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BOOKS WHICH HAVE INFLUENCED ME¹

THE Editor² has somewhat insidiously laid a trap for his correspondents, the question put appearing at first so innocent, truly cutting so deep. It is not, indeed, until after some reconnoissance and review that the writer awakes to find himself engaged upon something in the nature of autobiography, or, perhaps worse, upon a chapter in the life of that little, beautiful brother whom we once all had, and whom we have all lost and mourned, the man we ought to have been, the man we hoped to be. But when word has been passed (even to an editor), it should, if possible, be kept; and if sometimes I am wise and say too little, and sometimes weak and say too much, the blame must lie at the door of the person who entrapped me.

The most influential books, and the truest in their influence, are works of fiction. They do not pin the reader to a dogma, which he must afterwards discover to be inexact; they do not teach him a lesson, which he must afterwards unlearn. They repeat, they rearrange, they clarify the lessons of life; they

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disengage us from ourselves, they constrain us to the acquaintance of others; and they show us the web of experience, not as we can see it for ourselves, but with a singular change—that monstrous, consuming *ego* of ours being, for the nonce, struck out. To be so, they must be reasonably true to the human comedy; and any work that is so serves the turn of instruction. But the course of our education is answered best by those poems and romances where we breathe a magnanimous atmosphere of thought and meet generous and pious characters. Shakespeare has served me best. Few living friends have had upon me an influence so strong for good as Hamlet or Rosalind. The last character, already well beloved in the reading, I had the good fortune to see, I must think, in an impressionable hour, played by Mrs. Scott Siddons. Nothing has ever more moved, more delighted, more refreshed me; nor has the influence quite passed away. Kent's brief speech over the dying Lear had a great effect upon my mind, and was the burthen of my reflections for long, so profoundly, so touchingly generous did it appear in sense, so overpowering in expression. Perhaps my dearest and best friend outside of Shakespeare is D'Artagnan—the elderly D'Artagnan of the *Vicomte de Bragelonne*. I know not a more human soul, nor, in his way, a finer; I shall be very sorry for the man who is so much of a pedant in morals that he cannot learn from the Captain of Musketeers. Lastly, I must name the *Pilgrim's Progress*, a book that breathes of every beautiful and valuable emotion.

But of works of art little can be said; their influence is profound and silent, like the influence of

nature; they mould by contact; we drink them up like water, and are bettered, yet know not how. It is in books more specifically didactic that we can follow out the effect, and distinguish and weigh and compare. A book which has been very influential upon me fell early into my hands, and so may stand first, though I think its influence was only sensible later on, and perhaps still keeps growing, for it is a book not easily outlived: the *Essais* of Montaigne. That temperate and genial picture of life is a great gift to place in the hands of persons of to-day; they will find in these smiling pages a magazine of heroism and wisdom, all of an antique strain; they will have their "linen decencies" and excited orthodoxies fluttered, and will (if they have any gift of reading) perceive that these have not been fluttered without some excuse and ground of reason; and (again if they have any gift of reading) they will end by seeing that this old gentleman was in a dozen ways a finer fellow, and held in a dozen ways a nobler view of life, than they or their contemporaries.

The next book, in order of time, to influence me, was the New Testament, and in particular the Gospel according to St. Matthew. I believe it would startle and move any one if they could make a certain effort of imagination and read it freshly like a book, not droningly and dully like a portion of the Bible. Any one would then be able to see in it those truths which we are all courteously supposed to know and all modestly refrain from applying. But upon this subject it is perhaps better to be silent.

I come next to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a book of singular service, a book which tumbled the world upside down for me, blew into space a thousand

cobwebs of genteel and ethical illusion, and, having thus shaken my tabernacle of lies, set me back again upon a strong foundation of all the original and manly virtues. But it is, once more, only a book for those who have the gift of reading. I will be very frank—I believe it is so with all good books except, perhaps, fiction. The average man lives, and must live, so wholly in convention, that gun-powder charges of the truth are more apt to discompose than to invigorate his creed. Either he cries out upon blasphemy and indecency, and crouches the closer round that little idol of part-truths and part-conveniences which is the contemporary deity, or he is convinced by what is new, forgets what is old, and becomes truly blasphemous and indecent himself. New truth is only useful to supplement the old; rough truth is only wanted to expand, not to destroy, our civil and often elegant conventions. He who cannot judge had better stick to fiction and the daily papers. There he will get little harm, and, in the first at least, some good.

