads nearly all the modern European tongues; his memory for facts and names and figures is marvelous. I have known him, in published articles, to quote chapter and page of authorities without consulting his books; I have heard him recite from Italian poets for hours at a time and even give the variations of different editions that he may not have looked into for years. This venerable prelate is the pride and glory of the Catholic Church in America.* But this is an exceptional instance of wonderful memory. For the large majority of us memory is simply confirmed experience in regard to topics with which we have grown familiar. According as our mind becomes active on any subject will our memory grasp the facts and ideas, and even the remote incidents, connected with the subject. Cardinal Newman says

times sixty. Read such a book through once in order to get a general view of the aim and the method of its author. Read it a second time more carefully, in order deliberately to weigh the value of its parts. Read the more valuable parts a third time, with meditation and reflection, that you may digest and assimilate what nutriment is there. Intellectually man is ruminant, and he gets little permanent benefit from literary browsing unless he thus afterwards chews the cud." ("Books that have made Me," from the *Forum*, p. 90.)

* I need scarcely remark that the venerable prelate here alluded to was Monsignor Corcoran, whose loss we now deplore.



truly: "In real fact memory, as a talent, is not one indivisible faculty, but a power of retaining and recalling the past in this or that department of our experience, not in any whatever. Two memories which are both specially retentive may also be incommensurate. . . . . There are a hundred memories, as there are a hundred virtues."* And in this connection I would lay down a rule not given in your hand-books of reading.

V. Learn the art of forgetting. It is a great blessing and a rare art, that of knowing what to forget. It is an art not to be applied indiscriminately. There are many things in books—even in books not professedly bad—that are to be ignored, just as there are many occurrences in daily life that remain unmentioned. It is by a strong exercise of will-power that reason learns to overlook, or to reject from memory and imagination—from imagination, at all events—a certain objectionable sentence or paragraph in a book, or certain scenes and incidents that are neither beautiful, nor edifying, nor entertaining, nor instructive. Frequently the nobler passages so fill the mind that they leave no room for these accidentally unworthy ones. You stand before the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. You admire its vast proportions, its wonderful construction, its mysterious, overawing impression of prayerfulness. There recurs to your mind the magnificent chapter of Victor

* *Grammar of Assent*, sixth London edition, pp. 340, 341.

Hugo's novel—*Notre Dame de Paris*—translating its manifold beauties into words only little less expressive than its carved stones. Before its grandeur, the vision of physical grotesqueness and moral monstrosity, which the great word-artist would associate with it, drops out and fades away, with as much ease as the remembrance of the toads and slimy things that find sustenance in the moisture dripping at the base of its walls. You enter, and the sublimity of the structure is forgotten in a view sublimer still. It is that of a sea of upturned faces filling its vast structure, many of whom you recognize as leaders in the social, literary, and political world, hanging spell-bound on the utterances of a white-robed Dominican, * as from yonder historic pulpit he announces to them in irresistible eloquence the great truths of Christian doctrine. You leave, the echo of his thrilling words ringing in your ears. The impression remains, never to be effaced. Beneath the magic touch of such impressions the soul expands. Whatever is good and holy and pure and noble, in word or work, is the legitimate object of man's intellectual energies. This is the secret of the elevating influence of all true art. And here is where Victor Hugo fails. He mistakes bathos for sublimity. In the trail of his genius has followed a school of writers who wallow in filth, admire ugliness, sympathize with depravity, and love horrors. And their readers? Their intelligence has strayed from the true ideal—the ideal that lives—to a standard ever descending and to the cultivation of a taste that revels in the realism of Zola, whose beastliness had grown so revolting that his own disciples and admirers, in self-respect, were compelled to enter public protest against one of his latest books.

* I had the great pleasure of hearing Père Monsabré in several of his Lenten sermons, in 1887, under the circumstances here described.



This art of forgetting is not as difficult as you would suppose. Boys of good sense, who are indiscriminate readers and great devourers of books, practise it unconsciously. But as reason develops it takes a strong act of the will to render the brain impervious to certain classes of impressions. Hypnotism has proven how an external agent is capable of lulling certain nerve-centres of volition into torpor, and of causing the mind to become concentrated upon a single idea to the exclusion of all others, no matter how forcibly they may be pressed upon the attention, and to look at it in the manner the agent desires. Now, that which an external agent can so effectively do, the will, in its own way, can be trained to achieve. The mind's eye may be rendered blind to all else than the subject-matter it is surveying. Biography is filled with the blunders committed by great thinkers —such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Newton—when in this state of total absorption with some predominant thought. Consider the great will-power Mr. James Anthony Froude has brought to bear upon the distortion

of history. Note the facility with which he ignores the virtues of Mary Stuart; see the perfections he finds in Queen Elizabeth; and there is that "great blot of blood and grease on the history of England," * Henry VIII.; Mr. Froude can't perceive it; it is to his mind an unsullied page, and Henry VIII. a humane ruler and a profound statesman. In like spirit can Mr. Froude read a quotation until it begins to tell against his preconceived notion, drop out words that damage the view he would hold, garble sentences to suit his purposes, and play such pranks with quotation-marks as to make him the laughing-stock of all conscientious historians. That which Froude can achieve so well, simply that he may present an historical epoch in a novel light, we should be able to accomplish in another direction with the higher aim of keeping out of our soul intellectual and moral poison. This leads us to another rule.

VI. Be honest in your readings. Cultivate honesty of judgment, honesty of opinion, honesty of expression, so that you may be able to form an honest estimate of books. A book is commended as a classic, and you are unable to perceive its worth. This inability may arise from two causes: either you are not adequately educated up to the point of being able to appreciate such a book, or you have grown beyond the need or use of the book. If the book is beyond your grasp, do not attempt to read it; put it aside, and in the meantime read up other

* Dickens: *Child's History of England.*



matters in which you will find greater pleasure. But do not lose sight of the book. After a year or two try it again, and if you have been reading to some purpose your intellect will have expanded to the comprehension of the book that had been formerly beyond your reach. We all of us will find profit in educating ourselves up to a full appreciation of the great world-authors.

Then there are books that one outgrows. Every mind, acting in its normal state, passes through a process of development. What delights the child may be insipid to the man. The books of our youth are always pleasant memories to us, but we have no desire to spend our manhood hours upon them. Other books and other subjects, more befitting our riper years, absorb our attention. So it is with the different stages of a people's existence. Every age has its own peculiar wants and its own standards of excellence. Thus it not infrequently happens that books which were a revelation to our fathers have become mere commonplaces to us. This may arise from the fact that the thought which was novel when first presented to the previous generation has filtered through the various strata of society till it has become common property; we have grown familiar with it; it no longer excites the enthusiasm it did upon its first appearance. The book has done its work. Our age has another set of wants, calling for another set of thoughts, and we prize more highly the book supplying food for our own aspirations.