



On the Art of
READING
SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

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ON THE ART OF READING

by

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



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PREFACE

The following twelve lectures have this much in common with a previous twelve published in 1916 under the title *On the Art of Writing*—they form no compact treatise but present their central idea as I was compelled at the time to enforce it, amid the dust of skirmishing with opponents and with practical difficulties.

They cover—and to some extent, by reflection, chronicle—a period during which a few friends, who had an idea and believed in it, were fighting to establish the present English Tripos at Cambridge. In the end we carried our proposals without a vote: but the opposition was stiff for a while; and I feared, on starting to read over these pages for press, that they might be too occasional and disputatious. I am happy to think that, on the whole, they are not; and that the reader, though he may wonder at its discursiveness, will find the argument pretty free from polemic. Anyone who has inherited a library of 17th century theology will agree with me that, of all dust, the ashes of dead controversies afford the driest.

And after all, and though it be well worth while to strive that the study of English (of our own literature, and of the art of using our own language, in speech or in writing, to the best purpose) shall take an honourable place among the schools of a great university, that the other fair sisters of learning shall

Ope for thee their queenly circle...

it is not in our universities that the general redemption of English will be won; nor need a mistake here or there, at Oxford or

Cambridge or London, prove fatal. We make our discoveries through our mistakes: we watch one another's success: and where there is freedom to experiment there is hope to improve. A youth who can command means to enter a university can usually command some range in choosing which university it shall be. If Cambridge cannot supply what he wants, or if our standard of training be low in comparison with that of Oxford, or of London or of Manchester, the pressure of neglect will soon recall us to our senses.

The real battle for English lies in our elementary schools, and in the training of our elementary teachers. It is there that the foundations of a sound national teaching in English will have to be laid, as it is there that a wrong trend will lead to incurable issues. For the poor child has no choice of schools, and the elementary teacher, whatever his individual gifts, will work under a yoke imposed upon him by Whitehall. I devoutly trust that Whitehall will make the yoke easy and adaptable while insisting that the chariot must be drawn.

I foresee, then, these lectures condemned as the utterances of a man who, occupying a Chair, has contrived to fall betwixt two stools. My thoughts have too often strayed from my audience in a university theatre away to remote rural classrooms where the hungry sheep look up and are not fed; to piteous groups of urchins standing at attention and chanting "The Wreck of the Hesperus" in unison. Yet to these, being tied to the place and the occasion, I have brought no real help.

A man has to perform his task as it comes. But I must say this in conclusion. Could I wipe these lectures out and rewrite them in hope to benefit my countrymen in general, I should begin and end upon the text to be found in the twelfth and last—that a liberal education is not an appendage to be purchased by a few: that Humanism is, rather, a *quality* which

can, and should, condition all our teaching; which can, and should, be impressed as a character upon it all, from a poor child's first lesson in reading up to a tutor's last word to his pupil on the eve of a Tripos.

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

July 7, 1920

LECTURE I

INTRODUCTORY

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 1916

I

In the third book of the *Ethics*, and in the second chapter, Aristotle, dealing with certain actions which, though bad in themselves, admit of pity and forgiveness because they were committed involuntarily, through ignorance, instances “the man who did not know a subject was forbidden, like Aeschylus with the Mysteries,” and “the man who only meant to show how it worked, like the fellow who let off the catapult” (ἡ δειξαὶ βουλόμενος ἀφειναί, ὡς ὁ τὸν καταπέλτην).

I feel comfortably sure, Gentlemen, that in a previous course of lectures *On the Art of Writing*, unlike Aeschylus, I divulged no mysteries: but I am troubled with speculations over that man and the catapult, because I really was trying to tell you how the thing worked; and Aristotle, with a reticence which (as Horace afterwards noted) may lend itself to obscurity, tells us neither what happened to that exponent of ballistics, nor to the engine itself, nor to the other person. My discharge, such as it was, at any rate provoked another professor (*emeritus*, learned, sagacious, venerable) to retort that the true business of a Chair such as this is to instruct young men how to *read* rather than how to write. Well, be it so. I accept the challenge.

