‘How to Read Books’
Reading-Advice Books in Britain and America, 1870-1960

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Reading-advice books have surged in popularity in the last few years, with titles by Harold Bloom, Edward Hirsch, Geoffrey O’Brien, Anne Fadiman and others. Most seem to be extended essays or meditations on the experience of reading; others, like Bloom’s, are more didactic in spirit. In the latter case especially, they signal the sudden revival of a genre which seemed almost to have died out by the 1960s, having figured as a persistent presence in anglophone reading cultures for most of the previous century, and which inhabit an oddly neglected corner of the new historiography of reading. It would be invidious to list the recent monographs and essay collections in which one might have expected to find such books discussed, or to make much of the oversight. It may be that such books have been perceived as naive and prescriptive precursors of reading historiography rather than its proper object; or they may have fallen through the gap that sometimes seems to have developed between the study of elite and professional reading practices on the one hand and popular (especially ‘resistant’) reading practices on the other.

In any case, the surprising fact is that reading-advice books have hardly been mentioned in recent scholarship. It remains to be investigated how important they may have been, why, and in what connections; but in purely quantitative terms a case can surely be made for bringing them into the fold. On a preliminary search there appear to be well over sixty books of the ‘advice to readers’ type published in Britain, North America and elsewhere in the English-speaking world, extending from the third quarter of the nineteenth century to the third quarter of the twentieth: enough, we might suppose, to have some effects on the behaviour of several generations of readers.

The generic boundaries of the reading-advice book are somewhat blurred. Not all of them are conveniently titled ‘How to Read a Book’ (though, as the Appendix shows, a large number do in fact use that title or a variant of it), and conversely, some books with that kind of title are not quite reading-advice books. Decisions have somehow to be made as to the membership of the class, and a practical baseline definition would seem to be: ‘a book that tells ordinary readers why, what and how to read’. Applying such a definition tends to exclude, for ex-

2. This polarisation in reading research seems especially true of the twentieth century field, where the character of ‘middlebrow’ reading habits is still in its very early stages. The recent work of Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway has been groundbreaking in this respect.

BSANZ Bulletin 26, 2, 2002, 67-80
ample, pure literary memoirs, school primers and teaching aids, as well as works of cognitive psychology or sociological observation. It also helps to establish a rough chronological frame for the tradition of the reading-advice book. 1960, the year in which Robertson Davies' *The Personal Art* (a strongly generic instance) appeared, marks a plausible and convenient endpoint — after that date reading-advice books proper seem to peter out, until their recent resurrection. At the farther end of the tradition, the earliest such work seems to be Noah Porter's *Books and Reading: or What Books Shall I Read and How shall I Read Them?* (1871), giving us roughly a century of advice to consider.

My own curiosity about reading-advice books arises out of a general interest in the literary culture of the interwar period, which is when these books seem to have reached a peak of popularity. But the specific occasion may have been stumbling, almost by accident, upon two books written and published more than thirty years apart, on opposite sides of the Atlantic: the English novelist Arnold Bennett's *Literary Taste* (1909), and the American philosopher Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* (1940). Both are, in their own ways, wise, entertaining and commonsensical books despite their various blind spots and prejudices. Bennett's book in particular, with its loud insistence on the importance of a tiny trans-generational elite of 'literature lovers', could expect (I think) to attract few admirers in the contemporary humanities academy. Adler, a founder of the University of Chicago 'Great Books' movement, while just as certain as Bennett is about the value of the 'great books', is somewhat more insistent on the importance of democratic forms of dissemination.

Each book is clearly 'of its moment' in all sorts of ways; indeed, some of the differences between them suggest (hardly surprisingly) that the norms of 'serious reading' in 1940s America must have changed quite significantly from those of Edwardian England. But both books also reach well beyond the times of their initial publication, not only through their respective reprinting histories, but also through the things they have in common — substantively, rhetorically, and in a shared inventory of authorities and references. Placed side by side, the two books convey a strong sense of belonging to a single evolving tradition of reading advice, notwithstanding their distance from one another in time and place of initial publication. That trans-historical and transatlantic tradition of reading-advice is what I hope to describe and exemplify in the remainder of this article, with some suggestions as to its broader implications for the history of reading.

