



Arthur Schopenhauer
*Parega and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays**
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Chapter XXIV
On Reading and Books

§ 290

Ignorance degrades a man only when it is found in company with wealth. A poor man is subdued by his poverty and distress; with him his work takes the place of knowledge and occupies his thoughts. On the other hand, the wealthy who are ignorant live merely for their pleasures and are like animals, as can be seen every day. Moreover, there is the reproach that wealth and leisure have not been used for that which bestows on them the greatest possible value.

§ 291

When we read, someone else thinks for us; we repeat merely his mental process. It is like the pupil who, when learning to write, goes over with his pen the strokes made in pencil by the teacher. Accordingly, when we read, the work of thinking is for the most part taken away from us. Hence the noticeable relief when from preoccupation with our thoughts we pass to reading. But while we are reading our mind is really only the playground of other people's ideas; and when these finally depart, what remains? The result is that, whoever reads very much and almost the entire day but at intervals amuses himself with thoughtless pastime, gradually loses the ability to think for himself; just as a man who always rides ultimately forgets how to walk. But such is the case with very many scholars; they have read themselves stupid. For constant reading, which is at once resumed at every free moment, is even more paralysing to the mind than is manual work; for with the latter we can give free play to our own thoughts. Just as a spring finally loses its elasticity through the constant pressure of a foreign body, so does the mind through the continual pressure of other people's ideas. Just as we upset the stomach by too much food and thereby do harm to the whole body, so can we cram and strangle the mind by too much mental pabulum. For the more we read, the fewer the traces that are left behind in the mind by what has been read. It becomes like a blackboard whereon many things have been written over one another. Hence we never come to ruminate;* but only through this do we assimilate what we have read, just as food nourishes us not by being eaten but by being digested. On the other hand, if we are for ever reading without afterwards thinking further about what we have read, this does not take root and for the most part is lost. Generally speaking, it is much the same with mental nourishment as with bodily; scarcely a fiftieth part of what is taken is assimilated; the rest passes off through evaporation, respiration, or otherwise.

In addition to all this, is the fact that thoughts reduced to paper are generally nothing more than the footprints of a man walking in the sand. It is true that we see the path he has taken; but to know what he saw on the way, we must use our own eyes.

* In fact a strong and steady flow of new reading merely serves to speed up the process of forgetting all that has been previously read.

§ 292

There is no literary quality, such as for instance power of persuasion,

wealth of imagery, gift of comparison, boldness or bitterness or brevity or grace or facility of expression, no wit, striking contrasts, curtness, naïveté, and so on, which we can acquire by reading authors who have such qualities. But in this way we can bring about such qualities in ourselves, in the event of our already possessing them as a tendency or inclination and thus *potentia*; and we can become aware of them. We can see all that may be done with them and can be strengthened in the inclination or even in the courage to use them. From instances we can judge the effect of their application and thus learn their correct use. Only then do we really possess such qualities *actu*. This, then, is the only way whereby reading fits us for writing, in that it teaches us the use we can make of our own natural gifts, always on the assumption, of course, that we possess them. On the other hand, without such qualities, we learn nothing through reading except cold, dead mannerisms, and become shallow and superficial imitators.

§ 292a

In the interests of our eyes, health officials should see to it that the smallness of print has a fixed minimum beyond which no one should be allowed to go. (When I was in Venice in 1818 at a time when genuine Venetian chains were still being made, a goldsmith told me that those who made the *catena fina* would become blind after thirty years.)

§ 293

As the strata of the earth preserve in their order the living creatures of past epochs, so do the shelves of libraries preserve in their order past errors and their expositions. Like the living creatures, those books were in their day very much alive and made a great stir. But they are now stiff and fossilized and are considered only by the literary paleontologist.

§ 294

According to Herodotus, Xerxes wept at the sight of his immense army when he thought that, of all those thousands, not one would be alive after a hundred years. Who would not weep at the sight of the bulky Leipzig catalogue of new publications when he considers that, of all those books, not one will be any longer alive even after ten years?

§ 295

It is the same in literature as in life; wherever we turn, we at once encounter the incorrigible rabble of mankind, everywhere present in legions, filling and defiling everything, like flies in summer. Hence the immense number of bad books, these rank weeds of literature, which deprive the wheat of nourishment and choke it. Thus they use up all the time, money, and attention of the public which by right belong to good books and their noble aims, while they themselves are written merely for the purpose of bringing in money or for procuring posts and positions. They are, therefore, not merely useless but positively harmful. Nine-tenths of the whole of our present-day literature have no other object than to extract from the pockets of the public a few shillings. Author, publisher, and reviewer have positively conspired to bring this about.

