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Electricity and Personal Magnetism

We are puzzled in one respect by a recent series of advertisements in which Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Mason Brown, and Edward Teller endorse a 54-volume set of writings called the "Great Books of the Western World." The set of writings is published by Encyclopaedia Britannica in collaboration with the University of Chicago. It is supposed to put the thinking person in touch with the great ideas of civilization by making available to him, in their entirety, great works by the great thinkers themselves. Now the set, which can be bought on easy budget terms, includes some science. It includes, for example, Faraday's *Experimental Researches in Electricity*, which is 642 pages long, two columns to a page. What puzzles us is whether such learned and astute public figures really believe that a person interested in gaining an understanding of modern science and its development should proceed by making his way through this material.

To be sure, the reader is permitted at his discretion to skip unprofitable pages, and few thinking persons are likely to linger very long over, say, tables giving, for the 1840's, monthly magnetic declinations at Toronto, St. Petersburg, Washington, Lake Athabasca, and Fort Simpson. But how helpful, in addition, if the reader were only told which portions of the work describe fundamental discoveries and which of Faraday's views are no longer accepted. And how helpful to be told, if the readers of this material are to communicate with anybody but one another, which of Faraday's special terms have been replaced by other expressions and what the new expressions are. And finally, how helpful to be advised how much of this work to read before turning to other writings of Faraday, to other 19th century scientists, and to other scientists of other centuries.

Putting aside for the moment the problem of the general reader, our own impression is that a professional scholar, who is not a physicist or a historian of science, would be delighted, when reading Faraday, to supplement his own judgment on how he could concentrate his efforts with the judgment of some better informed colleagues. He would regard such assistance as no more presumptuous than the suggestion that he read Faraday in the first place. After all, the material may be new to him, but it is not new to the world. Why, then, should more heroic demands be made of the general reader than of the professional scholar? Furnishing each reader with a host of learned friends may not be feasible, but it is possible to give each one, in the form of properly introduced and annotated texts, the information such friends could supply. This is not to say that the general reader cannot improve his understanding of modern science and its development by studying great scientific papers. And there may even be a grain of truth in the advertisements' claim that perusal of man's great intellectual achievements will enable the reader "to think, speak, and act with new and impressive weight." But if contact with the soil is good on occasion for everyone, it does not follow that everyone must plow the soil afresh.

Other readers of these advertisements, of course, may be puzzled in other respects. Admirers of Dostoevski, for example, will note that the set of writings does include a reading schedule for some, if not all, of the books, and that the first half of *The Brothers Karamazov* is scheduled for one year, and the second half for the following year. What may puzzle Dostoevski enthusiasts is whether Schlesinger, Brown, and Teller are really so unfeeling as to ask any reader of the first half of the novel to wait even a week before starting the second half.—J.T.