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Machiavelli on Reading Great Books

When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently re clothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me. And for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me.

—Machiavelli, Letter to Francesco Vettori



HARDBACK MOUNTAIN

Giving my books the kiss-off.

Tunku Varadarajan

I was once told by an old graybeard (was he a teacher at school? An uncle in Madras? alas, I can't remember . . .) that a cultured man should have very few friends but very many books. I must

have been a youngish mite at the time, for I feel that I've carried the imprint of those words for as long as I've been sentient.

As my friends—all 2 1/2 of them—will testify, I've remained true to the first part of the sage's dictum. And my wife, bless her—and bless, also, her fortitude—will leap to give evidence that I've not merely been faithful to its second half but have complied with its dictates in a manner that might easily be described as fervid. A veritable Katrina of books deluges the two places we call home, and a day seldom goes by without my slinking in the front door with even more of the darn things in the pockets of my trench coat.

And so, as my wife might have said of my books had Walt Whitman not said it first: "Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding, / Outward and outward and forever outward." My recent suggestion, that we have a handyperson come around to put bookshelves in the last unshelved room in the Brooklyn apartment—the master bedroom—was met with an opera-perfect rendition of the riot act.

So imagine my consternation when, on having to pack up the contents of my office last week—I start a new job at the Journal, and must park myself in a new cubicle, with fewer shelves—I was faced with a devilish question: What to do with the books I'd accumulated there these last four years, books numbering, conservatively, well into four figures.

Seduction is a reliable path out of domestic cul-de-sacs, so I decided to try it on my wife—all for the sake of my books. Grandparents enlisted to take our young son for the night, I proceeded to cook a nifty meal for two, to be gargled back with a brace of bottles of her favorite red, L'Esprit des Pavot from the Peter Michael Winery in Calistoga. (Wine-buffs will know how hard it is to score this stuff, and I can only hint at the abundance of books I might have purchased with the funds I had to set aside for the vino.) And then, halfway through dinner, with the mood suitably softback, I popped the question: "Love," I said—sincerely, but not unmindful of the word's diplomatic possibilities—"do you, er, mind—the wine's good, isn't it!—er, may I bring . . . a pile of books home from the office?"

She (brusquely actuarial): "How many?"

He (now a quivering wreck): "Oh, I think about 3,000 . . ."

She (for there is a God, and He enabled a munificent compromise):
 “How about 1,500. And not one book more.”

And thus began a process with which I have grown—as a man who has led a peripatetic life—heartbrokenly familiar. You take root someplace, then a call comes from Fortune herself and you move on to another place. And since there is no moving on without a leaving behind, you teach yourself to discard.

You cannot take everything with you—even the Scriptures say that, though in respect only of the Last Passage. So acquaintances, clothes, furniture, pictures, all must be culled; as, too, must books, whose loss can sometimes weigh most heavily of all. Some measure out their lives with coffee-spoons; I do so with books left behind (in such places as Delhi, Oxford, London and Madrid).

I stood in my office, beside my wall of books, and sifted as gold-miners do: looking for what to keep and what to throw over my shoulder. Gold is a good measure in these things, for unless one sets standards ruthlessly, one can be distracted easily from the truths of onward movement. “Why did I want that book in the first place?” and “Can I live without that book?” are my tests—my cyanide solution to separate the aureate book from the dispensable.


Take *Industrial Landscapes*, a big book of ghostly and quite affecting pictures of abandoned factories in the Ruhr Valley. Did I really need to bear that home with me? Or that new hardback novel by a “gifted, deft and luminous” (I quote from the blurb on the dust jacket) Trinidadian writer—must I keep it? Or that Bantam Classic edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It’s a handy size for subway reading, but don’t I already have about eight different editions of the Whitman at home, not counting Complete Works, etc.?

Only a few books are slam-dunk discards: *Secrets of Longevity: Hundreds of Ways to Live to be 100* by one Dr. Maoshing Ni (a 38th-generation doctor of Chinese medicine) was one such. What could I have been thinking when I elected to take it from this newspaper’s books-for-review giveaway pile? Could it have been on a morning on which I was hung-over, a cameo of mortality playing before bloodshot eyes? “Sleep like a deer,” the doctor exhorts on one page; “No Raw Foods” in winter, he says on another. Bye-bye book.

