

Books Do Furnish A Mind, Part II

by Ibn Warraq (May 2015)



“Someday I will go to London and revisit all the places where I housed at the time of my greatest poverty. I have not seen them for a quarter of a century or so...I see the winding way by which I went from Oxford Street, at the foot of Tottenham Court Road, to Leicester Square [i.e. along Charing Cross Road]... Dozens of my books were purchased with money which ought to have been spent upon what are called the necessaries of life. Many a time I have stood before a stall, or bookseller’s window, torn by conflict of intellectual desire and bodily need. At the very hour of dinner, when my stomach clamoured for food, I have been stopped by sight of a volume so longcoveted, and marked at so advantageous a price, that I could not let it go; yet to buy it meant pangs of famine. My Heyne’s *Tibullus* was grasped at such a moment. It lay on the stall of the old book-shop in Goodge Street—a stall where now and then one found an excellent thing among quantities of rubbish. Sixpence was the price—sixpence! At that time I used to eat my mid-day meal (of course my dinner) at a coffee-shop in Oxford Street, one of the real old coffee-shops, such as now, I suppose, can hardly be found. Sixpence was all I had—yes, all I had in the world; it would have sufficed to feed me for that day... But I did not dare to hope that the *Tibullus* would wait until the morrow, when a certain small sum fell due to me. I paced the pavement, fingering the coppers in my pocket, eyeing the stall, two appetites at combat within me. The book was bought and I went home with it... and as I made a dinner of bread and butter I gloated over the pages.

“In this *Tibullus* I found pencilled on the last page: “Perlegi, Oct. 4, 1792.” Who was that possessor of the book, nearly a hundred years ago? There is no other inscription. I like to imagine some poor scholar, poor and eager as I myself, who bought the volume with drops of his blood, and enjoyed the reading of it even as I did. How much that was I could not easily say. Gentle-hearted Tibullus!—of whom there remains to us a poet’s portrait more delightful, I think, than anything of the kind in Roman literature.

“An tacitum silvas inter reptare salubres,

Curantem quidquid dignum sapiente bonoque est? ” Horace Letter to Tibullus

Or dost thou gravely walk the healthy wood,

Considering what befits the wise and good? *Translated* by Thomas Creech [1659-1700]

“So with many another book on the thronged shelves. To take them down is to recall, how vividly, a struggle and a triumph. In those days money represented nothing to me, nothing I cared to think about, but the acquisition of books. There were books of which I had passionate need, books more necessary to me than bodily nourishment. I could see them, of course, at the British Museum, but that was not at all the same thing; as having and holding them, my own property, on my own shelf. Now and then I have bought a volume of the raggedest and wretchedest aspect, dishonoured with foolish scribbling, torn, blotted—no matter, I liked better to read out of that than out of a copy that was not mine. But I was guilty at times of mere self-indulgence; a book tempted me, a book which was not one of those for which I really craved, a luxury which prudence might bid me forego. As, for instance, my *Jung-Stilling* [Heinrich Jung-Stilling, 1740-1817, a defender of Christianity, and a Universalist] It caught my eye in Holywell Street; the name was familiar to me in *Wahrheit und Dichtung* [*Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From my Life: Poetry and Truth*