By JOHN ERSKINE

FICTION
The Private Life of Helen of Troy
Galahad: Enough of His Life to Explain
His Reputation
Adam and Eve: Though He Knew Better

ESSAYS
The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent
The Kinds of Poetry
The Literary Discipline
Prohibition and Christianity, and Other
Paradoxes of the American Spirit
American Character and Other Essays
The Delight of Great Books

POETRY
Collected Poems, 1907-1922
Sonata, and Other Poems

DRAMA
Hearts Enduring

THE DELIGHT
OF
GREAT BOOKS

BY JOHN ERSKINE

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

PUBLISHERS

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
INDIANAPOLIS
The Delight of Great Books

ON READING GREAT BOOKS

1

The fact that a book is famous is enough to scare off some people who, if they had the courage to open the pages, would find there delight and profit. We make the mistake of fearing that the immortal things of art must be approached through special studies and disciplines, and we comfort ourselves on the principle of sour grapes, by deciding that even if we were prepared to read the classics, we should find them dull. But one explanation of any long fame is that it was deserved, and the men who wrote these books would have been horrified if they had known that you and I might think of them only as matter for school and college courses. They wrote to be read by the general public, and they assumed in their readers an experience of life and an interest in human nature, nothing more. I shall try to speak of those aspects of books which make them immortal, or as we say, which keep them alive. What is called literary scholarship—a misleading phrase—we shall leave to the historians. I shall point out in these books what calls me back to read them again and again, what they say for an average man in our year, 1928, or, if you prefer, what our world looks like when we hold up to it these much-used mirrors.
I said that “literary scholarship” is a misleading phrase. To be scholarly in literature, I should think, would be to know literature thoroughly, and to know it as art—to be sensitive to the life it expresses, to be wise in the psychology of the writer and the reader, to understand the kind of truth that can be said in words, and the kind of beauty language can create. So a scholarly musician, I should think, would be one who knew all the best music, and who knew the limitations of his art—what could or couldn’t be done with sounds, what couldn’t or could be expressed better in stone or paint. Robert Burns was a literary scholar in the true sense; he knew the whole body of songs of the type in which he worked, and he knew how to use his material.

But we have got into the habit of calling “literary scholarship” the knowledge of purely historical material, which surrounds a book as it surrounds anything else that occurs in time and place. No one in his senses would say that history is unimportant or uninteresting. But our studies in literature are usually arranged on the assumption that a knowledge of the history of a book will somehow introduce us to it, will help us to understand and to love. That assumption, I believe, is false. There is no connection necessarily between a knowledge of the approximate date when the Parthenon was put up and an architectural appreciation of the building. In fact, you could know the date without having seen the building. You can give a very scholarly lecture on Shakespeare without reading his plays. It has been done. But even if historical scholarship could introduce us to great books, the majority of mankind would not be free to make such an elaborate approach. A book which of itself says nothing to us, is doomed, and no amount of historical knowledge can rescue it.

What I have said implies, of course, criticism of the study of literature in schools and colleges. What we really teach under that name is history. I know very few class rooms in the United States where literature, as an art, is taught at all—and the condition is much the same in other countries. Personally I don’t see why this art shouldn’t be as well taught as music or painting, and in these papers my intention is to discuss books exclusively as masterpieces of literature. But I shouldn’t care to seem hostile to the teaching of history. I’m glad the children learn in school just when Shakespeare lived, and how many wives Shelley had, and why. I have seen an examination in one of our most scholarly colleges which asked, among other similar questions, how many English writers in the nineteenth century were drug addicts. The answer, if any one knew it, would have its own interest. My only quarrel with this kind of scholarship is that it goes under a false name, and it usurps the time which might be given to reading and enjoying great books.