Such books are an exception. Most are like *Love After War*, a selection of contemporary fiction from Vietnam. Certainly I could go through life without opening it and not be dismissed—except fas-

tidiously—as poorly read. That said, the philistinism in its abandonment is plain to see. But 1,500 is a cruel number—remorselessly rounded and inflexible—and the tome had to give way, along with many others.

There is in all this sloughing off a sense that I’m sinning in some way and that the old graybeard who taught me to hold fast to books would have disapproved quite thoroughly. Easy enough for him, of course, for it is not he who must abide by another, greater dictum: What the wife says, the husband does. And the wife has, here, her reasons.

After all, we do need room for the children’s beds, and a dining table, and other things now regarded as essential in a well-tended home. But I’m reminded, as I write, of those bitter words of Joseph Brodsky, who died in a house just a stone’s throw from mine: “There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.” Where, I wonder, would he have ranked the act of leaving them behind? 

Mr. Varadarajan is The Wall Street Journal’s editorial features editor and will soon become an assistant managing editor.

ON BOOKS

Peter Landry

It is an emotional event when a serious book collector takes a well bound book of classic content into his or her hands; it is the same as that experienced by a seasoned admirer of art. To make this book yours becomes your immediate object. With the achievement of the object will come a pride of possession and a spiritual homage.

He did not conceal a collector’s just pride of possession; but you need only see him take a book from its shelf to know that he felt himself the ephemeral custodian of a perennial treasure. There is a right way and a wrong way of taking a book from the shelf. To put a finger on the top, is a vulgar error which has broken many backs. This was never his way: he would gently push back each of the adjacent books, and so pull out the desired volume with a persuasive finger and

thumb. Then, before opening the pages, he applied his silk handkerchief to the gilded top, lest dust should find its way between the leaves. These were the visible signs of a spiritual homage. [Chapman, *Selected Modern English Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 376.]

It is, of course, not the momentary look and feel of a book which sustains a person's love for it; but, rather, its contents. A proper selection of books will yield a ready and useful source of knowledge which will assist in the daily bouts with life: books will become your allies, your friends, to whom you may turn for assistance and solace.

I have friends, whose society is extremely agreeable to me; they are of all ages, and of every country. They have distinguished themselves both in the cabinet and in the field, and obtained high honors for their knowledge of the sciences. It is easy to gain access to them, for they are always at my service, and I admit them to my company, and dismiss them from it, whenever I please. They are never troublesome, but immediately answer every question I ask them. Some relate to me the events of the past ages, while others reveal to me the secrets of nature. Some teach me how to live, and other how to die. Some, by their vivacity, drive away my cares and exhilarate my spirits, while others give fortitude to my mind, and teach me the important lesson how to restrain my desires, and to depend wholly on myself. They open to me, in short, the various avenues of all the arts and sciences, and upon their information I safely rely in all emergencies. "In my study," quaintly said Sir William Waller, "I am sure to converse with none but wise men; but abroad it is impossible for me to avoid the fools." [Charles Richardson (1775-1865) *The Choice of Books* (New York: Alden, 1883), pp. 23-4.]

Even a millionaire will ease his toils, lengthen his life, and add 100 per cent to his daily pleasures, if he becomes a bibliophile; while to the man of business with a taste for books, who through the day has struggled in the battle of life, with all its irritating rebuffs and anxieties, what a blessed season of pleasurable repose opens upon him as he enters his sanctum, where every article wafts him a welcome and every book is a personal friend. [Birrell (1850-1933), from "Bookworms," *Selected Essays*.]

. . . There is no other method of fixing those thoughts which arise and disappear in the mind of man, and transmitting

them to the last periods of time; no other method of giving a permanency to our ideas, and preserving the knowledge of any particular person, when his body is mixed with the common mass of matter, and his soul retired into the world of spirits. Books are the legacies that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation, as presents to the posterity of those who are yet unborn. (As attributed to Addison by Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 198.)

