

Books: What to Do?

by [James Como](#) (October 2020)



The Readers, Theresa Bernstein, 1914

I had been acquiring books since the day I spent a week's pay (\$40, 1962) at Barnes & Noble on 18th St. and Fifth Avenue: I walked out with about thirty items. I was fifteen. Twenty years later a fire destroyed half my personal library, which I thereafter spent three decades rebuilding. Occasionally a visitor would ask, "have you read all these?" I would answer variously. The literal answer to a question taken literally

would be No, though I knew, and had used, each intimately. Finally I settled on this: "What matters is that they have read me." Stares, but no more questions.

Upon retiring from full-time professing nine years ago I donated nearly a thousand volumes to my college library, and the departures hurt. Since then book-shedding has remained the mode. Salt in the wound was the need to end my membership in the private New York Society Library, a full-service, old, and old-school institution on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Worse: today I saw this sign, "We've Closed," on the two-storey, well-served, comfortable Barnes & Noble on 86th St. near Lexington Avenue (the only nearby venue carrying *The Claremont Review*), just a few blocks from my apartment.

I have resorted to a Kindle, a decent Plan B. I read it on a tablet that allows me to dance from book to book (Pryce-Jones's *Signatures*, Farnsworth's *Classical English Style*, Professor Borges: *A Course on English Literature*, *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, Cicero: *His Life and Times*, *Hamnet*). I was surprised to see that white lettering on a black background is so inviting, an advantage for a reader as restless as I, and as slow.

I still own a few hundred books. These are mostly collections (e.g. C. S. Lewis), reference works (no Google search can replace a good browse in Adler and Van Doren's *The Great Treasury of Western Thought* or in *The Complete Oxford English Dictionary*—in one volume, with magnifying glass), medieval matter, anthologies, old texts from English and Spanish Lit and from Western Civ, favorite authors (e.g. Helprin, Davies, Wilder, Undset), and non-fiction favorites that continue to amaze, such Curtius's *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* and *From Dawn to Decadence* by Jacques Barzun (published in his nineties), and essay collections by the polymath Martin Gardner, with whom I'd had the pleasure of dining twice.

What to do with or about them here in the darkening purple of my eighth decade? These dear objects are like ghosts— but welcome ghosts. So I would not exorcise them even if I could. (Many long gone continue to haunt: often I reach for this one or that, then hunt, then remember.) Sometimes I do find myself gazing at rows of spines along the wall and in the cases. I re-arrange them and keep them neat, that is, straight in a way that won't tire them out.

Alas, that fondling has its limits, including its psychological limit, but it has helped me to remember this: as I combed through the library to trim it how dimly I recalled—and, frankly, how unthoroughly had visited—much of what was left. So with an ocean of quotidian time I decided to re-summon these old spirits, hoping that some path—some central boulevard—would appear, first through one labyrinth, then another. Take care, though, I thought. Some favorites will draw you back to them: Borges, Maugham, Dr. Johnson, Chesterton, Chaucer, Will, rhetoric, or Will and Chaucer and *their* rhetoric.

Then, wondering where to start, I noticed this sign: the great anniversary (b. 1770) of William Wordsworth. Saint George (the patron saint of books) had tapped me on the shoulder and pointed. I would stroll the path of a Great Beginning, that of the English Romantic movement and its avatar. But immediately a Caution sign appears. Like any path this one has its byways, so alluring as to make one forget the highway.

For example, my devotion to comic books, especially Classic Comics. When I was seven years old, I found myself—that is, I realized I was—reading. It was Uncle Scrooge who had worked that magic. Then came war comics, some Archie and Little Lulu, fantasy and horror (this before the crimping Comics Code: when we moved house my mother made my brother and me *throw them out*—a fortune, Mother) and—*Tarzan*. I would go on to read most of the books and would appreciate Gore Vidal

opining that no one wrote physical action better than Burroughs.

During this period, Uncle Lou, my book-binding uncle (not *book-making*, a mistake I learned not to repeat), took my Classics and Tarzans and turned them into three bound volumes. I wore those out (and also learned a bit about book binding: look for the headband at the top of the spine, sign of sturdiness.) I also developed a habit even I thought strange, but not so strange that others, I would learn, didn't share, namely, to smell new books. What promise there is in that crafted shop-smell, especially those coming by mail. (Big books smell the best.)

Particular reading episodes remain vividly in my memory. Alexandra and I traveled to Santiago de Compostela, a stunning trip, not least because of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Then there was a vacation in Mallorca at a Club Med. Three times I had tried to read *The Lord of the Rings*