



PLAYBOY

December 1963

HOW TO READ A BOOK SUPERFICIALLY

• IN TWO PARTS •

BY MORTIMER ADLER

Part 2

Another obstacle to our understanding and enjoyment of some of the great works of fiction is that the author often steps into the role of preacher, teacher or lecturer. These dissertations occur not only in works with a serious message, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but also in such comic tales as *Don Quixote* and *Tom Jones*. In the latter two works, the discussions are closely related to the narration, consisting of literary criticism and literary history. The whole story of *Don Quixote* might be regarded as a form of literary criticism, since it deliberately parodies the trashy chivalric romances which were popular in Cervantes' time. But in addition to this practical or existential demonstration of the ridiculousness of the cliché-ridden romances, Cervantes provides a critical history of this literature, as well as a discussion of the popular drama of his time. He also gives us in Part II of his novel a criticism of the defects of which he had

been guilty in Part I—for instance, that “The Novel of the Ill-advised Curiosity” is out of place. Most of this critical material is apparently germane to the work, which is one of the prime examples of anti-literary literature—a work of fiction written to demonstrate the worthlessness of a certain type of fiction.

In the case of *Tom Jones*, the essays on literary criticism, which appear at the beginning of each of the 18 “books” that comprise the work, do not have such a close relation to the theme. Indeed, these admittedly are breaks in the narrative which the author, Henry Fielding, avows will be a welcome change for the reader. He proceeds to give his captive audience a whole theory of the writing of novels and also to get in his licks against the literary critics, whom he describes as “reptiles,” “slanderers,” ignoramuses, and incompetents. Here again our common-sense rule should prevail. The main thing in *Tom Jones* is the story of the misfortunes, exploits and embarrassing moments of that good-natured “gallant” young man and of the people with whom he is involved. If the chapters of literary criticism are an annoying interruption in our following the story, then we may ignore them at a first reading, without feeling guilty about “cheating.”

When we come to a book like Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, the presentation of the author’s theory of the causes of historical events adds a further, and to some readers a discouraging, complexity to what is already a very complex work. Indeed, the late H. L. Mencken has said it contains every endeavor known to man with the possible exception of a yacht race. It tells the story of several families over three generations against the background of Napoleon’s war against Russia. Close to 500 characters march through its pages. It is a vast fictional narrative which at the same time deals with widespread and complex historical events. In addition, it includes whole sections presenting Tolstoy’s philosophy of history—that historical events are completely determined and inevitable, not influenced at all by human decisions.

From the time the novel first appeared, extraordinary as well as ordinary readers have protested vehemently against the inclusion of these long discursive passages in a work of fiction. Turgenev accused Tolstoy of sheer charlatanism. Flaubert complained that “he repeats himself, he philosophizes.” And the critic Perry Lubbock said that he inserted “interminable chapters of comment and explanation, chapters in the manner of a controversial pamphlet, lest the argument of his drama should be missed.” Though the justice of these harsh criticisms can be challenged, it is still true that our

reading and understanding of this magnificent story will not be seriously impaired if we skip what Lubbock called “these maddening interruptions” in a first reading, and go on with the novel. Our enjoyment and completion of the work depend on our following out the destinies and interactions of the main characters and the incomparable portrait of men at war. Besides, the common reader will gather a good deal of Tolstoy’s theory of historical inevitability simply from his story of the way and its direction—for instance, the contrasting portraits of Napoleon and Kutuzov, the ridicule of pretentious military theorists, the comparatively greater role assigned to the common soldiers as against the “big brass,” and the way in which General Bagration saves the day at Austerlitz merely by his unplanned appearance on the scene.

This work certainly deserves its reputation. Few writers have equaled Tolstoy’s power to re-create concrete human actions—war, hunting, farming, family life and erotic love. But again it is not necessary to read everything in the novel the first time we read it—perhaps not at all. I, myself, find the parts dealing with Pierre Bezukhov’s Masonic activities boring, and this has not been remedied by continual rereading, so I pass them by. Other readers may find that other parts drag, and skip accordingly. Certainly this is a whale of a book, and far more enjoyable to read than 90 percent of the fat contemporary best sellers through which people plow in order to be “well-read” today.

Speaking of a whale of a book naturally reminds us of *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, a great work of fiction that includes numerous sections of nonfictional material. Pages and pages of the book are filled with a history and description of whale hunting and a pseudoscientific “cetology,” the study of whales. Here again it is far better for those who feel blocked and confused by the appearance of these chunks of historical and scientific material that interrupt the flow of the narrative, simply to skip them at a first reading. After all, it is obviously far less important to absorb all the details of the whaling industry than to perceive that Captain Ahab’s hunt for the white whale has something to do with man’s encounter with evil. *Moby Dick* is a rich and complex story, requiring enough of the reader’s concentration and energy, without forcing him, in addition, to an involuntary reading of the digressions into history and biology.

Another great book that contains much nonfictional and instructive material is, oddly enough, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, by PLAYBOY’S patron monk, François Rabelais. The common habit of

talking about Rabelais' work instead of reading it has concealed this from most of us. This does not mean that Rabelais is not Rabelaisian in the common sense. He is, and most delightfully and wholesomely so, in a manner to make most contemporary attempts at coarseness seem sick and effete. Yes, Gargantua's ingenious invention of a new type of toilet tissue is there, and so are the great feats of emptying heroic bladders to flood the countryside and win battles, the rhapsodies on the male member and on that now unfortunately passé article of wearing apparel, the codpiece, Panurge's plea for an impregnable wall for Paris constructed of women's essential parts, arranged according to size, the five recipes for the abatement of lust, of which "the too frequent reiteration of the act of venery" seems to be the surest. These and hundreds of other such incidents, as well as all the four- and five-letter words and many others that we never heard of—all are there. Rabelais' earthiness is indeed no mere spieler's come-on.

