

A Sentimental Education

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BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS. I figure I own around twenty-two hundred of them. Those that I haven't read, I probably won't, and those I have read, I doubt I'll re-read. In fact, perhaps only one percent matter to me as material objects, but they *do* matter. These twenty or so books are neither rare nor valuable; some are even falling apart. Nonetheless, they have a place in my memory along the lines of tasting duck confit for the first time or coming nose to nose with a Siberian tiger in a gazebo. It makes no difference that their authors went on to write better books or no books at all. What's more, I wouldn't replace them with first editions or trade in an old softcover for a new hardback. Because then they wouldn't be mine. Most were acquired in second-hand bookstores or library sales; they didn't cost much then and probably, allowing for inflation, don't cost much now. You may own these books, too, but I'm willing to bet ten bucks and my bespoke shoes that you didn't read them precisely when and where I did.

Were you at 40, rue Blanche in Paris in the summer of 1970? Well, I was and so was a 1964 New Directions paperback edition of Borges's *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* with its now familiar muted black-and-gray cover photograph. How this book ended up in the darkly furnished apartment of a family friend, I can't say. But on a hot August day with rain pattering on the windows, I sat alone in a living room with too many chairs and lamps, immersed in stories whose narrative voice I had not encountered before: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia. The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejía." The scholarly tone, the amused hint of irony ("Mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of men"), and the possibility of a world

whose physical reality is disavowed seemed to me singular qualities absent from any previous fiction.

Although some early readers felt that Borges's stories were more about literature than credible examples of it, the critic George Steiner disagreed: "When he cites fictitious titles, imaginary cross-references, folios and writers that have never existed, Borges is simply regrouping counters of reality into the shape of possible other worlds." I generally don't write in my books, but my well-handled copy of Steiner's *Language and Silence* contains penciled brackets around various paragraphs and even one, on page 205, in (the horror!) red magic marker. Steiner was the first critic to make me see that art cannot redeem the world. His characterization of German officers listening to Schubert in the evening and going off in the morning to gas and burn human beings—now almost a trope regarding man's inhumanity to man—was a revelation to a young man whose grandparents might have been killed by those very officers.

Much of what Steiner later wrote seemed to me more intellectually elaborate than it needed to be, but *Language and Silence*, by which I mean my 1969 Picador/Penguin paperback, whose cover consists of a detail from Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, possesses for me the nostalgic quality of an early photograph showing someone who thought books held the key to wisdom. "Above all, a man's thought is his nostalgia," Camus observed, referring to our desire to be reconciled with the universe, which he believed was "the essential impulse of the human drama." My nostalgia is only marginally less grand. I want to be reconciled with that youngster who studied philosophy and believed that Novalis's description of it as homesickness, the desire to be everywhere at home, was at the heart of his interest in literature.

There was a time when I couldn't bear to part with any book I cared about. Some because they represented a small financial sacrifice; others because they kept me company when I found myself alone in strange cities. I moved around a lot in my twenties and sometimes books were all I had. I remember apartments without a TV or radio or telephone. Telephone booths were my cell phone; libraries my

Google. Books didn't so much sweep me away as keep me grounded. I burrowed into them, dug out a cozy pocket and lived there for a time. The few books I owned were stored in my parents' apartment in the Bronx, and the books I had read mostly came from the Fordham Public Library or libraries wherever I happened to land. And, of course, secondhand book stores.

Although many of the secondhand book stores along Fourth Avenue in Manhattan were gone by the time I began to visit Book Row in the late 1960s, a few remained like the Academy Book Store on West Eighteenth Street, and whenever I found myself near Union Square I made sure to walk a few blocks north. I also popped into the Argosy Book Store on East Fifty-Ninth Street, the Gotham Book Mart on East Forty-Sixth, and, of course, the Strand, which, truth be told, struck me the same way as a Wine Warehouse does today. I usually find what I'm looking for, but after fifteen minutes I'm ready to go.

One day, in 1986, in downtown Rochester, New York, I wandered by chance into a secondhand shop and gleefully made off with a pint-sized, reddish hardback of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Croxley Master and Other Tales of the Ring and Camp*. There's no copyright date, but it was published by the George H. Doran Company, which operated from 1908 to 1927, when it merged with Doubleday. Conan Doyle was a fan of the prize ring and wrote a half dozen stories about fisticuffs, including "The Bully of Brocas Court," which to my knowledge is the only story ever to feature a pugilistic ghost. You can buy a used copy for around five dollars on AbeBooks, but you'd have to pay me fifty times that for mine.

