



READING AND THE GROWTH OF THE MIND

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren

We have now completed the task that lay before us at the beginning of this book. We have shown that activity is the essence of good reading, and that the more active reading is, the better it is.

We have defined active reading as the asking of questions, and we have indicated what questions must be asked of any book, and how those questions must be answered in different ways for different kinds of books.

We have identified and discussed the four levels of reading, and shown how these are cumulative, earlier or lower levels being contained in later or higher ones. Consequent upon our stated intention, we have laid more stress upon the later and higher levels of reading than upon the earlier and lower ones, and we have there-

fore emphasized analytical and syntopical reading. Since analytical reading is probably the most unfamiliar kind for most readers, we have discussed it at greater length than any of the other levels, giving its rules and explaining them in the order in which they must be applied. But almost everything that was said of analytical reading also applies, with certain adaptations that were mentioned in the last chapter, to syntopical reading as well.

We have completed our task, but you may not have completed yours. We do not need to remind you that this is a practical book, nor that the reader of a practical book has a special obligation with respect to it. If, we said, the reader of a practical book accepts the ends it proposes and agrees that the means recommended are appropriate and effective, then he must act in the way proposed. You may not accept the primary aim we have endorsed—namely, that you should be able to read as well as possible—nor the means we have proposed to reach it—namely, the rules of inspectional, analytical, and syntopical reading. (In that case, however, you are not likely to be reading this page.) But if you do accept that aim and agree that the means are appropriate, then you must make the effort to read as you probably have never read before.

That is your task and your obligation. Can we help you in it in any way?

We think we can. The task falls mainly on you—it is you who, henceforth, must do all the work (and obtain all the benefits). But there are several things that remain to be said, about the end and the means. Let us discuss the latter first.

What Good Books Can Do for Us

Means can be interpreted in two ways. In the previous paragraph, we interpreted the term as referring to the rules of reading, that is, the *method* by which you become a better reader. But means can also be interpreted as referring to *the things you read*. Having a method without materials to which it can be applied is as useless as having the materials with no method to apply to them.

In the latter sense of the term, the means that will serve you in the further improvement of your reading are the books you will read. We have said that the method applies to anything you read, and that is true, if you understand by the statement any *kind* of book—whether fiction or nonfiction, imaginative or expository, practical or theoretical. But in fact, the method, at least as it is exemplified in our discussion of analytical and syntopical reading, *does not ap-*

ply to every book. The reason is that some books do not require it.

We have made this point before, but we want to make it now again because of its relevance to the task that lies before you. *If you are reading in order to become a better reader, you cannot read just any book or article.* You will not improve as a reader if all you read are books that are well within your capacity. You must tackle books that are beyond you, or, as we have said, books that are over your head. Only books of that sort will make you stretch your mind. And unless you stretch, you will not learn.

Thus, it becomes of crucial importance for you not only to be able to read well but also to be able to identify those books that make the kinds of demands on you that improvement in reading ability requires. A book that can do no more than amuse or entertain you may be a pleasant diversion for an idle hour, but you must not expect to get anything but amusement from it. We are not against amusement in its own right, but we do want to stress that *improvement in reading skill does not accompany it.* The same goes for a book that merely informs you of facts that you did not know without adding to your understanding of those facts. Reading for information does not stretch your mind any more than reading for amusement. It may seem as though it does, but that is merely because your mind is fuller of facts than it was before, you read the book. However, your mind is essentially in the same condition that it was before. There has been a quantitative change, but no improvement in your skill.

We have said many times that the good reader makes demands on himself when he reads. He reads actively, effort-fully. Now we are saying something else. The books that you will want to practice your reading on, particularly your analytical reading, *must also make demands on you.* They must seem to you to be beyond your capacity. You need not fear that they really are, because there is no book that is completely out of your grasp if you apply the rules of reading to it that we have described. This does not mean, of course, that these rules will accomplish immediate miracles for you. There are certainly some books that will continue to extend you no matter how good a reader you are. Actually, those are the very books that you must seek out, because they are the ones that can best help you to become an ever more skillful reader.

