

ON READING THE CLASSICS

John Herman

Recently I re-read *Don Quixote*; and residing among those celebrated pages, browsing, tasting, enjoying, I experienced a sense of being—if I may use such elevated words—civilized and humanized.

Now this is surprising, not only because of the presiding violence in *Don Quixote*, to which Nabokov objected, but because the society which the book reflects is in many ways more primitive than our own—dirty, brutal, and uncouth. The Don himself, however, is anything but dirty, brutal, and uncouth; he is, in fact, a man of high culture—not because of any excessive learning or refinement, but because he holds himself to a lofty standard of conduct. And though this standard is markedly idiosyncratic for the Don's time and place (to say nothing of our own), it—the aristocratic standard of chivalry—has deep roots in our culture; was indeed, along with the very different standard of Christianity, the primary means of civilizing those clamoring hordes of barbarians whose descendants we now call European.

Reading *Don Quixote* set me thinking about the classics in general—what they are and why I return to them when so much of contemporary literature often seems a bore. What I shall proceed to offer are not conclusions, to which the nature of the questions do not perhaps lend themselves, but reflections gathered from a lifetime of reading.

And first I want to say that the classics give pleasure. Taken over a lifetime, the pleasures of reading are second, perhaps, only to those of the body when one is healthy and young—only less fleeting. Who would want to be without the company of Julian Sorel, Elizabeth Bennet, Becky Sharp, Prince André, Levin, Prince Myshkin and Dostoyevsky's other outrageous, unforgettable characters? And I confine myself to the nineteenth century novel.

But what *are* the classics? Here I recall what a judge once said about pornography, that he didn't know how to define it, but he knew it when he saw it. Various writers have compiled lists of the

“canon”, but the canon, in all its persuasive bulk, is no harder to find than a boa constrictor in a chicken coop, or, to quote T.S.Eliot out of context, a sapphire in the mud. Let us say, by way of short-cut, that any book first published one hundred years ago or more, which is still read for pleasure, is a classic.

I stipulate read for pleasure, for professional critics and scholars have to read all sorts of stuff. I also add the limitation of time, not out of antiquarian zeal, but because our ability to recognize what is or isn't a classic among contemporaries is a shaky business. There are good reasons for reading contemporary literature, but once a writer dies he goes up against the mighty dead, and in that company a contemporary writer's credentials are subject to serious re-evaluation.

The concept of a canon is much disputed in our time, for it is sometimes thought to disguise an unfair practice of exclusion, as if someone were anxious to reserve entry for dead white males alone. This argument seems to me to be about something other than literature. Read widely, read variously, read to satisfy your own taste: the novels of Thomas Love Peacock, the poetry of Jones Very, the fiction of Xavier de Maistre. None of this interferes with the fact that some books are better than others, are deeper, are better made; and these works give shape to the entire body of literature, as bones to the flesh they carry.

Indeed, something like a canon seems to me a necessity, for how does one orient oneself within the infinite cosmos of the written word? Where does one begin? What should we say of someone who had read the complete works of Peacock—or for that matter of Scott or Thackeray or George Sand, all admirable writers indeed—but had never read *Emma* or *War and Peace*? *Ars longa, vita brevis*. What the Latin Classics were to the eighteenth century gentleman, the nineteenth century novel is to the modern educated woman or man.

The classics give pleasure—pleasure of a deep and lasting variety; but one doesn't necessarily turn to them for entertainment. It would be unusual if one wasn't entertained by *Candide* or *Twelfth Night* or “The Miller's Tale”; but even here, entertainment is not the whole or even invariably the salient matter. *Candide* offers a

definitive statement on the shallow optimism of the bourgeois era; and the book's wry and disillusioned conclusion—*il faut cultiver notre jardin*—remains a classical expression of that era's—of our era's—ultimate failure. And as for the entertainment value of *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear*; it is right up there with drowning kittens.

