

ON READING OLD BOOKS" ¹
WILLIAM HAZLITT

I hate to read new books. There are twenty or thirty volumes that I have read over and over again, and these are the only ones that I have any desire ever to read at all. It was a long time before I could bring myself to sit down to the *Tales of My Landlord*, but now that author's works have made a considerable addition to my scanty library. I am told that some of Lady Morgan's are good, and have been recommended to look into Anastasius; but I have not yet ventured upon that task. A lady, the other day, could not refrain from expressing her surprise to a friend, who said he had been reading *Delphine*:² -- she asked, -- If it had not been published some time back? Women judge of books as they do of fashions or complexions, which are admired only "in their newest gloss." That is not my way. I am not one of those who trouble the circulating libraries much, or pester the booksellers for mail-coach copies of standard periodical publications. I cannot say that I am greatly addicted to black-letter, but I profess myself well versed in the marble bindings of Andrew Millar in the middle of the last century; nor does my taste revolt at Thurlow's *State Papers*, in russia leather; or an ample impression of Sir William Temple's *Essays*, with a portrait after Sir Godfrey Kneller in front. I do not think altogether the worse for a book for having survived the author a generation or two. I have more confidence in the dead than the living. Contemporary writers may generally be divided into two classes -- one's friends or one's foes. Of the first we are compelled to think too well, and of the last we are disposed to think too ill, to receive much genuine pleasure from the perusal, or to judge fairly of the merits of either. One candidate for literary fame, who happens to be of our acquaintance, writes finely, and like a man of genius; but unfortunately has a foolish face, which spoils a delicate passage:---another inspires us with the highest respect for his personal talents and character, but does not quite come up to our expectations in print. All these contradictions and petty details interrupt the calm current of our reflections. If you want to know what any of the authors were who lived before our time, and are still objects of anxious inquiry, you have only to look into their works. But the dust and smoke and noise of modern literature have nothing in common with the pure, silent air of immortality.

When I take up a work that I have read before (the oftener the better) I know what I have to expect. The satisfaction is not lessened by being anticipated. When the entertainment is altogether new, I sit down to it as I should to a strange dish, -- turn and pick out a bit here and there, and am in doubt what to think of the composition. There is a want of confidence and security to second appetite. New-fangled books are also made-dishes in this respect, that they are generally little else than hashes and *rifaccimenti* of what has been served up entire and in a more natural state at other times. Besides, in thus turning to a well-known author, there is not only an assurance that my time will not be thrown away, or my palate nauseated with the most insipid or vilest trash, -- but I shake hands with, and look an old, tried, and valued friend in the face, -- compare notes, and chat the hours away. It is true, we form dear friendships with such ideal

guests -- dearer, alas! And more lasting, than those with our most intimate acquaintance. In reading a book which is an old favourite with me (say the first novel I ever read) I not only have the pleasure of imagination and of a critical relish of the work, but the pleasures of memory added to it. It recalls the same feelings and associations which I had in first reading it, and which I can never have again in any other way. Standard productions of this kind are links in the chain of our conscious being. They bind together the different scattered divisions of our personal identity. They are landmarks and guides in our journey through life. They are pegs and loops on which we can hang up, or from which we can take down, at pleasure, the wardrobe of a moral imagination, the relics of our best affections, the tokens and records of our happiest hours. They are "for thoughts and for remembrance!" They are like Fortunatus's Wishing'Cap -- they give us the best riches -- those of Fancy; and transport us, not over half the globe but (which is better) over half our lives, at a word's notice!

My father Shandy solaced himself with *Bruscambille*. Give me for this purpose a volume of *Peregrine Pickle* or *Tom Jones*. Open either of them anywhere -- at the *Memoirs of Lady Vane*, or the adventures at the masquerade with Lady Bellaston, or the dispute between Thwackum and Square, or the escape of Molly Seagrim, or the incident of Sophia and her muff, or the edifying prolixity of her aunt's lecture -- and there I find the same delightful, busy, bustling scene as ever, and feel myself the same as when I was first introduced into the midst of it. Nay, sometimes the sight of an odd volume of these good old English authors on a stall, or the name lettered on the back among others in the shelves of a library, answers the purpose, revives the whole train of ideas, and sets "the puppets dallying." Twenty years are stuck off the list, and I am a child again. A sage philosopher, who was not a very wise man, said, that he should like very well to be young again, if he could take his experience along with him. This ingenious person did not seem to be aware, by the gravity of his remark, that the great advantage of being young is to be without this weight of experience, which he would fain place upon the shoulders of youth, and which never comes too late with years. Oh! what a privilege to be able to let his hump, like Christian's burthen, drop from off one's back, and transport oneself, by the help of a little musty duodecimo, to the time when "ignorance was bliss," and when we first got a peep at the rare-show of the world, through the glass of fiction -- gazing at mankind, as we do at wild beasts in a menagerie, through the bars of their cages, -- or at curiosities in a museum, that we must not touch! For myself, not only are the old ideas of the contents of the work brought back to my mind in all their vividness, but the old associations of the faces and persons of those I then knew, as they were in their life-time -- the place where I sat to read the volume, the day when I got it, the feeling of the air, the fields, the sky -- return, and all my early impressions with them. This is better to me -- those places, those times, those persons, and those feelings that come across me as I retrace the story and devour the page, are to me better far than the wet sheets of the last new novels from the Ballentyne press, to say nothing of the Minerva press in Leadenhall Street. It is like visiting the scenes of early youth. I think of the time "when I was in my father's house, and my path ran down with butter and honey," -- when I was a little, thoughtless child, and had no other wish or care but to con my daily task, and be happy! -- *Tom Jones*, I remember, was the

