



On the Advisability of Accumulating Books

Though chronically under-funded, public libraries consistently rank among the most popular and highly-esteemed aspects of local government. A library offers boundless entertainment and information of the highest order, for free, and also a haven of relatively quiet public space within which to pursue any and every interest. Nowadays all public libraries have computer access, most of them are equipped with WiFi, and many have coffeeshops attached. We sometimes wax nostalgic about the Carnegie libraries of the previous century, but they are gradually being replaced by a new generation of stylishly-designed buildings, often with exposed birch, maple, or cherry shelving, mellow carpets, fireplaces, and comfortable chairs with expansive views out across suburban woods or marshes. Librarians are almost invariably friendly and knowledgeable these days, and eager to go the extra mile to put you in touch with those little-known databases that take the grind out of any research project. Meanwhile, by means of inter-library loan (easily accessed on your computer at home) it has become possible to get your hands on almost any book in print—and also a great many that are no longer in print—for no charge, if you have the patience to wait a little.

Perhaps the single glaring drawback of the public library system lies in the fact that you have to *return* the books. For those who read a book diligently from cover to cover this may not be such a problem, but for those readers who, like me, tend to flit from book to book as the mood strikes them, even a long series of on-line renewals might not be enough. And in any case, it's only natural that the thrill we experience in the midst of a public library's shelves is one that we'd like to feel more often. Our

books are our friends. We'd like to bring them home and have them near at hand—both the ones we've read and the ones we look forward to reading. This is one of the reasons people buy books.



It seems to me that, following the pattern set down in 850 CE or thereabouts by Johns Scotus Erigena in his *Divisions of Nature* (though applying it in a different direction), we can divide people into four categories. Some people buy books and also read them. Some people buy books but *don't* read them. There are some who read books (courtesy of friends or the public libraries) but *don't* buy them; and some people neither buy books nor read them.

For many years I placed myself in the first category. I was an avid buyer of books, and it seemed to me that I read quite a few of them too. I would snatch up a book-club edition of *The Way of All Flesh* at the Salvation Army even though I'd never heard of it, simply because it looked like a classic that I might want to read some day. The house is now filled with such books, and enough time has passed that I can say with some degree of confidence that quite a few of them will never get read.

I like to think that in recent years I have moved into the category of those who read books, but no longer buy them much. Yet little piles of books seem to grow like mold in stray corners of the house, and it may be that I have fallen into the dismal category of those who continue to buy books while never actually making much of an effort to read them.

I was raised in a house with books, though they were largely the detritus of my parents' college coursework. I never actually *saw* my mom or dad open the volumes of Freud, Plato, Whitehead, and Russell that sat on the shelves—maybe they'd had already memorized them. In any case, my mom had taken an avid interest in the John Jakes series of historical romances, while my dad had long since settled into a routine of reading British mystery stories, a habit which he fed by weekly visits to the public library.

I would often accompany him on his Wednesday night trips around the shores of White Bear Lake, and I would return home clutching the latest anthology of Charles Adams or Peanuts cartoons, or *Dirt*

Track Summer, or Shorty at Shortstop.

A few years later, when my mother returned to the university in pursuit of her long-delayed degree, I would occasionally accompany her in lieu of a day at school. While she went to classes I would eat microwave sandwiches from the purple Chuckwagon truck parked next to Morall Hall while perusing cheap Modern Library editions of *The Trial* or *Troubled Sleep* that I'd just purchased at the Co-Op Junior in Stadium Village.



In those days the problem was to find enough books to fill the three shelves of the pine bookcase in my bedroom. (Edgar Rice Burroughs paperbacks don't take up much space, after all.) My concern has long since shifted in the opposite direction, toward matters of finding shelves, rear-

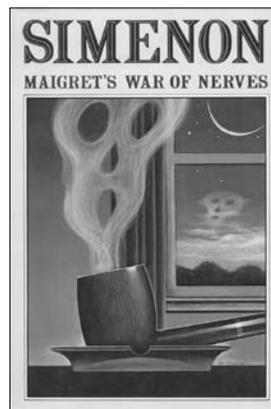
ranging books, and of determining which volumes I might actually rid myself of without lasting regret. Do I really need to be at all times within easy reach of hardbound editions of seven of Anatole France's novels? (Perhaps not.) Or the complete works of Laurence Sterne in six cracking leather-bound volumes? (I don't think so.)

Yet the desirability of having a few books around the house has never been at issue. Books are attractive. Books are fun to read. More than that, books are an extension of memory. It gives me pleasure, at this moment, to glance across the desk at the shelf beyond the printer, where, in the shadows over in the corner, I see a paperback copy of Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* next to George Moore's two-volume novel *Abelard & Heloise*, followed by Richard Rodriguez's book of essays, *Days of Obligation*. Then comes Henri Bergson's *The Creative Mind*; a novel by the Dutch writer Cees Nootboom, *The Following Story*; and a slim hardcover edition of *Man in the Holocene* by Max Frisch. It strikes me that this is an interesting group of books, and it pleases me to note that I've read at least part of every one of them.

