

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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It is so unsatisfactory to read a noble passage and have no one you love at hand to share the happiness with you. And it is unsatisfactory to read to one's self anyhow—for the uttered voice so heightens the expression. —**Mark Twain**



A READING LESSON

Robertson Davies

“Of making many books,” warns Ecclesiastes, “there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.” Faced with the prospect of digesting centuries’ worth of Great Books, the reader today may throw up his hands in despair. Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, himself a maker of many books, offers a remedy: Read selectively, listen to the inner music of a writer’s words, and reread books that bring you pleasure.

First of all I think it is desirable to put aside some time for reading—perhaps an evening, or an hour, or half an hour, or even 15 minutes, but a time in which to read and do nothing else and pay no attention to anything but the book.

We can read any way we please. When I was a boy, and was known to be fond of reading, many patronizing adults assured me that there was nothing I liked better than to “curl up with a book.” I despised them. I have never curled. My physique is not formed for it. It is a matter of legend that Abraham Lincoln read lying on his stomach in front of the fire; you should try that in order to understand the extraordinary indifference to physical comfort that Lincoln possessed. I have read about children who “creep away into the attic” to read, and Victorian children’s stories are full of children who cannot read anywhere except in a deeply embrasured window seat. You have to find your own best place for reading, and for most of us in the Western world it is sitting in a chair with a decent light—though for Lincolnians, of course, firelight is the thing. I have forgotten those people of whom it is said that they “always have their noses in a book.” This makes reading difficult, but as I have said, you must suit yourself.

You then read your book, somewhat more slowly than modern educationists recommend. Remember, you are trying to find out what the book has to say. You are not straining to reach the end, in order that you may read something else. If you don’t like the book, you do not have to read it. Put it aside and read something you do like, because there is no reason at all why you should read what bores you during your serious reading time. You have to read enough boring stuff in the ordinary way of life, without extending the borders of ennui. But if you do like the book, if it engages you seriously, do not rush at it. Read it at the pace at which you can pronounce and hear every word in your own head. Read eloquently.

I know this is heresy. People who teach reading are dead against what they call “verbalizing.” If you verbalize, you lose time. What time are they talking about? Time is one of the great hobgoblins of our day. There is really no time except the single, fleeting moment that slips by us like water, and to talk about losing time, or saving time, is often a very dubious argument. When you are reading you cannot save time, but you can diminish your pleasure by trying to do so. What are you going to do with this time when you have saved it? Have you anything to do more important than reading? You are reading for pleasure, you see, and pleasure is very important. Incidentally your reading may bring you information, or enlightenment, but unless it brings pleasure first you should think

carefully about why you are doing it.

All readers used to verbalize as they read. Indeed, during the Middle Ages people read aloud, and everybody knows the story about the scholar who had to discontinue his studies because he had a sore throat. Because they verbalized—I hate that word, but I can't find another—they truly took in—drank in, one might almost say—what they read and it was impressed on their minds forever.

Verbalizing is also one of the best critical procedures. If you meet with a passage in a book that seems to be in some way dubious or false, try reading it aloud, and your doubts will be settled. The trick of argument or the falsity of emphasis, will declare itself to your ear, when it seemed to be deceiving your eye. Lots of young people come to me to ask my advice about writing. I haven't much to give them, and if they think anyone but themselves can teach them to write, they are sadly mistaken. I am fond of a story about Beethoven, who was approached by a young man who asked him how to become a composer. "I cannot tell you," said Beethoven, "I really don't know." "But you have become a composer yourself," protested the young man. "Yes, but I never had to ask," was the answer. I tell the young people who come to me to try reading their work aloud, to see how it sounds. "Oh, but I'm not writing for performance," they say. "Oh yes, you are," I reply, and often they are mystified. But in truth writing is for performance. The great works of imagination—the masterworks of poetry, drama, and fiction—are simply indications for performance that you hold in your hand, and like musical scores they call for skilled performance by you, the artist and the reader. Literature is an art, and reading is also an art, and unless you recognize and develop your qualities as an interpretative artist you are not getting the best from your reading. You do not play a Bach concerto for the solo cello on a musical saw, and you should not read a play of Shakespeare in the voice of an auctioneer selling tobacco.

