

Ten books – Derek K Tracy

“Art is long, life short” Goethe taught us, and who reads, chooses. There is not enough time. Essayist Walter Pater said Romanticism added strangeness to beauty, and my favourite literary critic, the heavily flawed but brilliant Harold Bloom, expanded this to consider strangeness as the anchor and centre of all truly great works of art. We know it when we experience it, though we may struggle to define why. These ten works all have strangeness: sometimes light, sometimes heavy, always dancing and surprising; they have joy and wisdom. All have changed me. I cannot bear to try synopsis each into 150 word thumbnail outlines. As nothing pleaseth but rare accidents, I will, instead, describe moments or thoughts or memories or feelings from each. I have made no attempt to give them equal space.

Joy & sensuality

Leaves of grass – Walt Whitman

I sing the body electric. The song of my adolescence, the joy of my heart. My big brother, my kind uncle, my wise father: Gray Beard – O Captain! My Captain! The father of American literature, the democratiser and speaker of the American voice, filling the vast plains with his grand enumerations. How long have I loved Walt Whitman, “a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding, No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, no more modest than immodest”. His endless fecundity and energy, the ‘manyness’ of the cartographer of the self, the elegiac solitary wanderer looking in from outside.

I feel no others, no influences, in him, unless it is the discovery of the heart of the Hebraic *Song of Songs*, but he influences all after. DH Lawrence caught this perfectly: “Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman. Beyond him, none”. Of all the ten books, here I struggle most to capture and contain what I write, and how much I write: I feel a desire to show you page after page, verse after verse of *Leaves of grass*¹: look! Here! See what he wrote! “Incomparable things said incomparably well”, Emerson rightly proclaimed. I labour here to try weigh sunshine or fence in innumerable horizons, and instead can only let him – however briefly – talk to you himself.

*I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

*Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.*

Selected poems 1923-1958 - ee cummings

A triad of 20th Century American poets impacts me greatly: Pound, Eliot, and cummings. There are moments in Pound of unsurpassed beauty, verse cuttingly perfect. Eliot’s formal tortured Christianity of *Four Quartets* moves me deeply: the moment in the draughty church at smokefall

remembered - and there is only the dance. But when debating which of them to include, a line from cummings, the self-described “poetandpainter”, came to mind “thou answerest/ them only with/ spring”, and I will give over to his sensuality, and let him speak²:

*since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;
wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world
my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
– the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says
we are for each other; then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph
And death i think is no parenthesis*

Sin & penance

Paradise Lost – John Milton

I feel a penitent compulsion to re-read *Paradise Lost*³ about once a year, the irony of which - a lapsed Catholic turning to that great Protestant ascetic - is never lost upon me. Mankind is described as “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall”, though the real struggle between good and evil is Milton’s struggle; with his own faith, but also with the work itself, fighting, I feel, the suppressed realisation that his own creation, his Genesis, his Adam, the poem’s true hero, is Satan (“brighter once amidst the host/Of angels, than that star the stars among”). Every time I read it I am overcome by the poem’s newness and freshness; the shock of seeing ourselves in Satan, and the sense of the impossibility of this for Milton. Our secret delight and compact with him in uncovering the wonder of one of literatures greatest creations, magnificently malevolent and brooding. His sheer menace as he enters Eden and sees Adam and Eve, contemplating them as he plans their temptation (IV, 370-373):

*“Happy, but for so happy ill secured
Long to continue, and this high seat your Heav’n
Ill fenced for Heav’n to keep out such a foe
As now is entered”*

But we know his fate, as he knows it himself: “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell”. He may boast “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n”, but we don’t believe him, and he knows his torture to be eternal without hope of redemption, hating his state: “Under what torments inwardly I groan;/ While they adore me on the throne of Hell...So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,/ Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;/ Evil be thou my good”. I am always most stirred by the passage where Satan climbs and ascends to see Eden, intent on destruction, but is overcome by its beauty. The last line of verse of the passage is entirely overwhelming (IV, 153-156):

“...so lovely seemed
That landscape: and of pure now purer air
Meets his approach, and to the heart inspires
Vernal delight and joy, able to drive
All sadness but despair”

The Last Temptation – Nikos Kazantzakis

I will forever love *Zorba the Greek* for his unyielding, exuberant, joyous raging against the dying of the light, but *The Last Temptation*⁴ is Kazantzakis' masterpiece, and the great work on doubt. Why it was apostasy and banned by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches is self-evident. From the exegesis of Milton, Kazantzakis deigned – he fell - to write on episodes not covered in biblical texts, and expanded them, including terribly human disciples, the inner thoughts and fears of Jesus, and crucially, His doubts. To Kazantzakis, for prophesy to be fulfilled, Jesus must have true doubt about His divinity right to the very end of his life; without this, sacrifice is meaningless.