The best books are sprinkled in the same number over a given span of time: the longer the span, the longer the list. Thus, while a list of the best books will contain ones written from all ages, the majority, naturally enough, will come from that long span of time which precedes the current age. One definition of a classic book is that it is one that has survived the age in which it was written; that its words of advice and direction are applicable to all ages; it is a book that has surfaced from an older age to a newer age, kept afloat, so to speak, by the readers of all ages. It follows, then, that no book written in the current age can bear the badge, classic; it must wait until a new age has arrived when likely its author has long been dead. Certainly, however, one will be able to spot, within the current age, leading candidates or contenders.

A thousand snares beset the path to immortality ...; there are a hundred ways to the pit of oblivion. Therefore, when a writer has by general consent escaped his age, when he has survived his environment, it is madness and folly for us, the children of a brief hour, to despise the great literary tradition which has put him where he is. (Birrell, *op. cit.*, p. 300.)

The study of the classics ... teaches us to believe that there is something really great and excellent in the world, surviving all the shocks of accident and fluctuations of opinion, and raises us above that low and servile fear which bows only to present power and upstart authority ... we feel the presence of that power which gives immortality to human thoughts and actions, and catch the flame of enthusiasm from all nations and ages. It is hard to find in minds otherwise formed [viz., people who have not read the classics], either a real love of excellence, or a belief that any excellence exists superior to their own." (Hazlitt, *Round Table*.)

An art which must be acquired if one is to advance himself or herself, no matter the area of pursuit, is to make a list of the best reading material on the subject. Knowing how to read is fundamental,

but knowing what to read is just as essential. “Education has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.” (Trevelyan.) No matter the subject, then, the first question, always is —What shall I read?

Read “no mean books,” said Emerson who then proceeded to lay down three rules:

1. Never read any book that is not a year old.
2. Never read any but famed books.
3. Never read any but what you like.

In short, every book that we take up without a purpose is an opportunity lost of taking up a book with a purpose. One should not be a desultory reader; one should be a purposeful and organized reader. The world is much too full of books: “trivial, enervating, inane, and, even noxious.”

It is the case with literature as with life; wherever we turn we come upon the incorrigible mob of humankind, whose name is Legion, swarming everywhere, damaging everything, as flies in summer. Hence the multiplicity of bad books, those exuberant weeds of literature which choke the true corn. Such books rob the public of time, money, and attention, which ought properly to belong to good literature and noble aims, and they are written with a view merely to make money or occupation. They are therefore not merely useless, but injurious. Nine-tenths of our current literature has no other end but to inveigle a thaler or two out of the public pocket, for which purpose author, publisher and printer are leagued together. A more pernicious, subtler, and bolder piece of trickery is that by which penny-a-liners and scribblers succeed in destroying good taste and real culture. ... Hence, the paramount importance of acquiring the art not to read; in other words, of not reading such books as occupy the public mind, or even those which made a noise in the world, and reach several editions in their first and last years of existence. We should recollect that he who writes for fools finds an enormous audience, and we should devote the ever scant leisure of our circumscribed existence to the master spirits of all ages and nations, those who tower over humanity, and whom the voice of Fame proclaims: only such writers cultivate and instruct us. Of bad books we can never read too little; of the good never too much. The bad are intellectual poison and undermine the understanding. Because people insist on reading not the best books written for all time, but the newest con-

temporary literature, writers of the day remain in the narrow circle of the same perpetually revolving ideas, and the age continues to wallow in its own mire. ... Mere acquired knowledge belongs to us only like a wooden leg and wax nose. Knowledge attained by means of thinking resembles our natural limbs, and is the only kind that really belongs to us. Hence the difference between the thinker and the pedant. The intellectual possession of the independent thinker is like a beautiful picture which stands before us, a living thing with fitting light and shadow, sustained tones, perfect harmony of color. That of the merely learned man may be compared to a palette covered with bright colors, perhaps even arranged with some system, but wanting in harmony, coherence and meaning. ... Only those writers profit us whose understanding is quicker, more lucid than our own, by whose brain we indeed think for a time, who quicken our thoughts, and lead us whither alone we could not find our way. (Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-5.)

Birrell in another of his essays, "Is It Possible to Tell a Good Book from a Bad One?" writes as Richardson wrote, the output of books is extraordinary and their numbers destroy their reputation.