This business of verbalizing, of reading so that you hear what is read with the inner ear, is an invaluable critical method when you are reading poetry. Much of what passes as poetry is perishable stuff. Not long ago I was making a comparison between the *Oxford Book of English Poetry* as it appeared in 1900, edited by the late Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and the latest edition, edited by Dame Helen Gardner. It was an astonishing revelation of change in taste—in the taste of scholars of great reputation who as critics command respect. But I permitted myself—critical worm that I am in comparison with these godlike figures—to wonder if Sir Arthur and Dame Helen had taken the trouble to read aloud all that they offered to the world, with justifiable confidence in their authority,

as a survey of the best verse of five centuries. Had Sir Arthur ever really tested “A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot,” on his tongue? If he had done so, could he have missed that what he took for honey was saccharine? Perhaps so; there are elements in literary taste that seem not to be things of reason but of something relating to time, which determines taste. When Dame Helen includes “Lay your sleeping head, my love / Human on my faithless arm,” most of her readers will applaud, but what will readers say in another 70 years? Modern disillusion is unlikely to last forever, and nothing rings so hollow as the angst of yesteryear.

Reading to hear, rather than merely to comprehend, explains much about the poetry of earlier days. Old ballads, which seem somewhat simple-minded, with their bleak stories and their repeated refrains, when they pass over the eye, leap into vivid life when they are heard, because they belong to a tradition of poetry that had not renounced the delights of rhyme, rhythm, and the quality of incantation that our distant forebears valued in poetry. Poetry that has decided to do without music, to divorce itself from song, has thrown away much of its reason for being, and a recognition of the element of music in poetry narrows the gap between, for instance, Keats and Byron, which might appear to a reader who had never heard them to be almost unbridgeable. Until quite recently there was an academic fashion of looking down on Tennyson, who was said to be mellifluous but simple-minded. But listen to Tennyson, and his music will tell you something that the closest sort of mute analysis cannot do, and his stature as a poet is restored and perhaps increased thereby.

I have been talking about poetry, and I do urge you to renew your acquaintance with it, if by chance you have not been reading much poetry lately. Perhaps this is the point at which I should advise you, if you are reading for pleasure, to read several books at once, and to keep on your table a book of poetry, as well as a novel, some essays, and perhaps a play or two. The notion that you have to read solemnly through one book before you can allow yourself to take up another is simple Puritanism, probably left over from childhood. If you choose to be an epicurean reader, which is what I am recommending, there will be times when nothing but poetry will satisfy your appetite, and you must have poetry readily at hand. Perhaps you like to keep up with what the young poets are doing, and that is admirable, but I urge you also to read some poetry that has been tested by time, and which does things that the moderns do not seek to do, or perhaps—I say this almost apologetically—cannot do. One of the things I miss in modern poetry is joy, exuberance, sheer delight in life. That is a quality that preserves a poet marvelously.

Ty hye, ty hye! O sweet delight!
 He tickles this age that can
 Call Tullia's ape a marmosite
 And Leda's goose a swan.

Who writes charming invitations to pleasure in a kind of splendid giggling frolic spirit like that nowadays? Not the people who write lyrics—if they may so be called—for rock music; their joy seems to have its roots in disarray of the mind. But the little squib that I have just quoted springs from joy that is unalloyed, and it was written in a time when the plague and war and the ill-will of nations was just as prevalent on the earth as it is today, and the average expectation of life was about 32 years.

I myself have a taste for Browning. There are times when nothing but Browning will do. He is not particularly musical, and that is odd, because he is one of the few poets who was a technically trained and skilled musician. His language is knotty and there are times when his reader feels like

The old man of Ashokan
 Who loved to chew wood, mostly oaken;
 Very often he'd quip
 With a smile on his lip,
 Ah sho' can gnash oak in Ashokan.

