FOUR CHILDREN

BY ROBERT GRAVES

[*Spectator*]

As I lay quietly in the grass,
   Half dreaming, half awake,
I saw four children barefoot pass
   Across the tufted brake:
The sky was glass, the pools were glass,
   And not a leaf did shake.

The autumn berries clustered thick,
   Seldom I met with more;
I thought these children come to pick,
   As many picked before;
Each had a long and crooked stick,
   And crowns of ash they wore.

But not one berry did they take;
   Gliding, I watched them go
Hand in hand across the brake
   With sallies to and fro.
So half asleep and half awake
   I guessed what now I know.

They were not children, live and rough,
   Nor phantoms of the dead,
But spirits woven of airy stuff
   By wandering fancy led,
Creatures of silence, fair enough,
   No sooner seen than sped.

GEORG BRANDES ON READING

SOME men, not otherwise given to paradox, have maintained that the invention of printing has done more to stultify the human mind than any other single event in its history. They argue that, as men have fallen more and more into the way of learning things at second hand, their powers of learning at first hand have steadily diminished. The more a man knows through books about the manners of Koreans, they say, the less he is likely to know about his own garden. The result of reading for fifteen minutes a day in books recommended as the great books of the world is the achievement, not of Culture, but of a false sense of intellectual security, and such readers are to be compared to ostriches rather than to owls.

The injurious results of reading might be less grave if the superstition were not so current that there is a clearly defined list of great books that every man can profitably read and ought to read. This is the heresy against which Dr. Georg Brandes sets himself in an article 'On Right Reading' in the *Berliner Tageblatt*. Those readers who, when asked what single book they would choose to take with them for a protracted sojourn on a desert island, automatically answer, 'The Bible,' will be disturbed by Dr. Brandes's saying that not even the Bible as a whole can be urged upon all men as worth reading. The Old Testament especially, he points out, is made up of elements very unequal in their value, and many parts of it can be read intelligently only by very learned men. If the Bible falls short of having a universal cultural value, how much truer must this be of every other book in the world!

It is all very well, he continues, for children to be introduced to a somewhat conventional group of great books, — *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Odyssey*, Walter Scott, *Don Quixote*, and so forth, — but there is something defective in the cultivation of a grown man or woman who never reads anything out of the main current, never develops a special taste for some little-known or disregarded author of his own. 'No one, for example, reads the English historian Gibbon any more. Yet I once knew a young German painter and poet who had read and re-read his great book with the keenest pleasure. Gibbon's wide range of vision, his extraordinary intellectual independence, and his uncommon descriptive powers, make his history a book of permanent value, and my friend Arthur Fitger considered him the historian who had taught him more than all others.'

Dr. Brandes's choicest scorn is reserved for those readers who are so eager to know all there is to be known that they have recourse, not to great books themselves, but to books about them, to 'Histories of Universal Literature' and the like. Such readers do find themselves in possession of all the names and facts, but, like the small boy who knew all the swear-words and never used them, they profit very little