first work that broke the spell. It came down in numbers once a fortnight, in Cooke's pocket-edition, embellished with cuts. I had hitherto read only in school-books and a tiresome ecclesiastical history (with the exception of Mrs Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*): but his had different relish with it, -- "sweet in the mouth," though not "bitter in the belly," It smacked of the world I lived in, and which I was to live -- and showed me groups "gay creatures," not "of the element," but of the earth; not "living in the clouds," but travelling the same road that I did; -- some that had passed on before me, and others that might soon overtake me. My heart had palpitated at the thoughts of a boarding-school ball, or gala-day at Midsummer or Christmas: but the world I had found out in Cooke's edition of the *British Novelists* was to me a dance through life, a perpetual gala-day. The sixpenny numbers of this work regularly contrived to leave off just in the middle of a sentence, and in the nick of a story, where Tom Jones discovers Square behind the blanket; or where Parson Adams, in the inextricable confusion of events, very undesignedly gets to bed to Mrs Slip-slop. Let me caution the reader against this impression of Joseph Andrews; for there is a picture of Fanny in it which he should not set his heart on, lest he should never meet with anything like it; or if he should, it would, perhaps, be better for him that he had not. It was just like _____! With what eagerness I used to look forward to the next number, and open the prints! Ah! Never again shall I feel the enthusiastic delight with which I gazed at the figures, and anticipated the story and adventures of Major Bath and Commodor Trunnion of Trim and my Uncle Toby, of Don Quixote and Sancho and Dapple, of Gil Blas and Dame Lorenza Sephora, of Laura and the fair Lucretia, whose lips open and shut like buds of roses. To what nameless ideas did they give rise, -- with what airy delights I filled up the outline, as I hung in silence over the page! -- Let me still recall them, that they may breathe fresh life into me, and that I may live that birthday of thought and romantic pleasure over again! Talk of the ideal! This is the only true ideal -- the heavenly tints of Fancy reflected in the bubbles that float upon the spring-tide of human life.

"O Memory! Shield me from the world's poor strife, And give those scenes thine ever lasting life!"

The paradox with which I set out is, I hope, less startling than it was; the reader will, by this time, have been let into my secret. Much about the same time, or I believe rather earlier, I took a particular satisfaction in reading *Chubb's Tracts*,³ and I often think I will get them again to wade through. There is a high gusto of polemical divinity in them; and you fancy that you hear a club of shoemakers at Salisbury, debating a disputable text from one of St Paul's Epistles in a workmanlike style, with equal shrewdness and pertinacity. I cannot say much for my metaphysical studies, into which I launched shortly after with greater ardour, so as to make a toil of a pleasure. I was presently entangled in the briars and thorns of subtle distinctions, -- of "fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute," though I cannot add that "in their wandering mazes I found no end;" for I did arrive at some very satisfactory and potent conclusions; nor will I go so far, however ungrateful the subject might seem, as to exclaim with Marlow's *Faustus* -- "Would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book" -- that is, never studied such authors as

