

Twisted Threads of Reading: A Tradition of Implication, Inference and Indirection

by [Norman Simms](#) (February 2018)

Slowly we pushed on through the fretted network of branches and leaves. The quarry was silent. –The Island of Dr. Moreau, by H.G. Wells

Thankfully, despite all that is said regarding the end of books—that the novel as such is finished and some new genre will have to replace it in order to capture the experiences of our contemporary writers and readers—there is no end of books to read. Faster than new titles can be churned out, old books become available. Not only that, but there are long lists of titles we once meant to read but did not get around to perusing.

Rereading and re-thinking all the books one read throughout one's lifetime is a good way to turn away from the hurly-burly of modern noise. Yet, how does one choose those books to read from the multitude of titles on those nagging lists? Let me outline some methods that have formed themselves in the last few decades, particularly during the years since my retirement from lecturing.



By exercising their disastrous gift of the gab, they deepen the quasi-hypnotic trance in which human beings live and from it is the aim and purpose of all true philosophy, all genuinely spiritual religion to deliver them. –Aldous Huxley,

The Devils of Loudun.

When edited in Periclean Athens, transcriptions of the *homeridae* or professional singers-of-tales, became central to their educational system along with a select number of tragedies—Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides—whose events and characters tend to be drawn from the Homeric corpus. Thenceforth known under the name of Homer, the two great epics, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* continue at the heart of western civilization, along with, to be sure, the books of the Hebrew *Bible* and its Christian extensions.

The classical epics deserve to be read as often as possible and in as many translations as one can get hold of, and then there is a natural glide (or if one follows Dante's narrator into the *Divine Comedy*, the guide) into Virgil's *Aeneid* which in imitating Homer reduces the length of the two Greek poems of twelve cantos each into twelve in all for the Latin text. Then, as night follows day, comes the satirical parody of the *Aeneid* in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (sometimes also known as *The Metamorphosis*). These classical epics have much to teach us about the nature of human nature and its diverse civilizations, its many limits as well as its tenuous ideals, but also fill our minds with copious characters, actions, scenes and themes. From then on, wherever you turn, the Homeric heritage manifests itself and keeps one's mind alive.

On and on the books keep tumbling out of the traditional inkhorn, each one asserting, in its way, not just a uniqueness or eccentricity of its own, but a right to be the guardian and producer of its own individual truth.



Our wise men say that the thoughts of men bind the whole world together, bind every creature to mankind, even God Himself. We preserve the world our thoughts. If one of us plays false to his thoughts, he plays false not only to his own life, but to the whole world, to God Himself. [\[1\]](#)

How the *Bible* has been studied over the last few millennia and how people thought it was composed—and for what purpose—has determined in many ways the attitudes assumed by whole nations about the phenomenon of literacy. Because of that, literature has come to be thought of as an underlying paradigm for all culture.

For most of my life I read the books that were in my parents'

house, not least the bookcases filled with volumes they accumulated in their early days of marriage during the Depression and where, after *the* War, they placed the titles they either didn't read or had read and couldn't bring themselves to discard. I took one tome out after another, and their order on the shelves was the order in which I perused them, not for a very long time realizing they had any intrinsic relation to one another or might be better comprehended by finding out something about where and when they were written or published, who the authors were and what they stood for. Something similar happened with texts given out in the classroom, gifts given by family and friends who assumed they knew what I was interested in, and lists of recommended readings provided at the start of university courses. The resistance to this socially acceptable or politically correct method began, however, when I started to feel uncomfortable with certain periods of literary history. This led me to the classics of Greece and Rome where there seemed to be, if not a continuation of the oral traditions of the singers of tales who began it all, then at least a subversive, cynical and satirical counter-current to the trendy innovations each age threw up around itself.

With my interests driving me toward biblical texts, I learned to care much more about the origins of context in books. Like the bearded rabbis of old commenting on their scriptures, I found myself drawn to anomalies, contradictions, apparent irrelevancies, and peculiar features in the texts—oddities in orthography, syntax, size of ciphers, even the colour of ink.