Close upon the back of my discovery of Whitman, I came under the influence of Herbert Spencer. No more persuasive rabbi exists. How much of his vast structure will bear the touch of time, how much is clay and how much brass, it were too curious to inquire. But his words, if dry, are always manly and honest; there dwells in his pages a spirit of highly abstract joy, plucked naked like an algebraic symbol but still joyful; and the reader will find there a *caput mortuum* of piety, with little indeed of its loveliness, but with most of its essentials; and these two qualities make him a wholesome, as his intellectual vigour makes him a bracing, writer. I

should be much of a hound if I lost my gratitude to Herbert Spencer.

Goethe's Life, by Lewes, had a great importance for me when it first fell into my hands—a strange instance of the partiality of man's good and man's evil. I know no one whom I less admire than Goethe; he seems a very epitome of the sins of genius, breaking open the doors of private life, and wantonly wounding friends, in that crowning offence of *Werther*, and in his own character a mere pen-and-ink Napoleon, conscious of the rights and duties of superior talents as a Spanish inquisitor was conscious of the rights and duties of his office. And yet in his fine devotion to his art, in his honest and serviceable friendship for Schiller, what lessons are contained! Biography, usually so false to its office, does here for once perform for us some of the work of fiction, reminding us, that is, of the truly mingled tissue of man's nature, and how huge faults and shining virtues cohabit and persevere in the same character. History serves us well to this effect, but in the originals, not in the pages of the popular epitomiser, who is bound, by the very nature of his task, to make us feel the difference of epochs instead of the essential identity of man, and even in the originals only to those who can recognise their own human virtues and defects in strange forms, often inverted and under strange names, often interchanged. Martial is a poet of no good repute, and it gives a man new thoughts to read his works dispassionately, and find in this unseemly jester's serious passages the image of a kind, wise, and self-respecting gentleman. It is customary, I suppose, in reading Martial, to leave out these pleasant verses;

I never heard of them, at least, until I found them for myself; and this partiality is one among a thousand things that help to build up our distorted and hysterical conception of the great Roman Empire.

This brings us by a natural transition to a very noble book—the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. The dispassionate gravity, the noble forgetfulness of self, the tenderness of others, that are there expressed and were practised on so great a scale in the life of its writer, make this book a book quite by itself. No one can read it and not be moved. Yet it scarcely or rarely appeals to the feelings—those very mobile, those not very trusty parts of man. Its address lies further back: its lesson comes more deeply home; when you have read, you carry away with you a memory of the man himself; it is as though you had touched a loyal hand, looked into brave eyes, and made a noble friend; there is another bond on you thenceforward, binding you to life and to the love of virtue.

Wordsworth should perhaps come next. Every one has been influenced by Wordsworth, and it is hard to tell precisely how. A certain innocence, a rugged austerity of joy, a night of the stars, “the silence that is in the lonely hills,” something of the cold thrill of dawn, cling to his work and give it a particular address to what is best in us. I do not know that you learn a lesson; you need not—Mill did not—agree with any one of his beliefs; and yet the spell is cast. Such are the best teachers: a dogma learned is only a new error—the old one was perhaps as good; but a spirit communicated is a perpetual possession. These best teachers climb

beyond teaching to the plane of art; it is themselves, and what is best in themselves, that they communicate.

I should never forgive myself if I forgot *The Egoist*. It is art, if you like, but it belongs purely to didactic art, and from all the novels I have read (and I have read thousands) stands in a place by itself. Here is a Nathan for the modern David; here is a book to send the blood into men's faces. Satire, the angry picture of human faults, is not great art; we can all be angry with our neighbour; what we want is to be shown, not his defects, of which we are too conscious, but his merits, to which we are too blind. And *The Egoist* is a satire; so much must be allowed; but it is a satire of a singular quality, which tells you nothing of that obvious mote, which is engaged from first to last with that invisible beam. It is yourself that is hunted down; these are your own faults that are dragged into the day and numbered, with lingering relish, with cruel cunning and precision. A young friend of Mr. Meredith's (as I have the story) came to him in an agony. "This is too bad of you," he cried. "Willoughby is me!" "No, my dear fellow," said the author; "he is all of us." I have read *The Egoist* five or six times myself, and I mean to read it again; for I am like the young friend of the anecdote—I think Willoughby an unmanly but a very serviceable exposure of myself.

