

ON DANGEROUS READING.¹

AS it is always my wish to attain directness and practical utility in what I have to say, I will explain that, under the name of *dangerous* books, I mean now to attack particularly the usual kinds of fictitious narratives, novels, impure sentimental poetry, and biographies, whether accurate or not, of criminal and degraded characters. It is supposed that these are the sources from which present danger to my readers is most to be feared. Books professedly teaching error in religion, morals, or social concerns, are of course evil and dangerous. But they are open enemies. They are not usually surrounded with peculiar fascinations when set forth in the didactic form; they will not gain much favor with those who read the *Watchman and Observer*, who may be presumed to respect and believe a sounder system. I would aim rather at covert and insidious enemies, which profess only to amuse while they destroy; which say, "Am I not in sport," while they "scatter firebrands, arrows, and death."

Against all the usual kinds of fictitious histories, whether in prose or verse, and dramatic representations, there are two great objections, even though they be allowed to be pure, free from criminal traits and pictures, and free from false principles—

1. To do what they profess to do, to give a correct picture of human life and character in a fictitious narrative, is extremely difficult. To paint the springs of conduct and the passions in their causes and effects, to draw correctly the results in the life proceeding from dispositions in the heart, requires a high wisdom and experience very rarely possessed. It is the attribute of a favored few, whose knowledge of men and things springs from a sound philosophy, has been cultivated by large and varied experience of life, and is guided by a powerful understanding. How vain to expect this rare historic wisdom, only attained in part by one or two in the lapse of centuries—such as a Shakespeare and a Scott—in the pert, shallow, dreaming babblers,

¹ This article appeared in the *Watchman and Observer*, Richmond, Va., 1849.

whose frothy inventions deluge the country! The inexperienced young person who observes the air of simplicity, nature, and ease, that marks the works of the great masters of historic and imaginative literature, may imagine that it is easy to imitate them, and to paint from the fancy scenes as natural as theirs. But it is only ignorance that causes such a supposition. The very ease and naturalness of the narrative shows the exquisite finish and perfection of the work. It is this very ease, simplicity and naturalness that are forever beyond the reach of mediocrity, and are attainable by genius alone. The ignorant stone-cutter, looking at some model of classic beauty from a master's chisel, may imagine that surely he could make a statue like that, so utterly free from exaggeration and point, so exactly like a real man or woman. But his idea only shows his utter ignorance of the sculptor's art. He dreams not that the harmony and truth to nature, the absence of exaggeration, and the softened unity and propriety of the statue are just the qualities which it is most difficult to produce—just the qualities which the master alone can produce.

Thus, also, to draw an imaginary man, like nature in his feelings and his conduct, is the hardest task of literary genius, although the picture, when finished, may seem so simple and easy. It is an exploit utterly beyond the reach of our herd of novelists. I fearlessly assert that, even though their intentions and principles were pure, and their scenes undefiled by pictures of vice, the views of human life and of the human heart which they give would not be true to nature, but unnatural, exaggerated and absurd. They do not truly paint the springs of human conduct and feeling. The men and women who flaunt on their fantastic pages are not the men and women with whom the reader has to deal in real life. And he who suffers his views of life to be colored by such reading, as every novel and play-reader must to some extent, is destined to nothing but blunders, disappointments and disgusts, when he attempts to buffet with the *hard realities* of the world. His course must resemble that of the man who has never beheld visible objects except when distorted by a prism, and fringed with its fantastic hues, until he goes forth to travel through the world. Hence it is that we see so many young gentlemen and young ladies who have learned their views of life out of the delusive mirror of fiction disap-

pointed of their hopes, disgusted with their experience of actual life, and professing what they imagine to be a picturesque sort of Byronic misanthropy, which is in the eyes of all sensible people as contemptible as it is selfish.

The *true history* of the past, on the contrary, gives true and useful views of life, because they are painted from nature. There men are drawn as they really lived and acted. There the youth who would learn from an experience more cheaply purchased than his own, may look for instruction in the character of man, and the ways of the world in which he is to live. Let our readers resort to these wholesome pages, which instruct while they amuse. And especially must I commend those pictures of human life drawn by the finger of inspiration in the sacred Scriptures, as unerring in their accuracy and unequalled in their literary beauty, charming alike the unsophisticated taste of all classes, children and mature men, savages and cultivated masters of learning. The interest they inspire in all, and the inimitable freshness and simplicity of the narratives, contribute not a little to the evidence of the claim that their authors possessed more than human art.