Reading literature does not provide information, such as the dates of history or the trigonometric equations. What information, what edification, can be extracted from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*? That it is a poor idea for young American heiresses to marry super-sophisticate expatriates whom they know imperfectly? Clearly, one is posing the wrong question. Reading literature is itself experience, though not of the same order as actually marrying a Gilbert Osmond. But it is experience nonetheless, with all the ambiguity and incommensurability of experience; and the gift it offers is not any easily expressed lesson or piece of information, but the transformative one of living within the book's pages.

Let us return to *Don Quixote*. The Don is driven out of his wits by reading chivalric romance; but this lunacy also affords him a superior purchase on actual values. Now these values are themselves comically inadequate, and lead the Don into all manner of mishap, during which he often looses mayhem on those around him. But Cervantes knows what he is doing, and contrary to appearance, he is writing about the real world—our own real world. You get nothing for nothing, and what the Don gets is that radical illusion which nonetheless allows man to build civilization. Here, then, is one set of “edifying” reflections inspired by reading *Don Quixote*.

There are many other ways in which the classics edify, but let us leave that for another occasion. What I want to say is that the classics teach excellence. How could it be otherwise? It is not only a question of their having “weathered the test of time,” though this is no small achievement. The classics are those books which continue to be read by those who care the most about literature, love it the most, and, in fact, have the most discriminating eye for its excellence.

Now the school of excellence is not one much favored by our society, for excellence is about discovering the best, and this, willy-nilly, implies separating the sheep from the goats. We regard such

activity with distrust, yet there is not, I believe, a school more needful for America; more needful for its moral as well as its intellectual wellbeing; more needful for its achieving some modicum of equilibrium and self-understanding. For the classics teach us that previous ages and other societies have achieved superior, deeper, and more lasting works than anything we have achieved; and this lesson, inescapably enforced by the works themselves, can be nothing but salutary in our confused and troubled time.

Has reading the classics made me more “elitist”? Perhaps, though not, I trust, less well intentioned toward my neighbor. But the classics do not suffer fools gladly. They teach—not so much in their individual content, which is a slightly different story, but in the very fact of their being—that humanity remains pretty much the same; that change comes slowly and not necessarily for the better; that excellence not novelty wears best; and that the vast majority—very much including myself—is decidedly more foolish than otherwise. *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

I said that the classics have weathered the test of time, but this may lend my case an antiquarian cast that I do not welcome. It is true that reading literature in a systematic manner leads to all other branches of knowledge: history, politics, philosophy, art, the history of science; and this is, of course, salutary. But in addition to this historical dimension there is a perennial relevance to the classics, a relevance that perhaps constitutes the defining nature of their durability.

After Odysseus has returned to Ithaca, after he has killed the obstreperous suitors and re-established order in his household, it is time—and here we are at the penultimate moment of the epic—to re-establish order in his marriage. Now Penelope can still not be certain that this stranger who has appeared after two decades is indeed her husband, so she practices on him a little ruse. She tells Odysseus that their marriage bed has been moved. In fact one of the legs of the bed was formed by the stump of a tree that was left in place when the palace was built, so their bed cannot be moved; but only Penelope and Odysseus know this. When Odysseus hears what Penelope says, he blows up—for how is it possible that their marriage bed has been moved?—thus proving that he is indeed her husband.

The Odyssey transports us two-thousand nine-hundred years (I speak of the time when we believe the book was written) to the clamorous age of the Greek heroes; yet suddenly in this episode we are no longer immersed in the world of war and high adventure, but find ourselves in a scene that embodies as well as any I know the intimate dynamics of marriage.

Starting with the masterpieces of Greek and Roman literature and spreading outward from there, the literary classics form the center of the humanities; this is historically the case, and it remains the case today. Now the humanities are those works that do not purport to be written, like the Bible, by God, but rather by men, by man, by humanity. Man can only understand what he has made himself, says Vico, the eighteenth century Italian philosopher, and what he has made is culture—is the humanities.

The classics sit on the shelves waiting to be explored, experienced, loved. In reading them one discovers one's own humanity, both as a historical reality, and in its essence as it has been intuited again and again by the genius of the human imagination. This opportunity to discover and explore our own inmost nature is by its very logic open to us all; and in that sense reading the classics does not foster elitism but offers the greatest egalitarianism available.