I propose in this and some ensuing lectures to talk of the

Art and Practice of Reading, particularly as applied to English Literature: to discuss on what ground and through what faculties an Author and his Reader meet: to enquire if, or to what extent, Reading of the best Literature can be taught; and supposing it to be taught, if or to what extent it can be examined upon; with maybe an interlude or two, to beguile the way.

II

The first thing, then, to be noted about the reading of English (with which alone I am concerned) is that for Englishmen it has been made, by Act of Parliament, compulsory.

The next thing to be noted is that in our schools and colleges and universities it has been made, by Statute or in practice, all but impossible.

The third step is obvious—to reconcile what we cannot do with what we must: and to that aim I shall, under your patience, direct this and the following lecture. I shall be relieved at all events, and from the outset, of the doubt by which many a professor, here and elsewhere, has been haunted: I mean the doubt whether there really *is* such a subject as that of which he proposes to treat. Anything that requires so much human ingenuity as reading English in an English university *must* be an art.

III

But I shall be met, of course, by the question “How is the reading of English made impossible at Cambridge?” and I pause here, on the edge of my subject, to clear away that doubt.

It is no fault of the University.

The late Philip Gilbert Hamerton, whom some remember as an etcher, wrote a book which he entitled (as I think, too magniloquently) *The Intellectual Life*. He cast it in the form of

letters—“To an Author who kept very Irregular Hours,” “To a Young Etonian who thought of becoming a Cotton-spinner,” “To a Young Gentleman who had firmly resolved never to wear anything but a Grey Coat” (but Mr. Hamerton couldn’t quite have meant that). “To a Lady of High Culture who found it difficult to associate with persons of her Own Sex,” “To a Young Gentleman of Intellectual Tastes, who, without having as yet any Particular Lady in View, had expressed, in a General Way, his Determination to get Married.” The volume is well worth reading. In the first letter of all, addressed “To a Young Man of Letters who worked Excessively,” Mr. Hamerton fishes up from his memory, for admonishment, this salutary instance:

A tradesman, whose business affords an excellent outlet for energetic bodily activity, told me that having attempted, in addition to his ordinary work, to acquire a foreign language which seemed likely to be useful to him, he had been obliged to abandon it on account of alarming cerebral symptoms. This man has immense vigour and energy, but the digestive functions, in this instance, are sluggish. However, when he abandoned study, the cerebral inconveniences disappeared, and have never returned since.

IV

Now we all know, and understand, and like that man: for the simple reason that he is every one of us.

You or I (say) have to take the *Modern Languages Tripos*, Section A (English), in 1917.¹ First of all (and rightly) it is demanded of us that we show an acquaintance, and something more than a bowing acquaintance, with Shakespeare. Very well;

¹ The reader will kindly turn back to the start of the chapter, and observe the date at the head of this lecture. At that time I was engaged against a system of English teaching which I believed to be thoroughly bad. That system has since given place to another, which I am prepared to defend as a better.

but next we have to write a paper and answer questions on the outlines of English Literature from 1350 to 1832—almost 500 years—and next to write a paper and show particular knowledge of English Literature between 1700 and 1785—eighty-five years. Next comes a paper on passages from selected English verse and prose writings—the Statute discreetly avoids calling them literature—between 1200 and 1500, exclusive of Chaucer; with questions on language, metre, literary history and literary criticism: then a paper on Chaucer with questions on language, metre, literary history and literary criticism: lastly a paper on writing in the Wessex dialect of Old English, with questions on the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, language, metre and literary history.

Now if you were to qualify yourself for all this as a scholar should, and in two years, you would certainly deserve to be addressed by Mr. Hamerton as “A Young Man of Letters who worked Excessively”; and to work excessively is not good for anyone. Yet, on the other hand, you are precluded from using, for your “cerebral inconveniences,” the heroic remedy exhibited by Mr. Hamerton’s enterprising tradesman, since on that method you would not attain to the main object of your laudable ambition, a Cambridge degree.