ARRANGEMENT

Whether they can actually be called a "group" is doubtful, however. They don't have anything much in common. Yet to my mind, part of the pleasure of looking at books comes from the odd juxtapositions and surprising associations, and nothing can kill that sensation more quickly than to discover some sort of moronic order to the arrangement. Alphabetization? How primitive! Grouping books by subject, so that all the books about architecture, for example, are in the same place? Corbusier would be appalled.

Without patterns of organization, of course, it becomes more difficult to find things, and over the years a few zones of reading matter seem to have developed in spite of themselves. For example, most of the travel books, seldom-used cookbooks, and nature guides have made their way to the basement, along with the little genre fiction I possess. I'm not sure that I need to keep twelve hardcover Simenon mysteries near at hand, though most of the dust jackets date from the same era, which gives the ensemble a certain value as a design specimen. Meanwhile, the



novels of Leo Perutz sit side-by-side on the shelf upstairs—I tend to get them confused with one another—and my collection of Willa Cather novels stand in a row high up in the upper corner of a wall-to-wall shelf, well out of reach, and almost out of sight. I've already read most of them, and the dull greens and browns of the cloth bindings are nothing special to look at.

To look at? Yes, aesthetics does play a part in the arrangement of books. You may find an element of pretension in such considerations: "Who are you trying to impress?" And all of that. Yet would anyone be shocked to discover that our newer, better couch is in the living room, while the one our cat ripped to shreds sits the rumpus room? I think not. I would go further and advocate that books be arranged with due attention to height, gloss, and the color of the bindings. One pink book can shatter the appearance

of an otherwise very pleasing array. And there are certain type-fonts that come close to being intrinsically offensive.

I recently came across a hardback edition (second printing) of Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* at a used bookstore in Hibbing. This must surely be one of the ugliest books ever designed. The cover



consists of a dribbly yin-yang symbol in pale purple and bright pink. But the price was right (\$1.00) and the essays are wide-ranging and also (so I told myself) historically interesting. I just now read her review of Stanley Kaufmann's anthology *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, which

evokes a time when liberalism was in the ascendant and religion was much more on the defensive in the political sphere. In those days it was trendy to wax nostalgic about religious feeling in a world bereft of God. In the essay Sontag criticizes this posture, which she describes as "empty piety," though she thinks it has become common in "the backwash of broken radical political enthusiasms." And the essay was written in 1961. (So much for the radical 60s!)

And yet, interesting or not, that book is too ugly to appear in the living room.

The matter of dust jackets aside, once we juxtapose books from different countries and eras it becomes more likely that we'll begin a search for one book and end up reading something entirely different—perhaps a book that we almost forgot we owned. You might think that this would be as satisfying as browsing a bookstore and coming home with a new and exciting purchase—but it isn't. It's the new book—the one we *don't* have—that will make our day, and perhaps change our life.

Alas, if reading can become a substitute for living, then buying can sometimes become a substitute for reading.

BUYING

There is no stopping the expansion of books, perhaps. What retards the process—thank goodness—is that as we get older, it becomes easier to remind ourselves, when on the verge of purchasing a book, that a very similar book is already sitting on the shelf back home that we haven't read. In any case, the books I buy nowadays come almost exclusively from remainder catalogs and the de-acquisition shops of public libraries.

There are few better ways to spend the tag-end of an afternoon, I think, than to thumb through a newly-arrived Labyrinth Books catalog. Labyrinth specializes in books by academic publishers that have been knocked down in price. Just reading the titles and short descriptions can be illuminating:

Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt: Nowhere, are the stakes higher for deconstruction than in architecture. By locating the architecture already hidden within deconstructive discourse, the author opens up more radical possibilities for both architecture and deconstruction.

This volume, which, as far as I can tell, is about tearing down buildings, has been torn down itself, from \$28.00 to \$12.98. Very exciting indeed!

Morality: Its Nature and Justification: "Gert argues that morality is a informal system that, while limiting the range of morally acceptable options, does not provide final answers to every moral question." 456 pp

This one has been marked down from \$35.00 to \$11.98. (And after all, who would want to pay full price for a book that fails to offer full-blown solutions to every moral problem!)

One occasionally comes upon an entry that seem to have been composed at little hasily, perhaps by an intern. For example:

Japanese Swordsmanship: Technique and Practice: Offers a wonderful introduction to the martial artist who has been exposed to limited swordplay in a martial arts class and wants to continue learning separately. Illustrations and explanations of the moves and forms help readers fully learn each lesson. 296 pages

Yet learning swordsmanship “separately” can only take one so far, I’m afraid. And being “exposed” to swordplay, rather than actually engaging in it, sounds a bit passive, not to say dangerous. That may explain the mark-down from \$35 to \$12.98.



Though such entries can be fun to peruse—informative and hilarious by turns—I’m more likely to actually *buy* something from the Daedalus catalog, which trades in remaindered mainstream titles. In fact, I recently placed an order with them that exemplifies the book buyer’s dilemma.