Many people think the study of a writer’s life is essential to an understanding of his work. If this is so, there would be an advantage also in knowing the state of society in which he wrote, the political or economic or philosophical ideals which controlled him. Recently we have been told that if we psychoanalyze the author, we shall read his book more intelligently. And of course, if the book is an old one, we should be philologists, and master the language in which he wrote. Mr. Kenneth Burke disposed of these fallacies rather brilliantly, I thought, when he wrote not long ago that to know what
has happened and to know how and why it happened are two distinct kinds of understanding. But I should like to go further, and say that historical scholarship, of the various sorts just referred to, can never tell us how a masterpiece came into being. Biography is fascinating in its own right, and some poets have had exceptionally interesting lives. Of course we'd be glad to know about Milton, or Byron, or Keats, as men. But all we can know about them as authors, is in their works. So distinct is the biography of a writer from his books, that Doctor Johnson survives in the biography alone. It's the greatest biography in English, by general consent, yet I never met any one who was inspired by it to read what Johnson wrote. Recently Mr. Krutch has given us a psychological biography of Poe, interesting in itself, and calculated, we are told, to increase our understanding of the poet. Of the man, rather. Assuming that psychoanalysis is a science, and that Mr. Krutch's brand of it is the correct one, we learn from the book that Poe had certain complexes and inhibitions. What on earth has that to do with his poetry? Other men have had the same complexes and inhibitions—that's how the psychoanalysts know about them. But the other men did not write as Poe did. What makes him of importance as a writer is precisely that part of his equipment which he did not share with others. Literary or other artistic genius shows itself not in a man's life but in the work he produces. Until he writes a book, we refuse to believe our neighbor is another Dickens. If we can't see it before he writes, I fancy it's an illusion which makes us recall afterward the early promise of his talent. Where the genius is very great, as in Shakespeare, we are troubled by the absence of any promise, even illusory, adequate to such accomplishment, and the historian searches for more light. But if you were to meet Mr. Wells or Mr. Mencken or Mr. Hergesheimer, without knowing that they were writers, you would never guess it, least of all would you guess what kind of book they wrote, and we may be fairly sure that outside of their books, literary genius showed as little in Shakespeare or Chaucer. This fact is so well known that it distresses young writers, particularly in romantic periods, and they wear their hair long, or otherwise remedy this defect of nature which permits a poet, apart from his poems, to go unrecognized.

Though biography throws little essential light on literary achievement, many thoughtful people have still believed that we ought to know the public circumstances in which a book has been produced, and the ideas and emotions of its period. I think we should know this, as history. Walter Scott wrote historical novels at a time when others were writing them, or attempting to. If he had not helped his friend, the learned Dr. Strutt, to mend a bad historical novel, perhaps he might not have tried his own hand at Waverley. If Hawthorne had not been living among transcendentalists, he might not have questioned so many of their doctrines in The Scarlet Letter. If Milton's age had not been concerned with the problem of divorce, he might not have said so much in his great poem about the relation of husbands and wives. But how far are we to go with this sort of thing? And what does it mean? If you and I were not living in the United States, we might not use the English language. But what of it?
Those scholars seem to have a stronger case who say that the knowledge of the language the poet used should be part of the introduction to his work. Before you read Chaucer, you must know Middle English. Yes, and before you know Shakespeare, in the same sense, you must know Elizabethan English, and before you know Tennyson, you must know the English of fifty years ago, and before you know Galsworthy, we Americans must know English. But suppose I did know the language of each of these writers—I should then be in the position of one of their neighbors and contemporaries when the book came out—I should still have to read it, and interpret it, not by a knowledge of English, but by experience of life. Meanwhile, though my acquaintance with the language may be defective, it is surprising how much I get out of Galsworthy, Tennyson, Shakespeare and Chaucer simply by reading them, as though they really were my contemporaries. Once more, I should be sorry to seem hostile to the study of languages; every new one we learn opens a fresh world. But we ought not to deceive ourselves. Many a conscientious student has completed an elaborate study of language in the hope that at the end he would know something about literature, only to find that he knew a good deal about language. The approach to literature is always through life, and if a book no longer reflects our life, it will cease to be generally read, no matter what its importance for antiquarian purposes. I speak of all this not to attack methods of teaching literature—that might better be done elsewhere—but to dispel some of the prejudices which the historical method has created against famous books. Most people are awed by the difficulty of reading a classic. If scholars find it so complicated an experience, they argue, what could the average person make of it? Yet if you were to take the name of the author away from most of the great poems, novels and plays, and ask any intelligent reader to sample the work, as something not yet encumbered with erudition, he would probably discover in it just the same merits as have maintained its reputation down to our own day. I should like my readers to approach the books we are to discuss, with this simplicity and with this confidence.