But the matter is very much worse than your Statute makes it out. Take one of the papers in which some actual acquaintance with Literature is required—the Special Period from 1700 to 1785; then turn to your *Cambridge History of English Literature*, and you will find that the mere bibliography of those eighty-five years occupies something like five or six hundred pages—five or six hundred pages of titles and authors in simple enumeration! The brain reels; it already suffers “cerebral inconveniences.” But stretch the list back to Chaucer, back through Chaucer to those alleged prose writings in the Wessex dialect,

then forward from 1785 to Wordsworth, to Byron, to Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Meredith, even to this year in which literature still lives and engenders; and the brain, if not too giddy indeed, stands as Satan stood on the brink of Chaos—

Pondering his voyage; for no narrow frith
He had to cross—

and sees itself, with him, now plumbing a vast vacuity, and anon nigh-foundered, “treading the crude consistence.”

The whole business of reading English Literature in two years, to *know* it in any reputable sense of the word—let alone your learning to write English—is, in short, impossible. And the framers of the Statute, recognising this, have very sensibly compromised by setting you to work on such things as “the Outlines of English Literature”; which are not Literature at all but are only what some fellow has to say about it, hastily summarising his estimates of many works, of which on a generous computation he has probably read one-fifth; and by examining you on (what was it all?) “language, metre, literary history and literary criticism,” which again are not Literature, or at least (as a Greek would say in his idiom) escape their own notice being Literature. For English Literature, as I take it, is *that which sundry men and women have written memorably in English about Life*. And so I come to my subject—the art of reading *that*, which is Literature.

V

I shall take leave to leap into it over another man’s back, or, rather over two men’s backs. No doubt it has happened to many of you to pick up in a happy moment some book or pamphlet or copy of verse which just says the word you have unconsciously been listening for, almost craving to speak for yourself, and

so sends you off hotfoot on the trail. And if you have had that experience, it may also have happened to you that, after ranging, you returned on the track “like faithful hound returning,” in gratitude, or to refresh the scent; and that, picking up the book again, you found it no such wonderful book after all, or that some of the magic had faded by process of the change in yourself which itself had originated. But the word was spoken.

Such a book—pamphlet I may call it, so small it was—fell into my hands some ten years ago; *The Aims of Literary Study*—no very attractive title—by Dr. Corson, a distinguished American professor (and let me say that, for something more than ten—say for twenty—years much of the most thoughtful as well as the most thorough work upon English comes to us from America). I find, as I handle again the small duodecimo volume, that my own thoughts have taken me a little wide, perhaps a little astray, from its suggestions. But for loyalty’s sake I shall start just where Dr. Corson started, with a passage from Browning’s, “A Death in the Desert,” supposed (you will remember)—

Supposed of Pamphylax the Antiochene

narrating the death of St. John the Evangelist, John of Patmos; the narrative interrupted by this gloss:

[This is the doctrine he was wont to teach,
 How divers persons witness in each man,
 Three souls which make up one soul: *first*, to wit,
 A soul of each and all the bodily parts,
 Seated therein, which works, and is *What Does*,
 And has the use of earth, and ends the man
 Downward: but, tending upward for advice,
 Grows into, and again is grown into
 By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,

Useth the first with its collected use,
 And feeleth, thinketh, willeth—is *What Knows*:
 Which, duly tending upward in its turn,
 Grows into, and again is grown into
 By the last soul, that uses both the first,
 Subsisting whether they assist or no,
 And, constituting man's self, is *What Is*—
 And leans upon the former

(Mark the word, Gentlemen; “*leans upon the former*”—leaning back, as it were felt by him, on this very man who had leaned on Christ's bosom, being loved)

And leans upon the former, makes it play,
 As that played off the first: and, tending up,
 Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man
 Upward in that dread point of intercourse,
 Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him.
What Does, What Knows, What Is; three souls, one man.
 I give the glossa of Theotypas.]