Hartley, Hume, Berkeley, &c. Locke's *Essay on the Human Understanding* is, however, a work from which I never derived either pleasure or profit; and Hobbes, dry and powerful as he is, I did not read till long afterwards. I read a few poets, which did not much hit my taste, -- for I would have the reader understand, I am deficient in the faculty of imagination; but I fell early upon French romances, and philosophy, and devoured them tooth-and-nail. Many a dainty repast have I made of the *New Eloise*; -- the description of the kiss; the excursion on the water; the letter of St Preux, recalling the time of their first loves; and the account of Julia's death; these I read over and over again with unspeakable delight and wonder. Some years after, when I met with his [Rousseau's] work again, I found I had lost nearly my whole relish for it (except some few parts), and was, I remember, very much mortified with the change in my taste, which I sought to attribute to the smallness and gilt edges of the edition I had bought, and its being perfumed with rose-leaves. Nothing could exceed the gravity, the solemnity with which I carried home and read the Dedication to the *Social Contract*, with some other pieces of the same author, which I had picked up at a stall in a coarse leathern cover. Of the *Confessions* I have spoken elsewhere, and may repeat what I have said -- "Sweet is the dew of their memory, and pleasant the balm of their recollection!" Their beauties are not "scattered like stray-gifts o'er the earth," but sown thick on the page, rich and rare. I wish I had never read the *Emilius*, or read it with less implicit faith. I had no occasion to pamper my natural aversion to affectation or pretense, by romantic and artificial means. I had better have formed myself on the model of Sir Fopling Flutter. There is a class of person whose virtues and most shining qualities sink in, and are concealed by, an absorbent ground of modesty and reserve; and such a one I do, without vanity profess myself.⁴ Now these are the very persons who are likely to attach themselves to the character of *Emilius*, and of whom it is sure to be the bane. This dull, phlegmatic, retiring humour is not in a fair way to be corrected, but confirmed and rendered desperate, by being in that work held up as an object of imitation, as an example of simplicity and magnanimity -- by coming upon us with all the recommendations of novelty, surprise, and superiority to the prejudices of the world -- by being stuck upon a pedestal, made amiable, dazzling, a *leurre de dupe*! The reliance on solid worth which it inculcates, the preference of sober truth to gaudy tinsel, hangs like a mill-stone round the neck of the imagination -- "a load to sink a navy" -- impedes our progress, and blocks up every prospect in life. A man, to get on, to be successful, conspicuous, applauded, should not retire upon the centre of his conscious resources, but be always at the circumference of appearances. He must envelop himself in a halo of mystery -- he must ride in an equipage of opinion -- he must walk with a train of self-conceit following him -- he must not strip himself to a buff-jerkin, to the doublet and hose of his real merits, but must surround himself with a cortege of prejudices, like the Signs of The Zodiac -- he must seem anything but what he is, and then he may pass for anything he pleases. The world love to be amused by hollow professions, to be deceived by flattering appearances, to live in a state of hallucination; and can forgive everything but the plain, downright, simple, honest truth -- such as we see it chalked out in the character of *Emilius*. -- To return from this digression, which is a little out of place here.

Books have in a great measure lost their power over me; nor can I revive the same interest in them as formerly. I perceive when a thing is good, rather than feel it. It is true,

"Marcian Colonna is a dainty book;"⁵

and the reading of Mr Keat's *Eve of Saint Agnes* lately made me regret that I was not young again. The beautiful and tender images there conjured up, "come like shadows -- so depart." The "tiger-moth's wings," which he has spread over his rich poetic blazonry, just flit across my fancy; the gorgeous twilight window which he has painted over again in his verse, to me "blushes" almost in vain "with blood of queens and kings." I know how I should have felt at one time in reading such passages; and that is all. The sharp luscious flavour, the fine aroma is fled, and nothing but the stalk, the bran, the husk of literature is left. If any one were to ask me what I read now, I might answer with my Lord Hamlet in the play -- "words, words, words." -- "What is the matter?" -- "Nothing!" -- They have scarce a meaning. But it was not always so. There was a time when to my thinking, every word was a flower or a pearl, like those which dropped from the mouth of the little peasant-girl in the Fairy tale, or like those that fall from the great preacher in the Caledonian Chapel! I drank of the stream of knowledge that tempted, but did not mock my lips, as of the river of life, freely. How eagerly I slaked my thirst of German sentiment, "as the hart that panteth for the water-springs"; how I bathed and revelled, and added my floods of tears to Goethe's Sorrows of Werter, and Schiller's *Robbers* --

"Giving my stock of more to that which had too much!"

I read and assented with all my soul to Coleridge's fine Sonnet, beginning --

"Schiller! that hour I would have wish'd to die, If through the shuddering midnight I had sent,
From the dark dungeon of the tow'r time-rent, That fearful voice, a famish'd father's cry!"