But not only is the output enormous, and what may be called the undergrowth rank, but the treatment is too frequently crude. Penmen, as bookwriters are now pleasingly called, in their great haste to carry their goods early to market, are too apt to gobble up what they take to be the results of scientific investigation; and stripping them bare of the conditions and qualifications properly belonging to scientific methods, to present them to the world as staple truths, fit matter for aesthetic treatment. There is something half comic, half tragic in the almost headlong apprehension of half-born truths by half-educated minds. Whilst the serious investigator is carefully "sounding his dim and perilous way," making good his ground as he goes, "Till captive Science yields her last retreat," these half-inspired dabblers, these ready-reckoners, are already hawking the discovery about the streets, making it the motif of their jejune stage-plays and the text of their blatant discourses. (Birrell, *op. cit.*, p. 291.)

The choice of books would be greatly aided if the reader, in taking up a volume, would always ask himself just why he is going to read it, and of what service it is to be to him. It should always be borne in mind that the busiest reader must leave unread all but a mere fraction of the good books in the world. I quote, once again:

Only a creature possessed of Macaulay's reading power and the leisure of St. Simeon Stylites could keep his head above the stream of contemporary literature. Yet even he could be in miserable case. There is "our magnificent heritage" to be dealt with—the accumulation of classical English literature. And, vista behind vista, one sees the literature of other European nations, stretching back to the Greek and Roman classics and frowned over by those august nightmares, the Sacred Books of the East. What is to be done about it? Even if we allow no time for frivolities and read only those works which "you really must read," it has now become impossible for the longest-lived, the most methodical and resolute mortal to get through the excellent literature which stares at him from the shelves with mute entreaty and reproach. ["Too Many Books," *Selected Modern English Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1927).]

For the important question of what to read, one may profitably turn to lists which have already been prepared, provided that such a list has been prepared by a respected authority. For example, for the lawyer, who finds his free time to be at a premium, one might look to the article written by the American legal scholar, John H. Wigmore, "A List of one Hundred Legal Novels" [*Illinois Law Review* (1922), # 17, p. 26] to be of immeasurable help. Wigmore prepared the list with lawyers in mind, his thinking being that lawyers could learn much from the great novel writers of the past. Wigmore broke his list down into four categories:

- (A) Novels in which some trial scene is described—perhaps including a skilful cross-examination;
- (B) Novels in which the typical traits of a lawyer or judge, or the ways of professional life, are portrayed;
- (C) Novels in which the methods of law in the prosecution and punishment of crime are delineated; and
- (D) Novels in which some point of law, affecting the rights or the conduct of the personages, enters into the plot.

Though elsewhere I have set forth Wigmore's list let me give an example from each of his categories, as follows:

- (A) Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859);
- (B) Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* (1850);
- (C) Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749); and
- (D) Balzac's *Pere Goriot* (1834).

I might venture to say that a lawyer who has not read at least some of the novels on Wigmore's list is probably going to have a more difficult time trying to size up people, and sizing up people is one of the principle tasks of a practicing lawyer.

Emerson, recognizing that during our short life we face a sea of books, recommended that "many might well be read by proxy, if we had good proxies." I have developed the practice to take up with eagerness any book on books where it has been written by an established author. Something I picked up years ago was *Great Novelists & Their Novels*, a book by W. Somerset Maugham. In this book, Maugham, with great authority, dealt with, among others, Tolstoy, Austen, Stendhal, Brontë, Flaubert, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Melville; together with reviews of each of their great works. Another example of such a book is one that was written by Arnold Bennett *Books and Persons*. In this book, Bennett deals with, among others: Wordsworth, Conrad, Anatole France, Poe, Wells, Meredith, Trollope, Chesterton, Kipling, Galsworthy, and Henry James. Another which I have in my library is a book by Walter Bagehot (1826-77, a Scottish lawyer to whom, because of his writings, I own much), *Literary Studies* (Shelley, Gibbon, Sterne, Scott, Macaulay, Tennyson, Browning, et al.).

I leave you, for now, with a thought from Thoreau, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!" 📖

Peter Landry is a well known Canadian lawyer who loves books.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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