Browning's tough colloquialism used to be held against him, and as an undergraduate I encountered professors who would quote:

Irks care the crop-full bird?
 Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

—and then go off into paroxysms of dusty academic mirth at what they thought was Browning's willful clumsiness. But once you have accustomed yourself to his voice, Browning has golden things to say, and I have been a lifelong champion of *The Ring and the Book*, which is neglected by many readers because it is long and intimidating. But it is also a very great poem, and you do not have to read it all at once. But to sense its worth you should read in it, and reread, at various times in your life. Frequently it recalls to me the Loathly Damsel of medieval legend, who was repellent at first encounter but who, when embraced, changed into a girl of inexhaustible charm, wisdom, and beauty.

What I have just said about rereading is a point I should like to stress. The great sin, as I have said, is to assume that something

that has been read once has been read forever. As a very simple example I mention Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. People are expected to read it during their university years. But you are mistaken if you think you read Thackeray's book then; you read a lesser book of your own. It should be read again when you are 36, which is the age of Thackeray when he wrote it. It should be read for a third time when you are 56, 66, 76, in order to see how Thackeray's irony stands up to your own experience of life. Perhaps you will not read every page in these later years, but you really should take another look at a great book, in order to find out how great it is, or how great it has remained, to you. You see, Thackeray was an artist, and artists deserve this kind of careful consideration. We must not gobble their work, like chocolates, or olives, or anchovies, and think we know it forever. Nobody ever reads the same book twice.

Of course everybody knows that, but how many people act upon it? One of the great achievements of literature in our century is Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*; in the edition I have it runs to 12 convenient volumes. In my experience people tend to read it when young, and never to look at it again. But it is not a young person's book. Of course young people should read it, but they should go on reading it or reading in it during the life that follows. When I read it as a young man, the homosexual exploits of the Baron de Charlus seemed extraordinary dispatches from an unknown world; nowadays, when one can meet a mini-Charlus every day of the week, the extraordinary quality has gone. But what has not gone—what is indeed freshly understood—is Proust's serious and compassionate treatment of this theme in a book of many themes. Charlus is one of those great characters whom we know better than we know most of our contemporaries, and his creator's attitude toward him and his tenderness toward the Baron's dreadful disintegration enlarge our own sensibility and give us a different attitude toward excitable protests on behalf of "gays" in our very un-Proustian society. The Baron would have shrunk from being typified as "gay."

So it is also with another towering creation of this century, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. One cannot, of course, measure what Molly Bloom's magnificent soliloquy at the end of that book has done to enlarge and reshape our ideas about women, but one knows that its influence has been vast. When Sigmund Freud asked his supposedly unanswerable question—"What do women really want?"—he had not read what Molly wanted or he would have phrased it differently. It is not that she says what she wants, but she makes us feel what she wants, and it is something far beyond the range of any sociological or psychoanalytical answer. Molly wants to live on a mythological level, and that certainly does not mean that she

wants to posture as a goddess or indulge in any pseudoclassical antics; it means that she wants a largeness of perception, a wider dimension of life, a psychological freedom that the modern world does not give her. She wants a rich simplicity. And that is the whole thrust of the book. Unaware of the fact, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus are living out a great classical theme in their dingy Dublin lives, and the greatness of what they are doing eludes them. Eludes them not because they are stupid—they are nothing of the sort—but because it is part of our fate never to see our destiny as a whole or discern the archetypal forces that shape our lives. Molly does not see these things either, but she has an intuitive sense of them, and thus she is able to long for them when the men, corseted in reason and logic, cannot draw so near to this aspect of truth.