External evidence for an actual tradition of sorts is provided by the publication dates of the forty-odd reading advice books listed in the Appendix, all of which possess the characteristics specified earlier. The list is chronologically arranged, and it shows a relatively homogeneous spread of publication across a ninety-year period — relatively homogeneous because in fact there does appear to be some clustering around particular dates, notably 1930. It may be possible to adduce historical reasons for such concentrations, but in doing so the reading-historian needs to take account of what was commercially available at a given moment, not just what was new. Earlier books were frequently reprinted, such
that Quiller Couch's *Art of Reading*, for example — first published in 1924 — was almost continuously in print until the end of the Second World War; J. Sherwood Weber’s *Good Reading Guide for Serious Readers* was in print from 1935 to 1969 (its reading lists regularly updated). Arnold Bennett’s book, by contrast, was out of print for a quarter of a century before being reissued in a revised edition in 1937.

The combined effect of new and reprinted books throughout the period is that of a more or less unbroken stream of reading advice aimed, for the most part, at a broad reading public. This public is envisaged and addressed somewhat differently by different writers at different times, according to age, gender, educational level, historical circumstances, and also (though rarely explicitly) social class. Generally, though, these differences seem not to have affected the content of the books sufficiently to inhibit their real or potential mobility across some two or three biological generations of readers.

This is the sense — only a limited sense, obviously — in which the advice books can be seen as a ‘trans-historical’ tradition. They are also, I suggested, a ‘transatlantic’ tradition, by which I mean especially (though not exclusively) an Anglo-American tradition. One index of this is the publication of many of the books, whatever their national origins, in near-simultaneous American and British editions; and there is also some evidence of a more conscious and systematic bridging process taking place in the form of transatlantic revisions. An example is F.K. Druy’s *What Books Shall I Read?* (1933), described on the title page as ‘an adaptation and enlargement for American readers’ of a book called *Books and Reading* by W.E. Simnett, published seven years earlier.3

The ‘transatlanticism’ of the advice-books, however, is most strongly manifested in the content of the books: in the British, American and European books they include in their lists of recommended reading, and also — perhaps more significantly — in the authorities they cite on the value and methods of reading: an American authority like Emerson is as likely to be quoted on these subjects by a British adviser as a British authority like Carlyle by an American adviser.

What can the (limited) internationalism of the advice-books mean? In a century as aggressively nationalistic as the one in question (1870-1960) their easy, at times seamless, transcendence of the national — so far as it goes — is worth wondering about. What kinds of political and cultural pressures were these books responding to? In answering that question it can be difficult to resist the temptation to move laterally in search of explanations within the wider historical context.4 But which historical context? Transatlantic internationalism is obviously a very different matter when it is found in Boston in 1885, in Cambridge (Eng-

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4. I would like to acknowledge an indirect debt for this way of conceptualising the issue to the work of Christopher Baswell (Barnard College) and David Wallace (University of Pennsylvania) on medieval textual histories.
land) in 1924, in New York in 1930, and in London in 1945; and yet it appears in the advice-books in all those times and places (and in many others), no doubt responding in some degree to the cultural cues and social anxieties distinctive to each moment, but also reproducing, rethinking, or subtly modifying a tradition already firmly in place.

Examining the books only in relation to those contemporaneous moments is likely to be insufficient by itself, and needs to be complemented by a perspective that tries to see them as an institution in their own right. What this paper therefore seeks to do, at least initially, is simply to describe some of the main internal features of these books, considered not laterally but longitudinally; as an evolving, changing tradition certainly, but also as a coherent single corpus.

One of their most noticeable features — slightly unusually perhaps for books aimed at a modern general readership — is their regular recourse to a body of historical authorities on reading. The total number of cited authorities is very large, since each adviser has their own favourites to add to the general stock. Much of this general stock became readily available to all in the early 1880s when Alexander Ireland, a critic and booklover from Cheshire, compiled a Booklover’s Enchiridion which in its enlarged third edition, published in Boston, contained substantial passages by some 250 authors, ‘from Solomon and Cicero to Carlyle, Emerson and Ruskin … the summed-up testimonies of the most notable Booklovers on the subject of Books, and the Habit and Love of Reading’.

