

On One's Reading

By Seneca (4BC – AD65)

(From letter CV)

JUDGING from what you tell me and from what I hear, I feel that you show great promise. You do not tear from place to place and unsettle yourself with one move after another. Restlessness of that sort is symptomatic of a sick mind. Nothing, to my way of thinking, is a better proof of a well-ordered mind than a man's ability to stop just where he is and pass some time in his own company.

Be careful, however, that there is no element of discursiveness and desultoriness about this reading you refer to, this reading of many different authors and books of every description. You should be extending your stay among writers whose genius is unquestionable, deriving constant nourishment from them if you wish to gain anything from your reading that will find a lasting place in your mind. To be everywhere is to be nowhere. People who spend their whole life traveling abroad end up having plenty of places where they can find hospitality but no real friendships. The same must needs be the case with people who never set about acquiring an intimate acquaintanceship with any one great writer, but skip from one to another, paying flying visits to them all. Food that is vomited up as soon as it is eaten is not assimilated into the body and does not do one any good; nothing hinders a cure so much as frequent changes of treatment; a wound will not heal over if it is being made the subject of experiments with different ointments; a plant which is frequently moved never grows strong. Nothing is so useful that it can be of any service in the mere passing. A multitude of books only gets in one's way. So if you are unable to read all the books in your possession, you have enough when you have all the books you are able to read.

And if you say, 'But I feel like opening different books at different times', my answer will be this: tasting one dish after another is the sign of a fussy stomach, and where the foods are dissimilar and diverse in range they lead to contamination, of the system, not nutrition. So always read well-tried authors, and if at any moment you find yourself wanting a change from a particular author, go back to ones you have read before.

Each day, too, acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well. After running over a lot of different thoughts, pick out one to be digested thoroughly that day. This is what I do myself; out of the many bits I have been reading I lay hold of one. My thought for today is something which I found in Epicurus (Yes, I actually make a practice of going over to the enemy's camp - by way of reconnaissance, not as a deserter!). "A cheerful poverty," he says, "is an honourable state." But if it is cheerful it is not poverty at all. It is not the man who has too little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more. What difference does it make how much there is laid away in a man's safe or in his barns, how many head of stock he grazes or how much capital he puts out at interest, if he is always after what is another's and only counts what he has yet to get, never what he has already. You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth? First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough.