



Mortimer Adler
in
PLAYBOY?



YES!

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THE NOT-SO-CLASSIC CLASSICS

Opinion by

Mortimer Adler

Founder of the Great Books Program offers an unexpected appraisal of some of literature's sacred cows

Part 1 of 2

My work in The Great Books Movement since the early 1920s has made me keenly aware that many persons associate the reading of the so-called “classics” with boredom and fatigue. I have suggested previously in these pages (*How to Read a Book Superficially*, PLAYBOY, December 1963) how a great book may be read with enjoyment and profit, and without suffering undue fatigue or strain. I was speaking then of books that are of permanent worth and which are, on the whole, eminently readable.

However, I recognize that there is another type of book—the kind of famous work that is painfully boring, no matter how ingeniously you read or skim it, and which is best tossed aside to avoid further punishment. If it is a sin not to read a famous book all the way through, and to cast it aside permanently, then it is a sin of which I have been guilty many times, and which I shall continue to be guilty of. I can summon to mind a whole rogues’ gallery of famous books that have bored me and which I have cast into outer darkness, never allowing them to be named on any list of permanently worth-while reading that I have anything to do with.

I am not talking only about the lugubrious and usually voluminous best sellers that turn up so often, those ephemeral wonders that everybody talks about and which everyone is supposed to read—for a few months. In my literary rogues’ gallery there is no respecting of age or reputation. Cicero is there as well as Cozzens, the *Arabian Nights* and the *Decameron* as well as *The Magic Mountain*.

Let us start with Cicero, since he is the oldest and probably the most illustrious of my miscreants. I find anything by Cicero insufferably boring. He is to my mind a tedious windbag, a spouter of flatulent nothings. This is the reaction, too, of the Latin teacher who plays the unheroic male lead in Kingsley Amis’ charming story of the seduction of a nice girl, *Take a Girl Like You*:

For a man so long and thoroughly dead it was remarkable how much boredom, and also how precise an image of nasty silliness, Cicero could generate. “Antony was worth twenty of you, you bastard,” Patrick said.

So muses Patrick after 40 minutes of trying to haul a class of boys through one of Cicero’s renowned oratorical gems. “Shakespeare had your number all right, you ponce,” he mutters (probably referring to the scene in *Julius Caesar* where Casca says that Cicero spoke in Greek and it was all Greek to him). I think that the fictional Patrick had Cicero’s number, too. He *was* a windy and tiresome bore.

Such an opinion, I admit, goes counter to that of respectable scholars and critics. Ever since the First Century, when Quintilian praised Cicero as the greatest of all Roman writers, most judges of ancient literature have considered him to be the supreme master of Latin prose style. “For a millennium and a half,” says Michael Grant in his recent excellent handbook *Roman Literature*, “his language was the language of Western civilization.” To which my only response is, “Thank God it’s changed!”

Whatever the effect of Cicero’s orations may have been on his hearers—and he is reputed to have been a marvelous spellbinder—it makes no difference to us today as we try to plow through his turgid, declamatory “periods.” Here is a fairly moderate example of Cicero’s oratory, from his *First Phillipic*:

For when an illimitable evil was creeping into the State, and spreading day by day more widely, and when the same men were building an altar in the Forum who had carried out that burial that was no burial, and when daily more and more scoundrels, together with slaves like themselves, were threatening the dwellings and temples of the city, so signal was the punishment Dolabella inflicted not only on audacious and rascally slaves, but also on debauched and wicked freemen, and so prompt was his upsetting of that accursed column, that it seems to me marvelous how greatly the time that followed differed from that one day.

Grant admits that such gaseous effluvia is not effective with present-day readers. “It is hard for us,” he notes, “to put ourselves in the place of the Roman audiences who were so susceptible to Cicero’s rotund vigor.” (I like that “rotund vigor” bit!) But then he goes on to quote Arthur Quiller-Couch, an eminent literary critic of a bygone era, that literature is essentially “memorable speech,” and

hence tends toward the “purple patches” which we nowadays find so irksome.

I suppose, then, that one’s reaction to Cicero’s writings depends on just how much one can take of what Grant calls “the rhetorical element in literature.” How much can you take, for instance, of Thomas Wolfe’s “rotund vigor” and “purple patches”? If you can take 500 to 1000 pages of that sort of thing, then you will thrive on Cicero’s rhetoric. As for me, just a little bit of floridity goes a long way. I am satisfied with a nosegay, or at most a bouquet. I don’t want to be buried in flowers!

Wolfe said in his own defense, in a famous letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, that he was a “putter-inner,” like Shakespeare, Cervantes and Dostoyevsky, as opposed to a “leaver-outer,” like Flaubert. To this my response is that I enjoy what the great “putter-inners” mentioned by Wolfe put in, that I get sustenance from them, whereas I find writers like Cicero bombastic and unfulfilling.