Thirty years later the inventory was updated by R.M. Leonard in a Booklover’s Anthology of Passages Written in Praise of Books.

The working common core of authorities for the reading-advice tradition is, of course, much smaller than that. I estimate that there are about a dozen authors whose familiar pronouncements on reading — they might be termed dicta legendi — appear in some form in the great majority of reading-advice books: the authors of these dicta include Cicero, Richard De Bury, Montaigne, Bacon, Milton, Johnson, Burke, De Quincey, Lamb, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

What is interesting about these names, or at least about the dicta they come to be identified with, is that several of them are somewhat ‘wild for to hold’ in their original surroundings, and need to be tamed in order to bring them into line with the values of liberal self-help on which most of the advice books are premised. So, for example, Montaigne’s gay encouragements to waywardness and lack of application in the famous essay ‘Of Books’ are usually paraphrased rather than quoted direct. The translated original reads in part, ‘What I do not see immediately I see even less by persisting … application and over-serious effort confuse, depress and weary my brain … If one book bores me, I take up another; and I turn to reading only at such times as I begin to be tired of doing nothing.’

7. Harold Bloom, in his recent How To Read and Why, positions himself well within the tradition, quoting Milton, Bacon, Johnson and Emerson as his guides (pp.1-7).
Milton's obscure but impressive-sounding description of a good book as 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit' (perhaps the most quoted of all the dicta) is often fortified -surprisingly often, in fact -by his rather more radical dictum 'as good almost kill a man as kill a good book'. Less often we are given the chilling sentiment, expressed in the same paragraph of *Areopagitica*, that 'it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Books demean themselves, as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors'. But the fierce Frederic Harrison is able to find a place even for this in his *Choice of Books* (1886).9

To take another example, Charles Lamb's perverse and cranky denunciation of 'books which are no books' is quoted everywhere, even though that category includes all those volumes which "no gentleman's library should be without", not excepting the elsewhere agreed masterpieces of Hume and Gibbon.10 And Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, finally, is not above wrenching the blunt directive 'Read not to contradict or confute' quite out of its carefully dialectical context in Bacon's essay 'Of Studies' as a way of authorising the reader's necessary submission to the power of the classic.11

My general point is that the reading-advisers seem determined to maintain a solid canon of authoritative historical sayings about reading, even when, as is often the case, these sayings appear to violate the cultural norms of the day. Such determination, I suspect, bespeaks not so much a lack of imagination as a conscious desire to build a continuous and cohesive tradition of reading norms.

Before elaborating on that suspicion, let me say a little more about the content of the advice-books in order to illustrate further the 'tradition-like' character of the series. As we shall see, it incorporates not just a canon of authoritative sayings about reading, but also a store of anecdotes and tropes (which are recycled, like the sayings, in a variety of ways), and also an evolving set of debates about reading.

The advice-books generally frame their advice and construct their norms in terms of three main questions, namely:

Why should people read?
What should they read?
How should they read?

Macmillan's Colonial Library

THE CHOICE OF BOOKS

AND

OTHER LITERARY PIECES

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1891

All rights reserved.
To the first question—Why read?—the usual answer involves some combination of pleasure and self-improvement, though the two terms are elaborated, and balanced differently by different advisers. A distinction between British and American attitudes does seem possible here: there are some indications, especially in the late nineteenth century, of a 'pleasure-bias' on the eastern side of the Atlantic and a 'self-improvement bias' on the western side. But the distinction is far from universal: for example, Frederic Harrison and Lucy Soulsby, both English writers, are fiercely disciplinarian in attitude, while the American Frank Luther Mott, by contrast, is something of a free spirit.