Today, the idea of halving my library doesn't bother me. If you're looking for a thousand books of poetry, fiction, history, biography, philosophy, and criticism, I'm the man to see. Nonetheless, there's that one percent that stays put. I doubt that I'll reach again for my green, case-bound 1961 Modern Library copy of *Ulysses*, but I don't see how I can let go of the amazement I felt the first time I read the damn thing. The same holds true for my New Directions sixth printing of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*. The novel's opening one-paragraph

sentence doesn't seem as glorious as it did when I was twenty-four, but it did once, and so the book stays. And like every other person who lives west of Broadway near Morningside Heights, I own the two-volume blue-and-beige Modern Library edition of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The first volume's copyright is 1934, while the second volume's is 1932, so it may not be a matched set, but I can handle that. And though C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation has its well-documented flaws, I have no desire to measure it against more recent translations. Odd to think that these books were published just ten years after Proust's death, which means, of course, that this year marks his centennial *yahrzeit*.

"My great adventure is really Proust. Well—what remains to be written after that?" Virginia Woolf lamented in 1922. Well, *To the Lighthouse*, for one, which brings me to my 1955 Harvest Book edition, whose yellow lettering on a blue backdrop above an expanse of blank whiteness makes every other cover of the novel seem either too busy or commonplace. Lighthouses and thoughtful-looking women have adorned the novel's various covers over the years, but none calls to mind the delicious feeling of slowly coursing through the melodic middle part, "Time Passes," which leads to the titular and final section, which begins: "What does it mean then, what can it all mean? Lily Briscoe asked herself, wondering whether, since she had been left alone, it behooved her to go to the kitchen to fetch another cup of coffee or wait here." Could it be that this confluence of an existential and a mundane question is Woolf's answer to Lily's musings? I probably missed this the first time around, but I remember all too well my startled sadness on hearing so casually of Mrs. Ramsay's passing.

I didn't buy many novels when I was young. That's why libraries were invented, and because Dickens's and Dostoyevsky's novels were borrowed, I never formed an attachment to their jackets. I did, of course, buy the novels assigned in class, and I came to own a good many more thanks to library sales, but the books that I went out of my way to purchase were those that addressed—well, what Lily wondered about—the meaning of things or, more accurately, how humankind

has tried to make sense of the cosmos and our place in it. A tall order and susceptible to philosophical woolgathering, but I was lucky. At twenty-three or twenty-four, I stumbled across my 1971 Cambridge University Press paperback of C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (first published in 1964), which planted in my head the thought that "saving appearances" made the world stay round. I then picked up a second printing of Alexandre Koyré's *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), which details conceptions of the cosmos from Nicolas of Cusa to Newton. Koyré's is not strictly a scientific work (he was a philosopher and historian of science), whereas my 1953 Dover edition of J. L. E. Dreyer's *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1906, is definitely more celestial than sublunar.

It's hard to say why I was drawn to these books. I wasn't particularly interested in astronomy, but unanswerable questions about the origins and nature of the universe nibbled away at me. I was intrigued by *how* it began, but tortured by the *why*. Out of nothing: *something*. Out of the imponderable vastness: suddenly heat and gases and eventually massive grains of matter, and after billions of years, our solar system, and after more billions, life on earth, and then lickety-split in terms of something, consciousness or *existence* as we know it. For what? So we'd learn that we live briefly in an infinitely expanding *and* accelerating universe, a universe with dark matter and dark energy and antimatter and trillions upon trillions of stars, all of which comprise a tiny fraction of space—I mean, *what the hell?* "The stars, she whispers, blindly run," Tennyson wrote, scaring me when I was fourteen or fifteen.

I became a teenage cosmologist. I cut out magazine articles whose titles had the words "white dwarfs" or "black holes" in them. I drew my own Ptolemaic map of the cosmos. I kept a notebook about theories of the universe, and even though our galaxy is hurtling through space at over one million miles per hour, I was able to Xerox page after page in books and encyclopedias about the Big Bang. But none of it made any sense—not god, not creation, not even science.

I wanted what the ancients took for granted: the immutability of the heavens.

