

If My Library Burned Tonight

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If my library burned down. . . fortunately for me, it never has. But I have moved house sufficiently often and I have had enough book-borrowing friends to be able to form a pretty good idea of the nature of the catastrophe. To enter the shell of a well-loved room and to find it empty, except for a thick carpet of ashes that were once one's favorite literature – the very thought of it is depressing. But happily books are replaceable – at any rate the kind of books that fill the shelves of my library. For I lack the collector's spirit and have never been interested in first editions and rare antiquities. It is only about the contents of a book that I care, not its shape, its date, or the number on its flyleaves. Fire, friends, and changes of residence can never rob one of anything that cannot, like Job's children, camels, and she-asses, be restored in fullest measure.

In principle I would like to possess all the poetry worth reading in all the languages I have a nodding acquaintance with. But as an emergency measure, in the first few weeks after our hypothetical fire, I shall buy myself only the most indispensable aids to mental health and security.

There will be Shakespeare – because, like the giraffe, there ain't no such animal. He is an impossibility and yet, marvelously, he exists; too good to be true, but a fact of history and experience.

There will be Chaucer – because, of all the great poets, I feel towards him the warmest personal affection, because, if I dared to wish for genius, I would ask for the grace to write *Troilus* and *The Canterbury Tales* – presumptuous request, but not so utterly inordinate as would be the wish to write like Shakespeare.

There will be Homer – because he is of the family of Chaucer, but on a grander scale; an absolutely truthful poet, who accepted life as it actually is, accepted it as nearly in its entirety as it is possible for anyone to do, who is not a mystic as well as a realist.

There will be Dante – because (though, as a human being, he seems to me second only to Milton himself in unpleasantness) he was, like Shakespeare, one of those enormous impossibilities that are yet verifiable facts; because he knew the secret, never fully mastered by any other writer, of producing the highest poetical effects by means of a rock-like, skeletal simplicity of language.

There will be Donne because of his fascinating combination of modern sensibilities with medieval learning. There will be Marvell because his small gift was perfect. There will be Wordsworth because he is one of the forces of nature, and this in spite of the fact that he could write worse than anybody and that, after Milton and Dante, he was probably the least sympathetic of the great poets. There will be Baudelaire – because he was the last and the most eloquent of the Fathers of the Church.

There will be Rimbaud – because he achieved perfection in the act of accomplishing a literary revolution. There will be Mallarmé – because he was the most perfectly conscious of artists, and because his poetry has been, for me, a kind of obsession, ever since, as a boy of twenty, I tried my hand at translating his *Après-Midi d'un Faune*.

There will be Yeats – because, in his later verses, he does extraordinary things with combinations of words almost as bare and bony as those of the *Divine Comedy*. There will be Eliot – because his is the most beautifully articulate voice of the generation to which I happen to belong. So much for poetry. Not that infinitely more could not be said about it; but a library cannot consist of poetry alone. There must be novels, essays, biographies, letters (not to mention all the rest).

All the great novelists are considerably larger than life; that is their distinguishing characteristic. In some cases they are larger than life in all directions. In others one special talent or trait of personality is inordinately developed so that we have a creature like the fiddler crab, with his one gigantic claw attached to a body of ordinary dimensions. Proust and James Joyce are notable examples of the fiddler-crab type of novelist. Both were men of enormous talents, but both were handicapped by an inordinate self-centeredness, which led the Frenchman into an endless, onanistic preoccupation with his own past and present sensibilities and the Irishman into blind alleys of magical incantation and a private language. In spite of which, both of them have to be in our library.

Of the greatest novelists, the men who are larger than life in all directions, we need say very little. There is Tolstoy, who knew everything by a kind of physiological “empathy,” a feeling himself into the organic nature of his characters. There is Dostoevsky, who knew everything by a purely psychical intuition and by sheer intellect. There is Dickens, who knew it all in virtue of his exuberant imagination, and Balzac whose omniscient fantasy was systematic and pseudological. All these would have to be bought for the new library. And along with them a set of Stendhal, that exhilarating combination of the passionate

romantic and the cynical analytic. And Stendhal's master in analysis, Choderlos de Laclos, the author of that extraordinary book, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. And that other romantic analyst, Benjamin Constant. Nor must we forget the great eighteenth-century master of narrative – Henry Fielding, whom we must love for his all-accepting truthfulness akin to that of Chaucer and Homer; and the Voltaire of *Candide*, a work which contains, not indeed the last word on the subject of human wisdom, but certainly the last but one; and Swift, perennially comic and a misanthrope whose distaste for the human race finds in every successive year of our history new and ever more hideous justifications. As for Smollett – no; my sense of humor is not robust enough to rejoice unreservedly in syphilis and broken legs. And as for Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* – the book, no doubt, is a work of genius, but full of so complacent an egotism that I never want to read it again. Returning to the nineteenth century, I find myself very well able to support the loss of Scott and Thackeray. But I would re-possess myself of quite a lot of Trollope; for his bourgeois shrewdness is so great as to be positively titanic, his common sense, Victorian Britishness intense to the point of being almost supernatural. And what about Flaubert? It is a long time since I read *Madame Bovary*; but *L'Education Sentimentale*, which used to be one of my favorite books, sadly disappointed me when I re-read it a year or two since. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, however, will be among the first books to be re-bought. It is the epic, not of "man's first disobedience," but of man's primal and original stupidity, a comic book that is positively Miltonic in its sweep and scope. Compared with it, Swift's *Advice to Servants* and *Polite Conversation* are mere Theocritean idylls.