The main editorial process that created what would later be called for the Jewish people *TaNaCh*, an acronym for three sub-collections—*Torah*, *Nivim*, and *Ktavim* or Pentateuch (Five Books of Moses), Prophets and Writings—occurred in the sixth century BCE. This happened at about the same time that the Greeks regularized their educational system around the Homeric epics, the trio of tragic dramatists, and the commentaries found in

the philosophers of Athens. When, where and how the different components of *TaNaCh* were first created and collected, remains the subject of controversy. From time to time, in the text of Scriptures, allusion is made to earlier books and to ancient oral traditions—and mostly, it would seem, a culture is imagined without literacy or speculative thought. That different versions of the same episodes and events occur, even in juxtaposition, just as there are different versions of the primary myths of creation and the formation of human society to be found in the opening chapters of Genesis, the poetic meditations in psalms, and the picturesque and visionary discourses of the prophets, suggests that at least in the later stages of editing and rewriting someone was comparing texts and making choices, more often than not, it seems, by stripping those received accounts to bare bones. In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of reading the *TaNaCh* is seeing how motivations, intuitions as to meaning and interpretation of figurative language occurs by implication, by oblique and incomplete hints, or by riddling suggestion. When the text comments on itself, as it does on occasion in a passage or sentence or phrase that shocks by the shift in tone, register or language, the reader is drawn into an argument that eventually crystallizes in the endless debates of Talmud and other rabbinical texts. Sometime it seems as though the earliest redactor-scribes were forming documents in response to the growing immensity of classical writing around them in the Hellenic world and beyond. Whatever else they may have been thinking when these ancient Hebrew compilers created the choral hymn at the start of *B'reshit* with its cosmogenesis and creation of the human world; it is resonant with a vivid rebuttal to the classical texts, such as Hesiod's *Theogony* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. If the "beginning" of Genesis was one of the last written compositions of the Torah, it is regardless a thrilling rejection of mythology, magic, arbitrary violence, and irrationality. One can see more primitive aspects of the sources still evident in the choral antiphons of the Book of Job where they are presented by the false friends and undercut

by the rational mind of the protagonist—who is eventually seconded by the returning Voice in the Whirlwind.

In other words, unlike the later Christian concept of a bible constructed as a combined preliminary Old Testament to be completed, clarified, fulfilled and transcended by a shorter and more concentrated *New Testament*, the *TaNaCh* does not claim to be a single revelation of a profound underlying Truth. Yet, like the Hebrew *Bible*, the *New Testament* forms itself in three components: The Four Gospels plus the Acts of the Apostles giving the narrative history of the life of Jesus and the theological and political foundations of his post-resurrection Church; the many letters of the Disciples, Paul first among them; and the apocalyptic prophecies of the mystical Heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Saint John's Revelation. In such a conception, the Old Testament only makes sense and only contains the truth insofar as any reading is keyed to the three sections of the New, while the New Dispensation requires the historical grounding of the Hebrew Scriptures, claims its authority through the cleansing and explanations of the Greek texts, and draws for its liturgical and theological resonance allusions and echoes of Jewish precedents.

The secularized western tradition of literature and critical interpretation is based in large part on the teachings of the Church and its protesting and reforming churches. The poems, novels, plays, and essays that come in such a cultural practice follow notions of an underlying truth that then reading itself, like the writing agency, aims to go through and beyond words to higher and more everlasting realities of which words are only a temporary cover. The Hebrew traditions as continued and questioned by the rabbis assumes, contrariwise, that the creator and the energies of creation are the words themselves.

But while those classical epics in Greek and Latin grow and expand by imitation and parody through medieval, Renaissance and beyond, there are books that develop in other ways, and

they form amoeba-like renewals of themselves that reflect back into the original core of narrative and dramatization insights and critiques that create a dialogue of culture. For instance, out of the various historical romances of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table come re-tellings of the original adventures that parallel and interweave quests for each of the primary characters and of their sons, cousins, friends and rivals. These are long, intricate romances in verse and prose that sometimes take on the language and customs of new host nations, and modify the dynamics of the original warrior cult, the chivalric court, and the *ducie luf* of a new sweet style of *fin amor* (refined love).