The three books arrived one Friday afternoon in a fine cardboard box: *The Tomb in Seville*, by Norman Lewis, *Casanova in Bolzano*, by Sándor Márai, and *K*, by Roberto Calasso.

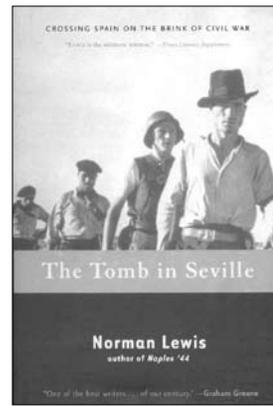
Having some time on my hands, I started off with the book about Casanova. Why had I purchased it? Because I doubt if I’ll ever *read* Casanova’s memoirs, which run to many volumes, but the film-version with Heath Ledger wasn’t all that bad, and I’ve heard that he’s an interesting eighteenth-century figure. According to the description in the catalogue, the novel brings our attention to bear on a brief, manageable period in Casanova’s life—the famous escape from the Venetian prison and the subsequent weeks spent in Bolzano. The author is described in the catalog as “one of the great modern novelists, in the same league as Gabriel García Márquez....” (A Hungarian Márquez? How bizarre!) who succeeds in holding forth on “just about everything important in human activity: love, honor, how to live, how to die, the importance of style and dignity...”

But after eighty pages I put the book down. I didn’t like Casanova and I didn’t like Márai’s style, which seemed to circle endlessly around events that should have been taking place at break-neck speed. In fact, the plot seemed to be merely an excuse for the author’s “holding forth” rather than a means of limning Casanova’s character.

As for the Calasso book, *K*, I bought it simply because Calasso’s *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is one of my favorite books. I suspect that his book about the myths of India, *Ka*, is also a master-

piece, though I haven’t read it, and I thought I ought to have this one too, even though I’m not a big fan of Kafka himself, to whose life and work the book is devoted. In all probability *K* will sit on the shelf for ages, unread and eventually unnoticed. On the other hand, the signal virtue of owning books is that from time to time we *do* pluck some such forgotten volume off the shelf unexpectedly and are transported to new worlds of fascination and delight. But Kafka? Yes, but Calasso! And the book cost less than a glass of cheap red wine.

The third book, *The Tomb in Seville* by Norman Lewis, was a guaranteed winner. Lewis is one of my favorite writers and the description in the catalog matched my own impressions of Lewis’s work exactly:



“Acclaimed British travel writer and novelist Norman Lewis here recalls the pilgrimage he and his brother-in-law made through 1934 Spain to the

family crypt in Seville. As the country began to tear itself apart, the two found themselves traveling on foot, sleeping in caves, dodging bullets while seeking a café, and taking a detour through Portugal. The *London Review of Books* hailed this final work by Lewis for its ‘genial, gently ironic tone and a marvelous eye for the odd and grotesque’”

By the end of the weekend I had read the book. Fine landscapes, interesting people, more than a few adventures, daring river crossings and bullets flying everywhere. Of course I loved it. I even copied out a few passages. Here, for example, is a fine section, both insightful and description:

The walk turned out to be of great interest and provided an opportunity to analyze that sense of the fantastic which the Spanish landscape seldom failed to produce. I came to the conclusion that this visual effect originates partly in the dryness of the air which leaves the remotest corners of the plain unsoftened by distance, and in its turn produces an almost eerie feeling of proximity with the very limits of vision.

With this went a kind of suppression of irrelevant detail, a directness and evenness of coloring, and something of a stylization of light and shade in the manner of a travel poster. The hollows and hillocks, and the rare line of poplars, appeared to arrange themselves in rhythmic patterns. The fields reeled away in all directions, forming immaculate designs in pale gold and silver. Summer had long since withered away in a single week, and the sun glittered with chilly brilliance in the dark blue sky.

Yet here the question arises: If you knew you would like the book, and read it immediately when you got it, wouldn't it have been just as easy to check it out of the library? Easy, yes, but far less satisfying. Because beyond the experience of reading a book, there is the pleasure of having it close at hand. A book's physical presence is both a comfort and a reminder that however vague and uncertain our memories of a narrative or an exposition of theory may become, they can easily be revived by simply re-opening the book. And the very sight of a book may remind us of stories and ideas that had faded from view entirely. In all likelihood we will never again catch sight of a book we returned to library last week. And if we *do* want to see or read it again, the library may no longer have it.

This brings us to perhaps the best source of cheap and interesting books, the de-acquisition shops of public libraries. It's a pity to see these choice volumes so wantonly discarded, yet books do take up a lot of space, and more than occasionally the library system's loss is our gain.

