

ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

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Essays in Miniature by Agnes Repplier

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AGNES REPPLIER

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MINIATURE**

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BY

AGNES REPPLIER



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ESSAYS IN MINIATURE

OUR FRIENDS, THE BOOKS

THERE is a short paragraph in Hazlitt's *Conduct of Life* that I read very often, and always with fresh delight. He is offering much good counsel to a little lad at school, and when he comes to a matter upon which most counselors are wont to be exceedingly didactic and diffuse—the choice of books—he condenses all he has to say into a few wise and gentle words that are well worth taking to heart :

“ As to the works you will have to read by choice or for amusement, the best are the commonest. The names of many of them are already familiar to you. Read them as you grow up with all the satisfaction in your power, and

make much of them. It is perhaps the greatest pleasure you will have in life, the one you will think of longest, and repent of least. If my life had been more full of calamity than it has been (much more than yours, I hope, will be) I would live it over again, my poor little boy, to have read the books I did in my youth."

In all literature there is nothing truer or better than this, and its sad sincerity contrasts strangely with the general tone of the essay, which is somewhat in the manner of Lord Chesterfield. But here, at least, Hazlitt speaks with the authority of one whose books had ever been his friends; who had sat up all night as a child over *Paul and Virginia*, and to whom the mere sight of an odd volume of some good old English author, on a street stall, brought back with keen and sudden rapture the flavor of those early joys which he remembered longest, and repented least. His words ring consolingly in these different days, when we have not only ceased reading what is old, but when—a far greater misfortune—we have forgotten how

to read "with all the satisfaction in our power," and with a simple surrendering of ourselves to the pleasure which has no peer. There are so many things to be considered now besides pleasure, that we have well-nigh abandoned the effort to be pleased. In the first place, it is necessary to "keep up" with a decent proportion of current literature, and this means perpetual labor and speed, whereas idleness and leisure are requisite for the true enjoyment of books. In the second place, few of us are brave enough to withstand the pressure which friends, mentors and critics bring to bear upon us, and which effectually crushes anything like the weak indulgence of our own tastes. The reading they recommend being generally in the nature of a corrective, it is urged upon us with little regard to personal inclination; in fact, the less we like it, the greater our apparent need. There are people in this world who always insist upon others remodeling their diet on a purely hygienic basis; who entreat us to avoid sweets or acids, or tea or coffee, or whatever we chance to particularly like; who tell us per-