I believe I may date my insight into the mysteries of poetry from the commencement of my acquaintance with the authors⁶ of the *Lyrical Ballads*; at least, my discrimination of the higher sorts -- not my predilection of such writers as Goldsmith or Pope: nor do I imagine they will say I got my liking for the Novelists, or the comic writers -- for the characters of Valentine, Tattle or Miss Prue, from them. If so, I must have got from them what they never had themselves. In points where poetic diction and conception are concerned, I may be at a loss, and liable to be imposed upon: but in forming an estimate of passages relating to common life and manners, I cannot think I am a plagiarist from any man. I there "know my cure without a prompter." I may say of such studies, *Intus et in cute*. I am just able to admire those literal touches of observation and description which persons of loftier pretensions overlook and despise. I think I comprehend something of the characteristic part of Shakespeare; and in him indeed, all is characteristic, even the nonsense and poetry. I believe it was the celebrated Sir Humphrey Davy who used to say, that Shakespeare was rather a metaphysician than a poet. At any rate, it was not ill said. I wish that I had sooner known the dramatic writers contemporary with Shakespeare; for in looking them over about a year ago, I almost revived my old passion for reading, and my old delight in

books, though they were very nearly new to me. The periodical Essayists I read long ago. The *Spectator* I liked extremely: but the *Tatler* took my fancy most. I read the others soon after, the *Rambler*, the *Adventurer*, the *World*, the *Connoisseur*: I was not sorry to get to the end of them, and have no desire to go regularly through them again. I consider myself a thorough adept in Richardson. I like the longest of his novels best, and think no part of them tedious; nor should I ask to have anything better to do than to read them from beginning to end, to take them up when I chose, and lay them down when I was tired, in some old family mansion in the country, till every word and syllable relating to the bright Clarissa, the Divine Clementina, the beautiful Pamela, "with every trick and line of their sweet favour," were once more "graven in my heart's table."⁷ I have a sneaking kindness for Mackenzie's Julia de Roubigne -- for the deserted mansion, and straggling gilliflowers on the mouldering garden-wall; and still more for his Man of Feeling; not that it is better, nor so good; but at the time I read it, I sometimes thought of the heroine, Miss Walton, and of Miss _____ together, and "that ligament fine as it was, was never broken!" -- One of the poets that I have always read with most pleasure, and can wander about in for ever with a sort of voluptuous indolence, is Spenser, and I like Chaucer even better. The only writer among the Italians I can pretend to any knowledge of, is Boccaccio, and of him I cannot express half my admiration. His story of the Hawk, I could read and think of from day to day, just as I would look at a picture of Titian's!

I remember, as long ago as the year 1798, going to a neighbouring town (Shrewsbury, where Farquhar has laid the plot of his Recruiting Officer) and bringing home with me, "at one proud swoop," a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and another of Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* -- both which I have still; and I still recollect, when I see the covers, the pleasures with which I dipped into them as I returned with my double prize. I was set up for one while. That time is past "with all its giddy raptures": but I am still anxious to preserve its memory, "embalmed with odours," -- With respect to the first of these works, I would be permitted to remark here in passing, that is a sufficient answer to the German criticism which has since been started against the character of Satan (viz., that it is not one of disgusting deformity, or pure, defecated malice) to say that Milton has there drawn, not the abstract principle of evil, nor a devil incarnate, but a fallen angel. This is the Scriptural account, and the poet has followed it. We may safely retain such passages as the well-known one --

--"His form had not yet lost All her original brightness; nor appear'd Less than archangel ruin'd; and the excess Of glory obscur'd" --

for the theory, which is opposed to them, "falls flat upon the grunsel edge, and shames its worshipers" Let us hear no more, then, of this monkish cant, and bigoted outcry for the restoration of the horns and tail of the devil! -- Again, as to the other work, Burke's *Reflections*, I took a particular pride and pleasure in it, and read it to myself and others for months afterwards. I had reason for my prejudice in favour of this author. To understand an adversary is some praise: to admire him is more. I thought I did both: I knew I did one. For the first time I ever cast my eyes on anything of Burke's (which was an extract from his *Letter to a Noble Lord* in a three-

