

chapter 7

Preparation for Work

READING

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I

Work means learning and producing; in both cases a long preparation is needed. For production is a result; and in order to learn, when the subject matter is difficult or complex, one must first have gone through what is simple and easy: "You must go to the sea by the streams, and not all at once," St. Thomas tells us.

Now reading is the universal means of learning, and it is the proximate or remote preparation for every kind of production.

We never think entirely alone: we think in company, in a vast collaboration; we work with the workers of the past and of the present. The whole intellectual world can be compared, thanks to reading, to a great editorial or mercantile office, where each one finds in those about him the initiation,

help, verification, information, encouragement, that he needs.

It is therefore a primordial necessity for the man of study to know how to read and to utilize his reading, and would to heaven that people were not habitually oblivious of the fact!

The first rule is to read little. In 1921, in *Le Temps*, Paul Souday,¹ having it appears some grudge to vent on me, caught on to this precept: "Read little," and tried to find in it an obscurantist spirit. My reader knows what that objection is worth. Paul Souday certainly knew it quite as well.

I am not advising anyone to limit his reading stupidly: all the foregoing chapters would give the lie to such an interpretation. We want to develop breadth of mind, to practice comparative study, to keep the horizon open before us; these things cannot be done without much reading. But *much* and *little* are opposites only in the same domain. Here much is necessary in the absolute sense, because the work to be done is vast; but little, relatively to the deluge of writing that, even in the most restricted special fields, floods our libraries and our minds nowadays.

What we are proscribing is the passion for reading, the uncontrolled habit, the poisoning of the mind by excess of mental food, the laziness in disguise which prefers easy familiarity with others' thought to personal effort.

The passion for reading which many pride them-

¹ A notable literary critic, of rationalistic and positivist turn of mind. (Tr. Note.)

selves on as a precious intellectual quality, is in reality a defect; it differs in no wise from the other passions that monopolize the soul, keep it in a state of disturbance, set up in it uncertain currents and cross-currents, and exhaust its powers.

We must read intelligently, not passionately. We must go to books as a housekeeper goes to market when she has settled her menus for the day according to the laws of hygiene and wise spending. The mind of the housekeeper at the market is not the mind she will have in the evening at the cinema. She is not now thinking of enjoyment and dazzled wonderment, but of running her house and seeing to its well-being.

The mind is dulled, not fed, by inordinate reading, it is made gradually incapable of reflection and concentration, and therefore of production; it grows inwardly extroverted, if one can so express oneself, becomes the slave of its mental images, of the ebb and flow of ideas on which it has eagerly fastened its attention. This uncontrolled delight is an escape from self; it ousts the intelligence from its function and allows it merely to follow point for point the thoughts of others, to be carried along in the stream of words, developments, chapters, volumes.

The continual sight stimuli thus occasioned destroy mental energy, as constant vibration wears out steel. There is no real work to be expected from the great reader, when he has overstrained his eyes and the membranes of his brain; he is in a state of chronic mental headache, while the wise

worker, preserving his self-control, calm and clear-headed, reads only what he wants to retain, retains only what will be useful, manages his brain prudently and does not abuse it by cramming it absurdly.

Better go out of doors, read in the book of nature, breathe fresh air, relax. After the requisite activity, arrange for the requisite recreation, instead of automatically yielding to a habit which is intellectual only in its matter, which in itself is as commonplace as gliding down a slope or climbing hills aimlessly.

People talk of keeping *au courant*, and no doubt an intellectual cannot ignore the human race, nor be indifferent to what is written in his special field; but take care lest the current should carry away with it all your capacity for work, and, instead of bearing you onwards, prevent you from making any headway against it. It is only by rowing oneself that one goes forward; no current can take you to the point you aim at reaching. Go your own way and do not drift into the wake of everybody else.

What you must principally cut down is the less solid and serious kind of reading. There must be no question at all of poisoning your mind with novels. One from time to time, if you like, as a recreation and not to neglect some literary glory, but that is a concession; for the greater number of novels upset the mind without refreshing it; they disturb and confuse one's thoughts.

As to newspapers, defend yourself against them with the energy that the continuity and the in-

discretion of their assault make indispensable. You must know what the papers contain, but they contain so little; and it would be easy to learn it all without settling down to interminable lazy sittings! Anyhow, there are hours more suitable than working hours for running after the news.

A serious worker should be content, one would think, with the weekly or bi-monthly chronicle in a review; and for the rest, with keeping his ears open, and turning to the daily papers only when a remarkable article or a grave event is brought to his notice.

I sum up what I want to say in this connection: never read when you can reflect; read only, except in moments of recreation, what concerns the purpose you are pursuing; and read little, so as not to eat up your interior silence.

II

The principle of choice is already included in these first remarks. "What discernment we should exercise," said Nicole, "about the things that feed our mind and are to be the seed of our thoughts! For what we read unconcernedly today will recur to our minds when occasion arises and will rouse in us, even without our notice, thoughts that will be a source of salvation or ruin. God stirs up the good thoughts to save us; the devil stirs up the evil thoughts of which he finds the seed in us."¹

¹ Nicole, *Essais de morale contenus en divers traités*, V.II, Paris 1733, p. 244.