2. The habitual contemplation of fictitious scenes, however pure, produces a morbid cultivation of the feelings and sensibilities, to the neglect and injury of the active virtues. The purpose for which fictions are read, and the drama is frequented, is to excite the attention and the emotions. They must be animated and full of incident, or they will not be popular. The reader who indulges much in them soon becomes so accustomed to having his sensibilities excited, and the labor of attention relieved by the interest of the plot, that he is incapable of useful reading and business. The just, natural, and instructive pages of history seem to him too flat, and he dozes over the most noble exertions of intellect which literature offers. His debauched mind is as unfit for useful studies as the tremulous and enervated arm of the drunkard the morning after his orgies for wholesome labor.

But there is also an injury to the moral character as well as to the habits of mental industry, which is a necessary result of the fundamental laws of feeling. Exercise is the great instrument ordained by God to strengthen the active principles of the heart. On the other hand, all the passive susceptibilities are

worn out and deadened by frequent impressions. Illustrations of these two truths are familiar to every one; but there is one well-known instance which offers us at once an example of the truth of both of them. It is that of the experienced and benevolent physician. The active principle of benevolence is strengthened by his daily occupations until it becomes a spontaneous and habitual thing in him to respond to every call of distress, regardless of personal fatigue, and to find happiness in doing so. But at the same time, his susceptibilities to the painful impressions of distressing scenes are so deadened that he can act with nerve and coolness in the midst of suffering, the sight of which would at first have unmanned him.

Now, all works of fiction are full of scenes of imaginary distress, which are constructed to impress the sensibilities. The fatal objection to the habitual contemplation of these scenes is this, that while they deaden the sensibilities, they afford no occasion or call for the exercise of *active* sympathies. Thus the feelings of the heart are cultivated into a monstrous, an unnatural, and unamiable disproportion. He who goes forth in the works of active benevolence among the real sufferings of his fellow creatures will have his sensibilities impressed, and at the same time will have opportunity to cultivate the principle of benevolence by *its exercise*. Thus the qualities of his heart will be nurtured in beautiful harmony, until they become an ornament to his character and a blessing to his race. This is God's "school of morals." This is God's plan for developing and training the emotions and moral impulses. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." And the adaptation of this plan of cultivation to the laws of man's nature shows that the inventor is the same wise Being who created man. It is by practicing this precept of the gospel that man is truly humanized. But the beholder of these fictitious sorrows has his sympathies impressed, and therefore deadened, while those sympathies must necessarily remain inert and passive, because the whole scene is imaginary. And thus, by equal steps, he becomes at once *sentimental and inhuman*. While the Christian, whose heart has been trained in the school of duty, goes forth with cheerful and active sympathies in exercises of beneficence towards the real

woes of his neighbor, the novel reader sits weeping over the sorrows of imaginary heroes and heroines, too selfish and lazy to lay down the fascinating volume and reach forth his hand to relieve an actual sufferer at his door.

I have proceeded hitherto upon the supposition that these books are pure in sentiment and description. But they are very rarely so. The vast majority, besides being liable to the objections formerly stated, in their full force, lie under the still more damning charge of moral impurity. Many of them are, in truth, systems of error, covertly embodying and teaching ruinous falsehoods. Some are written for the secret purpose of teaching infidelity, and some to teach the epicurean philosophy. Many of them are the aimless effusions of a general hatred against every thing correct and pious. There may be no professed attack on right principles, probably no didactic discussion at all, in the whole book, and yet the whole may be false philosophy or heresy, teaching by fascinating incident and example. To the thoughtless young, in search of entertainment, it seems to be a tale constructed to amuse, and nothing more, and yet every character represented in it, and all the plan of the book, may be designed to place religion, morality and right principles in a contemptible attitude, and to present the characters who advocate error in an attitude of superiority. How delusive this mode of teaching is, as a test or evidence of truth, can be easily seen. It is perfectly easy to draw two sets of characters, of which those embodying and representing error shall wear the superior, and those representing truth the inferior aspect, when the characters are all fictitious, and the painter is the errorist himself. When the lion and the man, in the old fable, travelling together, came to the picture of a man bestriding a conquered lion, the lion said to his human companion: "Had a lion been the painter of that picture the figures would be inverted." So it is perfectly easy to paint truth at the bottom and error at the top when falsehood holds the brush.