The American adviser Charles Alphonso Smith provides a fairly standard list of 'reasons to read' in his book *What Can Literature Do For Me?* (1913). The book was reprinted in 1921, and then again in 1925, this time with a new title, *What Reading Can Do For Me*. (Much might be written on the implications of the two changes: from 'literature' to 'reading'; and from question to statement). The six reasons he offers, in his words, are as follows. Having listed them, he devotes a chapter to each of them in turn:

I  It [literature/reading] can give you an outlet
II  It can keep before you a vision of the ideal
III  It can give you a better knowledge of human nature
IV  It can restore the past to you
V  It can show you the glory of the commonplace
VI  It can give you the mastery of your own language

In the 1925 edition, there is a new Foreword by Lyman Abbot, who appears to be several degrees more pragmatic and cynical than Smith. Books, Abbot tells us, perform three services in the home: as ornaments, tools and friends.

To illustrate the ornamental service, he uses the familiar 'new library' anecdote. A wealthy businessman builds a new library, wants to fill the shelves, buys up a job lot of nice old books, finds the shelves are too shallow, and has the books sawn in half. But Abbot has stripped the anecdote of the anti-philistine force it usually carries: for him it shows that books must indeed be good ornaments if a prosperous businessman so values them! He interprets the familiar 'books-as-friends' trope in an unusual way too: thus, books are better than human friends, not because they are always there for you (the usual observation), but because you don't have to agonise about whether to send them invitations; furthermore, you can shut them up without hurting their feelings!

*Debates* about reading arise mainly in connection with the questions of what and how to read. Lists of what to read are a constant feature of the tradition from the start. Most of the advice books, from Noah Porter's on, have a list appended, often to help with 'forming your own library'. Some advisers endorse

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12. Smith glosses and exemplifies this reason as being able to 'find yourself' in a particular writer, and thus to use a book for private consolation and company. C. Alphonso, Smith, *What Can Literature Do For Me?*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921, p.11.
other people's lists as good enough for them: Frederic Harrison, for example, gives his approval to the 'library' compiled by Auguste Comte in the 1840s: a list of five hundred books 'of permanent value' in the fields of poetry, science, history and religion, designed for working men as part of the Positivist program of education. Others compile their own: Lucy Soulsby, Drury and Sinnett, C. Alphonso Smith, Luther Mott, Arnold Bennett and Mortimer Adler all supplement their advice with extensive lists. In a few the lists dominate the advice, for instance J. Sherwood Weber's Good Reading: A Guide for Serious Readers, through its many revisions and reprints.

The question of lists of good or great books once again raises the possibility of a clearcut transatlantic difference, only to have it blur somewhat on closer inspection. There is a popular view - perhaps a mainly British one - that Americans produce more lists of great books, and value them more, than the British do. There is probably an element of truth in this, the 'self-help' tradition being stronger in America than Britain; but - unsurprisingly perhaps - the reading-advice books offer no real evidence of it. Not all of them provide lists, but the majority do, and there seems, at this level, to be no particular national tendency apparent. Soulsby, Sinnett and Bennett, for example, are all British and all of them present extensive booklists; and the most famous list of all, Sir John Lubbock's 'Hundred Best Books', was British too. Lucy Soulsby, crusty headmistress of an Oxford girls' school, is very forthright about the need for lists, brooking no nonsense about them from the young ladies, fresh from her school, who formed her primary imagined readership.

'You may very likely find my books dull. If so, do not be rash in expressing your feelings.' There were of course some reading-advisers (both British and American) who stood firm against the barbarity of lists. Ironically A.W. Pollard, co-compilator of that doyen of scholarly booklists, the Short Title Catalogue, was one, sternly deprecating not only booklists like Lubbock's, but also the uniformly-bound reprints series, those 'stately and monotonous volumes ... deprived of flavour and friendliness', that were so popular in Britain for most of the nineteenth century.

14. Like most truisms, this one is difficult to reference precisely. A typical expression of it occurs in David Denby, Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World, New York: Touchstone Press, 1997, pp. 204-205.
15. The Lubbock list was first contained in an address entitled 'The Choice of Books' by the great pioneer of the British public library system, Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury), delivered at the London Working men's College, and printed in his The Pleasures of Life, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1887, pp.65ff.
Many American advisers produced lists, but the most exhaustive answer to the question of what books Americans should read came in the form of two very large ‘classics’ collections: the 50-volume Harvard Classics, originally marketed as Dr Charles W. Eliot’s ‘Five Foot Shelf’, first published in 1909 and reprinted many times since; and some thirty years after that, Mortimer Adler’s 54-volume set, *Great Books of the Western World*. Both sets came with built-in reading advice, explicitly aligned, in both cases, with the ideal of a ‘liberal education’, but with some clear differences: the Harvard Classics are more ‘literary’ in content, for example, than the Chicago collection, and they include more excerpts and fewer whole works, a practice Adler regarded as a recipe for ‘intellectual St. Vitus’s dance’.