There are one or two characteristics of literature as an art, which we usually misunderstand. One of them is involved in the question of what the historical scholar calls "sources." Shakespeare wrote about Antony and Cleopatra; so did Plutarch, much earlier, and Shakespeare read Plutarch. Plutarch, then, is one of Shakespeare's "sources," and we check up to see how much Shakespeare got from the other man—that is, to what extent they resemble each other. Of course, their writings as works of art haven't the slightest resemblance, and no one ever confused them. Even if we have not studied literature by the historical method, and even if we haven't heard this word "sources," it is natural to recognize resemblance between one writer and another, and to feel that the later one imitated the earlier. There is a lazy tendency in our minds to classify things and people; we gravitate toward formulas, even though our better judgment suggests that truth lies in fine distinctions, and that the flavor and color of life are produced by precious differences. If Milton's Paradise Lost seems
to be telling over again the story of creation, as it is found in the first chapters of Genesis, we ought to reread those chapters to see how far Milton has changed the story or added to it. The resemblances don't count; the differences are what make it worth while to read Paradise Lost. If the books were really alike, the world would probably remember only one of them.

In fact, very few great books ever had what we should call an original plot. I say "very few," to be prudent—I know of none. Two reasons have been suggested for this phenomenon, both of which may be true. It is said that the writer instinctively tries to address his possible readers in language they are most likely to understand, and if they are occupied with a certain kind of story at the moment, he will use that plot in his own way, as so much language, to say what he has on his mind. We are told also that the reader will instinctively look for more of the kind of story he likes, and the book which seems best in this kind will be praised until we accept it as a masterpiece. The illustrations of this tendency, so far as the reader is concerned, are many. A few years ago we were reading books about the South Sea Islands. The revived taste for this sort of book led naturally to a new interest in Herman Melville, and we decided that the masterpiece among South Sea stories was Typee, but it would be hard to prove that Typee inspired the recent accounts, and the recent accounts certainly did not inspire Melville.

Once you have understood the tendency of both reader and writer to rework old and familiar images of life, you can reason back from the experience we have to-day, and imagine how people received the classics when they first appeared. If Mr. Shaw write about Caesar and Cleopatra, we say he has modernized the old story, and if we don't like Mr. Shaw, we imply that he has taken a great liberty with sacred things. But all the great writers, it would seem, have modernized famous material—not always in the direction of humor, but sometimes so. Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, or Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida, no doubt shocked the classical antiquarian of their day. What extraordinary liberties Virgil took with Homer's plot and his characters! How Tennyson changes Malory around! How presuming of Mr. Robinson to cut up Tennyson and Malory both, into his beautiful poem Lancelot!

If we usually feel in a great work of literature that the tradition has been modernized, our feelings are guiding us correctly, I believe. In the finest books there will always be some elements of alloy, something contemporary and local, which readers in another time and place can not recognize, and if the book continues to be read, the wish grows in us to get rid of the dead parts. We wish the mirror to be clear when we look into it. We wish to see only our own face. The reader achieves this end by skipping. The publisher does it by getting some one to edit the text. The creative genius does it by re-writing the book.