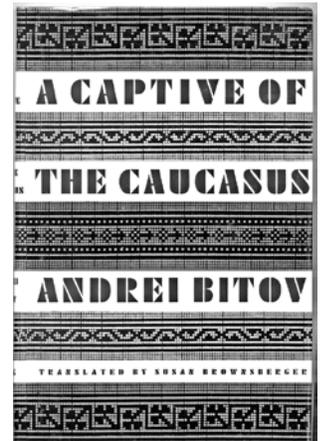
A short list of hardbound books that have come my way in recent times for \$1.00 or less would include: *The City and the Country* (1973), by Raymond Williams; *Peaks: Seeking High Ground Across the Continents*, by Richard Bangs (signed); *Even in Quiet Places*, by William Stafford; *The Unknown Swedes*, by Vilhelm Moberg; *The Pleasures of Wine*, by Gerald Asher; *Floods, Famines and Emporers*, by Brian Fagan; *Consilience*, by Edward O. Wilson; *A Portrait of Lost Tibet*, by Rosemary Jones Tung; *Other People's Trades*, by Primo Levi; *To the Frontier*, by Geoffrey Moorhouse; *Notes from Madoo: Making a Garden*

in the Hamptons, by Robert Dash; *The Camera My Mother Gave Me*, by Susanna Kaysen; *Playing Cards and Their Story*, by George Beal; *The Good Citizen: a History of American Civic Life*, by Michael Schudson; *Billancourt Tales*, by Nina Berberova; *Killing Time* by Paul Feyerabend; *Archeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, by Colin Renfrew; *A New World*, by Amit Chaudhuri; *Classics Revisited*, by Kenneth Rexroth; *Downtown: My Manhattan*, by Pete Hamill; *Sephardic Flavors*, by Joyce Goldstein; *In a Hundred Graves: A Basque Portrait*, by Robert Laxalt; *The Inner Chapters*, by Chuang Tzu; *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, by Barry Sanders; *A Captive of the Caucasus*, by Andrei Bitov; *King: A Street Story*, by John Berger; *Your Face Tomorrow*, by Javier Marias; and *The Mirror of Ideas*, by Michel Tournier.

The list goes on and on. (And so do the shelves of books.)

Before such books *do* find a place on the shelves, however, it's important that they lay around for a while on the coffeetable, the nightstand, the dresser or the back of the desk.

The idea, after all, is that you're going to look at them *soon*. Even to look at the cover a few times, and experience the anguish of as-yet-unfulfilled explorations, commingled with a tinge of buyer's remorse perhaps, will impress the book in memory, and



give it a slot in the cerebral card-catalogue we all lug around inside our heads. A book that slips off into the shelves prematurely, on the other hand, may vanish from consciousness for decades, if not forever.

The discerning reader may have noted that most of the acquisitions I've listed above would fall into the category of literature or *belle lettres* rather than fiction. I find myself at a loss when the conversation turns to the subject of Books Recently Read, and my friends recite their overlapping lists of novels from *The Kite Runner* to *March*, from Cormac McCarthy's *The*

Road to Anne Tyler's *Digging to America*. I can hear sentences forming in my head that begin, "The other day I looked at this book about ..." but such remarks have no purchase in the world of popular novels, book-clubs, and genre fiction. A biography of Adam Smith? In any case, it would take far too long to explain *what makes* a given passage or book about mountain climbing or Swedish immigration interesting. I would certainly *like* to get a few more novels under my belt. (And in fact, I recently read a fairly good one: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid.) It's a great feeling, to get a fine novel under your belt that you can hold to yourself and refer to in conversation for the rest of your life as something that really made a deep impression. A book that you can recommend without reservation.

Though such events are rare for me, I recently finished a very fine Norwegian novel, *Out Stealing Horses*, by Per Petterson. It's a novel about being a boy and growing up and fathers and sons, with lots of rivers and pines and also a serious World War II dimension. The poetry of it reminded me a little of Mark Spragg's non-fiction work set in Yellowstone, *Where Rivers Change Direction*, though the narrative had more subtle time-shifts and perhaps a better story-line.

More often you'll find me with my nose in a book like *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged*, by Roger Scruton. Well, books about the decline of culture are a dime a dozen these days, and they probably always have been. After all, it's been two thousand years since Cicero lamented, "Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book."

Scruton's contribution to the genre has the merit of being short, and his command of the Western tradition allows him to deliver statements of vast historical sweep with utter confidence, without dwelling overlong on the details. For example:

It is because of America, its success, its conflicts, and its symbolic importance in the world, that the question [of Western identity] is still with us.... Take away America, its freedoms, its optimism, its institutions, its Judeo-Christian beliefs, and its educational tradition, and little would remain of the West, beside the

geriatric routines of a now toothless Europe.

Examining the shifting role of religion within this skein of affinities, he comes to the conclusion that it has never really vanished from the scene:

The extreme point has been reached today, in which neither the elite culture nor popular entertainment belong to the practice of religion, but where both, in secret and not so secret ways, bear the impress of religion, and carry into the world of enlightened common sense that now surrounds us, precious canisters of the intriguing darkness from which humanity began and for which some part of us still yearns.

In a similar vein, he revives Aristotle's theory of the relation between ethics and habit without boring us unduly with Aristotle himself, and he defends the New Criticism (without ever mentioning it by name) against more recent theories about poetic interpretation that abandon aesthetic issues entirely in their eagerness to advance the politics of resentment.