What Does, What Knows, What Is—there is no mistaking what Browning means, nor in what degrees of hierarchy he places this, that, and the other.... Does it not strike you how curiously men today, with their minds perverted by hate, are inverting that order?—all the highest value set on *What Does*—*What Knows* suddenly seen to be of importance, but only as important in feeding the guns, perfecting explosives, collaring trade—all in the service of *What Does*, of “Get on or Get Out,” of “Efficiency”; no one stopping to think that “Efficiency” is—must be—a relative term! Efficient for what?—for *What Does, What Knows* or perchance, after all, for *What Is*? No! banish the humanities and throw everybody into practical science: not into that study of natural science, which can never conflict with the “humanities” since it seeks discovery for the pure sake of truth, or charitably to alleviate man's lot—

Sweetly, rather, to ease, loose and bind
As need requires, this frail fallen humankind...

—but to invent what will be commercially serviceable in besting your neighbour, or in gassing him, or in slaughtering him neatly and wholesale. But still the whisper (not ridiculous in its day) will assert itself, that *What Is* comes first, holding and upheld by God; still through the market clamour for a “Business Government” will persist the voice of Plato murmuring that, after all, the best form of government is government by good men: and the voice of some small man faintly protesting “But I don’t want to be governed by business men; because I know them and, without asking much of life, I have a hankering to die with a shirt on my back.”

VI

But let us postpone *What Is* for a moment, and deal with *What Does* and *What Knows*. They too, of course, have had their oppositions, and the very meaning of a university such as Cambridge—its *fons*, its *origo*, its τό τί ἦν εἶναι—was to assert *What Knows* against *What Does* in a medieval world pranced over by men-at-arms, Normans, English, Burgundians, Scots. Ancillary to Theology, which then had a meaning vastly different from its meaning today, the university tended as portress of the gate of knowledge—of such knowledge as the Church required, encouraged, or permitted—and kept the flag of intellectual life, as I may put it, flying above that gate and over the passing throngs of “doers” and mailed-fisters. The university was a Seat of Learning: the colleges, as they sprang up, were Houses of Learning.

But note this, which in their origin and still in the frame of their constitution differentiates Oxford and Cambridge from all their ancient sisters and rivals. These two (and no third, I

believe, in Europe) were corporations of Teachers, existing for Teachers, governed by Teachers. In a Scottish university the students by vote choose their Rector: but here or at Oxford no undergraduate, no Bachelor, counts at all in the government, both remaining alike *in statu pupillari* until qualified as Masters—*Magistri*. Mark the word, and mark also the title of one who obtained what in those days would be the highest of degrees (but yet gave him no voting strength above a Master). He was a professor—“Sanctae Theologiae Professor.” To this day every country clergyman who comes up to Cambridge to record his *non-placet*, does so by virtue of his capacity to teach what he learned here—in theory, that is. Scholars were included in college foundations on a sort of pupil-teacher-supply system: living in rooms with the lordly masters, and valeting them for the privilege of “reading with” them. We keep to this day the pleasant old form of words. Now for various reasons—one of which, because it is closely germane to my subject, I shall particularly examine—Oxford and Cambridge, while conserving almost intact their medieval frame of government, with a hundred other survivals which Time but makes, through endurance, more endearing, have, insensibly as it were, and across (it must be confessed) intervals of sloth and gross dereliction of duty, added a new function to the cultivation of learning—that of furnishing out of youth a succession of men capable of fulfilling high offices in Church and State.

Some may regret this. I think many of us must regret that a deeper tincture of learning is not required of the average passman, or injected into him perforce. But speaking roughly about fact, I should say that while we elders up here are required—nay, presumed to *know* certain things, we aim that our young men shall be of a certain kind; and I see no cause to disown a sentence in the very first lecture I had the honour of reading

before you—"The man we are proud to send forth from our schools will be remarkable less for something he can take out of his wallet and exhibit for knowledge, than for *being* something, and that something recognisable for a man of unmistakable intellectual breeding, whose trained judgment we can trust to choose the better and reject the worse."