We come now to the twentieth century and ask ourselves, what about Wells, what about Conrad, what about D. H. Lawrence? A recent re-reading of *Tono Bungay* leads me to think that, after the fire, I shall confine myself to Wells's scientific romances. In the years when they were first published his novels of contemporary life seemed thrillingly significant. Today, Wells's comments upon the problems of thirty and forty years ago have lost their pungency, and we find ourselves unable to take much interest in the paper-thin silhouettes which pass in these novels for characters. And Joseph Conrad? Thirty years after a first enthusiasm I find his books, for all their beautiful construction, a bit empty and unsubstantial. But all the same I shall invest in a set of them. About D. H. Lawrence, on the contrary, I feel no reservations. For Lawrence was a novelist unquestionably larger than life. For his astounding insights into nature, for his

knowledge of the “dark gods” that reign in the depths of the human psyche, he will always claim an honored place in any library.

And now for the essayists. We begin inevitably with Montaigne and Pascal, the two opposite poles of human thought – Montaigne, the pole of humanism and this-worldliness, Pascal, the pole of other-worldliness and “the order of Charity.” From the *Essais* and the *Pensées* alone, an intelligent reader could acquire a complete education in the art of being fully a human being.

Bacon is one of those authors whom one receives bound in limp leather as a prize for good conduct at school. In spite of which he shall always have a place in my library. Along with Balthazar Gracian, his younger contemporary, he can impart the secrets of concentrated utterance, of a style at once telegraphic and dignified.

My next choice, chronologically, would be Thomas Traherne, whose *Centuries of Meditation* are the beautiful expression of that supernatural joy which is one of the fruits of the spirit. Then we must have John Dryden, because he writes like a gentleman. And Addison for the same reason – only by now the gentlemanliness has become a little too self-conscious. And Voltaire, because, in spite of the often ridiculous shallowness of the *Philosophical Dictionary*, he says everlastingly important things about tolerance, about prejudices, about superstitions, about that chronic infamy in all social organizations which is the main root of man’s inhumanity to man. And David Hume for his Scotch sagacity and Samuel Johnson for his vast common sense and often moving eloquence. And Coleridge, of course – but only in his notebooks and his *Aids to Reflection*; for in the *Biographia Literaria* he exhibited (as Kierkegaard half a century later was also to exhibit) an almost fatal incapacity to leave off. And then Charles Lamb, the most literary and yet, surprisingly, the most spontaneous of artists. And De Quincey, whose prose is of no epoch, but timelessly excellent. And Macaulay who writes like a military band and is the best possible reading for a rainy afternoon. And Emerson who writes like an oracle and possesses an authentic wisdom. And Walter Bagehot, that admirable critic who was also a far-sighted man of affairs. And Sainte-Beuve, the man of huge learning and of a gusto that nothing could blunt. And Matthew Arnold, all of whose remarks about Philistinism and education are still entirely apposite. And Ruskin, whom I must be allowed to read in selections; for he maddeningly mixes nonsense with the humanest social wisdom and the most wonderfully revealing insights into the character of inanimate nature; he alternates insufferable divagations with prose of an unmatched magnificence. And Schopenhauer, one of the few

great Germans who do not display that “nimety,” or “too-muchness,” which Coleridge set down as the national literary sin. And Heine, the greatest virtuoso of romantic prose, with the sudden, almost musical transitions from the ironic to the all-but-sentimental, from the transcendental to the calculatedly grotesque. And among more recent essayists, there will be the admirably substantial More and Babbitt; and E. M. Forster, whose *Abinger Harvest* contains some of the most delicately witty writing of our century; and Virginia Woolf, who was not so much larger than life as to qualify for greatness as a novelist, but was perfectly fitted to the critical essay.

And finally there are the biographies, diaries, letters, memoirs. I can only name a few at random. The letters of Keats, for example, more memorable in some respects than his poetry; the letters of Byron, which will certainly outlast Childe Harold. The astonishingly truthful notebooks of Constant and Stendhal. The autobiographies of Alfieri, the man who tried to turn himself into a dramatic genius by sheer will power, and of Lorenzo da Ponte, Mozart’s librettist and an adventurer who was always duped and swindled, and who therefore inspires so much more sympathy than does his ferociously successful contemporary, Casanova. The Goncourt Journals – 5,000 pages of sharp observation and carefully documented malice. And those Diaries, in which Scawen Blunt recorded his impressions of a society recent enough for many of us to remember and yet almost as remote from the contemporary world as is the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent or the Rome of Tiberius. And on this dying fall, this note of defunctive music, let us draw to our close.

“What props, thou ask’st, in these bad days my mind?” One of the answers to Arnold’s curiously unpronounceable question remains today what it has been ever since man first invented the art of writing: a collection of good books.