BJPsych | The British Journal of Psychiatry (2021) 218, 352–353. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2021.32

Ten books

Chosen by Derek K. Tracy

'Art is long, life short' Goethe taught us, and who reads, chooses.[1] Walter Pater said Romanticism added strangeness to beauty,[2] and Harold Bloom considered this the centre of all great art.[3] These ten works have strangeness: all have changed me and made me a better psychiatrist.

Joy and sensuality

Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman

'I sing the body electric'.[4] The song of my adolescence, the joy of my heart. My kind uncle, my wise father: Gray Beard – O Captain! My Captain! The great democratiser filling the vast American plains with his grand enumerations, teaching us the joy of being human. In Whitman I find hope daily for those I treat, the strength and wonder of our ordinariness: 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding, No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, no more modest than immodest'.[4] His endless fecundity and energy, the 'manyness' of the cartographer of the self, the elegiac solitary wanderer looking in from outside.

Selected poems 1923–1958 by ee cummings

A triad of 20th Century American poets impacts me greatly: Pound, Eliot and cummings. There are moments in Pound of cuttingly perfect verse, and Eliot's tortured Christianity of *Four Quartets* moves me deeply.[5] But when debating who to include, cummings spoke 'thou answerest/ them only with/ spring'.[6] He reminds me of how clinicians often see 'deficit' but in each of us is passion and fire, and sometimes that needs to be sought and ignited. Only Rimbaud equals his heart, but none his sensuality:[6]

> *since feeling is first*
> *who pays any attention*
> *to the syntax of things*
> *will never wholly kiss you*

Sin and penance

Paradise Lost by John Milton

I feel a penitent compulsion to re-read *Paradise Lost*[7] about once a year. The struggle between good and evil is our own; for Milton, with the work itself, fighting his realisation that the poem's hero is Satan ('brighter once amidst the host/Of angels, than that star the stars among'[7]). It teaches me that there is enough badness in the best of us, and goodness in the worst of us, to encourage great caution in judging others. Every time I read it, I am overcome by the shock of seeing ourselves in Satan. The secret delight in uncovering the wonder of one of literatures greatest creations, magnificently malevolent and brooding.

The Last Temptation of Christ by Nikos Kazanstakis

Banned as apostatic for writing the inner thoughts and fears of Jesus, *The Last Temptation*[8] is the great work on doubt. Like yours, my life and my career have had adversity, and here is where I turn when I falter. For Kazantzakis, without doubt, sacrifice was meaningless, and he called it 'not a biography, it is the confession of every man who struggles'. His Christ questioned his divinity to the very end of his life, yet it is a work drenched deep in belief. A quarter of a century after first reading it, it haunts me still. If I think of devastating endings to novels, I tend to first recall the horror of *The Grapes of Wrath*.[9] But the conclusion of *The Last Temptation* is the greatest in Western literature; a feat of near impossibility given how even the least pious of us already knows the traditional story. *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* It is accomplished.

On being human

Meditations by Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius: last of the five good emperors, last holder of the *Pax Romana*. He wrote[10] solely for himself, imbuing a unique honesty, devoid of ego and affectation. True questioning, full of uncertainty, struggle, and both self-reflection and recollection of the guidance of others. I can think of no more temperate a counsellor, bringing me peace even when answers are not found, encouraging me to reflect deeply, and to question myself and my practice. Likewise, advice but never moralising: consolation. A good mind, an examined life. He taught me 'that both the longest-lived and the earliest to die suffer the same loss. It is only the present moment of which either stands to be deprived'.[10] My family will confirm that when in Rome, I dance around his Doric column, erected in AD 193, in the Piazza Colonna. The Italians had the good sense to place their Prime Minister's residence facing this; how often incumbents have sought counsel from the philosopher King, I do not know.

War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy

EM Forster said 'The final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends',[11] and *War and Peace*[12] is a book for which I have endless affection. Fielding's *Tom Jones*[13] is perhaps the novel perfected, but nowhere has such lives lived and grown and aged and matured as in *War and Peace*. In Tolstoy I am reminded of that which endures – friendships and relationships slowly sailed over calm deep oceans of time, not the tumultuous exciting waves of novelty. That from which I draw strength; that which I hope I return in kind.