By this means of teaching, treacherous as it is, when regarded as a vehicle of evidence, subtle error is often insinuated into inexperienced minds, which have been educated in the love of truth, and would repel the open approaches of falsehood; of this kind are many modern and professedly pious novels, so current in this country, and especially in England, cunningly teaching Tory

principles and Puseyism, in the history of imaginary personages, who are made attractive to the young by the dress of some generous qualities. Such is the story called *Ten Thousand a Year*, which, while it presents us with much that is truly lovely and pious, treacherously employs the favor which it thus conciliates from us to make a false and malignant fling at the great and glorious Whig party of England. Such is the masterpiece of the Parisian novelist, Sue, constructed to recommend, in the fascinating person of a lovely young woman, painted with many heroic and magnanimous traits and invested with every element of interest, an embodiment of blasphemous infidelity and beastly epicurism and unchastity. Such are the little *Romans de Voltaire*, which seem to be trifles light as air, thrown off in the hours of relaxation, and sparkling with careless wit; but which are, in truth, every one a cunning and savage stab aimed at some vital truth. Indeed, we shall lose nothing by passing a general condemnation upon that whole school of modern French novels whose cheap translations, stitched in colored paper covers, circulate through all our railroad cars and book stalls, and even in the parlors of our people. They are, usually, foul with the concentrated moral filth that is collected and putrefies among the dregs of the great atheistical metropolis. They are rank with those poisonous errors in social concerns, politics, morals and religion, whose results are now seen in the agrarianism, the profligacy, the barricades, and the murderers of republican Paris. Every lady of decent fame should blush to have one seen upon her parlor table or to acknowledge that she had read one. Every head of a family should devote them to the flames, however fashionable, or however fascinating, however foplings, male or female, may smother that ignorance of their contents would exclude one from the "ton," as inexorably as he would the foul rags of a beggar who had died of the small pox on his premises.

But these books, whether intended to teach heresy and false philosophy or not, are generally guilty also of representing to the reader supposed scenes of crime and vice, thus subjecting his heart to a danger similar to that of associating with bad company. They are, in a word, obnoxious to all the objections of evil company in their strongest form. Does the youth hear oaths and blasphemies in the tavern bar-room? He hears them

in the scenes of the novelist. Does he become benefitted by witnessing brawls and duels? He witnesses them in the novel. Is his lust excited by beholding the arts and the gratifications of licentiousness in the house of ill-fame? He beholds them also in the novel. Now some have argued, that it is desirable to make the young familiar by their own observation with all the forms of vice, because in after life they must be exposed to their temptations. But such a policy shows a great ignorance of man's nature. Not so judged the Psalmist when he prayed, "Turn away mine eyes from *beholding* vanity." Not so judged the wisest of men when he urged, "Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it, and pass away." Not so judged Paul, nor even the prudent heathen whom he quoted, when he taught that, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." All human beings, however amiable, have in their hearts, until sanctified, the dormant seeds of *all the vices*. Who does not know that the contemplation of such vices tends to awaken those seeds into life? It is just thus that evil companions and evil example tend to corrupt those who were previously innocent. It is dangerous to become familiar with wickedness, even by contemplating it in others.

"Vice is a monster of so frightful mein
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace."

It were to be desired that the young should never know anything of vice by their own observation, except its retributions. How dangerous, then, the habitual reading of those works whose interest consists in the faults and vices of their imaginary personages?

And here I must pause to record my protest against a kind of reading which some persons seem to consider even less objectionable than works of fiction, because they profess to be true histories, the biographies of notorious villains. We have now lives of highway robbers, pirates, murderers, and swindlers, of Murrell and Monroe Edwards and Dick Turpin, and a multitude of such like rogues, giving a particular detail of all their villainies, where the only claim to public attention they offer is the peculiar baseness of their lives. It is much to be lamented that the love of novelty and exciting incident should so mislead

any as to make them capable of finding pleasure in dwelling upon these records of moral deformity, which should be repulsive to all right minds. Those who busy themselves in the production of these biographies may be justly regarded as assuming, in the moral world, a grade only analogous to that of the turkey buzzard, whose office it is to gain a disgusting livelihood by picking up the fragments of spiritual carrion which pollute the community, and gloating over their loathsome particulars with epicurean relish. To the same elevated class must be assigned those writers whose business it is to rake up the crimes of the prisons, the police courts, and the haunts of vice, for the columns of the newspapers. Indulgence in these kinds of reading is unworthy of a mind of the lowest grade of education. It tends to degrade and brutify the taste and feelings. And there is always danger that the wild daring and generosity imputed to the characters of outlaws will tempt the young to look favorably upon their crimes, and even to think of imitating them.