It is a cunning and low, but not unprofitable, trick which literary men, bread-and-butter writers, and scribblers have succeeded in playing on the good taste and true culture of the age. For they have gone to the length of having the whole of the *elegant world* in leading-strings so that it has been taught and trained *to read a tempo*; in other words, everyone has to read the same thing,

the newest and latest, in order to have something to talk about in his social set. For this purpose inferior novels and similar productions come from pens once famous, like those of Spindler, Bulwer, Eugène Sue, and others. But what can be more miserable than the fate of such a literary public which considers itself in duty bound at all times to read the latest scribblings of the most ordinary minds who write merely for money and therefore always exist in crowds; of a public which in consequence must be content only to know by name the works of rare and superior minds of all times and countries? In particular, the belletristic *daily* press is a cunningly devised plan for robbing the aesthetic public of the time it should devote to the genuine productions of this branch of literature, so that such time may be spent on the daily bunglings of commonplace minds.

Because people read always only the *newest* instead of the best of all times, authors remain in the narrow sphere of circulating ideas and the age becomes more and more silted up in its own mire.

In regard to our reading, the art of *not* reading is, therefore, extremely important. It consists in our not taking up that which just happens to occupy the larger public at any time, such as political or literary pamphlets, novels, poems, and the like, which make such a stir and even run to several editions in the first and last years of their life. On the contrary, we should bear in mind that whoever writes for fools always finds a large public; and we should devote the all too little time we have for reading exclusively to the works of the great minds of all nations and all ages, who tower above the rest of mankind and whom the voice of fame indicates as such. Only these really educate and instruct.

We can never read the bad too little and the good too often. Inferior books are intellectual poison; they ruin the mind.

One of the conditions for reading what is good is that must not read what is bad; for life is short and time and energy are limited.

§ 295a

Books are written on this or that great mind of antiquity and the public reads them, but not his works. This is because it will read only what has just been printed and because *similis simili gaudet*,¹ and the shallow and insipid twaddle of one of our blockheads is more agreeable and to its liking than are the thoughts of the great mind. But I am grateful to fate that it introduced me in my youth to a fine epigram of A. W. von Schlegel which has since become my guiding star:

Carefully read the ancients, the true and genuine ancients;
What the moderns say of them is not of much account.

Oh, how one commonplace mind is like another! How they are all cast in one mould! The same thought, and nothing else, occurs to each of them on the same occasion! In addition, we have their mean and sordid personal aims. The worthless twaddle of such miserable fellows is read by a stupid public if only it has just been printed, and the works of great minds are left unread on the shelves of libraries.

[¹ 'Birds of a feather flock together.']

The folly and waywardness of the public are incredible, for it leaves unread the works of the noblest and rarest minds in every branch of knowledge and of all ages and countries, in order to read the scribblings of commonplace minds which daily appear and, like flies, are hatched out every year in swarms. All this it does merely because they are quite new and hot from the press. Such

productions, indeed, should be ignored and treated with contempt on the very day of their birth, as they will be after a few years. They will then be for all time merely a theme for laughter at past generations and their rubbish.

§ 296

At all times, there are two literatures which proceed together somewhat independently of each other, one real and the other merely apparent. The former grows into *permanent literature*; it is pursued by those who live *for* learning or poetry; it goes its own way seriously and quietly but extremely slowly, and in Europe produces in a century scarcely a dozen works which, however, *endure*. The other kind of literature is pursued by those who live *on* learning or poetry. It gallops along to the accompaniment of much noise and shouting on the part of those who are interested, and every year brings to market many thousands of works. But after a few years, one asks where they are and what has become of their fame which was so premature and so loud. We can, therefore, describe the latter as flowing or drifting literature and the former as stationary and permanent.

§ 296a

To buy books would be a good thing if we could also buy the time to read them; but the purchase of books is often mistaken for the assimilation and mastering of their contents.

To expect that a man should have retained all that he had ever read is like expecting him to carry about in his body all that he had ever eaten. From the latter he has lived physically and from the former mentally and has thus become what he is. But just as the body assimilates what is homogeneous to it, so will everyone *retain* what *interests* him, that is, what suits his system of ideas or his aims. Everyone naturally has the latter, but very few have anything like the former. They therefore take no objective interest in anything and thus nothing of what they read strikes root; they retain nothing.

*Repetitio est mater studiorum.*² Every important book should at once be read through twice partly because the matters dealt with, when read a second time, are better understood in their sequence, and only when we know the end do we really understand the beginning; and also because, on the second reading, we approach each passage in the book in a mood and frame of mind different from that which we had at the first. Thus the impression proves to be different, and it is as if we are looking at an object in a different light.