In the final chapter, Scruton defends the autonomy of aesthetic judgment based on feeling and the recognition of value, and outlines a "ray of hope" that serious culture might once again move to the forefront of serious education. That isn't likely to happen any time soon. No one is giving out PhDs these days for feeling, judgment, or aesthetic insight; we pick those things up on our own. That's just one more reason to surround ourselves with books.

And the same was probably true in Cicero's day.

WEEDING

But as the books pile up, decisions must eventually be made about what to keep and what to toss. It's a time-consuming process and very easily put off. The minute we take a book into our hands, it suddenly becomes interesting again and the situation begins to take on the frustratingly paradoxical character of a fairy tale. Not only do I no longer want to *rid* myself of the book in my hands, I actually want to sit down and begin reading it immediately, thus short-circuiting the entire weeding process.

To combat this effect I have developed a two-

tiered approach, with books being removed first to the basement, where they're given the opportunity to redeem themselves (and also get musty). Once they've moldering among the cobwebs for a decade or so it becomes easier to convince myself that I *really* don't have much interest in them.

In recent years I have begun to notice, as I select titles from this subterranean collection and place them into boxes, that 90 percent of them have a library's withdrawal stamp on the first page. Some of them have made their way through my entire system of acquisition without being opened, like a tomato seed that moves from one end of the alimentary canal to the other without providing an iota of nourishment. Yet there is really no way to know in advance which of the titles we purchase will later capture our attention, and which will pass us by unnoticed. It's the price we pay to have a cornucopia of interesting paths of inquiry available to us in every corner of the house.

I am usually too lazy to scrape the bar codes off the plastic dust jackets of these library rejects, and many of them remain unbought by the used-book dealers I show them to and end up at the Salvation Army. But just this afternoon, I got lucky. Having gathered up three boxes of books from the basement, I set off on my usual round of visits. My first stop was Biermeier's B & H Books on 4th Street, on the west side of the freeway in the further reaches of Dinkytown. It's a small, old-fashioned shop with wooden floors and displays of books piled high in the windows. In my college years I lived a block away and was going there before B & H sold it to Biermeier. It's easy to park right out front—an important consideration when you're lugging three or four boxes of books around—and the owner's pricing is knowledgeable and fair, if not lavish. He's a quiet, circumspect fellow—we never talk—though he does seem to remember my last name. On this occasion he offered me \$25 for a small stack he'd drawn from my offerings and set aside on the desk.

"Has the bridge collapse affected business?" I asked him as he was writing out the check.

He looked up at me and replied mordantly, "Let's just say it hasn't helped."

"The books keep piling up," I said, gesturing vaguely around the room.

"Don't I know it," he said.

As I bent down to gather up a box of the rejects I said, "It seems like these boxes are as full as when I brought them in!"

"I snuck a few of my own in there, just to get rid of them," he replied with a kindly smirk.

With this brief exchange we had arrived at an entirely new level of jocularitry.

My next stop was the Bookhouse in Dinkytown, where the critical issue is to get a parking meter nearby. I pulled into a vacant slot on the far side of the street, crossed over to the store, and went inside. A short woman with wildly gray hair stood in front of the counter. She was engaged in an animated conversation with several other members of the staff, but when she turned and saw me she looked me in the eye and said, "Well hello, John. We don't see *you* around here much anymore."

"Hi, Kristen," I replied, "How have you been? I was in a few times when you weren't here."

It may have been true. But by the time I'd finished that remark she had gone back to the issues she was discussing with her staff. It appeared that she was on her way out. In a momentary break in the conversation I said, to no one in particular, "Can someone look at a few boxes of books?"

"How many have you got?" Kirsten asked, turning in my direction once again, genuinely hoping to be helpful but clearly in a rush.

"Just two," I lied, not wanting to scare her off.

"Oh, bring them in. Bring them in." So I consolidated the three boxes into two as best I could, leaving a few of the real dogs in the trunk, and hobbled back across the street with my load.

While Kirsten was looking through the books I went down to the basement to peruse the philosophy section—mostly old tired books with absurdly portentous titles involving being, contingency, truth, method, and so on. I could hear books being slapped one on top of another hastily in the lobby upstairs, and at one point I heard Kristin say to an associate, "He's a very old customer. A friend of the store." I was rather flattered by the remark, though I drifted

on around the corner to the anthropology section, fearful of what I might hear next. (“Always brings in junk.”)

Finally I made my way back upstairs. “We can give you \$25 in cash or \$31 in trade,” she said.

“Sounds fine to me. I guess I’d better take the cash.”

“I’m glad we had time to take care of that,” she said. And then it was back to explaining to an assistant at considerable length how to UPS some package to Toronto, and on out the door she went, with an assistant trailing behind her.

