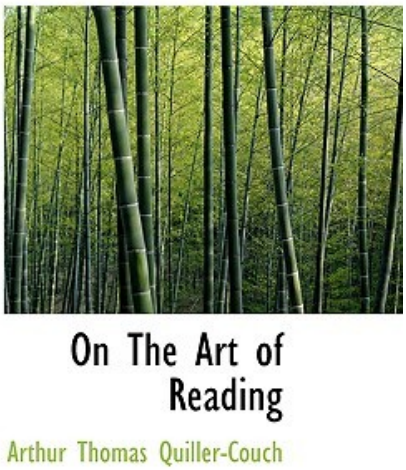

On The Art Of Reading

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On The Art Of Reading Details

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Hope says

Literary Critic and Poetry anthologist Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (1863-1944) delivered these 12 lectures at Cambridge between 1916 and 1918. His major thrust was that masterpieces of literature need to be taught in a way that allows the student to interact with and absorb them rather than in a way that only passes on the teacher's opinions about them. He deplores cramming literary information into students heads and readily recognizes that no one can ever be an "expert" in English literature.

Although he had a low view of the authority of Scripture he promoted its use as beautiful literature; he affirms that the cadences of the King James Version influenced many of the classics of 19th century England and that all thoroughly educated students must be familiar with the flow of biblical language.

Often verbose and occasionally witty, Sir Arthur asserts that literature teaches "What Is" (as opposed to the "What knows" of science); not lifeless facts, but thoughts about what it means "to be." All great literature, says he, (1) speaks to the spiritual element of man, (2) is universal to all men, and (3) is permanent (i.e. survives centuries of sifting).

"While pleading before you that Reading is an Art - that its best purpose is not to accumulate knowledge, but to produce, to educate a man - that 'tis a folly to bite off more than you can assimilate - and that with it, as with every other art, the difficulty and the discipline lie in selecting out of vast material what is fit, fine, and applicable." (from lecture II)

To sum up his ideas, he encourages quality over quantity and slow-savoring vs. gorging.

Henry Sturcke says

This book collects a second set of lectures Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch gave at Cambridge University to defend the decision to create a chair there for the study of English Literature. Thus it is a companion to his first series of lectures, *Notes on the Art of Writing*, given soon after he became the second to hold the professorship. There is some repetition of points he raised in the earlier set, such as the need to read great literature “absolutely,” by which he means tackling the text itself rather than merely reading secondary works that describe or explain the greats. The reader also won’t be surprised at Quiller-Couch’s gallery of greats, with Shakespeare, Milton, and the Authorized Version (“King James”) of the Bible occupying pride of place.
It might surprise some that a translation of a body of writings from ancient Hebrew and Greek, produced by a committee, should appear alongside Shakespeare, but Quiller-Couch maintains its eminence as the first great achievement of English prose. It’s clear, though, that even in his time, the place of the Bible in the study of English literature was controversial. He devotes three of the ten lectures here to the topic. In the third of them, he uses the Book of Job as an example of greatness.
In the first lecture, Quiller-Couch introduces a distinction to which he will return throughout the book, one that Browning makes in his “A Death in the Desert” between what does, what knows, and what is, with the last being the highest. In one sense, it seems to mean knowing one’s soul, or the transcendent. Quiller-Couch also claims, though, that the reader’s identification with the protagonist of a work of literature—becoming, say, Hamlet, for the moment—is also a form of knowing “what is,” a surprising extension of what Browning

might have meant by it. At any rate, Quiller-Couch maintains that literature is the pre-eminent means of this highest form of knowledge. He even maintains its superiority in this over philosophy. Here is the conclusion to his second lecture: “Literature understands man and of what he is capable. Philosophy, on the other hand, may not be ‘harsh and crabbed, as dull fools suppose,’ but the trouble with most of its practitioners is that they try to *comprehend* the Universe. Now the man who could comprehend the Universe would *ipso facto* comprehend God, and be *ipso facto* a Super-God, able to dethrone him, and in the arrogance of his intellectual conceit full ready to make the attempt.”
A third controversial position staked out here is that no child is too young to be exposed to the greats. Homer and the Tempest are his illustrations for this.
I enjoyed this series of lectures a bit more than the first set. He still comes across at times as “Uncle Q” and one can hear the strains of “Rule Britannia” wafting in the background as he argues for the generally civilizing influence of great (English) writing. Nonetheless, I can easily imagine that those who had the privilege to read Paradise Lost or King Lear with him had their lives deepened by the experience.

Kathy Weitz says

Excellent! So many quotes. Here are a few:

"To nurse that spark, common to the king, the sage, the poorest child—to fan, to draw up to a flame, to ‘educate’ What Is—to recognise that it is divine, yet frail, tender, sometimes easily tired, easily quenched under piles of book-learning—to let it run at play very often, even more often to let it rest in what Wordsworth calls
a wise passiveness
passive—to use a simile of Coventry Patmore—as a photographic plate which finds stars that no telescope can discover, simply by waiting with its face turned upward—to mother it, in short, as wise mothers do their children—this is what I mean by the Art of Reading." Lecture II

"A teacher, as I hold, should watch for what his pupil divines of his own accord . . ." Lecure V

"I say that it matters very little for the moment, or even for a considerable while, that a pupil does not perfectly, or even nearly, understand all he reads, provided we can get the attraction to seize upon him. He and the author between them will do the rest: our function is to communicate and trust." Lecture XII

Also, I loved his little lesson plan for Ode On A Grecian Urn in Lecture V.ix. Even used with my poetry scholars this past year!

Rick Davis says

This book was excellent, witty, and fun. It ought to be read by anyone who teaches literature, whether English or otherwise. It was so good, I can even forgive Q for being such a Marcionite.

Claudia says

I love Q. I was introduced to him by Helene Hanff, in her charming book, *Q's Legacy* (linking isn't

working right now, unfortunately).

I don't often agree with his taste, and I sadly don't have the Greek he assumes I know, but reading him makes me happy. Admittedly, his world was limited in many ways (sexist, racist, classist, etc., all stipulated), but the standard of literacy and civility he simply expects and embodies is bracing, and gives me something to aspire to. Just because he wasn't thinking of me as his student doesn't mean I'm not.

I also discovered, reading this particular book on my phone, that I love reading old books on modern screens. There's something odd and marvelous about reading a lecture he gave exactly 100 years earlier, to the day, and doing so on a tiny, incredibly powerful machine he couldn't even have imagined.

Ange says

Mainly scanning through to anything of interest. Most of it is above my level of comprehension. Does discuss much on the Bible as literature. And covers what children should read and why.

Thomas says

A series of lectures on how, what, and why to read. It's almost a hundred years old now, but the lessons are just as relevant to day as back then. Probably the best piece of advice was to read Paradise Lost when I turn 30.

Debra says

The best way to learn to write is to read good literature and to write. The author gives more excellent advice about what to read, and how literature should be taught, examined and written about. Also read "On the Art of Writing"