Some readers make the mistake of supposing that such books—the ones that provide a constant and never-ending challenge to their skill—are always ones in relatively unfamiliar fields. In practice, this comes down to believing, in the case of most readers, that only

scientific books, and perhaps philosophical ones, satisfy the criterion. But that is far from the case. We have already remarked that the great scientific books are in many ways easier to read than non-scientific ones, because of the care with which scientific authors help you to come to terms, identify the key propositions, and state the main arguments. These helps are absent from poetical works, and so in the long run they are quite likely to be the hardest, the most demanding, books that you can read. Homer, for example, is in many ways harder to read than Newton, despite the fact that you may get more out of Homer the first time through. The reason is that Homer deals with subjects that are harder to write well about.

The difficulties that we are talking about here are very different from the difficulties that are presented by a bad book. It is hard to read a bad book, too, for it defies your efforts to analyze it, slipping through your fingers whenever you think you have it pinned down. In fact, in the case of a bad book, there is really nothing *to* pin down. It is not worth the effort of trying. You receive no reward for your struggle.

A good book does reward you for trying to read it. The best books reward you most of all. The reward, of course, is of two kinds. First, there is the improvement in your reading skill that occurs when you successfully tackle a good, difficult work. Second—and this in the long run is much more important—a good book can teach you about the world and about yourself. You learn more than how to read better; you also learn more about life. You become wiser. Not just more knowledgeable—books that provide nothing but information can produce that result. But wiser, in the sense that you are more deeply aware of the great and enduring truths of human life.

There are some human problems, after all, that have no solution. There are some relationships, both among human beings and between human beings and the nonhuman world, about which no one can have the last word. This is true not only in such fields as science and philosophy, where it is obvious that final understanding about nature and its laws, and about being and becoming, has not been achieved by anyone and never will be; it is also true of such familiar and everyday matters as the relation between men and women, or parents and children, or man and God. These are matters about which you cannot think too much, or too well. The greatest books can help you to think better about them, because they were written by men and women who thought better than other people about them.

The Pyramid of Books

The great majority of the several million books that have been written in the Western tradition alone—more than 99 per cent of them—will not make sufficient demands on you for you to improve your skill in reading. This may seem like a distressing fact, and the percentages may seem an overestimate. But obviously, considering the numbers involved, it is true. These are the books that can be read only for amusement or information. The amusement may be of many kinds, and the information may be interesting in all sorts of ways. But you should not expect to learn anything of importance from them. In fact, you do not have to read them—analytically—at all. Skimming will do.

There is a second class of books from which you can learn—both how to read and how to live. Less than one out of every hundred books belongs in this class—probably it is more like one in a thousand, or even one in ten thousand. These are the good books, the ones that were carefully wrought by their authors, the ones that convey to the reader significant insights about subjects of enduring interest to human beings. There are in all probably no more than a few thousand such books. They make severe demands on the reader. They are worth reading analytically—once. If you are skillful, you will be able to get everything out of them that they can give in the course of one good reading. They are books that you read once and then put away on your shelf. You know that you will never have to read them again, although you may return to them to check certain points or to refresh your memory of certain ideas or episodes. (It is in the case of such books that the notes you make in the margin or elsewhere in the volume are particularly valuable.)

How do you know that you do not ever have to read such books again? You know it by your own mental reaction to the experience of reading them. Such a book stretches your mind and increases your understanding. But as your mind stretches and your understanding increases, you realize, by a process that is more or less mysterious, that you are not going to be changed any more in the future by this book. You realize that you have grasped the book in its entirety. You have milked it dry. You are grateful to it for what it has given you, but you know it has no more to give.

Of the few thousand such books there is a much smaller number—here the number is probably less than a hundred—that cannot be exhausted by even the very best reading you can manage. How do you recognize this? Again it is rather mysterious, but when you

have closed the book after reading it analytically to the best of your ability, and place it back on the shelf, you have a sneaking suspicion that there is more there than you got. We say suspicion because that may be all it is at this stage. If you knew what it was that you had missed, your obligation as an analytical reader would take you back to the book immediately to seek it out. In fact, you cannot put your finger on it, but you know it is there. You find that you cannot forget the book, that you keep thinking about it and your reaction to it. Finally, you return to it. And then a very remarkable thing happens.

If the book belongs to the second class of books to which we referred before, you find, on returning to it, that there was *less there than you remembered*. The reason, of course, is that you yourself have grown in the meantime. Your mind is fuller, your understanding greater. The book has not changed, but you have. Such a return is inevitably disappointing.