Ulysses is a wonder, and we can recur to it time and again with the certainty of finding new pleasures and new insights. It is also one of the funniest books in our language. The fun lies not in obvious jokes; it is in the grain of the prose, and it rises from the extraordinary mind of the author. When we read, we must always be aware of the mind that lies behind the book. Not that we may be wholly persuaded by it, or that we should have no minds of our own, but that we may share it and be shown new meanings by it. Also that we should assess it. When I was a professor I seemed to meet a great many students who were wholly possessed and beglamoured by Oscar Wilde, and some of them were, for a few weeks, mini-Wildes, dealing extensively in *réchauffé* wit of the 1890s. Sometimes I suggested that they examine, not the refulgent surface, the shot-silk elegance of his prose, but whatever they were able to discern behind it of the mind that had created such beautiful things. It is a Fabergé mind, and although we should not like to be without Fabergé, we should not wish to make him our standard of artistic achievement. There are people who insist that Wilde ranks with Congreve as a great writer of comedy. Consider both minds: Congreve was wise—worldly wise as well—in a degree that Wilde never achieved, kindly, good, generous, fatuous man that he was.

Joyce is an Irishman of a different stripe, and Wilde's admirers might describe him as a dirty-fingernails writer. If Joyce's fingernails are dirty, it is because he has no objection to grubbing in the dirt, if the dirt has anything to tell him. And he has taught us one of the lessons of our century, which is that the dirt has very important things to tell us, because it is from the dirt that we all spring, and no disease is so fatal to an adequate understanding of life as over-refinement, which is inevitably false refinement. For refinement of feeling is surely a quality we bring to everything we touch, and not something that cuts us off from a great part of human experience.

Modern hygiene has banished much of the physical dirt of an earlier day, but the lessons that are hidden in the dirt must not be forgotten.

Of Joyce's other remarkable book, *Finnegans Wake*, I shall not speak, because I have not yet come to any conclusions about it. I know few people who have read it, and of those, I meet fewer still who appear to have come anywhere near to understanding it. I grope in it, holding a candle that is plainly marked "Manufactured by C. G. Jung and Co., Zurich." It is not a candle that Joyce would have approved—he hated Jung because Jung told him something he didn't want to hear—but the Jungian candle is the only one I have.

I hope you do not think that I am being trivial, or treating you with less than proper respect, because I am talking so much about novels. When I was an undergraduate there were still academics who thought novel-reading an inferior sort of literary enjoyment. But a good novel has its roots in life as surely as a good poem and usually more truly than the work of most essayists. It was when I was young that I read the opinion of a critic—popular at that time and now almost forgotten—John Middleton Murry, that "a truly great novel is a tale to the simple, a parable to the wise, and a direct revelation of reality to a man who has made it part of his being." I have never forgotten that and test the novels I read by its acid, seeking for gold, for gold plate, and for dissembling brass.

The simplest function of the novel is the tale, but only someone who has never tried it thinks that the discovery and relation of a tale is simple work. The wish to be told a story never dies in the human heart, and great storytellers enjoy a long life that more subtle writers sometimes envy. Consider the Sherlock Holmes stories. Unless you are beglamoured by them, they are queer reading. The mysteries that confront the great detective are tailor-made for his style of detection; they are puzzles suited to a particular puzzle solver. Confront Holmes with a simple backstreet murder or theft, and he would probably have to confess his inferiority to the Scotland Yard bunglers he despised. But the tale-telling is so skillful, the contrast between Holmes and Watson so brilliant, the upper-middle-class level of crime, which is the kind that Holmes usually takes on (you observe that he rarely has truck or trade with the likes of Jack the Ripper), is all so deftly handled by Arthur Conan Doyle that he has created a legend that seems to be increasing 60 years after the death of its creator. Will Virginia Woolf last so long? It seems to me that I see the mists closing in as her novels give place to scandalous revelations about her life.

Then comes the parable. What is a parable? A moral tale, is it not? Such novels are very popular because, whatever appears on the surface, our time loves a display of moralism; innumerable novels are rooted in the words of Saint Paul: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” That is the message of Tom Wolfe’s bestseller *Bonfire of the Vanities*. It seems to be couched in modern, rather grotty language: Keep your nose clean; don’t risk everything for the big bucks; never trust a dame. But behind this street wisdom is the wisdom of Paul, served up with the pepper and tabasco that persuades so many innocent readers that they are getting something undreamed of in the past.