This earthiness is wonderfully enjoyable, but that is by no means all that there is to Rabelais' masterpiece, for it is also in large part a distillation and presentation of Renaissance learning. At the beginning Rabelais suggests the two faces of his work, pointing on the one hand to the saving power of laughter and claiming nothing but wholesome mirth as his aim, while on the other hand warning that a serious message is cleverly hidden under the "jests, mockeries, lascivious discourse, and recreative lies." He urges that the reader "by a sedulous lecture, and frequent meditation, break the bone' and suck out the marrow."

This seems to contradict what I have been saying. But, for one thing, I think Rabelais' rather large claim is to be taken with several grains of salt, especially when he promises to "disclose . . . the most glorious doctrines and dreadful mysteries." I do not think, however, that he is just trying to put the cloak of respectability over his "Rabelaisian" stories, for indeed the work is a potpourri of all the arts, sciences and poetry of his time. This varied material is somehow welded together and brought into the story. For instance, it is in his stories about Gargantua and Pantagruel that Rabelais gives us a concrete and humorous description of his ideal educational program, in contrast with the degenerate scholastic type of education. His views about the stupidity and horror of war between nations are expressed in the context of his tale, which he tells in uproarious fashion. He attacks legal folderol and hairsplitting in the comical litigation between Lord Kissbreech and Lord Suckfist. His antipapist views are embodied in a satirical section dealing with Pope-Figland and Papimany. Undoubtedly, all the currents of the

Renaissance and Reformation are present in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Still, we do not read it as social and cultural history, which we can get in handier form elsewhere. If we are edified and instructed, it is because we have been seduced into it by the story and the style—by Rabelais' joyous bouncing about of words.

But, again, we are not compelled to read every single, blessed word. There are frequent repetitions of themes and ideas, and some parts of the work drag, especially in the later books. I am sure that Rabelais himself would approve a reader's skimming or skipping the parts that bore him. After all, his life ideal, as portrayed in the utopian community of Theleme in the book, is nonconstraint. **DO WHAT THOU WILT** is its motto. Rabelais' view is that constraint corrupts.



What about such monumental pieces of literature as the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost* and *Faust*? Are they not exceptions? Such works seem to demand a whole mass of accessory scholarship, including a score card to tell the players, and a detailed map of the scene to find our way around. There is a good deal of justice in this objection. We may take the *Divine Comedy* as a prime example of such monumental, all-embracing literature. How can we appreciate this work even partially without some knowledge of the philosophical and theological doctrines which it presupposes, of the historical characters who fill the work, and of the political situation in Dante's time, including the role of the papacy to which he refers so often? There is no doubt that all the footnotes, explanations and graphs that are solicitously tacked onto most editions of the *Divine Comedy* are quite helpful. But it is also true that they can hinder a successful reading of the work the first time around. We may get so enmeshed in following the footnotes and locating ourselves on the various levels of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise that we may miss the message as well as the story and the lovely language in which it is told.

Whatever Dante has to say to us is told in the form of a story. It is, on the author's own admission, an allegory of man's free will and destiny, and he begs the reader to seek out the underlying meaning of the narrative. That meaning, however, is to be grasped through our own reading, imagination and appreciation, not through a pile of glossaries, dictionaries, footnotes, guidebooks or maps. Dante himself said that he was appealing to the reader through poetic fiction. His aim, he said, was "to put into verse things difficult

to think.” There are many possible meanings and levels of meaning at a first reading, and it is doubtful if we can ever fully exhaust them in innumerable readings. But whatever meanings we do perceive through our own personal insight must come through reading the story about Dante, lost in a dark and tangled wood at the midpoint of his life, and following him on his way through Hell and the other regions. It is not important that we grasp the extremely complicated topography of Hell at a first reading. What really matters is that we sense the prevailing tone, are impressed by the dramatic and touching incidents, and become aware of the central personal relationships, such as the master-disciple relation between Virgil and Dante. And, besides, the author himself stops the story from time to time to sketch the plan of his imaginary regions and hint at the meanings intended by some of the incidents and characters.

Again, as with many other of the great books, there are sections of the work that are dull and tedious—every page of the *Divine Comedy* is not on the same level of vitality, lucidity and interest. There is a good deal of it that you will not only want to skim the first time, but also the next few times. And the same goes for *Paradise Lost*, *Faust* and similar works.

This is a good time to recall that the reason why we reread a book is not merely to grasp what was lost or blurred in the first reading, but also to enjoy again what we enjoyed the first time. Exactly the same impulse is at work as the one that impels us to see again a movie which we particularly enjoyed and admired. William Faulkner, remarking on how he continually reread the literary classics, pointed out that with these “old friends” you do not have to begin at the start and go on to the end. “I’ve read these books so often,” he said, “that I don’t always begin at page one and, read on to the end. I just read one scene, or about one character, just as you’d meet and talk to a friend for a few minutes.” This is all the more reason to read through and enjoy a great book the first time. Without that initial acquaintanceship and pleasure, the stage of familiar friendship and repeated enjoyment can never be reached.

The moral is evident—it is a far, far better thing to have read a great book superficially than never to have read it at all. ♡

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Max,

I enjoyed reading the three-part Symposium on The Great Idea of Happiness. It was a great format to use in explaining the different conceptions of the Idea of Happiness. I hope the symposium format is used on some of the other Great Ideas for future Issues.

Ivan Bilich

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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is published weekly for its members by the
Center for the Study of The Great Ideas
Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann
Max Weismann, Publisher & Editor
E-mail: TGIdeas@speedsite.com
Homepage: TheGreatIdeas.org
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