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Whereas a writer such as Cicero bores me with empty rhetoric—with too much nothing—another type of writer bores me with exhaustiveness of detail—with too much something. Emptiness and exhaustiveness—defects at the opposite extremes—both of them bore me.

Charles M. Doughty’s *Travels in Arabia Deserta* is an excellent example of the second defect. It is a book with a high reputation, which is praised by competent judges—the sort of book one thinks one should or must read: T. E. Lawrence, who certainly knew the Arabian Desert well and who himself was a great prose writer, called Doughty’s book “a joy to read as a great record of adventure and travel (perhaps the greatest in our language),” also “one of the great prose works of our literature,” as well as “a bible,” “a classic,” and a work that “can never grow old”—in short, a great book.

Yet I, sad to say, have not found it any of these things. Even if it is, as Lawrence assures us, the greatest book on the desert and its denizens that has ever been written, I shall never be able to profit from it. For, moved by such praise, I have tried to read the work, and despite all good intentions and dogged persistence, I simply could not get into it. It bored me to tears—rather dry ones, too.

The reason I have not been able to follow Doughty on his travels through the Arabian Desert is indicated in Lawrence’s eulogy. He

makes the point repeatedly that Doughty is overwhelmingly and exhaustively *complete*, that he gives us *all* the details. “Doughty tries to tell the full and exact truth of all that he saw,” says Lawrence, to convey faithfully “the complete existence” of the desert Bedouins. But this is precisely what I find tedious about Doughty, what makes it impossible for me to go through the thousand pages or more in which he tells all. I do not want to hear *all* the details — completeness fatigues me. “Doughty’s completeness is devastating,” Lawrence remarks, to which I can only assent with a groan.

Perhaps a reader who is intensely interested in Arabia and the Arabs as a subject of study will find it rewarding and illuminating to pursue his search through the mass of details that Doughty so abundantly provides. But Lawrence said plainly that he was not recommending the book to specialized students, who already knew it, but for “the outside public, willing to read a great prose work.” It is just here that the book fails—simply in readability and attractiveness for the general reader—which is use hallmark of a great book. Even if we start out with the general “imaginative appeal of Arabia and the Arabs,” which Lawrence spoke of, our interest will soon be stifled by a glut of details.



“It’s a good wine—but not a great wine.”

Another reason that the book is unreadable is the author’s abominable style. Even if *Arabia Deserta* were only half or a third as long as it is, it would be unreadable. Yet this is what Lawrence has to say on Doughty’s style: “It is a book which begins powerfully, written in a style which has apparently neither father nor son, so closely wrought, so tense, so just in its words and phrases, that it

demands a hard reader.”

Of this style without a father or a son—in other words, a sterile bastard—The *Reader's Encyclopedia* remarks that it “combines the archaic English of the Chaucerian and Elizabethan periods with Arabic.” This is certainly a strange combination. No wonder I had trouble reading the book. Have you ever tried to read Chaucerian-Elizabethan-Arabic-English prose?

Similarly, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us that Doughty's main purpose was to write a work in “pure English prose,” couched in “direct Elizabethan style,” ignoring “all later growths in syntax and vocabulary.” Before praising Doughty's “majestic style,” the article concedes that it is “irksome to some.” Count me among the some who find it irksome, tedious, deadening and even ridiculous.

I am aware that students of English prose style, such as Sir Herbert Read, have discerned in Doughty's work fine examples of flexibility and subtlety in the use of prose patterns. But we do not go to an account of travels in the Arabian Desert primarily for examples of English prose rhythms. We go to it for information and for narrative interest—and here it fails for readers like myself.

This is the lead sentence in Doughty's “classic” work:

A new voice hailed me of an old friend when, first returned from the Peninsula, I paced again in that long street of Damascus which is called Straight; and suddenly taking me wondering by the hand “Tell me (said he), since thou art here again in the peace and assurance of Ullah, and whilst we walk, as in the former years, toward the new blossoming orchards, full of the sweet spring as the garden of God, what moved thee, or how couldst thou take such journeys into the fanatic Arabia?”

There are even “richer” sentences to follow, if you have the heart to continue.

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The deadly combination of the exhaustive with the exhausting is also to be found in a more contemporary work and one probably more often read than Doughty's—Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. This book received acclaim throughout the world in the 1920s and 1930s as one of the masterpieces of the novel form, destined to assure its author literary immortality. It is, however, aston-

ishing that a book with such a heavy load of discursive subject matter, and written in Mann's peculiar, diffuse style, should have had such a wide sale. As with many another erstwhile "book that everyone is talking about," it may be that few of those who bought the book read it all the way through.