So much more obvious than the apostasy is the profundity of the faith described within the book: it is a work drenched deep in believe, and I say this as an atheist. Kazantzakis himself said the book was “not a biography, it is the confession of every man who struggles”. A quarter of a century after first reading it, three scenes haunt me still. The first is Jesus preaching for the first time, wracked by anxiety and uncertainty, wondering what he would say (“I am a simple illiterate man, poor and despised like yourselves. My heart has much to say, but my mind is unable to relate it”). Unknowing that the listening crowd saw whole armies of blue winged angels behind him as the Holy Spirit passed through him as he spoke. The second is his meeting with John the Baptist, who was foreseen his coming: the crowd crying out in fear as the river Jordan stops flowing as John pours baptismal waters upon Him.

If I think of devastating endings to novels, I tend to first recall *The Grapes of Wrath*, the horror of which always shakes me. But the ending of *The Last Temptation* is perhaps the greatest in western literature; a feat of near impossibility given how even the least pious of us already knows the traditional story. *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* It is accomplished.

On being human

Meditations - Marcus Aurelius

My stoic older brother to Milton; an interesting reflection for me is that I'm not sure I would self-identify as a stoic in the philosophical sense (I flip too readily to Epicurean), yet I am undoubtedly drawn to their works. Marcus Aurelius: the last of the five good emperors, the last holder of the Pax Romana. What is remarkable is that his writings⁵ were never intended to be seen. He wrote them for himself; spoken not meant to be heard, addressing himself. It gives them a unique honesty, devoid of ego and affectation. True questioning, full of doubt, uncertainty, struggle, and both self-reflection and recollection of the guidance of others

I can think of no more temperate a counsellor, and turning to him brings me peace even when answers are not found. Advice but never moralising: consolation. A good mind – human and humble - an examined life. He has some guidance for you; he wrote it two thousand years ago, but he knew you would need to hear it, today: “Rarely, and never without essential cause, to say or write to anyone that ‘I am too busy’; nor to use a similar excuse, advancing ‘pressure of circumstances’ in constant avoidance of the proprieties inherent in our relations to our fellows and contemporaries”.

He taught me “that both the longest-lived and the earliest to die suffer the same loss. It is only the present moment of which either stands to be deprived”. My family will confirm that when in Rome,

I dance around the Piazza Colonna, and the Doric column erected in AD 193 that pictorially celebrates his achievements. The Italians had the good sense to place the Palazzo Chigi, the residence of their Prime Minister, facing this; how often incumbents have sought counsel from the philosopher King, I do not know.

War and Peace – Leo Tolstoy

I read *War and Peace*⁶ in the most unlikely of settings - Botswana. Three months away on a med-school elective: in a pre-internet and reverse-charge calling era I wanted something to sustain me and thought if ever I get a chance to read this enormous work, it is now. So under African winter suns, more beautiful than European summers, I lived a Russian winter and Napoleon's invasion of 1812. EM Forster said that "The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends", and this is a book for which I have endless affection.

How to capture it? I think that Fielding's *Tom Jones* is perhaps the novel perfected, and Tolstoy himself did not regard *War and Peace* as a novel in the traditional sense, but nowhere has such rounded character development been matched. The word 'epic' has become debased and applied to box-set TV shows about fantasy kingdoms, but here is true epic, in terms of lives lived and grown and aged and matured. One of the least expected things that happened after reading it was a sense of knowing some people who did not exist. During events that subsequently happened in my own life, I would imagine what Pierre Bezukhov or Prince Andrei or Natasha Rostova would have said, how they might have reacted – indeed how they would have interacted with each other. An experience unique to this sublime work.