It occurred to me at that point that Kirsten had said nothing about the rejects. My third and final stop would normally have been the Salvation Army. But with no rejects to deliver, and \$46 burning a hole in my pocket, I could think of nothing better to do than to stop at Surdyk’s to pick up a few bottles of Grange des Rouquette GSM, a powerful but affordable Rhone blend made by the Boudinaud family, who have been making wines in the Rhone Valley for five generations—or so the label reports. I don’t care if they started last week, the wine is good. (In case you’re wondering, the “GSM” stands for the grape varieties used to make the wine—Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre.) I also purchased a “rustica” baguette in the cheese shop next door.

During my hunt through the basement earlier in the morning for discardable books I had come upon a forgotten volume called *History and the Humanities* by Hajo Holborn. I don’t know who Hajo Holborn is, but the book looked interesting, and visions of a pleasant evening were beginning to take shape in my head involving the Boudinaud family’s wine, a new collection of Mozart violin sonatas I’d recently checked out of the library, the baguette, some Hope butter, (a dairy that churns butter the old fashioned, small-batch way) and an intriguing essay from the Holborn book called, “Wilhelm Dilthey and the Critique of Historical Reason.” Now we’re really living!

READING

Mustn’t forget about the reading. Though some book-buyers fall into the category of

collectors—those who buy but don’t read—I don’t. I might occasionally become curious about the value of my Doré Bible, my complete set of the works of Francis Parkman, or my signed copies of books by Cather, Milosz, Glenway Westcott, or the Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein, and look them up on-line. The figures you see there are not great, and in any case reflect not what *you* would get for the book, but what a dealer would *like* to get, to cover the cost of the book and the overhead during the ten years it has already spent on the shelf. In any case, though the figure for a given book may be many times what I paid for it, it would only buy groceries for a week or two, while the pleasure of having these lofty thinkers present and in close proximity—their very signatures!—is incalculable.

No, I buy a book for only two reasons: to open up the possibility of actually reading it someday, or to have that presence close at hand. A book is like a temple, after all. It contains life. Every book is limited by its chosen subject, format, and range, but within its chosen realm it is likely to be far more well-balanced and complete than the lives we are living out here in the real world, beyond words, on the *outside*. That’s where the pleasure of reading comes from. As we follow the words we go *inside*, bending our thoughts into new and unexpected types of order, absorbing new visions and experiences, suffering new depths of emotion. For some, it’s an essential form of nourishment.



Some fifteen years ago, in *The Disappearance of the Outside*, Andrei Codrescu was already exploring the possibility that the rise of computer-gaming and various forms of Virtual Reality might dissolve the distinction between inside and outside, with unfortunate consequences for the human psyche. The explosion in popularity of Ipods, which give each of us the opportunity to assemble a soundtrack for our own little ongoing autobiographical drama, might also be contributing to the same effect. But I’m not sure these observations and criticisms differ much from the ones leveled a hundred years ago at young adults who buried their noses in books, rather than stepping out

into the world to play rugby or at least collect a few butterflies. Are books an escape from reality, or are they reality intensified? I suppose it depends on what you read. And how you read.

In the essay on reading that he wrote in 1905 and published in the magazine *Renaissance latine*, Marcel Proust seemed to take greater interest recollecting *where* he enjoyed reading as a child—which room, which chair, which hour of the day—than *what* he was reading. He goes on, however, to describe reading as a pleasantly one-sided friendship in which we need not trouble ourselves wondering what the author thinks of *us*, and can laugh or become bored tactlessly, as we see fit.

Yet in Proust's view the larger value of reading lies in its power to transfer a sort of "breeding" from the author to the reader. Beyond the empty eloquence of a de Musset and the vain striving for distinction of a Fromentin, (Proust's chosen examples) writers of all sorts convey to us the "good manners" of the mind.

In spite of everything, literary men are still like the people of quality of the intelligence, and not to know a certain book, a certain particularity of literary science, will always remain, even in a man of genius, a mark of intellectual commonness. Distinction and nobility consist, in the order of thought also, in a kind of freemasonry of customs, and in an inheritance of traditions.

Strange views! Few of us "know" all the right books. In fact, the very idea that such a canon exists begins to wither as we discover, in the course of our reading, how many truly remarkable writers remain entirely unknown, much less vaulted into the firmament of those writers whom *everyone* ought to have read.

To his credit, Proust warns against the habit of excessive reading as a means of passive entertainment, observing that reading "is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it."

I would say that to read *Don Quixote* is a good thing, even if we never go on to write a worthy sequel. Numerous studies have shown that reading provides far greater mental stimulation than watching television, for example, regardless of the content involved.



A recent poll conducted by the Associate Press revealed that in the previous year one in four Americans did not read a single book. Such trends are worrisome. The same poll also reported, however, that among those who *did* claim to have read at least one book, the average number read was seven. I find that impressive. Putting these numbers together, we arrive at the average number of books read per adult—five. The report, drawing on other sources, also revealed that 3.1 billion books were *bought* in the United States last year. That's ten books for every man, woman, and child in the country. Without getting too demographic about it, we can say that the average adult bought fifteen books and read five of them last year. That's a lot of new books for a nation to absorb, year after year.

I suspect that people read more books than they report. A year is a long time, after all, and it isn't all that easy to remember back. I have been surprised more than once to come upon a relatively recent journal entry referring to a book that I would swear I had read several years ago.