But if the book belongs to the highest class—the very small number of inexhaustible books—you discover on returning that *the book seems to have grown with you*. You see new things in it—whole sets of new things—that you did not see before. Your previous understanding of the book is not invalidated (assuming that you read it well the first time); it is just as true as it ever was, and in the same ways that it was true before. But now it is true in still other ways, too.

How can a book grow as you grow? It is impossible, of course; a book, once it is written and published, does not change. But what you only now begin to realize is that the book was so far above you to begin with that it has remained above you, and probably always will remain so. Since it is a really good book—a great book, as we might say—it is accessible at different levels. Your impression of increased understanding on your previous reading was not false. The book truly lifted you then. But now, even though you have become wiser and more knowledgeable, it can lift you again. And it will go on doing this until you die.

There are obviously not many books that can do this for any of us. Our estimate was that the number is considerably less than a hundred. But the number is *even less than that for any given reader*. Human beings differ in many ways other than in the power of their minds. They have different tastes; different things appeal more to one person than to another. You may never feel about Newton the way you feel about Shakespeare, either because you may be able to read Newton so well that you do not have to read him again, or be-

cause mathematical systems of the world just do not have all that appeal to you. Or, if they do—Charles Darwin is an example of such a person—then Newton may be one of the handful of books that are great for you, and not Shakespeare.

We do not want to state authoritatively that any particular book or group of books must be great for you, in this sense, although in our first Appendix we do list those books that experience has shown are capable of having this kind of value for many readers. Our point, instead, is that *you should seek out the few books that can have this value for you*. They are the books that will teach you the most, both about reading and about life. They are the books to which you will want to return over and over. They are the books that will help you to grow.

There is an old test—it was quite popular a generation ago—that was designed to tell you which books are the ones that can do this for you. Suppose, the test went, that you know in advance that you will be marooned on a desert island for the rest of your life, or at least for a long period. Suppose, too, that you have time to prepare for the experience. There are certain practical and useful articles that you would be sure to take with you. You will also be allowed ten books. Which ones would you select?

Trying to decide on a list is instructive, and not only because it may help you to identify the books that you would most like to read and reread. That, in fact, is probably of minor importance, compared with what you can learn about yourself when you imagine what life would be like if you were cut off from all the sources of amusement, information, and understanding that ordinarily surround you. Remember, there would be no radio or television on the island, and no lending library. There would be just you and ten books.


This imagined situation seems bizarre and unreal when you begin to think about it. But is it actually so unreal? We do not think so. We are all to some extent persons marooned on a desert island. We all face the same challenge that we would face if we really were there—the challenge of finding the resources within ourselves to live a good human life.

There is a strange fact about the human mind, a fact that differentiates the mind sharply from the body. The body is limited in ways that the mind is not. One sign of this is that the body does not continue indefinitely to grow in strength and develop in skill and grace. By the time most people are thirty years old, their bodies are

as good as they will ever be; in fact, many persons' bodies have begun to deteriorate by that time. *But there is no limit to the amount of growth and development that the mind can sustain.* The mind does not stop growing at any particular age; only when the brain itself loses its vigor, in senescence, does the mind lose its power to increase in skill and understanding.

This is one of the most remarkable things about human beings, and it may actually be the major difference between *homo sapiens* and the others animals, which do not seem to grow mentally beyond a certain stage in their development. But this great advantage that man possesses carries with it a great peril. *The mind can atrophy, like the muscles, if it is not used.* Atrophy of the mental muscles is the penalty that we pay for not taking mental exercise. And this is a terrible penalty, for there is evidence that atrophy of the mind is a mortal disease. There seems to be no other explanation for the fact that so many busy people die so soon after retirement. They were kept alive by the demands of their work upon their minds; they were propped up artificially, as it were, by external forces. But as soon as those demands cease, having no resources within themselves in the way of mental activity, they cease thinking altogether, and expire.

Television, radio, and all the sources of amusement and information that surround us in our daily lives are also artificial props. They can give us the impression that our minds are active, because we are required to react to stimuli from outside. But the power of those external stimuli to keep us going is limited. They are like drugs. We grow used to them, and we continuously need more and more of them. Eventually, they have little or no effect. Then, if we lack resources within ourselves, we cease to grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually. And when we cease to grow, we begin to die.

Reading well, which means reading actively, is thus not only a good in itself, nor is it merely a means to advancement in our work or career. It also serves to keep our minds alive and growing. 

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