

## READING AND INTELLIGENCE.

MOST of the readers of THE WEEK have probably seen and examined the somewhat portentous list of books recommended by Sir John Lubbock as the best in their several departments, or at least as the most serviceable for any one desirous of laying the foundation of a liberal culture. The list is supposed to embrace one hundred books in all; but as many of the so-called books consist themselves of several volumes each, the mass of reading recommended is much greater than might at first be supposed. We do not hesitate to say that there are very few persons who have read all the books in Sir John's list, and far fewer still who have read them all to advantage. We feel almost disposed to add that the whole list scarcely could be studied with advantage by any one individual. Breadth of culture is of course desirable; but the great principle of the division of labour must be recognized. If a man, for the sake of "culture," attacks departments of study that, by the constitution of his nature, are wholly out of his line, the probability is that he will get more harm than good from his excursions into the foreign territory. He will come back with a smattering of names and phrases; but, from the nature of the case, the knowledge he acquired will lie loosely before him, and in attempting to use it he will be all astray as to its real significance. The object of all reading, we may assume, is increase of intelligence. Now, true intelligence consists in knowing one or two things well, so as to have the type of true knowledge formed in the mind, and in recognizing one's lack of knowledge, and therefore of competence, in other departments.

Far from promoting intelligence, the reading of a great many books often has the effect of arresting its development. In fact it may almost be said that when reading becomes a *habit* its beneficial influence is at an end. No book should be read without a definite purpose of deriving therefrom that which will make the mind stronger and clearer; and he who is really desirous of doing justice to his intellectual nature will watch the effect upon himself of all that he reads. "But how would this apply," some one may ask, "to what is called light reading—fiction for example—would you proscribe that?" By no means, we reply. Fiction may serve a useful purpose by cultivating the social side of our nature. That is its main office; and, if it does not fulfil that, it is not only valueless, but in all probability hurtful. If one reads a novel in the same spirit of idle curiosity in which one would listen to any social tittle-tattle, one might certainly be better employed. But a novel written in a genial spirit by one who knows what is best in men and women, may be a real source of edification. Next to living intercourse with our fellow-beings under circumstances favourable to the development of geniality, there is nothing so well adapted to the mitigation of asperities and crudities of individual character as the reading of a good novel. We come back to our point, however, that all reading should be done with a purpose. We should never make reading an end in itself, and should never let it degenerate into a habit. We should test it continually by its results and should resort to it in just such measure as we find suited to our needs.

Evidently, then, to read wisely requires intelligence. Certainly, just as much as to do anything else wisely. Then, where is the intelligence to come from in advance of reading? The answer is that it will come, if at all, partly by inheritance and partly by training. A child who, having inherited a well-balanced mental temperament, has been taught to take a true view of his or her position in the world, and, above all, who has been formed to sound moral habits, is already intelligent. Among the moral elements of intelligence we reckon as of the highest importance:

- (1) The sense of justice.
- (2) The sense of authority.
- (3) The sense of the vital character of the relation existing between the individual and society.

The sense of justice means something more than the instinct of fair play, noble as that instinct is. It means a recognition of the fact that a certain broad standard of equity is applicable to all human actions, and that no exhibition of more ornamental virtues can atone for a falling short in common justice. The implications of a well-established sense of justice are indeed too many to be even hinted at here. Suffice it to say that the mind in which such a sense has been implanted, has a clue of the highest value, to guide it through the complexities of thought, and an invaluable standard for the appraisal of all kinds of literary values.

By the sense of authority we mean, in the most general terms, the perception that, "there is a higher and a lower," and that the most mischievous thing the lower can do, is to refuse to recognize its proper place. The young person in whom the sense of authority has been developed, will respect experience; and respecting it, will learn to distinguish true experience from the sordid and shallow teachings that

sometimes usurp the name. To have the sense of authority is to know that some respect is due to long-established facts, and that only the very strongest theoretical reasons should be regarded as valid against what time appears to have sanctioned. It is, further, to know how to pay proper deference to all special knowledge and all established reputations, without falling a victim to the mere worship of names. A moment's consideration will suffice to show how extremely important for the intelligent pursuit of any department, either of knowledge, or of activity, such a sense of authority as we have described must be. It will give balance and caution, and will facilitate a true discernment of spirits, both in literature and in life. To one who has a reasoned respect for authority, the world of books will appear like a more or less well-ordered commonwealth. To one who is destitute of the feeling, all writers, past and present, will make up a mere mob of individualities. The first will have canons of judgment, which, though imperfect, will aid the formation of taste; the second, without any ideas of measure or proportion, will be at the mercy of every chance impression and will infallibly fall into many grotesque, and even hurtful, errors.

In the third place, we postulate a perception of the vital relation subsisting between society and the individual. This, above all, is what reduces the individual to his true place and checks the growth of egoism—the most misleading of all influences in relation to the intellectual life. The remark is as old as Spinoza, at least, that man is too much a victim to the habit of abstraction. One of the results of the habit is the wide-spread delusion that individuals are the true reals, and that society is more or less of an ideal conception. As well say that the branches or twigs of a tree are the true reals and that the tree itself is an abstraction. The commonest experience, if we will but open our eyes to it, shows that the individual is what society makes him, that his whole intellectual and moral life are the products of social action, that his whole happiness is dependent on social communion, and that his physical life itself is, from day to day, governed by his social environment. "That the social medium," observes Dr. Maudesley ("Body and Will") "has been created for man by humanity as the blood is formed by the tissues for the organism, is a fact which we cannot keep too clearly in mind. As soon as he (man) enters it, he finds himself surrounded with the fruits of the long travail of humanity in the most easily assimilable forms; a language that embodies its social evolution; all the various appliances of the arts and sciences that have been tediously acquired in the succession of the ages; commerce and its complicated monetary means for the interchange of commodities; the surface of the earth as it has been laboriously adapted to his uses by countless generations of mankind; human beings of his own kind, each of whom has, implicit in his nature, the experiences of the race from its beginning, and so appeals, as well by the silent eloquence of look and gesture as by the articulate word, to the like implicit contents of his nature." To have imbibed true ideas on this subject, we may therefore say, is to be enabled to see in literature, not so much the glorification of individuals as the glorification of humanity. It is to have done with the notion of literature as a thing made up of butterfly excursions over sunny fields, or as an endless competition of painted prettinesses. It is to demand in all that claims to be literature the dominance of a social purpose, a clear desire to win some good for the human race.

There must, therefore, as we hold, be intelligence in reading in order that there may be intelligence as the result of reading; and the precedent intelligence (as we may call it) is largely and almost wholly a matter of right moral development—the intelligence of the heart. With such a preparation a youth may almost be trusted to select his own reading, and he may certainly be depended on to derive real advantage—to gain increase of intelligence—from what he reads. Further help, of course, is not superfluous, seeing how much there is of so-called literature strewing the world's highways on which time would only be wasted. It should never be forgotten that reading is a kind of eating; and that like eating it should be done, not only with discrimination but with moderation. The selection of books which might be judicious for one might not be so for another; and the amount of reading which might be beneficial for one might overtax the mental digestion of another. We want in the world trained judgments and healthy activities. These we find in many persons whose literary equipment is very slender; these we too often miss in persons whose minds, as every one supposes, have been elaborately cultivated, and whose reading is immense. Books in the mass are good, bad, and indifferent. The bad and indifferent are to be avoided; and the right use to make of the good is, not to convert them into fetishes, nor to let them take the place of an independent mental activity, but to avail ourselves of them simply as aids towards the formation of sound intellectual habits, and a true ideal of life.