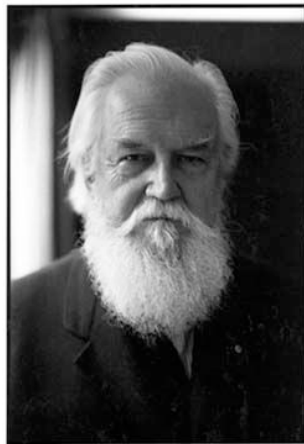
Now, what about the book that is a direct revelation of reality? We all have our favorites, and they are the books that accord with the reality life has brought to us. We cannot hope to grasp total, all-embracing reality. For many people these are the great blockbusters—novels like *War and Peace*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Magic Mountain*, *Middlemarch*, *Remembrance of Things Past*. I have known people who found this sort of revelation in *Don Quixote*, which I can understand but not accept as my own; I have known others who found it in *Tristram Shandy*, which I confess puzzles me. One must find one’s own great novels, which seem to illuminate and explain portions of one’s own experience, just as one must find the poetry that speaks most intimately to oneself. For one reader it is Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, for another Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, for another *The Ring and the Book*. And so it would be possible to go on elaborating and extending lists, because the choice is great and individual preference the final factor in making a choice. And in addition to these milestones on the most traveled roads, the real enthusiast for reading will find byways, like the works of Rabelais, or Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, or the magpie accumulations of John Aubrey. It is absurd to speak of these books as byways, but I do so because I do not meet many people who read in them frequently, or indeed at all.

How dull he is being, you may think, as I draw near to my conclusion. How like a professor. He is simply parroting Matthew Arnold, with his tedious adjuration that “culture is the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit.” But I assure you that I mean no such thing, and I have always had my reservations about Matthew Arnold, who was too cultured for his own good. He seems never to have listened to the voices which must, surely, have spoken to him in dreams or in moments when he was off his guard—voices that spoke of the human longing for what is ordinary, what is commonplace, vulgar, possibly obscene or smutty.

Our grandparents used to say that we must eat a peck of dirt before we die, and they were right. And you must read a lot of rubbish before you die as well, because an exclusive diet of masterpieces will give you spiritual dyspepsia. How can you know that a mountain peak is glorious if you have never scrambled through a dirty valley? How do you know that your gourmet meal is perfect in its kind if you have never eaten a roadside hot dog? If you want to know what a masterpiece *The Pilgrim's Progress* is, read *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and if you have any taste—which of course may not be the case—you will quickly find out. So I advise you, as well as reading great books that I have been talking about, read some current books and some periodicals. They will help you to take the measure of the age in which you live.

I hope you are not disappointed in the advice I have been giving. Certainly I have not flogged you on to feats of endurance and intellectual stress. Quite the contrary, I have urged you to relax, to read more slowly, to reread books that speak to you with special intimacy, to act out your fictions in your minds, as if you were a great theatrical director with infinite choice in casting, in decor, in all the adjuncts that produce a convincing atmosphere.

I have urged you to allow your poetry to sing to you so that you may hear the authentic bardic voice wherever it is to be found. This is reading for pleasure, not to become immensely widely read, not to become an expert on anything, but to have read deeply and to have invited a few great masterpieces into your life. 📖



Fikeshi/68

Robertson Davies was born on August 28, 1913, in the small village of Thamesville, Ontario. He was educated at Upper Canada College, Queen's University, and earned a degree in literature from Oxford. After a few years in theatrical life, he shifted into journalism, as the literary editor of *Saturday Night* magazine, and later the editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*. During this period, he began to write plays, and then novels, starting with *Tempest-Tost* in 1951. He wrote 10 other novels, grouped into trilogies, as well as many plays. In 1961 Davies was appointed Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto, the post where he remained until his retirement. Robertson Davies died on December 2, 1995, at the age of 82.

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