[² 'Repetition is the mother of studies.']

The *works* are the *quintessence* of a mind; and so even if a man has the greatest mind, his works will always be incomparably more valuable than his acquaintance. In essential points they will even replace and indeed far surpass this. Even the writings of a mediocre mind can be instructive, entertaining, and worth reading, just because they are his *quintessence*, the result and fruit of all his thought and study; whereas associating with him may not satisfy us. Thus we can read books by those in whose company we should find no pleasure; and so great mental culture gradually causes us to find entertainment almost entirely in books and no longer in people.

There is for the mind no greater relaxation than reading the ancient classics. As soon as we have taken up any one of them even for only half an hour, we at once feel revived, relieved, purified, elevated, and strengthened, as if we had enjoyed drinking at a fresh rock-spring. Is this due to the ancient languages and their perfection, or to the greatness of the minds whose works remain unimpaired and unaffected after thousands of years? Perhaps it is the

effect of both together. But this I do know, namely that if, as is now threatened, men were to give up learning the ancient languages, then a new literature would appear consisting of barbarous, shallow, and worthless writings, such as had never previously existed, especially as German, which possesses some of the excellent qualities of the ancient languages, is zealously and methodically dilapidated and mutilated by the worthless scribblers of the 'present time' [*Fetzzeit*], so that, crippled and impoverished, it gradually degenerates into a wretched jargon.

There are *two histories*, one of *politics* and the other of *literature* and art. The former is the history of the *will*, the latter that of the *intellect*. The former is, therefore, generally alarming and even terrifying; dread, fear, distress, deception, and horrible murder *en masse*. The latter, on the other hand, is everywhere delightful and serene, like the intellect in isolation, even where such history gives a description of mistaken paths. Its main branch is the history of philosophy. This is really its ground-bass whose notes are heard also in the other kind of history and which, even here, fundamentally guides opinion; but this rules the world. Rightly understood, philosophy is, therefore, the most powerful material force, although it works very slowly.

§ 297

In the history of the world half a century is always a considerable period because its material always continues to flow, since there is always something happening. On the other hand, the same period of time in the history of literature is often of no account at all just because nothing has happened; for the attempts of bunglers do not concern it. Therefore in such a case, we are where we were fifty years ago.

To make this clear, let us picture the progress of knowledge in the human race in the form of a planetary orbit. Then the wrong paths, which the race often takes soon after every important advance, may be represented by Ptolemaic epicycles. After running through each of these, the human race is again where it was before it made the deviation from the planetary path. The great minds, however, who actually lead the human race further along the planetary orbit, do not make the epicycle which happens to be made by others. This is the reason why posthumous fame is often bought at the price of losing the approbation of contemporaries and vice versa. For example, such an epicycle is the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling, crowned at the conclusion by the Hegelian caricature thereof. This epicycle deviated from the circular path at the point where Kant had continued to follow it and where I have again taken it up in order to carry it further. But in the meantime, those sham philosophers and a few others with them ran through their epicycle that is just completed. The public that ran through it with them has now become aware that it is precisely at the point whence the epicycle had started.

Associated with this state of affairs, is the fact that, approximately every thirty years, we see the scientific, literary, and artistic spirit of the times declare itself bankrupt. During such a period, the errors in question have increased to such an extent that they collapse under the weight of their own absurdity and the opposition to them has at the same time become stronger. The position is thus now changed, but often there follows an error in the opposite direction. To show this course of things in its periodical recurrence would be the proper pragmatic material for the history of literature; but such a history gives it little thought. Moreover, on account of the relative shortness of such periods, their data are often difficult to bring together from remoter times; and so we can most conveniently observe the matter in our own age. If we wanted an instance of this from the exact sciences, we could take Werner's Neptunian geology. But I adhere to the example which has already been mentioned and lies close at

hand. Kant's brilliant period was in German philosophy immediately followed by another wherein the attempt was made to impress instead of to convince, to be showy and hyperbolic and moreover incomprehensible instead of clear and thorough, indeed to form an intrigue instead of to look for the truth. With all this, it was impossible for philosophy to make any progress. Finally, this whole school and method ended in bankruptcy. For in Hegel and his companions the audacity of scribbling nonsense on the one hand and that of corrupt and unscrupulous eulogizing on the other, together with the obvious intention of the whole pretty business, had reached such colossal proportions that the eyes of all were ultimately bound to be opened to the whole charlatanry; and as, in consequence of certain disclosures, protection from above was withdrawn from the whole business, so too was the applause. Fichte's and Schelling's antecedents of this pseudo-philosophizing, the poorest there has ever been, were dragged by it into the abyss of discredit. Thus the complete philosophical incompetence in Germany in the first half of the century that followed Kant is now perfectly clear, whereas to foreigners one boasts of the philosophical gifts of the Germans, especially since an English author has had the malicious irony to call them a nation of thinkers.