Unaware, of course, of how pretentious it sounded, I wanted to solve or, better yet, dissolve the paradox of existence. Why should existence even exist? Could it ever have not existed? In most respects, however, I was like any other kid. I hung out with friends, I began to smoke, I played softball, but at night in bed I wondered how the universe came into being and how there could be nothing *but* existence. Obviously such questions didn't tug at me as I dreamed about Jane or Ann in social-studies class, or argued whether Mickey Mantle was better than Ted Williams (he wasn't), but they were certainly the reason I was drawn to philosophy and literature.

Books, I thought, would make sense of things, and, at first, poetry, short stories, and novels compensated for the lack of certainty and meaning in life. Then, as I began to read nonfiction, compensation came in the form of the intellectual currents flowing between art, science, literature, and philosophy. E. M. Forster's injunction "Only connect" in *Howard's End* (a fine novel, but not among my one percent) meant not only relating to people; it also meant the epiphanic tingle I felt on page 15 in my twelfth printing of Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1974): "This change of taste in [English] gardening. . . was the foreshadowing, and one of the joint causes—of a change of taste in all the arts and, indeed, of a change of taste in universes."

The history of ideas has its own publishing history, and during the first half of the twentieth century it nearly became popular history. John Herman Randall, A. N. Whitehead, Norman Cohn, Jacques Barzun, and Isaiah Berlin all wrote books that found their way to my bookshelves, but they came too late to make the same impression as had J. B. Bury's *The Idea of Progress* (1932) and Herbert Butterfield's *The Origins of Modern Science* (1925). Bury's is a 1960 Dover book, and my relationship to Dover Books is an uneasy one. True, the pages are sewn in signatures and the bindings won't crack or split, but the absurdly stiff covers give me a pain. Butterfield's book is another story—a smallish paperback (a 1962 First Collier Books Edition) whose

publisher apparently did not believe in margins. Bury informed me of the eighteenth-century quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns (which played such a pivotal role in the development of a literary canon) and notified me that progress was an Enlightenment invention. And Butterfield, recounting developments in science, made sure I understood that history has to be interpreted from the point of view of those who generate it and not from the biases and assumptions of the present. These may not seem like theses that quicken the pulse, but to me, in my early twenties, they put the world in perspective, they provided connections, they yielded order.

Among my bookcases are four of burnished solid oak. Stacked two high, they measure eleven feet across, sixteen inches deep, and eight feet tall and probably hold a good half of my library. Sometimes I gaze at them from across the room and marvel. There's Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* next to Gershom Scholem's *Kabbalah*, and close by is *The Complete Works of Rabelais*. The books don't mock me; I'm very glad I read them, but I can't help thinking that they're mementos of a time when I was less wise and more hopeful, when death had little meaning and the world was ripe with possibilities. And I wonder if holding on to them is the same as holding on to my youth, an endeavor that just may not pan out.

Obviously, I don't know how many of them ended up in my apartment, though I'm pretty sure that my Modern Library editions of Wilde's *De Profundis* (1926) and *Intentions* (undated) were obtained at the biannual library sale held by the Amsterdam branch of the New York Public Library. These small bendy hardcovers, leather bound (or in a good imitation), have tenure not only because Wilde was the smartest literary man of his day, but also because I had to fight a hundred or so book collectors, including dozens of rude, snarling, ill-dressed book dealers, to get them.

Shoulders and elbows were also necessary to secure my 1922 second edition of *Trivia* by Logan Pearsall Smith, published in 1917 by Doubleday, Page & Company, as well as my 1921 first edition of

More Trivia, published by Harcourt, Brace, and Company. I hadn't heard of Logan Pearsall Smith (the best name ever for an essayist, though he mainly composed vignettes in "moral prose," some no more than half a page long) until Gore Vidal wrote a piece about him for the *New York Review of Books* in 1984. Smith may not be to everyone's taste, but to me he was the adult in the room: sensible, sensitive, and seeming in my mind to look like Leslie Howard. Well, he didn't, as it turns out (Google Images set me straight), but he looks every inch a man of letters, without my knowing, of course, what *that* looks like.