There are some reasons why the evil company of a bad book is even more corrupting and dangerous than that of a wicked living companion. One of these is, that the heroes and heroines, who are painted as defying the rules of good morals in some vital points, are still adorned with many imaginary qualities, such as courage, magnanimity, generosity, wit, and genius, which cause the young and impulsive reader to admire them in spite of their crimes. And from admiring the criminal it is but one step to excusing the vice, so that by this means the moral distinctions are worn out in the mind. Such a story as Bulwer's *Eugene Aram* should be entitled "Murder made Amiable." The usual tendency of these works is to familiarize the reader to viewing, without revulsion, nay, with actual admiration, the characters of duelists, drunkards, seducers, and other villains. And these fictitious villains are more dangerous companions than the bad men of real life, because this union of criminal traits with attractive and romantic qualities, which half atone for their faults in the view of the novel reader, is usually wholly imaginary. In actual life we find no such union, but wicked men appear coarse and repulsive. Vice soon robs their characters of that grace and delicacy which make the fictitious hero so dangerous an example.

These descriptions of moral delinquencies are, therefore, more

dangerous to the young than an actual mingling with living vice. In every real scene of wickedness there are usually features of coarseness, brutality, and loathsomeness, which disgust and repel the ingenuous mind. Vice appears in its real ugliness, and excites some of that hatred which it deserves. But in the fictitious painting all these coarser features are concealed, for they would mar the literary beauty of the work and outrage that pretence of decency which the world sees fit to wear. The scene is dressed in the gayest, the brightest, the most alluring garb which the genius of the author can throw around it. All can see how dangerous this false and partial portraiture must be to the unthinking. It represents the serpent with his graceful folds and his burnished scales of gold and purple, without his slime, his venom, and his fang. How natural that the inexperienced should be enticed to fondle it and be stung! And once more, the companionship of these descriptive scenes of vice is twice dangerous, because of the wit, the eloquence, and the genius by which the poison is commended to the taste. Actual vice is usually coarse and vulgar. Here its picture is gilded by all the skill of accomplished minds. Scenes of licentiousness are *enstamped, burned in*, upon the youthful imagination and memory by all the fire and force of the author's genius.

But there are also general reasons why a dangerous book, whether a descriptive and imaginary one or otherwise, is more insidious than any other evil companion. These books present themselves to us as seemingly quiet and passive things. They do not obtrude themselves on us, but stand as our helpless servants, coming only when we call them, and retiring the moment we bid them. They wear nothing of the aspect of assault or antagonism about them; and hence we are completely off our guard, and open to their influences. Again, they are usually read in the hour of retirement, when the mind is withdrawn into itself. Complete mental solitude, united with an absorption of the attention, especially by a work of fiction, produces an overwrought and morbid state of the sensibilities. Those wholesome, though unnoticed, restraints on the impulses of feeling, produced by the presence, the eye, the observation of a fellow-man, are absent. No human eye, no public opinion, no fear of ridicule, no sense of the shame of discovery, pierces the secret "chambers of imagery," where the soul is revelling in its intel-

lectual orgies and spiritual abominations. What wonder that the poison burns more deeply than when we are exposed to the corrupting society of living men checked by the restraints of publicity?

The results of such reading are neither vague, slight nor imaginary. They are as real and practical, as palpable and direct, as the common results of drunkenness. The writer of these remarks could point to a decided case of *lunacy*, neither remote nor obscure, which was notoriously produced by prolonged novel-reading. When a tragedy was enacted in one of our cities, which shocked the whole country with sudden murder and the final desolation of a home, the grey-headed father of the wretched woman whose delinquency had produced the catastrophe, stood up in a court of justice and testified on oath that the ruin was attributable to his daughter's indulgence in novel-reading. When the learned, pious, amiable and noble head of our University fell by the hand of an assassin, his death thrilling the community with horror and almost overturning the institution of which he was the pillar and ornament, the work of so many years of enlightened and patriotic exertion, the miscreant who shed his blood without cause boasted that his atheistical callousness to danger and to the value of human life was imbibed from the poisonous pages of Bulwer. And though catastrophes so shocking do not usually result from such reading, there are few or none who have indulged in it who have not suffered some injury in weakened principles, morbid feelings, and partial unfitness for the duties of actual life. Had a wise parental restraint been placed upon the youthful reading of the writer of these columns, it would have added no little to the equanimity, happiness and usefulness of his life. "*Haut ignara mali miseris succurrere disco.*"