One of the recurrent general questions posed in relation to what people should read was: is it possible to read too much? Could excessive reading, even of good books, be damaging? Surprisingly perhaps, the case for the affirmative was sometimes stoutly maintained: you could indeed overdo it. Theodore Koch, for example, adduces no less an authority than Milton’s Christ to argue that ‘many books ... are wearisome’ (*Paradise Regained*, IV, 321-2), and quotes Arthur Schopenhauer to suggest that if reading allows the author to think for us, too much reading reduces our capacity to think for ourselves:

> This is the case with many learned persons: they have read themselves stupid. For to occupy every spare moment in reading, and to do nothing but read, is even more paralyzing to the mind than constant manual labor, which at least allows those engaged in it to follow their own thoughts.

Indeed, over-indulgence in reading is a vice — *le vice impuni*, as the French critic Valéry Larbaud is quoted as saying, ‘and in the young may prove a menace to character-building’.

Not surprisingly the unqualified nature of that view modulates, especially in the twentieth century, into the more familiar admonitions against reading too much ‘pulp’ or popular literature at the expense of ‘serious literature’. Ranged against the advocates of highly selective reading such as Harrison and Koch is a nineteenth-century phalanx of four liberal peers, Lords Sherbrooke, Avelbury, Balfour and Bryce, together with Augustine Birrell and, in the twentieth century, the English novelist Hugh Walpole and the American scholar Frank Luther Mott. All are champions of ‘wide reading’ doctrine, all professing some version of Sherbrooke’s view that ‘the reading of better books will come when you have a habit of reading the inferior’.

The debate on how much to read, like the debate on what to read, persists throughout the advice tradition,

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shifting at times from considerations of quantity to questions of method, from 'how much?' to 'how?'

This third and in some ways most interesting question to be dealt with by the advice books is 'how to read?'. Most of the books devote at least a chapter to describing, prescribing and illustrating techniques, habits, rules and routines for reading: such things as annotation, note-taking, minimum daily amounts of reading, optimum times in the day for reading, sequencing books (or types of books) in the most engaging order, pursuing particular topics or themes through a variety of genres, comparing and contrasting books, adopting favourite authors, reading aloud, memorising, and a host of other 'literate practices'.

One surprisingly long-running debate in this area has to do with the practice of 'skipping' – reading so as to leave out the 'dull' or otherwise unpalatable bits of books, in order to maintain the all-important inclination to read (the traditional rationale) or – more pragmatically – leaving out the 'dispensable' bits in order to cover more ground in the limited time available to the proverbial Busy Man (a rationale seldom found before the twentieth-century). Differing views on this question are expressed over several decades of reading advice.

Authorities could be summoned on both sides of the skipping debate: the licence to 'skip' was definitively authorised: by Montaigne, and also – if somewhat more equivocally – by Bacon, Samuel Johnson, Emerson and others. On the other side Quintilian had insisted that 'every good writer is to be read, and diligently; and when the volume is finished, is to be gone through again from the beginning', and Pliny that 'no book was so bad but that some part of it might be profitable'.

The reading-advisers themselves similarly line up on both sides of the question. Skipping is explicitly recommended to British readers by Sir Arthur Helps and Augustine Birrell, to Americans by Frank Luther Mott among others. (Australian readers were urged by the Scots-Australian essayist and man-of-letters Walter Murdoch, to 'skip like young lambs' if they felt like it, thereby becoming 'the skippers of their souls'). Others, like Arnold Bennett, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Frederic Harrison, and Lucy Soulsby deplored skipping as a form of mental laziness or moral delinquency. Jay Broaden Hubbell, an American adviser of the 1920s, similarly disapproved of the skipping of books, yet he and others were prepared to make an exception for the skipping of newspapers, even to recommend it.