The reasons which have led our older universities to deflect their functions (whether for good or ill) so far from their first purpose are complicated if not many. Once admit young men in large numbers, and youth (I call any Dean or Tutor to witness) must be compromised with; will construe the laws of its seniors in its own way, now and then breaking them; and will inevitably end, by getting something of its own way. The growth of gymnastic, the insensible gravitation of the elderly towards Fenner's—there to snatch a fearful joy and explain that the walk was good for them; the Union and other debating societies; college rivalries; the festivities of May Week; the invasion of women students: all these may have helped. But I must dwell discreetly on one compelling and obvious cause—the increased and increasing unwieldiness of Knowledge. And that is the main trouble, as I guess.

VII

Let us look it fair in the face: because it is the main practical difficulty with which I propose that, in succeeding lectures, we grapple. Against Knowledge I have, as the light cynic observed of a certain lady's past, only one serious objection—that there is so much of it. There is indeed so much of it that if with the best will in the world you devoted yourself to it as a mere scholar, you could not possibly digest its accumulated and still accumulating stores. As Sir Thomas Elyot wrote in the 16th century (using, you will observe, the very word of Mr.

Hamerton's energetic but fed-up tradesman), "Inconveniences always do happen by ingurgitation and excessive feedings." An old schoolmaster and a poet—Mr. James Rhoades, late of Sherborne—comments in words which I will quote, being unable to better them:

This is no less true of the mind than of the body. I do not know that a well-informed man, as such, is more worthy of regard than a well-fed one. The brain, indeed, is a nobler organ than the stomach, but on that very account is the less to be excused for indulging in repletion. The temptation, I confess, is greater, because for the brain the banquet stands ever spread before our eyes, and is, unhappily, as indestructible as the widow's meal and oil.

Only think what would become of us if the physical food, by which our bodies subsist, instead of being consumed by the eater, was passed on intact by every generation to the next, with the superadded hoards of all the ages, the earth's productive power meanwhile increasing year by year beneath the unflinching hand of Science, till, as Comus says, she

would be quite surcharged with her own weight
And strangled with her waste fertility.

Should we rather not pull down our barns, and build smaller, and make bonfires of what they would not hold? And yet, with regard to Knowledge, the very opposite of this is what we do. We store the whole religiously, and that though not twice alone, as with the bees in Virgil, but scores of times in every year, is the teeming produce gathered in. And then we put a fearful pressure on ourselves and others to gorge of it as much as ever we can hold.

Facit indignatio versus. My author, gathering heat, puts it somewhat dithyrambically: but there you have it, Gentlemen.

If you crave for Knowledge, the banquet of Knowledge

grows and groans on the board until the finer appetite sickens. If, still putting all your trust in Knowledge, you try to dodge the difficulty by specialising, you produce a brain bulging out inordinately on one side, on the other cut flat down and mostly paralytic at that: and in short so long as I hold that the Creator has an idea, of a man, so long shall I be sure that no uneven specialist realises it. The real tragedy of the Library at Alexandria was not that the incendiaries burned immensely, but that they had neither the leisure nor the taste to discriminate.

VIII

The old schoolmaster whom I quoted just now goes on:

I believe, if the truth were known, men would be astonished at the small amount of learning with which a high degree of culture is compatible. In a moment of enthusiasm I ventured once to tell my “English set” that if they could really master the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*, so as to rise to the height of its great argument and incorporate all its beauties in themselves, they would at one blow, by virtue of that alone, become highly cultivated men.... More and more various learning might raise them to the same height by different paths, but could hardly raise them higher.

Here let me interpose and quote the last three lines of that Book—three lines only; simple, unornamented, but for every man and every woman who have dwelt together since our first parents, in mere statement how wise!