The point of view I am stating is not everywhere accepted. Many readers like to think of books, and, I suspect, of life, as far more static than they seem to me. They are of the same philosophy as those who object to Hamlet in modern costume. They think that the tradition should be sacred. Personally, I have no quarrel with the tradition, and I think those friends of mine are rather
weak of imagination who find it necessary to put Hamlet in a golf suit. But the same reasoning prevents me from holding too fanatically to the tradition. Either the modern dress or the traditional ought to satisfy. What dress the original Hamlet wore I don't know, and he surely did not speak English. If the play were given in Shakespeare's language, with his pronunciation, it would sound foreign to my ears. So I accept the modernization as a law of nature, and should be offended only if the essential drama were lost. It can't be, so long as man concerns himself with such problems of life and death as bothered Hamlet. If my uncle had murdered my father and married my mother, I should feel I ought to do something about it, but in this introspective day of ours I should have a hard time deciding what to do. My uncle might be a simple criminal, or he might be a case for the psychologists. Meanwhile, if my mother had a hand in the crime, I'd rather not know it, but if I didn't know, I should have to keep on speculating about it. In what costume should I go through this agony? To me it makes no difference. Hamlet, I find, is very like myself, and I can live the part in any dress. Othello, on the other hand, begins to be out of date. I don't like to see him smother his wife, and what's worse, I no longer feel, as gentlemen once did, that in the supposed circumstances she just naturally had to be smothered. The play is full of splendid verse, much quoted, but as a whole it badly needs rewriting. Shakespeare is among the greatest of the great, but this play of his my neighbors and I no longer care to see.

On Reading Great Books

3

If we accept the idea that literature is a changing thing in the hands of the writers, there ought to be no difficulty in agreeing also to the idea, already implied, that it is a changing thing in the hands of the readers. Whenever we read a book we love, we change it, to some extent. We read into it our own interpretations, and the meanings which the words have taken on in our time. If a book is so rigid that it can not lend itself to these fluctuations, it is useful only while it seems strictly true, and afterward it is completely out of date. Telephone directories and time-tables are the extreme examples, but all novels or plays based on scientific fact run this risk. The instance of spontaneous combustion in Bleak House is a weakness in an otherwise fine story, because, no matter how impressive the description, we no longer believe it is possible, and no interpretation will save it. All the novels which now rest on hypotheses of psycho-analysis, and such biographies as Amy Lowell's Keats, which make generous use of the same theories, will at once be superannuated if science shifts its ground. The great books are those which are capable of reinterpretations, which surprise us by remaining true even when our point of view changes. This is why we rank Homer and Virgil and Dante, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Cervantes and Molière so high—because they still say so much, even to peoples of an altogether foreign culture, a different past, an opposed philosophy. Every once in a while a writer or a school of writers appears in rebellion against
this principle of the psychology of art, deliberately trying to produce something which shall simultaneously be faithful to the immediate environment, in the sense in which the telephone directory is correct, and also of permanent interest. In so far as they succeed in the first ambition they usually fail in the second. Ben Jonson was this kind of realist; he wished to make plays, not out of imaginative material, as his friend Shakespeare did, but out of the life he knew, and he promised to report the actions and the language of the men and women about him. Perhaps he did so; it is for the antiquarian to say. To the average reader he is now a bookish name, except for a few songs, in which he modernized themes from the Greek mythology. Obviously Browning was closer to the ordinary facts of his time, to its speech, manners and problems, than Tennyson, but the mass of his work begins to be much harder to understand. We should all like to seem modern in our books; nothing hurts a writer so much as to be told he is out of touch with the age he lives in. But the realists who have tried to be modern by being strictly contemporary, have gone down with the fashions they anchored in, whereas the writers of other days who still seem modern, must have provided us from the first with something more like a mirror of life than a photograph.

This means, of course, that what we enjoy in a book may not be what the author intended to express. I don’t see how we can escape this conclusion, though most study of literature assumes that the purpose in reading is to find out what the author wanted to say. Even the un-literary take it for granted that we write in order to express ourselves. Yet it is the audience in art who are expressed, not the creator. What he has created is a magic surface in which they can see themselves more clearly than elsewhere. Gratitude makes them feel that the artist must have been a kindred spirit, and they say they understand him. No historian of literature, however, would admit that to Shakespeare Shylock was a tragic character, as he is to us. This is only the most familiar of many famous illustrations. There is a passage in Malory which we believe once delighted the reader as showing the fine courtesies of chivalry. Lancelot disguised himself in Kay’s armor, and rode out to see what would happen. He met four fellow-knights of the Round Table, who mistook him for Kay, as he expected. Being high-spirited gentlemen, in a ruguish mood, they decided to knock their friend Kay out of his saddle. The first one tried it, but Lancelot “smote him so sore that horse and man fell both to the earth.” The second tried it, with the same result. The third man Lancelot knocked unconscious. The fourth had his horse fall on him. Lancelot rode on to the king’s palace, and when the four arrived, and saw him there in Kay’s armor, “then there was laughing and smiling among them.” The passage has its delight for us, looking from our standpoint at this specimen of humor. It may be that we enjoy it more than Malory’s early readers did, just as we get a deeper profit, or so we think, from our tragic Shylock than the Elizabethan groundlings could have had from their comic Jew-baiting. But in neither example is it likely that we have the author’s point of view, and I doubt if it is desirable or worth while to search for it. The reason men have said that great artists are inspired, is that great artists create more than
they know—meanings they have not heard of, beauty they have not seen.