In any case, we have no right to say that we have not been warned beforehand about what sort of book this is, for Mann tells us bluntly in the foreword that he is going to deal with the story in considerable detail. "We do not fear being called meticulous," he says, "inclining as we do to the view that only the exhaustive can be truly interesting." The question for the reader is whether this long, "meticulous" and exhaustive account of the spiritual journey of the hero, Hans Castorp, is worth the toil it takes to follow it—whether, indeed, the exhaustive is "truly interesting." As far as I am concerned, it is not worth it, and, for me, the exhaustive is fatiguing.

In the first place, the book does not have much of a story in the usual sense—a plot woven out of overt incidents, problems and development. It is essentially static; it does not move, or rather, moves at a glacial pace. The essential action of the novel is the struggle between health and sickness in the mind of Hans Castorp—a spiritual action. This could be a very interesting subject for a novel. Dostoevsky wrote a series of fascinating fictions concerned with spiritual struggles in his leading characters. And Dante's story in the *Divine Comedy* is one of spiritual development.

But, despite many fascinating passages—for instance, the conversations between Settembrini, the optimistic humanist, and Naphta, the pessimistic irrationalist; or the romance between Hans and the alluring Clavdia Chauchat—it is hard to maintain interest in Mann's "masterpiece." One reason for the flagging of attention is the exceedingly long and detailed descriptions of mood and thought, and the giant clumps of nonfictional material that bestrew the story. The result is soporific, and the reader is put to sleep, from which he is awakened at the end of the book (if he has persevered that long), as Hans Castorp is—by the outbreak of the First World War. Like Hans, the reader, too, may feel oppressed and well-nigh asphyxiated by the "high altitudes" of speculation. Pages and pages—in a chapter fittingly entitled "Research"—are filled with paragraphs such as this one:

What was life? No one knew. It was undoubtedly aware of itself, so soon as it was life; but it did not know what it was.

Consciousness, as exhibited by susceptibility to stimulus, was undoubtedly, to a certain degree, present in the lowest, most undeveloped stages of life; it was impossible to fix the first appearance of conscious processes at any point in the history of the individual or the race; impossible to make consciousness contingent upon, say, the presence of a nervous system. The lowest animal forms had no nervous systems, still less a cerebrum; yet no one would venture to deny them the capacity for responding to stimuli. One could suspend life; not merely particular sense organs, not only nervous reactions, but life itself. One could temporarily suspend the irritability to sensation of every form of living matter in the plant as well as in the animal kingdom; one could narcotize ova and spermatozoa with chloroform, chloral hydrate, or morphine. Consciousness, then, was simply a function of matter organized into life; a function that in higher manifestations turned upon its avatar and became an effort to explore and explain the phenomenon it displayed—a hopeful-hopeless project of life to achieve self-knowledge, nature in recoil—and vainly, in the event, since she cannot be resolved in knowledge, nor life, when all is said, listen to itself.

There then follows lengthy and detailed information and speculation on biological, anatomical and psychological matters, drawn from various scientific works which Hans and, no doubt, his creator have just been reading. All this is summoned up to prove a speculative point that, just as disease is a perversion of life, life itself is a disease of matter. I am not quite sure just how profound this sort of thing is, nor whether it belongs, and at such length, in a novel. Nor does it seem satisfactory to skip such material, as I have advised doing with the older classics such as *Moby Dick*, since it's all bound in with the unfolding of the main theme and with the development of Hans Castorp's consciousness.

Probably another reason for the reader's flagging of attention is the thick web of symbolism which pervades the book. *The Magic Mountain* is a philosophical allegory as well as the story of Hans Castorp's spiritual development. The title itself suggests the high, airless, speculative realm above ordinary life and experience; and the sanatorium may be taken as a microcosm of European civilization before World War I. The various characters represent various cultural tendencies or universal human impulses—Settembrini for rational humanism, Naphta for irrational intuitionism, Krokowski for psychoanalytical probing into the inner diseased depths, Behrens for detached and amoral science, and Clavdia for the erotic or the eternal feminine.

I don't know why I should find Mann's symbolism so tedious when I accept and enjoy Dante's allegorical telling of a tale. Mann's characters are certainly not mere sticks on which he hangs his symbols. On the contrary, they are masterfully rendered down to their most idiosyncratic characteristics. Yet there is something unsatisfactory and frustrating about Mann's symbolism. It is vaguer and more dreamlike than Dante's and it lacks the clear, hard, objective quality of the allegory in the *Divine Comedy*, which is conveyed mainly through concrete events and things. Mann's symbolism is a heavy, misty, Germanic sort of thing, which distracts us from what is essential—the story itself, which he assures us in the foreword is “highly worth telling.”

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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