Thus they in mutual accusation spent
The fruitless hours, *but neither self-condemning*;
And of their vain contest appear'd no end.

A parent afterwards told me [my schoolmaster adds] that his son went home and so buried himself in the book that food and sleep that day had no attraction for him. Next morning, I need hardly say,

the difference in his appearance was remarkable: he had outgrown all his intellectual clothes.

The end of this story strikes me, I confess, as rapid, and may be compared with that of the growth of Delian Apollo in the Homeric hymn; but we may agree that, in reading, it is not quantity so much that tells, as quality and thoroughness of digestion.

IX

What Does—What Knows—What Is...

I am not likely to depreciate to you the value of *What Does*, after spending my first twelve lectures up here, on the art and practice of Writing, encouraging you to *do* this thing which I daily delight in trying to do: as God forbid that anyone should hint a slighting word of what our sons and brothers are doing just now, and doing for us! But Peace being the normal condition of man's activity, I look around me for a vindication of what is noblest in *What Does* and am content with a passage from George Eliot's poem "Stradivarius," the gist of which is that God himself might conceivably make better fiddles than Stradivari's, but by no means certainly; since, as a fact, God orders his best fiddles of Stradivari. Says the great workman,

"God be praised,
Antonio Stradivari has an eye
That winces at false work and loves the true,
With hand and arm that play upon the tool
As willingly as any singing bird
Sets him to sing his morning roundelay,
Because he likes to sing and likes the song."
Then Naldo: "'Tis a pretty kind of fame
At best, that comes of making violins;

And saves no masses, either. Thou wilt go
To purgatory none the less.”

But he:

“ ’Twere purgatory here to make them ill;
And for my fame—when any master holds
’Twixt chin and hand a violin of mine,
He will be glad that Stradivari lived,
Made violins, and made them of the best.
The masters only know whose work is good:
They will choose mine, and while God gives them skill
I give them instruments to play upon,
God choosing me to help Him.”

“What! Were God
At fault for violins, thou absent?”

“Yes;

He were at fault for Stradivari’s work.”

“Why, many hold Giuseppe’s
violins As good as thine.”

“May be: they are different.

His quality declines: he spoils his hand
With over-drinking. But were his the best,
He could not work for two. My work is mine,
And heresy or not, if my hand slacked
I should rob God—since He is fullest good—
Leaving a blank instead of violins.
I say, not God Himself can make man’s best
Without best men to help him....

’Tis God gives skill,
But not without men’s hands: He could not make
Antonio Stradivari’s violins
Without Antonio. Get thee to thy easel.”

So much then for *What Does*: I do not depreciate it.

X

Neither do I depreciate—in Cambridge, save the mark!—*What Knows*. All knowledge is venerable; and I suppose you will find

the last vindication of the scholar's life at its baldest in Brown-
ing's "A Grammarian's Funeral":

Others mistrust and say, "But time escapes:
 Live now or never!"
He said, "What's time? Leave Now for dog and apes!
 Man has Forever."
Back to his book then; deeper drooped his head:
 Calculus racked him:
Lead before, his eyes grew dross of lead:
 Tussis attacked him....
So, with the throttling hands of death at strife,
 Ground he at grammar;
Still, thro' the rattle, parts of speech were rife:
 While he could stammer
He settled Hoti's business—let it be!—
 Properly based Oun—
Gave us the doctrine of the enclitic De,
 Dead from the waist down.
Well, here's the platform, here's the proper place:
 Hail to your purlieus,
All ye highfliers of the feathered race,
 Swallows and curlews!
Here's the top-peak; the multitude below
 Live, for they can, there:
This man decided not to Live but Know—
 Bury this man there.

Nevertheless Knowledge is not, cannot be, everything; and indeed, as a matter of experience, cannot even be counted upon to educate. Some of us have known men of extreme learning who yet are, some of them, uncouth in conduct, others violent and overbearing in converse, others unfair in controversy, others even unscrupulous in action—men of whom the sophist Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* may stand for the general