The bad news hidden in the study's fine print, in my opinion, is that the Bible and other religious works accounted for 67 percent of the books read. I doubt if many of these readers actually read the Bible cover-to-cover last year. More likely they read a passage or two at the dinner table before sitting down to a meal. There's nothing wrong with that. But reading the Bible to the exclusion of other books could arguably be taken as a sign of cultural regression. The study went on to report that those who read religious works are more likely to be "older and married women, lower earners, minorities, lesser educated people, Southerners, rural residents, Republicans, and conservatives." Thus all stereotypes are confirmed—and isn't that what sociology is all about?

In any case, we should remain suspicious of attempts to link fluctuations in reported book-reading with rising and falling literacy, intelligence, or moral fiber among Americans. It remains to be proven that reading a Harlequin Romance or a passage from Deuteronomy once a month makes you a

better person than reading the *New York Times* every day or the *Economist* once a week.

For most readers the real issue will always be—too many books, too little time. It amazes me to thumb through the copy of the *New York Review of Books* that arrives in the mail twice a month. Leaving aside for the moment the excellent and comprehensive reviews themselves, I am flabbergasted by the advertisements for university and independent press publications announcing the arrival of so many fascinating studies that it makes me want to cry. No one could possibly keep up with all the fine literature, subtle lines of historical investigation, and serious political analyses being produced these days, on top of all the outdated titles that continue to pile up around the house.

Take William Dilthey, for example. I am well aware that his name is not a household word, though Ortega y Gasset, for one, considered him the most important philosopher of the second half of the nineteenth century. Dilthey falls into the category of those thinkers who recognized the importance of the individual in historical analysis, and therefore found little use for social theory, yet could not rid themselves of the bad dream of making history a science.

That, at any rate, is my vague recollection. I'd all but forgotten Dilthey until I opened that stray copy of essays by Hajo Holborn I mentioned a few minutes ago. Yet now that I've been reminded of his presence, I'm eager to get going on that essay. And I have a dim memory of having purchased a trade paperback of Dilthey's work from a stall in the lobby outside the Border's Bookstore in Calhoun Square—the one that closed down a few years ago. It had a teal blue spine. Yale University. Now where has that gone to?



The French essayist Joseph Joubert (1754-1824) once wrote:

I would like thoughts to follow one another in a book like stars in the sky, with order, with harmony, but effortlessly and at intervals, without touching, without

mingling; and nevertheless not without finding their place, harmonizing, arranging themselves. Yes, I would like them to move without interfering with one another, in such a way that each could survive independently. No overstrict cohesion; but no incoherence either; the lightest is monstrous.

Stars in the sky. Thoughts in a book. Books on a shelf?

Such delicacy can eventually lead to diffidence and inertia, however, and it's interesting to note that Joubert himself never wrote a book, leaving it to his executors, including Chateaubriand, to choose aphorisms from among his letters and journals after his death and settle on an arrangement for them. But it's easy to see what he was driving at. There are many books that might just as well have been essays; many essays that could easily have been whittled down to a paragraph or two. I sometimes wonder how much of what I know (or think I know) about books comes from the blurbs on the back of books.

On the other hand, the world that is built up in the pages of a novel draws its strength and vividness from layering, shifts in perspective, and the cumulative effect of conversations and events. Similarly, the flow of ideas in an essay by Montaigne, say, can sometimes sustain an environment of thought that's more pleasing and more powerful than any of the ideas or observations contained in it.



Not long ago I ran across a passage in which the charms of "good writing" were spelled out in some detail, with W. H. Hudson's prose being taken as a case in point:

Mr. Hudson...seems always to be meditating or remembering; writing for him is a means of saying what he would never say aloud. He makes his dearest friend of the reader, and confides in him with speech that has the beauty of a wild animal's eyes... He seldom says much in a single sentence or paragraph, but he has a cumulative power that cannot be proved by quotation, a wandering music that blows where it lists, because he never forces his inspiration or tells you what he has not got to say...

That Hudson is a very good writer I would not dispute. (Ford Madox Ford once remarked that Hudson wrote the way the grass grows—and meant it as a compliment!) Whether his writing is *powerful* I'm not so sure. His most famous book, *Green Mansions*, is a novel, but most of his works take the essay form. A quick survey just now of various bookshelves here and there around the house has produced copies of *Birds and Man* (1901), *Hampshire Days* (1903), *Green Mansions* (1904), *Tales of the Pampas* (1916), *The Book of a Naturalist* (1919), *A Traveler in Little Things* (1921), and *A Hind in Richmond Park* (1922). It took a little digging to locate my copies of *A Crystal Age* (1887), and *Far Away and Long Ago: A History of My Early Life* (1918).