I suppose, when I am done, I shall find that I have forgotten much that was most influential, as I see already I have forgotten Thoreau, and Hazlitt, whose paper "On the Spirit of Obligations" was a turning-point in my life, and Penn, whose little

book of aphorisms had a brief but strong effect on me, and Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan*, wherein I learned for the first time the proper attitude of any rational man to his country's laws—a secret found, and kept, in the Asiatic islands. That I should commemorate all is more than I can hope or the Editor could ask. It will be more to the point, after having said so much upon improving books, to say a word or two about the improvable reader. The gift of reading, as I have called it, is not very common, nor very generally understood. It consists, first of all, in a vast intellectual endowment—a free grace, I find I must call it—by which a man rises to understand that he is not punctually right, nor those from whom he differs absolutely wrong. He may hold dogmas; he may hold them passionately; and he may know that others hold them but coldly, or hold them differently, or hold them not at all. Well, if he has the gift of reading, these others will be full of meat for him. They will see the other side of propositions and the other side of virtues. He need not change his dogma for that, but he may change his reading of that dogma, and he must supplement and correct his deductions from it. A human truth, which is always very much a lie, hides as much of life as it displays. It is men who hold another truth, or, as it seems to us, perhaps, a dangerous lie, who can extend our restricted field of knowledge, and rouse our drowsy consciences. Something that seems quite new, or that seems insolently false or very dangerous, is the test of a reader. If he tries to see what it means, what truth excuses it, he has the gift, and let him read. If he is merely hurt, or offended, or exclaims upon his author's

folly, he had better take to the daily papers; he will never be a reader.

And here, with the aptest illustrative force, after I have laid down my part-truth, I must step in with its opposite. For, after all, we are vessels of a very limited content. Not all men can read all books; it is only in a chosen few that any man will find his appointed food; and the fittest lessons are the most palatable, and make themselves welcome to the mind. A writer learns this early, and it is his chief support; he goes on unafraid, laying down the law; and he is sure at heart that most of what he says is demonstrably false, and much of a mingled strain, and some hurtful, and very little good for service; but he is sure besides that when his words fall into the hands of any genuine reader, they will be weighed and winnowed, and only that which suits will be assimilated; and when they fall into the hands of one who cannot intelligently read, they come there quite silent and inarticulate, falling upon deaf ears, and his secret is kept as if he had not written.

NOTES

THIS article first appeared in the *British Weekly* for 13 May 1887, forming Stevenson's contribution to a symposium on this subject by some of the celebrated writers of the day, including Gladstone, Ruskin, Hamerton; and others as widely different as Archdeacon Farrar and Rider Haggard. In the same year (1887) the papers were all collected and published by the *Weekly* in a volume, with the title *Books Which Have Influenced Me*. This essay was later included in the complete editions of Stevenson's *Works* (Edinburgh ed., Vol. XI, Thistle ed., Vol. XXII).

Page 159. *The most influential books . . . are works of fiction.* This statement is undoubtedly true, if we use the word "fiction" in the sense understood here by Stevenson. It is curious, however, to note the rise in dignity of "works of fiction," and of "novels"; people used to read them with apologies, and did not like to be caught at it. The cheerful audacity of Stevenson's declaration would have seemed like blasphemy fifty years earlier.

Page 160. *Mrs. Scott Siddons.* Not for a moment to be confounded with the great actress Sarah Siddons, who died in 1831. Mrs. Scott Siddons, in spite of Stevenson's enthusiasm, was not an actress of remarkable power.

Page 160. *Kent's brief speech.* Toward the end of *King Lear*.

"Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer."

Page 160. *D'Artagnan . . . Vicomte de Bragelonne*. See Stevenson's essay, *A Gossip on a Novel of Dumas's* (1887), in *Memories and Portraits*. See also notes, pp. 35, 99. *Vicomte de Bragelonne* is the title of the sequel to *Twenty Years After*, which is the sequel to the *Musketeers*. Dumas wrote 257 volumes of romance, plays, travels etc.

Page 160. *Pilgrim's Progress*. See note, p. 120.

Page 161. *Essais of Montaigne*. See note, p. 139. The best translation in English of the *Essais* is that by the Elizabethan, John Florio (1550-1625), a contemporary of Montaigne. His translation appeared in 1603, and may now be obtained complete in the handy "Temple" classics. There is a copy of Florio's *Montaigne* with Ben Jonson's autograph, and also one that has what many believe to be a genuine autograph of Shakspeare.

Page 161. "*Linen decencies*." "The ghost of a linen decency yet haunts us."—Milton, *Areopagitica*.