This is to say again the old truth, that art is a constant collaboration between the artist and the audience. Once the work is created, it leaves the author's hands for ever—the readers remodel it, or neglect it. Yet in such a shifting stream of interpretation there is more stability than at first appears. There is something constant in human nature. There are facts of life which do not depend upon fashions for their existence, nor upon philosophy for their importance. Birth, death, hunger, love, hate, the two sexes forever facing their own attractions and antipathies—it's a fair guess that men will recognize these elements of experience for a long while. Cowardice is as easy to detect as it ever was. When Moses came down from the mount and found the people worshiping the golden calf which Aaron had fashioned with a graving tool, he took his brother to task, and Aaron replied, "I cast the gold into the fire—and there came out this calf." Similarly the attitude of heroism is clear, in whatever fashion it shows itself, though the Persian spy, according to Herodotus, did miss the point of the Spartan preparations for death, as they sat in the sun and combed their long hair.

The account of reading which I have just given, as a creative process in which we all take part, and in which we constantly reinterpret books to respond to our needs, may seem to imply a dark skepticism as to the possibility of knowing or stating any certain and permanent truth. You may grant there are invariables in human nature, yet ask if I have not denied a place to universal principles which lie outside of men, and which science and religion are supposed to formulate.

That there are such principles, I certainly would not deny. That it is easy for man to state them, no scientist or theologian would claim. The question is important here because a fair consideration of it helps us to see what imaginative literature, as distinguished from science or theology, can do for us, and what, therefore, we should look for when we read an imaginative book. All that I have said has been an argument against confusing literature with science. In a great poem or novel we should find a reflection of ourselves. The truth such a work should have is the kind we want in a mirror. Human language, with its power to suggest, to call up images, to sound overtones, to mean a dozen things at once, is a good instrument for rousing emotions and imagination. The fact that words will change their meanings, gives the writer hope that his work may continue to be read, and even for his immediate audience he chooses words which will mean as many things as possible, so that all temperaments may be reached. But with such a loose instrument the scientist or the theologian is helpless. What he usually does is to invent a language of his own, a special vocabulary, to which he hopes no emotions or other hazy elements will attach, and by which he intends to say one thing and nothing else. Since it is hard to find words absolutely bare of imaginative suggestion, the scientist takes the logical step, and sooner or later invents symbols, such as we meet in mathematics. Now he can tell the truth. But unfortunately, the language which he has achieved lacks one essential of communica-
tion—except by the initiated, it can't be understood. A large part of the difficulty of all science lies in its artificial language. Of course the scientist, seeking truth, never intended to hide it in a cryptogram, and after a while he begins to worry because so many of us are not in the secret. He then interprets the symbols—puts them in plain words—that is, in unprecise words, in the language of which our poetry is made. We take up the little book which makes Einstein neighborly, and we are relieved to find that our brain is good enough to follow the doctrine. "But remember," says the scientist, "what you are reading is not exactly Einstein—it's a popularization." There we are, back again where we started.