Paging through the essays today, I see that reading him at too young an age is an affectation, while reading him at too old an age calls into question the slightness of many of the pieces, and there may be no happy medium. Here is the entire last entry of *More Trivia*; it's called "The Argument": "This long speculation of life, this thinking and syllogizing that always goes on inside me, this running over and over of hypothesis and surmise and supposition—one day this Infinite Argument will have ended, the debate will forever be over, I shall have come to an indisputable conclusion, and my brain will be at rest."

I don't have a clue how I came by my 1974 University of Chicago Press paperback of Frances A. Yates's *The Art of Memory* or her equally magnificent *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, which I have in the Midway reprint of 1979, also from Chicago. Nor do I know how to summarize either of these works except to say that Yates was a British historian in the sense that Jussi Björling was a Swedish tenor or Babe Ruth an American baseball player. To my depthless, fidgety mind, Yates's staggering erudition, her comprehensive knowledge of Greek and medieval esoterica, was nothing short of intimidating. Her books made me want to learn all I could about the historical periods she dealt with and, at the same time, suggested that I didn't have the fortitude or the smarts to do them justice.

I may have even paid full price for her books, a rarity since so many of my books contain a penciled-in figure. My second edition of Joseph Chiari's *Symbolisme from Poe to Mallarmé: The Growth of a*

Myth (Gordian Press, New York, 1970, originally published in 1956) set me back, according to the inside cover, \$4.50 in August of 1977. The book contains a foreword by Chiari's "great friend" T. S. Eliot. Chiari, who authored some thirty books, is barely known today, and I probably bought the book *because* of the foreword. Anyway, sitting down with it forty-five years ago was like catching a movie one never heard of and being swept up in the story. In this movie, Chiari's introduction and first chapter make up a remarkable document about poetic influence, years before W. Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom tackled the subject.

Speaking of Eliot, time may yet dispatch my beat-up 1932 first edition of his *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (Harcourt, Brace and Company) before I do. Eliot, of course, is the theatrical warhorse of criticism, cited so often that I feel apologetic even mentioning him. But I have no choice. Consulting his essays fifty years ago, I knew I was in the presence of *authority*, I felt I was ingesting authority, and there was something both thrilling and comforting about his pronouncements on the English and French poets. It's terribly unfashionable today to be in thrall to authority, especially to one as privileged as Thomas Stearns Eliot, but in 1969, we knew that some writers and artists were just plain better than others. Period. I suppose you could say that I miss the days when writers had dominion over the earth or at least that part of it inhabited by readers who felt that poetry and prose could help explain and sustain their own existence. Can anyone today say of a writer what Maxim Gorky said to himself on first meeting Tolstoy: "I am not an orphan on the earth, so long as this man lives on it"?

Although Chiari's *Symbolisme* covers some of the same ground as Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle*, Wilson's book is mentioned only once and only in a footnote. Wilson's first book was the first of his that I read and the first to pique my interest in modern French literature. It was published in 1931 and the pity is that my 1969 paperback edition from Charles Scribner's Sons has a paisley, puce-blue-green cover design, which proves I can love what isn't attractive. Wilson

wanted to set symbolism in a broader cultural context and uses A. N. Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* (my copy is a 1995 Mentor paperback) to demonstrate that just as the romantic poets had rebelled against the notion "that man was something apart from nature, something introduced into the universe from outside and remaining alien to all that he found," so the symbolist poets disavowed the naturalism and scientific materialism of the mid-nineteenth century. Right, I thought, another example of Camus's nostalgia and one in keeping with Eliot's famous declaration: "In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered."

A dissociation that perhaps was never so gallantly expressed as by the French avant-garde around the turn of the twentieth century, and surely no book captured better the forms of this artistic expression than Roger Shattuck's *The Banquet Years*, whose 1968 First Vintage Books Edition rests inside its jacket like a closet built around one's clothes. John Gerbini designed the cover: a pale blue and two shades of white background hosting the disembodied heads of Eric Satie, Alfred Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Henri Rousseau. The heads are situated between a flying ten-men tandem bicycle and a vintage photograph of people gathered in a narrow field to watch an early biplane. Maybe it's just me, but I find the cover as indelible, if not as edible, as Proust's *petite madeleines*.