Page 161. *Whitman's Leaves of Grass*. See Stevenson's admirable essay on *Walt Whitman* (1878), also note, p. 57.

Page 162. *Have the gift of reading*. "Books are written to be read by those who can understand them. Their possible effect on those who cannot, is a matter of medical rather than of literary interest."—Prof. W. Raleigh, *The English Novel*, remarks on *Tom Jones*, Chap. VI.

Page 162. *Herbert Spencer*. See note, p. 94.

Page 162. *Caput mortuum*. Dry kernel. Literary, "dead head."

Page 163. *Goethe's Life, by Lewes*. The standard Life of Goethe (in English) is still that by George Henry Lewes (1817-1878), the husband of George Eliot. His *Life of Goethe* appeared in 1855; he later made a simpler, abridged edition, called *The Story of Goethe's Life*. Goethe, the greatest literary genius since Shakspeare, and now generally ranked among the four supreme writers of the world, Homer, Dante, Shakspeare, Goethe, was born in 1749, and died in 1832. Stevenson, like most British

critics, is rather severe on Goethe's character. The student should read Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, a book full of wisdom and perennial delight. For *Werther*, see note, p. 141. The friendship between Goethe and Schiller (1759-1805), "his honest and serviceable friendship," as Stevenson puts it, is among the most beautiful things to contemplate in literary history. Before the theatre in Weimar, Germany, where the two men lived, stands a remarkable statue of the pair: and their coffins lie side by side in a crypt in the same town.

Page 163. *Martial*. Poet, wit and epigrammatist, born in Spain 43 A. D., died 104. He lived in Rome from 66 to 100, enjoying a high reputation as a writer.

Page 164. *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, often called "the noblest of Pagans" was born 121 A. D., and died 180. His *Meditations* have been translated into the chief modern languages, and though their author was hostile to Christianity, the ethics of the book are much the same as those of the New Testament.

Page 164. *Wordsworth . . . Mill*. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), poet-laureate (1843-1850), is by many regarded as the third poet in English literature, after Shakespeare and Milton, whose places are unassailable. Other candidates for the third place are Chaucer and Spenser. "The silence that is in the lonely hills" is loosely quoted from Wordsworth's *Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle, Upon the Restoration of Lord Clifford*, published in 1807. The passage reads:

"The silence that is in the starry sky,
The sleep that is among the lonely hills."

... In the *Autobiography* (1873) of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), there is a remarkable passage where he testifies to the influence exerted upon him by Wordsworth.

Page 165. *The Egoist*. See note, p. 100. Stevenson never tired of singing the praises of this novel.

Page 165. *A Nathan for the modern David*. The famous accusation of the prophet to the king, "Thou art the man." See II *Sam.* 12.

Page 165. *Thoreau ... Hazlitt ... Penn ... Mitford's Tales ...* Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), the American naturalist and writer, whose works impressed Stevenson deeply. See the latter's excellent essay on Thoreau (1880), in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books...* Hazlitt, See note, p. 39. His paper, *On the Spirit of Obligations*, appeared in *The Plain Speaker*, 2 Vols., 1826. *Penn*, whose little book of aphorisms. This refers to William Penn's famous book, *Some Fruits of Solitude: in Reflections and Maxims relating to the Conduct of Human Life* (1693). Edmund Gosse says, in his Introduction to a charming little edition of this book in 1900, "Stevenson had intended to make this book and its author the subject of one of his critical essays. In February 1880 he was preparing to begin it ... He never found the opportunity ... But it has left an indelible stamp on the tenor of his moral writings. The philosophy of R. L. S. ... is tinged through and through with the honest, shrewd, and genial maxims of Penn." Stevenson himself, in his *Letters* (Vol. I, pp. 232, 233), spoke of this little book in the highest terms of praise.

Page 166. *Mitford's Tales*. Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855), a novelist and dramatist who enjoyed an immense vogue. "Her inimitable series of country sketches, drawn from her own experiences at Three Mile Cross, entitled 'Our Village,' began to appear in 1819 in the 'Lady's Magazine,' a little-known periodical, whose sale was thereby increased from 250 to 2,000. ... The sketches had an enormous success, and were collected in five volumes, published respectively in 1824, 1826, 1828, 1830, and 1832. ... The book may be said to have laid the foundation of a branch of literature hitherto untried. The sketches resemble Dutch paintings in their fidelity of detail."—*Dic. Nat. Biog.*