The difficulty which science faces in language is a profound one. But it does not arise in literature, unless we go to imaginative books for what only science can give. The business of science is to increase our knowledge and our use of truth, but the function of imaginative literature is to increase our sense of life and our vision of it. If we distinguish the two functions, we shall not be disturbed that books take on new powers with new readers, nor that we find in them ourselves rather than the author. We shall perhaps be ready to admit that a knowledge of the author's life is of less profit as an introduction to his writing than a consciousness of our own lives. We can understand how little the study of history and the study of literature have to do with each other—history, one of man's many attempts to tell the truth, at least temporarily, about other people—and imaginative literature, man's perennial attempt to realize himself as he is.

Yet since language is forced into a double service, it is not surprising that the scientific spirit tends to invade literature, and always to its detriment as a work of art. The formulas of science change quite as fast as the interpretations of a poem, but though it is fairly easy for us in our artistic conscience to admit without regret that the interpretations do change, in the part of us which seeks truth we find it hard not to believe our version of truth is final. If truth is variable, where are we? We translate and make the question personal—if our version of truth must be revised, what will become of the world? That which we profoundly believe, we wish to be permanent. The more we admire the steps by which nature has come from the first wiggle of life up to us, the less we feel the need of further progress. Many people who believe in evolution are probably convinced it has stopped.

In almost every great book there is a dead spot or two which once expressed an ardent belief in truth—a belief so ardent that the writer tried to put it into final and inflexible words, and alas! he succeeded. In the old epics the theology seems less civilized than the picture of human life—the gods behave less well than men. The fact is, the poet left us free to interpret the men in our own image, but he told what he believed to be the pious truth about the gods. There is a large area of this sort in Paradise Lost. Because so many of us have found Milton's theology impossible, we perhaps have thought of him as a particularly narrow-minded ancient. But we do the same thing now. With us truth is stated more often as science than as theology, but with the same untenable assumption that our version of it will stand. In a hundred years I
suspect Ibsen’s *Ghosts* may seem antiquated, so far as concerns the science implied in it, but the mother and the minister will probably still reflect some modern characters.

5

The method I should advise in reading great books is a simple one. I should try, first of all, not to be awed by their greatness. Then I should read without any other preparation than life has given me—I should open the pages and find out how much they mean to me. If I found my experience reflected in some parts of the book and not in others, I shouldn’t worry about those blind spots. They may be the fault of the book in those places—it may be out of date. But it is more prudent of me to suppose, what is just as likely, that my own experience is perhaps a little thin in the regions those parts of the book dealt with. To find out which is so, I should read the book a second time, and a third. Whether or not the repeated readings clear up the difficult pages, they will show me new meanings in the part I already understand.

When we encounter these dead spots in books supposed to be masterpieces, and when we are humble enough to explain them by some insufficiency in ourselves, the impulse is to go for help to other books, to works of criticism. It is much more profitable to go directly to life. I won’t say that no aid can be had from other people; I couldn’t believe that and keep on teaching literature, or even write these papers. But the best teachers of literature, in my opinion, try to suggest the experience, which such passages are designed to reflect; they remind their hearers of experience mislaid for the moment;

they can only remind—they can’t impart it. We do as much for each other, far from classrooms, whenever your casual enthusiasms open my eyes to a beauty in art or in nature which I overlooked, but which I am ready to admire. Sometimes I ask a student in class to tell me the plot of the book we are about to discuss. I have never listened to an honest summary of that elementary sort without learning something new about the story; I have seen it now through another person’s life. In fact, there’s no better way to measure personality than to ask for the outline of a story you know well. But most of this experimenting we can do on ourselves. We can overhaul our experience, to find the material needed to understand the book; we can open our eyes to life about us, and find the material there. It is fatal to suppose the great writer was too wise or too profound for us ever to understand him; to think of art so is not to praise but to murder it, for the next step after that tribute will be neglect of the masterpiece.

It is advisable to sample as many of the great books as we can, for the first ones we come to may not be those which reflect us most completely. But once we have found our author, we have only to read him over and over, and after a while to read out from him, into the authors who seem kindred spirits. When the reader has found himself in two great authors, he is fairly launched.

But the books should be read over and over. Until we have discovered that certain books grow with our maturing experience and other books do not, we have not learned how to distinguish a great book from a book.