W. H. Hudson by Hermenegildo Sàbat

Hudson was something of an oddity even in his own day, and one of his contemporaries commented that writers of his ilk "...are likely to remain few, for they are little encouraged. We are not yet a public of readers civilized enough to demand the highest virtues of prose; we prefer 'clamorous sublimities' and phrases that ask to be noticed; we must be urged through a book by the writer's whip." Hudson is certainly not a well-known writer today, but looking at the copyright page of *Far Away and Long Ago* I notice that in its time (which happened to be immediately following Hudson's death in 1922, as is so often the case) the book went through at least twenty-three printings.

Works like these are the kind that make the accumulation of books worthwhile. They do not demand to be read cover-to-cover. Quite the contrary. But when the mood suddenly strikes you to settle into a slow-moving Anglo-Argentine essay about birds, landscapes, or people, it may be just the ticket. It's unlikely that you'll find a copy on a spur-of-the-moment visit to your local Barnes & Noble store or local library. (The large and well-endowed Hennepin County library system carries five copies of *Green Mansions*, and that's it. The older Minneapolis system has twenty-three of his works. Not bad!) A similar argument could be advanced for books of poetry, and even those classics that you've always meant to get under your belt but seldom seem to have time for. Why not keep a copy around the house for that evening when the mood is right?



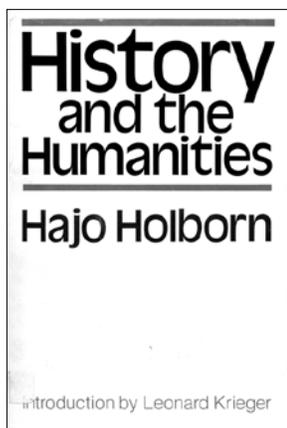
A slim book appeared in English translation recently, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, by the French psychoanalyst and professor of literature Pierre Bayard. Bayard has also written books about Proust, Balzac, Laclos, and Stendhal, among others, so we may presume that he has done some reading. Yet here he emphasizes the importance of the bigger picture, of the relation of books to one another, of that literary heritage Proust was talking about, which we might never get a proper bead on if we paused to actually *read* books cover to cover. At one point Bayard suggests that scholars own up to their incomplete educations and begin to employ a new set of abbreviations to go along with *op. cit.* and *ibid.* He suggests the following: UB: book unknown to me; SB: book I have skimmed; HB: book I have heard about; and FB: book I have forgotten.

It may be only fitting for me to admit that I have never seen, much less opened the cover of this book by Bayard—I merely skimmed a review of it. In any case, it seems to me that one further abbreviation might be useful: OB: book that I own, and have right here beside me (but haven't necessarily read).

I am sure that whatever else may be on his mind, Bayard does not advocate that we dispense with

reading altogether. It is necessary to establish at least a few pillars of rock-solid reading experience before attempting to raise an edifice of literary half-truths and speculations. And most readers hope to be swept up into a new and expansive world of experience at least once in a while.

Perhaps the opposite side of the coin being offered by Bayard receives a bit of polish from Francine Prose in her recent *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. I have skimmed several portions of this work, and it strikes me that the author's extremely close analysis of selected passages of, say, Henry Green's *Loving*, soon grow a little tiresome. There can be no mistaking Prose's love of literature, which is strong and deep, and I have little doubt that the effects she is describing are genuine. Yet to most readers, such effects are diminished by being too closely analyzed, like magic tricks the method of which has



been tactlessly revealed. All the same, I wish that I were engaged, right now, in an absorbing literary classic that would accompany me through the coming months. The type of book that simply carries you along, the way I remember being carried along in earlier stages of life by *Lord of the Rings*, *All the King's Men*,

Parade's End, *Vanity Fair*, *Woodcutters*, *Don Quixote*, *The Makioka Sisters*, or *The Charterhouse of Parma*.

I'm afraid I've become a dabbler. The last author I elevated into my personal pantheon of exalted geniuses was Jose Saramago, and that was years ago. I recently made a stab at *Last Evenings on Earth* by Roberto Bolaño but it didn't take. I thoroughly

enjoyed *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri—vivid, economical, penetrating, and more than occasionally wise—but these are short stories, and she's just too young. It would appear that I have only limited time for any one human voice or predicament. There are so *many* voices, insights, and perspectives available to us these days, and they stretch back for centuries.

I have recently had the opportunity to examine that essay on Dilthey by Hojo Holborn I was telling you about. Near the end of his critique Holborn underscores Dilthey's belief in "the relativity of every metaphysical or religious doctrine," and cites Dilthey's description of history as "a vast field of ruins of religious traditions, metaphysical positions, demonstrated systems of all sorts."

Such brief quotations can hardly serve as a summary of anyone's thought. Yet it strikes me that while the word "ruins" may apply to the history of architecture, it would never be appropriate when applied to the vanished religious traditions, philosophical systems, and individual works of art that make up the historical record. These things are certainly not in ruins. They're all around us still. In fact, they're right here on the shelf. And the relativity of which Dilthey speaks could never be one of aimlessly shifting sands or a wilderness of mirrors. Rather, it must refer to the relativity of a developing perspective that continues to claw its way, by means of reading—and living—toward a translucent and ever-clearer, yet still frustratingly elusive ideal.

