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A Danish Critic's Warning

Emerson's Views on Power

By CLARK KINNARD

AS soon as a person or thing interests you, seize it, absorb yourself in it. You will learn a thousand times more by doing that than by absorbing yourself in a thousand things and people.

As Georg Brandes explains (in his essay, "On Reading"), "The object widens before your gaze, and gradually expands to a whole horizon. Never begin with the horizon, or you will stare at random and see nothing."

It is pointed out by Brandes, a Dane, who is perhaps the greatest living critic of literature, that the real importance is not in the book—but in the way it is read.

"I do not, of course, mean to say there are not numbers of poor books it is a waste of time to have anything to do with. People warn, and justly, against dangerous books, and occasionally the books called dangerous really are so, but these dangerous books are not only those which speculate in the youthful reader's sensual impulses, or appeal to his idleness or frivolity, but those also that represent base and low things as admirable, or disseminate prejudices, and throw a hateful light on liberal-mindedness, or the pursuit of freedom.

"Next to the dangerous books are the wearisome books. It is a sorry superstition that leads people involuntarily to cherish a certain respect for earnestness and erudition that weary them. Wearisome books discourage people from acquiring knowledge.

"Histories, for example, are often wearisome; but how many patient people keep on reading them because they regard it as a sort of duty! Do not waste your time and energy over what is dry as dust, unless, as a specialist, you are seeking for information. History is, and ought to be, the most interesting of all subjects. To my mind it is far more interesting to read about real men and women than about fictitious ones, even if the latter have been drawn from life.

"Historians sometimes take too little pains, and describe men merely from the outside, without first having acquired the intimate personal sort of feeling that enables them to understand their hero's character and motives.

"Read such books as Carlyle's 'Cromwell' and the first volume of his 'Frederick the Great,' or Michelet's 'History of France,' or Mommsen's 'Roman History.' Here on each page the characters are alive, and seem to come forward to meet us."

WHO shall set a limit to the influence of a human being? Emerson, meditating on this, observed that there is not yet an inventory of a man's faculties, any more than a bible of his opinions.

"There are men," he pointed out, "who by their sympathetic attractions carry nations with them and lead the activity of the human race. And if there be such a tie that wherever the mind of man goes, nature will accompany him, perhaps there are men whose magnetisms are of that force to draw material and elemental powers, and, where they appear, immense instrumentalities organize after them.

"LIFE IS A SEARCH AFTER POWER; and that is an element with which the world is so saturated—there is no chink or crevice in which it is not lodged—that no honest seeking goes unrewarded.

"A man should prize events and possessions as the ore in which this fine mineral is found; and he can well afford to let events and possessions and the breath of the body go, if their value has been added to him in the shape of power.

"If he has secured the elixir, he can spare the wide gardens from which it is distilled. A cultivated man, wise to know and bold to perform, is the end to which Nature works, and the education of the will is the flowering and result of all this geology and astronomy."

All successful men have agreed in one thing, Emerson sees—they were causationists.

"They believed that things went not by luck, but by law; that there was not a weak or a cracked link in the chain that joins first and last things.

"A belief in causality, or strict connection between every pulsebeat and the principle of being, and, in consequence, belief in compensation, or that nothing is got for nothing—characterizes all valuable minds, and must control every effort that is made by an industrious one. "The most valiant men are the best believers in the tension of the laws."

Napoleon Bonaparte observed that "All great captains have performed vast achievements by conforming with the rules of art—by adjusting efforts to obstacles."

The key to the age may be this, or that, or the other, as the young orators describe; to Emerson the key to all the ages is—Imbecility; imbecility in the vast majority of men at all times, and even in heroes in all but certain eminent moments; victims of gravity, custom and fear. "This gives force to the strong—that the multitude have no habit of self-reliance or original action," he concludes.

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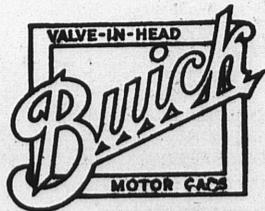
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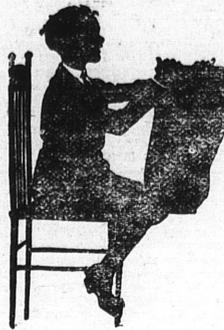
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