I sometimes feel that of the great Russian authors, Dostoyevsky is most credited as psychologically insightful; to me this feels true directly – indeed he frequently uses the word 'psychological' in his works, and a novel such as *Crime and Punishment* demands we explore human behaviour and motive. But I find that Tolstoy does this just as well, albeit indirectly; the growth in depth of the characters allows us to feel the many facets of humanity. When I contrast these two wonderful fathers, Dostoyevsky's existentialism can be crushing, a fate that somehow never befalls the personally nihilistic Tolstoy who manages to lift us in flight. Forster argued that whilst many novels captured a place, few captured *space*, and that this was the gift of *War and Peace*: the great space that is Russia, and how through it, "great chords begin to sound".

Rhythm

Flaubert called Don Giovanni, Hamlet, and the sea the three finest things God ever made. The two following works on an age-old anvil wince and sing, and are rhythm defined: the first starting with the sea, the second encompassing Hamlet; we'll deal with a different Don after. (For poems and rhythm, I am obligated to mention the sprung rhythm of Gerard Manly Hopkins and my inner adolescent call out to Belloc's *Tarantella*.)

The Waves - Virginia Woolf

Three books have caught me completely unaware and unexpected: *100 years of solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *Jazz* by Toni Morrison, and this⁷. I picked it up many years ago knowing nothing about it and little about Woolf. My memory is of a random purchase in an empty bookshop on a pre-parenthood lazy London Sunday sometime between Americano and Merlot o'clock. A small, thin book, and my first exposure to literary modernism.

Virginia Woolf wrote “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit?” It was a push back against the Edwardian emphasis on the “fabric of things”, and she lived it and she wrote it: a centrality of literary culture over the scientific or political. (Memorably, she quipped “in the end it turns out that civilisation is a lunch party at No 50 Gordon Square.”)

The Waves is a prose poem, one that gives primacy to the lyrical and to eloquence over something as mundane as narrative. It feels perverse to try elucidate the stream of consciousness that laps through the book like a soft dream that is half-remembered. But if I must convey something of it, it is six voices who speak – and a seventh who is only spoken about – that flow across and into each other. Often the story moves by what the characters do not say, but what we learn of them through their attitudes and behaviours in a book of intense originality. It challenges and dissipates the permanence of identity, the individual, and the self, reintegrating through human experience. The character Bernard tells us “I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville, Rhoda, or Louise: or how to distinguish my life from theirs”.

It completely captures her aesthetic, that Wildean call that all art is quite useless, and to give wholly to it exactly for that reason. Woolf demanded “Yet who reads to bring about an end however desirable? Are there not some pursuits that we practice because they are good in themselves, and some pleasures that are final?”

Ulysses – James Joyce

“m’m’ry”: a poem and a world in a single word. Memory with gaps, with multiple holes in it; memory that is damaged, flawed, only partially recalled. That is what only James Joyce can do. A quote from *Finnegans Wake*, a book I don’t suppose can be read, in the conventional understanding of the phrase, any more than the night sky can be fully seen. It can be looked at, enjoyed, returned to, but never really started or finished: his book of the night is larger than we can be. Not so with *Ulysses*⁸, his book of the day. Always immense in my mind from being a boy growing up in Dublin, it is founded upon the outrageous conceit of combining the *Odyssey* with *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, it is far more accessible than folk generally believe; Carl Jung rightly said of it “behind a thousand veils nothing lies hidden”, and the apparent verbal density is ultimately transparent.

I find Leopold Bloom the only character in literature to match Don Quixote in immensity. I see his thoughts – entirely naked – I can feel his kindness and generosity, his suffering, his eternal curiosity, yet not know his judgement. He forces me to judge, and I wonder how he treats me for that: with his kindness or with contempt? I picture his face looking at me, *homme moyen sensuel*, staring inquisitively, not unkind, blinking slowly, seeing all, but saying little. Middle aged yet ancient, preceding Dublin and all Dubliners – eternal man. His breadth of thought exceeds my capacity to know him (and I want to know him). Like the Don, he cannot be circumvented; unlike the Don, I do not feel invited in to converse, but am instead questioned, or I question myself; the Don teaches us, Bloom psychoanalyses us, but does not tell us what he finds. He is nature, and humanity: he holds up a mirror to us, and we see ourselves. Here Comes Everybody before he will fall asleep, dreaming himself into Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker in the *Wake*.