I would, then, exhort all heads of families especially to be inexorable in cleansing their households of all such literary poison. We all know well that, however the young who are in the habit of indulging this dangerous taste may be convinced of its evils, there is little hope that *they* will be firm enough to wean themselves from it. And in this fact alone there is surely a sufficient argument of its danger, that its fascinations are so great, and its consequences so insidious, that even rational and ingenuous persons, though convinced of the mischief, cannot forego the indul-

gence. It devolves, therefore, on the heads and guides appointed for youth by God and by nature to protect them from the intoxicating evil, by the strong arm of parental authority. Parents should feel that their station both authorized and required them to remove such evils, as much as intoxicating liquors or opium. Fictions are the intoxicating stimulants of the immortal part. As parents love the souls of their children, they should snatch away the poison more rigidly than those nuisances which deprave and ruin the body.

I am well aware that men are usually more influenced to evil by one bad example than they are towards good by ten good arguments. It betokens little success to this essay to promote a good cause and to protect my readers against a common danger, that they have it in their power to answer me, as they have perhaps done ere this, that the usage of genteel society countenances what I am condemning, that novels are found on every parlor table, in Christian as well as irreligious houses, on the book-shelves of the daughters of ruling elders and clergymen, and in the hands even of doctors of divinity. I suppose it will avail nothing against such examples for me to answer, that if the universality of a custom proved its propriety, then there would be nothing so proper as *sin*, since there is nothing so universal, except perhaps breathing. In justice to those masters in Israel who look into such books, it should be stated that some of them do it only from a sense of duty, similar to that which induces the physician to analyze poisons, in order that he may warn others of their effects. Many of them, too, must account their indulgence in such reading as one of those lamentable infirmities to which good men are liable, an infirmity regretted by themselves, and by no means to be imitated by others. At most, the painful prevalence of the habit among those who profess to be on the side of virtue cannot prove that it is safe or right, but only that our Saviour's description of the visible church is still true: "Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, and I will profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

There is one more reason against fictitious reading, simple, brief and absolutely conclusive. *All men* who read novels will confess that usually they read them *as an indulgence*, and not as a means of improvement. Now, it is an indulgence which *is not*

recreation, for it excites, wearies and emasculates the mind even more than excessive mental labor. But every man is responsible to God for the improvement of every hour which is not devoted to wholesome recreation. *Novel-reading is the murder of time*, and on this simple ground every mind which professes to be guided by religious principles is sternly challenged by God's authority to forego it. "Redeem the time." "The night cometh."

CO-OPERATION!

SOMETHING FOR VIRGINIANS TO READ.

OF the trite maxim that "union is strength," the Presbyterians of Virginia seem often to be ignorant. There is scarcely a public interest or institution belonging to them which has not suffered from the want of steady co-operation. Independence among us has become a vice, for it is often carried so far that one man will surrender no opinion, liking, or prejudice, in order to unite his strength with others in the support of an enterprise of admitted and fundamental importance. Is the matter in hand the founding or sustaining of a school, academy, college, religious paper, theological seminary? Is it urged, or even demonstrated, that its success will be most favorable to the cause of Presbyterianism? Is it correctly inferred, thence, that each individual ought to give it the support appropriate to his condition? All this is admitted in the general and in the abstract; but in the particular a sufficient number will usually be found preferring some similar project, so as effectually to mar its complete success. One says, "This school, college, seminary, periodical, whichever it may be, is not so perfect as some other similar ones abroad, therefore I shall not sustain it." Says another, "This teacher, or editor, is not the man of my choice; replace him with Mr. A. B., and I will sustain you heartily." But says a third, "If you do remove him, to make room for Mr. A. B., I promise you, you shall never have another iota of my support." Indeed, it often seems that you have but to make an enterprise a Virginia cause, and convince our people that it presents a special claim for their support, to create a motive to neglect it; our darling independence must be vindicated from the notion that we are bound to do anything regularly any longer than it pleases our sovereign selves.

The State pride also, of which Virginians are usually supposed

¹ An editorial article in *The Central Presbyterian* of October 31, 1857.