Mais remontons plus haut encore, à cette aube de la préhistoire où l'art de la parole était inconnu. Comment alors, d'un cerveau à un autre, s'opérait le traversèrent de leur contenu intime, de leurs idées et de leurs désirs? Il s'opérait en effet, si l'on en juge par ce qui se passe dans les sociétés animales dont les membres semblent se comprendre presque sans signes comme en vertu d'une sorte d'électrification psychologique par influence. [\[2\]](#)

But let us go back even more, to the very dawn of prehistory where the art of the word is unknown. How then does it happen that from one human brain to another there is transference of the deepest content, ideas and desires? It seems to operate, in effect, if one may judge by what happens in animal communities where the members understand one another without signs, by virtue of psychological electricity.

There is also a way of reading early eighteenth-century novels that increasingly interiorize the action, dig out space for interior monologues, and scrape away the rust of aristocratic idealism and rhetorical artificiality. Thus, one can start with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the confessions of an innocent housemaid seduced by her master and set next to it

Henry Fielding's mock retelling as *Shamela*, who cynically and seductively turns the tables by showing how the title character undermines the integrity of the naïve Squire Booby. Richardson and Fielding then go at one another with a series of novels that pick up the same or similar characters, putting them through their paces in analogous episodes and tilting at one another's middle class puritanical values.



But how soon is conversation exhausted! How does the daily return of the same materials diminish the charms of society! Whatever happens to the town falls on me as part of it. The inheritance makes me like one of its towers; and when I will fall sick, Mr. Schneidab, the village barber, will hasten, as accoucheur sent by the fates, to deliver me into another world. [\[3\]](#)



A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance issuing from the lips of the medium. You have seen the vapour of fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. [4]

I was recently reading Rainer Maria Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. I started to follow up on the several books mentioned by the fictional narrator; and that had me reading the fascinating letters of Bettina von Arnim to Goethe but mostly to Goethe's mother. Malte spoke of how influential these letters were for him. Fascinating because Bettina was only thirteen years old, very precocious and yet still a child, so that she uses words and concepts beyond her understanding and seems unaware of her own erotic dreams. These reminded me of how little I had actually read of Goethe, whether in translation or more rarely in German.

At the same time I am reading the memoirs both of Prince Talleyrand and of Eugene Delacroix, somehow both of them

connected through the myth of Talleyrand being the biological father of the painter, and not just his protector and mentor in later life; all of this out of a discussion of Charles Delacroix's surgical removal of a huge testicular cancer.



*Singer, thing of evil,
stupid and wicked slave
of the voice, of that
instrument that was not
invented by the human
intellect, but begotten
of the body, and which,
instead of moving the
soul, merely stirs up
the dregs of our nature!
For what is the voice*

but the Beast calling, awakening that other beast sleeping in the depths of mankind, the Beast which all great art has ever sought to chain up, as the archangel chains up, in old pictures, the demon with his woman's face? [\[5\]](#)

But there are other unexpected connections between texts I read that go beyond characters, places, objects and events to unexpected convergences of idea, sometimes joined by words and phrases that leap from author to author, paying no attention to place or time of origin or genre of conception, or even the original language in which they were written. If, for instance, you read Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and are struck by the first appearance of Queequeg and are told that he has been out in the streets of New Bedford "selling his head" meaning a string of smoked and tattooed heads brought from New Zealand, is it wrong to recall the little episode in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* where Gammer, the old woman servant, fears that she has sold her head to Dr. Fitzpiers who wants to chop it off and measure it after her death? If such a cluster of connected images, themes, characters, and events does exist, surely our sense of literary tradition takes on new

meaning.

[1] Sholem Ash, *Three Cities: A Trilogy*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. "Petersburg" (New York: G.P. Putnam, 's Sons, 1943; original, 1933) p. 234.

[2] Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation: étude sociologique* (Paris: Eibron Classics, 2005; replica edition of the original 1890) p. 230.

[3] Anonymous, "Uncle's Will" in *The Masterpiece Library of Short Stories*, Volume XVII, "Old German," ed., J.H. Hammerton (London; The Educational Book Company Ltd, n.d. [? 1914-1918]) p. 210.

[4] Agatha Christie, "The Last Séance" in Herbert van Thal, ed., *The Second Pan Book of Horror Stories* (London: Pan, 1960) p. 63.

[5] Vernon Lee, "A Wicked Voice" in *The Virgin of the Seven Daggers: Excursions into Fantasy* (London: Penguin, 2008) pp. 125-126.

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