Two chapters perpetually confound me and show perhaps the edges of what is possible in literature. The Oxen of the Sun tells a seemingly simple episode of Mina Purefoy’s delivery of her child. The backdrop has Leopold meet Stephen Dedalus (Telemachus to Bloom’s Odysseus) and some of his drunken medical student friends at the maternity unit, awaiting Buck Mulligan. As a father, Leopold is

prompted to think of his own children, including one who died, and his worries for Mina; complex, adult realities and pains. Stephen and the students are in metaphorically children; they debate fertility and conception, but with youthful and immatured philosophies, before disembarking back to the pub. In the background, Mina successfully delivers her child. But stylistically, it achieves an impossibility. Joyce takes the history of English literature from Thomas Mallory to Dickens, writing the chapter alternating a pastiche of styles of a myriad of successive British authors; their literary growth, change, and development is the gestation of the pregnancy.

Even more stunning is the episode Nausicaa, one infamous for the wrong reasons, and a large part of why the work was initially banned for indecency. To say that misses the point is as great an understatement as one can make. It begins on Dublin's Sandymount strand, describing the actions of three young women looking after children; it shifts from action into the thoughts of one of them, Gerty. As it progresses one becomes aware of a different harmony entering, and that it has changed to the thoughts of another, a man; and from his - Bloom's - thoughts it alters into his actions. From one person to another, from action to thought to thought to action, playing like a symphony as one instrument takes up from another but continues the melody. From the idealised imaginings of young love of Gerty – “her every effort would be to share his thoughts” is realised as they anticipate each other's minds – to the sadness of his aged love; from romanticised to sexualised; from feminised to masculinised; from innocence to bawdy; from oneiric to mundanity. While in the background throughout, conducting the tempo, a church service – a temperance retreat - starts and plays and ends, pulsing and climaxing. Love laughs at locksmiths. Utterly magnificent.

Northrop Frye noted how Joyce's works, not organised on traditional principles, could give a sense of shapelessness, but were crafted and organised to an obsessional degree. This leads to the danger of viewing Joyce as a cryptogrammatic puzzle to solve; to get absorbed solely in such detail is truly to get lost, yet the depths of his work encourage endless re-readings and mining new jewels of discovery each time. Ulysses is, and has, lightness, if you will give yourself to it; humour pervades Joyce – he teases and plays, and the work is genuinely, repeatedly, terribly funny. It is sublime and self-knowing, pure artistry showing off, peacock-like. The daring of a genius in full awareness of the greatness of his powers: “Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-law. But always meeting ourselves.”

Wisdom:

Inferno – Dante Alighieri

Il sommo poeta, Dante of Florence, guided by Virgil, the poet of Rome. Like Milton and Kazanstakis, this most religious of works verges on the blasphemous through the audacity of Dante's righteousness and the telling of fiction as fact. Where it exceeds them both is in having the angels as witnesses to Dante, and not the other way around. Only Dante, pre-Renaissance, could have a pagan unencumbered by Christianity guide his own faith through reason, to a place where heart, beauty, and profundity of intellect combine.

If we adopt Bloom's model of strangeness being the central characteristic of the highest art, then it perhaps has its apotheosis in Dante. If his western canon exists, I believe it centres on this comedy that Boccaccio labelled Divine (why a 'comedy': it might be because it runs from the tragedy of *Inferno* to the happiness of *Paradise*, or perhaps because it was, atypically for the time, written in the vernacular – we'll never be sure). The comparison with Milton is instructive. Milton always has a

greater intimacy and seduction for me: a nearness, an immediacy, an epic yet also a lyrical ode. With Dante we read it hewn into the granite and cultural bedrock of civilization: it has always been, we just uncover what was always known. Carved, cleaved, bleeding still. In Canto III we read God's inscription on the gate of hell: "justice moved my maker on high" – it shouts of Dante's obligation to write for us.

Inferno is genuinely frightening and harrowing at parts. I can never escape imagining pre-reformation audiences reading it in fear as well as wonder. We struggle as a modern audience that a loving God could mete out punishments as harsh, as cruel, and as eternal as those described. We empathise with the sinners; perhaps as a psychiatrist, hearing the woes and frailties of others gives us some comfort in facing universal fragility. I feel the hurt in the verse where Dante, talking to a soul punished for having taken its own life by being transmuted into the body of a thorn bush, cries (XIII,84) "such pity fills my heart".

I always wonder what I lose when I read a translated work; I question it equally when I try imagine – at an extreme – translating the idiosyncratic Dublin vernacular of Joyce to other languages. I never feel this loss so much as when I read Dante. Italian-less, I marvel at the *terza rima* rhyming scheme in the Italian I can see on the opposite page, and imagine the individual words upon which verses and tercets swing and sing. I am enamoured reading the contrasting views of Dante scholars debating interpretations of a single word, and how such learning and conversation has been continued for over seven hundred years.