Now whoever wants from the history of art proofs of the general scheme of epicycles which is here put forward, need only consider Bernini's flourishing school of sculpture in the eighteenth century, especially in its further development in France. It represented common nature instead of antique beauty, postures of the French minuet instead of antique simplicity and grace. It became bankrupt when, after Winckelmann's criticism, there followed a return to the school of the ancients. Again, a proof from painting is furnished by the first quarter of the nineteenth century, which regarded art as a mere means and instrument of mediaeval piety and, therefore, chose for its sole theme ecclesiastical subjects. But these were now treated by painters who lacked the true earnestness of that faith yet, in consequence of the aforesaid erroneous view, took as models Francesco Francia, Pietro Perugino, Angelo da Fiesole, and others like them, and indeed valued these more highly than the really great masters who followed them. With reference to this error, and because an analogous attempt had at the same time asserted itself in poetry, Goethe wrote the parable *Pfaffenspiel*. This school was also recognized as based on fads and whims, became bankrupt, and was followed by a return to nature, announcing itself in genre-pictures and all kinds of scenes from life, although they sometimes strayed into vulgarity.

In keeping with the course of human progress which we have described, there is the *history of literature* which is for the most part the catalogue of a cabinet of abortions. The spirit in which these are preserved the longest is pigskin. On the other hand, we need not look there for the few successful births. They remain alive and are met with everywhere in the world where they go about as immortals, eternally fresh and youthful. They alone constitute the *real literature*, described in the previous paragraph, whose history, poor in personalities, we learn in our early years from the lips of the cultured and not first from compendiums. As a remedy for the now prevailing monomania of reading the history of literature in order to be able to chatter about everything without really knowing anything, I recommend an eminently readable passage from Lichtenberg, vol. ii, p. 302, of the old edition.³

³ The passage from Lichtenberg is as follows:

'I believe that in our day the history of the sciences is pursued too minutely, to the great detriment of science itself. People like to read it, but it really leaves the mind not exactly empty but without any power of its own, just because it makes it so full. Whoever has felt the urge not to cram but to strengthen his mind, to develop his powers and aptitudes, to broaden his views, will have found that there is nothing more feeble and spiritless than conversation with a so-called man of letters in that branch of knowledge wherein he himself

has not thought but knows a thousand circumstances appertaining to its history and literature. It is almost like reading a cookery-book when we are hungry. I believe also that the so-called history of literature will never thrive among those who think and feel their own worth and the value of real knowledge. They are more interested in using their own faculty of reason than in wanting to know how others have used theirs. The saddest thing about the business, as we shall find, is that, just as the inclination for literary investigations grows in a branch of knowledge, so does the power of extending that knowledge itself diminish, but the pride of possessing the knowledge increases. Such men think they themselves are more in possession of the branches of knowledge than are the real possessors. It is certainly a well-established observation that true knowledge or science never makes its possessor proud. On the contrary, only those allow themselves to be inflated with pride who, through inability to extend the branch of knowledge itself, are engaged in clearing up obscure points in its history, or are able to narrate what others have done. For they regard this occupation, which is mainly mechanical, as the exercise of the branch of knowledge itself. I could support all this by examples, but they would be odious.']

But I would like someone to attempt one day *a tragic history of literature* wherein he would describe how the different nations, each of which is most proud of the great authors and artists of whom it boasts, how, I say, they treated them during their lifetime. In such a history he would bring to our notice the endless struggle that the good and genuine of all times and countries had to wage against the ever-prevailing bad and absurd; the martyrdom of almost all the true enlighteners of mankind and of almost all the great masters in every branch of knowledge and art would be described. He would show us how, with few exceptions, they passed their lives in poverty and misery without recognition, without interest and sympathy, without followers, while fame, honour, and wealth went to the unworthy ones in their branch of knowledge. And so he would show us how things happened to them as happened to Esau who, while hunting and killing game for his father, was deprived of his father's blessing by Jacob sitting at home and disguised in his cloak. Nevertheless we shall see how, in spite of all this, love for their cause buoyed them up until finally the bitter struggle of such an educator of the human race was over, the immortal laurel beckoned to him, and the hour struck which also meant for him :

The heavy armour turns to a cloak of flight,
Brief is the sorrow, and endless the delight.⁴

[⁴Schiller, *Fung frau von Orleans*.]

* Scanned from Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*, Volume Two, Translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

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