The skipping debate remained an issue within the institution of reading-advice for many years. In certain instances the advocates of skipping and skimming the classics were undoubtedly canvassing the development of more 'efficient', less time-consuming forms of reading for people in a hurry who nonethe-

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22. Quintilian and Pliny (the Younger, but himself quoting his uncle, the Elder) are both quoted by Ireland, Enshrined, p.6.
less wanted to acquire a familiarity with the great books. The contradictions inherent in that project were eased, if not genuinely resolved, in the first half of the twentieth century by anthologies of effectively 'pre-skipped' classic extracts and highly organised reading regimens such as those provided by the International University Society in Britain and the Harvard Classics Reading Guide ('Fifteen Minutes a Day') in the United States. In the previous century, it might be argued, skipping was seen less as a form of efficiency than as an instrument of intensification and entertainment, and earlier anthologies such as Elegant Extracts (1805) and The Casquet of Literature (1876) are more confident in the sufficiency of those aims.

Such generalisations about the social functions of reading advice tend to lose cogency and interest the more broadly they are applied. Accordingly, I have refrained from venturing much further down this track in the present article, and have tried to examine principally the 'traditionality' of the reading-advice books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, considered as a series. My focus, in other words, has been on their character as an institution. This is not necessarily the most obvious or even the most interesting thing about them, when considered book by book. For quite apart from the varied styles and personalities of the writers, the books are all, in some degree, responding or at least alluding to contemporaneous cultural and intellectual contexts.

Thus, Frederic Harrison's commitment to Comtean Positivism, Llewellyn Jones's interest in philosophical Pragmatism and his loathing of the Humanists, and J.B. Kerfoot's intimate knowledge of the silent cinema, were clearly important factors in the writing and reception of their advice-books. Similarly, Robert Rogers' critical views on the Book of the Month Club and his involvement in a 'Creative Reading' enterprise in Boston, and Gerald Stanley Lee's links to the Chautauqua Society, deserve investigation in their own right. My interest, however, has been in the centripetal dimension of the series as a whole, the force of internal consolidation and containment that keeps even an outlier like I.A. Richards' How To Read a Page 'in the loop', not just as a negative rejoinder to Adler's How To Read a Book, (which it is, in part), but also in a positive sense, in having links to the same notions of critical semantics and 'straight thinking' that were referenced by some of the American reading-advisers of the 1930s.

One function of such a self-unifying, self-maintaining tradition, throughout its near century of existence, may have been the 'management' of externally im-

27. Stuart Chase's The Tyranny of Words (1938) was the most popular American exponent of Semantics and 'straight thinking', Chase references and expounds works by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards (The Meaning of Meaning, 1932), Alfred Korzybski (Science and Sanity, 1933), Kenneth Burke (Permanence and Change, 1936) and others.
posed changes in reading behaviour by absorbing the new tensions and questions that these changes produced, as and when they occurred, into a well-established corpus of observations, anecdotes and debates about book-reading. In that sense it might be seen as functioning, at times, as a conservative counterweight to the literary avant-gardes; at other times as a facilitator and disseminator of new reading possibilities.

It is also true, I think, that the advice-books worked to secure a certain dignity and autonomy for the activity of reading as distinct from that of writing, and to preserve an awareness of the books of the past as distinct from those of the present and future. In the political climate of the 1930s and 1940s, 'swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight', those were things that needed doing for the sake of a literary culture. The armies arrayed against reading in our current climate may be (pace Bloom) less ignorant than in former times, and what is under threat may be not so much literature as books; but the old reading-advisers seem once again to be playing their part.

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APPENDIX

Anglo-American Books About Reading: A Select Chronology

Noah Porter, Books & Reading, New York, Scribner’s, 1871.
C. Alphonso Smith. What Can Literature Do For Me? NY, 1913.
Frank Luther Mott, Rewards of Reading. NY: Henry Holt & Co. 1926.
I.A. Richards, *How To Read a Page*, 1945