I mention these books not without trepidation. I worry they'll be seen as the humble brag of someone who wants the world to know that he has read some pretty highfalutin books. But we can't help what we read when we have no fixed idea about what we plan to do with our lives. These books had my number when the number of my years were relatively few. At fourteen, eighteen, and even twenty-five, certain books light up the mind and affix forever, in case one still isn't sure, one's bookish self. They not only clear the head; they allow you to imagine what others with more imagination have thought and envisioned. And they take your measure (are you really up to *Ulysses*—I mean, do you really *like Ulysses*?). For me, they gave me a hand up

the intellectual ladder without pushing aside novels or poetry or, for that matter, somewhat lower falutin books, books that I'd also hate to see go. Although hardly a collector, I've managed to scare up a fair number of antediluvian paperbacks by the likes of David Goodis, Dashiell Hammett, R. W. Burnett, Victor Canning, Charles Williams, George Simenon, Rex Stout, Donald Westlake, some in their original Avon, Bantam, Signet, Fawcett Gold Medal, and Pocket Books incarnations.

The first book I ever bought because I truly wished to own it is a faded red 1915 Oxford Edition of *The Poetical Works of John Keats* with gilt lettering that I purchased at Paul's Book Store in Madison, Wisconsin in 1968. It's a small solid book with gossamer pages whose front matter features a reproduction of Joseph Severn's famous drawing of the poet. Now and then I remove it from a glass-encased bookshelf and hold it in my hands. I believe we have a rapport. I believe we belong together, although I am not by nature a spiritual person. God, destiny, prognostication, and mild forms of paranormal activity do not trouble me. We control what we can until we can't, and if we escape misery or tragedy it's only because randomness, paradoxically, rules the universe. I say this despite the means by which I acquired one-tenth of my one percent.

Thirty years ago I contemplated writing about the British critic and raconteur Desmond MacCarthy. Accordingly, I headed off to Broadway and Thirteenth Street. In those days the literary criticism at the Strand was stuck in with Literature, which was somewhere toward the back of the store, near the left wall. Before I reached the rows designated by the letter *M*, a book fell from an upper shelf, just missing my head. I knew it was from a high shelf because of the loud clap it made on hitting the floor. It was *Desmond MacCarthy: The Man and His Writings*, a collection of essays put together by the British biographer David Cecil and published in 1984 by Constable and Company Limited. It wasn't the book I was looking for, but what were the chances of this one dropping at my feet, not just in a demure way, but seemingly pushed from a spot it shouldn't have been in the

first place at the exact moment I was passing by? This was no random occurrence. The universe and I may not have been reconciled, but at least we were in sync.

But to what purpose? I never did write a piece about MacCarthy, even though I soon found the book I *was* looking for in a used bookstore in Englewood, New Jersey. Titled simply *Criticism*, it was published in 1932 by Putnam and printed in England, and its preface concludes with a nod to Logan Pearsall Smith for help with the selections. Both books were a small revelation. Most critics write as though they know a lot more than their readers, but MacCarthy scribbled or typed as though we all belong to the same bookish fellowship. His prose conveys a modesty that complements rather than distracts from his considerable learning: "When I come across a profound piece of criticism into which the critic has, I feel, been led by surrendering to his own temperament, I wonder if my own method of criticizing is not mistaken." Striving to read impartially, he tamped down his biases and predilections in order to go "straight to the spot where a general panorama of an author's work is visible."

MacCarthy, to my knowledge, never wrote about Kafka, whose temperament was, to put it gently, very different from his own. Kafka had rather high expectations when it came to books. He thought we should "read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. . . . that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide." Not exactly Dickinson's "Frigate. . . to take us lands away," is it? Kafka's ability to feel the catastrophe in words, I confess, amazes me. Was I ever that sensitive to language? That responsive? Appreciation remains, but disasters. . . disasters are rare.

Then again, I don't buy Emerson's claim that "I cannot remember the books I've read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so, they have made me." Surely the man remembered *some* of the books that made him. Why be coy about it? As for me, my memory isn't a sieve, but it isn't a fortress either. I've got my one percent and then

some, and when I see the books stacked on my desk, covers tarnished, pages loose, spines creased, I can't say that any one volume is my Rosebud, but together they compose a person who, at one time, long ago, was emboldened to think he might actually understand existence or grasp more fully the imaginative possibilities in poetry and fiction. I never kept a diary or journal, so in a real sense these books constitute an approximate calendar of my past. Not that a more complete accounting would interest anyone, but it occurs to me that I have just written my autobiography.