One feels a lifetime could be given to this work alone, and it never fully known, and, blasphemously, that is what Dante wished: submission and fealty to a revelatory new New Testament. Having passed through the gate of Hell, when Charon challenges their progress through the underworld and refuses to ferry Dante across the river Acheron, Virgil rebuffs him, saying of their journey (III, 95) "It is so willed where will and power are one". One feels that verse applies to the whole work, and Dante's sense of its primal primacy.

Don Quixote – Miguel de Cervantes

It is a foolish but fun endeavour to rate and rank works of art. I am always overcome by how qualitatively greater than all others my final choice is. How different. How strange. How permanently original. In the beginning and in the end, alpha and omega. No deeper wisdom of being human. Four hundred years of filtration through time, culture, geography, and language have left behind, in flame, what was true then, what is true now, what will be true always – a singular universal vitality. A book that cannot be overpraised, it shows us the very limit of art. When we read it, we feel the author, we meet a mind so much greater than our own holding us a world they have created, whose cognitive horizons we cannot scan. To read Cervantes is to be enveloped and encompassed; he is always greater, always further than us; we are held like children.

At a simplistic level it is a book¹⁰ on madness and meaning; a peculiar attractant I suppose to a psychiatrist. Don Quixote's madness - and the peasant-like simplicity of his Squire Sancho Panza - allows the world to be seen differently, newly, afresh, deconstructed. Folly, in this instance, should never be misconstrued for contamination of principles, which remain always just, yet equally it does not take a moral position, but rather one of moral inquiry where constructs of 'good' and 'bad' are unduly simple. The book's structure is utterly remarkable: the first part, published in 1605, tracks his chivalric adventures; the second part, published in 1615 is predicated on the Don being aware that his adventures have been printed and made him famous – those characters he meets now know him from Part One. It is an outrageous construct that allows profound discussion on how we are perceived, and what has value in life. Kundera called it the founding of the modern era of European art, centred on

man's being. The Don sallies forth in a new epoch and a world of ambiguity, from which a directing God of values and rules had fled.

It is tragic, it is heroic, it is wise; it is the funniest and saddest book I have ever read. I ache with happiness to think of it. It is the greatest friendship in literature: the wisdom the Don and Sancho share outwits us all. Herodotus said that knowledge may give weight, but accomplishments give lustre, and many more people see than weigh. We delight in seeing the Don's travels of adventure and achievement, and remember the tales of their encounters, but through the unburnished truth of their journey we are given the weight of their knowledge, through their conversations we learn, we grow, we are ennobled.

What it is, and what it means to be human: our frailties, our foibles, our suffering, our flaws, our greatness. Borges said "to fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god". We love Cervantes for gifting the Don to humanity, and we fall in love with the Don for being that most fallible of gods. A hero of our time, of all time. The Knight of the Funny Face, the Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha.

Conclusion

Re-reading my choices, I am surprised by how, well, Catholic it now seems to me. Perhaps it is more an Irishness, and a Joycean agon with a smothering loving mother, a Kathleen Ni Houlihan, and a long-absent abusive bulldog step-father, the national scars of which profoundly endure (I think Yeats' and Beckett's Protestantism only confirm the core Irish issues of identity and otherness). As Stephen Dedalus says in *Ulysses* "Famine, plague, and slaughters. Their blood is in me, their lusts my waves". Perhaps it is a cultural syntopical catholicism – with a small 'c' - of the type best captured by Hilaire Belloc: "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine/ There's always laughter and good red wine/ At least I've always found it so/ *Benedicamus Domino!*" Or perhaps, most parsimoniously of all, the Devil really does have all the best tunes.

Clive James, a most under-rated cultural critic (wit can be obscuring of wisdom) said that one can only really understand Dante at the end of one's life. I suspect that is true, and that it is true of all the wisdom writers, and our encountering their strangeness. Each decade has its charms; the years change and I change. These ten works remain eternal, but as I mature they reveal new beauties and depths as my life filters differently through their words and pages. I have relationships with them and their authors that deepen through my life. To borrow from Eliot, I shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all my exploring will be to arrive where I started and know the place for the first time; to give the last words to Whitman, "to elaborate is no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so". I am grateful to these ten books for their company, their counsel, their wisdom, and their joy.

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