times-a-week paper, the *St. James's Chronicle*, in 1796), I said to myself, "this is true eloquence: this is a man pouring out his mind on paper." All other style seemed to me pedantic and impertinent. Dr Johnson's was walking on stilts; and even Junius's (who was at that time a favourite with me) with all his terseness, shrunk up into little antithetic points and well-trimmed sentences. But Burke's style was forked and playful as the lightening, crested like the serpent. He delivered plain things on plain ground; but when he rose, there was no end of his flights and circumgyrations -- and in this very Letter "he, like an eagle in a dove-cot, fluttered his Volscians" (The Duke of Bedford and the Earl of Lauderdale⁸) In Corioli." I did not care for his doctrines. I was then and am still, proof against their contagion; but I admired the author, and was considered as not a very staunch partisan of the opposite side, though I thought myself that an abstract proposition was one thing -- a masterly transition, a brilliant metaphor, another. I conceived, too, that he might be wrong in his main argument, and yet deliver fifty truths in arriving at a false conclusion. I remember Coleridge assuring me, as a poetical and political set-off to my sceptical admiration, that Wordsworth had written an *Essay on Marriage*, which, for manly thought and nervous expression, he deemed incomparably superior. As I had not, at that time seen any specimens of Mr Wordsworth's prose style, I could not express my doubts on the subject. If there are greater prose-writers than Burke, they either lie out of my course of study, or are beyond my sphere of comprehension. I am too old to be a convert to a new mythology of genius. The niches are occupied, the tables are full. If such is still my admiration of this man's misapplied powers, what must it have been at a time when I myself was in vain trying, year after year, to write a single Essay, nay, a single page or sentence; when I regarded the wonders of his pen with the longing eye of one who was dumb and a changeling; and when to be able to convey the slightest conception of my meaning to others in words, was the height of an almost hopeless ambition! But I never measured others' excellences by my own defects; though a sense of my own incapacity, and of the steep, impassable ascent from me to them made me regard them with greater awe and fondness. I have thus run through most of my early studies and favorite authors, some of whom I have since criticized more at large. Whether those observations will survive me, I neither know nor do I much care: But to the works themselves, "worthy of all acceptance," and to the feelings they have always excited in me since I could distinguish a meaning in language, nothing shall ever prevent me from looking back with gratitude and triumph. To have lived in the cultivation of an intimacy with such works, and to have familiarly relished such names, is not to have lived quite in vain.

There are other authors whom I have never read, and yet whom I have frequently had a great desire to read, for some circumstances relating to them. Among them is Lord Clarendon's *History of the Great Rebellion*, after which I have a hankering, for hearing it spoken of by good judges -- from my interest in the events, and the knowledge of the characters from other sources, and from having seen fine portraits of most of them I like to read a well-penned character, and Clarendon is said to have been a master in his way. I should like to read Froissart's *Chronicles*, Holinshed and Stowe, and Fuller's *Worthies*. I intend, whenever I can to read Beaumont and Fletcher all through. There are fifty-two of their plays, and I have only read a

dozen or fourteen of them. *A Wife for Month* and *Thierry* and *Theodoret* are, I am told delicious, and I can believe it. I should like to read the speeches in Thucydides, and Guicciardini's *History of Florence*, and *Don Quixote* in the original. I have often thought of reading the *Lives of Persiles* and *Sigismunda*, and the *Galatea* of the same author. But somehow reserve them like "another Yarrow." I should also like to read the last new novel (if I could be sure it was so) of the Author [Scott] of *Waverley*: -- no one would be more glad than I to find it the best!

NOTES:

1 Hazlitt's "On Reading Old Books" was first published in the "New Monthly" magazine. It is to be found in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819) and in *The Plain Speaker* (1826).

2 (Madam de Stael's novel.) The original footnote found in Keynes' collection; I have, in turn, placed them in parentheses.

3 (By Thomas Chubb, on political and religious subjects, published between 1732 and 1745 -- W.C.H.)

4 (Nearly the same sentiment was wittily and happily expressed by a friend, who had some lottery puffs, which he had been employed to write, returned on his hands for their too great severity of thought and classical terseness of style, and who observed on that occasion, that "Modest merit never can succeed!")

5 (Marcian Colonna is the title of a dramatic piece by Barry Cornwall (B.W. Procter). -- W.C.H.)

6 The authors of *Lyrical Ballads*, are, of course, Wordsworth and Coleridge with whom Hazlitt had a personal acquaintance.

7 (During the peace of Amiens, a young English officer, of the name of Lovelace, was presented at Buonaparte's levee. Instead of the usual question, "Where have you served, sir?" the First Consul immediately addressed him, "I perceive your name, Sir, is the same as that of the hero of Richardson's Romance!" Here was a Consul. The young man's uncle who was called Lovelace, told me this anecdote while we were stopping together at Calais. I had also been thinking that his was the same name as that of the hero of Richardson's Romance. This is one of my reasons for liking Buonaparte.)

8 (He is there called "Citizen Lauderdale" Is this the present Earl [1826]?)

February 2010. On Reading Old Books. any so-called "Christian" books today are not worth reading, and some are spiritually dangerous. Given the vast number of such books in the marketplace, we need wisdom and discernment in what we read, lest we be unwittingly led astray. C.S. Lewis gives us wise guidance on this important issue. There is a strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books. This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones is now the

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