Dostoyevsky is more credited as psychologically insightful; this feels true directly, such as *Crime and Punishment* demanding we explore behaviour and motive.[14] But Tolstoy does this better, albeit indirectly; character growth allowing us to know the many facets of humanity. Forster argued that while many novels captured a *place* the gift of *War and Peace* was the great *space* that is Russia, and how through it, 'great chords begin to sound'.[11]

Rhythm

The Waves by Virginia Woolf

A random purchase on a pre-parenthood lazy London Sunday many years ago, sometime between espresso and Merlot o'clock. A small, thin book, and my first exposure to literary modernism.[15] Woolf wrote 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end…this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit'.[16] She lived it and she wrote it: a centrality of literary culture over the scientific or political, the Wildean call that all art is quite useless, and to give wholly to it exactly for that reason. Here I find my illogical self: the many lives we all lead, their soft overlappings. Cautioning me to not always need or seek answers or patterns or reasons – to think less, to feel more.

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2021.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ulysses by James Joyce

'm'm'ry': memory with gaps, partially recalled, damaged. A poem in a single word – magic only Joyce can conjure - from *Finnegans Wake*,[17] a book I don't suppose can be conventionally read any more than the night sky can be fully seen. It can be looked at, enjoyed, returned to, but never finished: his book of the night is larger than we can be. Not so *Ulysses*,[18] his book of the day; Jung rightly said of it 'behind a thousand veils nothing lies hidden'.[19]

I find Leopold Bloom the only literary character to match Don Quixote in immensity. I feel his kindness, his suffering, his eternal curiosity, yet don't know his judgement. I picture his face, *homme moyen sensuel*, middle aged yet ancient, staring inquisitively, seeing all, but saying little. Like the Don, he cannot be circumvented; unlike the Don, I don't feel invited in to converse, but am instead questioned. The Don teaches us, Bloom psychoanalyses us, but does not tell us what he finds. Joyce is, I feel, the closest I have come to being the patient of a psychiatrist. He asks who I am, not always a comfortable feeling, and I seek to remember this, and to be less sure.

Northrop Frye noted Joyce's works can give a sense of shapelessness, but are obsessionally crafted.[20] The danger is attempting 'solving' his cryptogrammatic puzzles; to get therein absorbed is truly to get lost, yet the depths of his work encourage endless rereadings and discoveries. Ulysses has lightness and great humour, if you will give yourself to it, as Joyce teases and plays. It is sublime and self-knowing, pure artistry, peacock-like. The daring of a genius in full awareness of the greatness of his powers: 'Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-law. But always meeting ourselves'.[18]

Wisdom

Inferno by Dante Alighieri

Thanatos – our inescapable draw towards, and recoil from, death and oblivion. How we hide, but can never escape our final ending. Audaciously telling fiction as fact with the angels as his witnesses, Dante[21] guided by the pagan Virgil to a place where heart, beauty and profundity of intellect combine.

If strangeness is the central characteristic of the highest art, then here it has its apotheosis. Milton always has a greater intimacy and seduction, an epic yet also a lyrical ode; with Dante we read it hewn into the granite bedrock of civilisation. It has always been, we just uncover what was always known. Carved, cleaved, bleeding still. In Canto III we read God's inscription on the gate of hell: 'justice moved my maker on high'[21] – it shouts of Dante's obligation to write for us.

We empathise with the sinners and struggle that a loving God could mete out punishments as cruel and eternal as those described. Like all psychiatrists, I have known people who have died by suicide; their hurts, their loved ones' hurts, my hurts, they never leave. I feel the pain where Dante, talking to a soul punished for having taken its own life by being transmuted into the body of a thorn bush, cries 'such pity fills my heart'.[21]

Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes

I am always overcome by how different, how permanently original, how qualitatively greater than all others my final choice is. Four hundred years of filtration through time, culture, geography and language have left behind, in flame, what is true now, what will be true always. A book[22] that cannot be overpraised, the very limits of art. To read Cervantes is to meet a mind so much greater than our own, whose cognitive horizons we cannot scan; always further than us, we are held like children.

At a simplistic level it's a book on madness and meaning; a peculiar attractant I suppose to a psychiatrist. Don Quixote's madness – and the simplicity of his Squire Sancho Panza – allows the world to be seen newly, deconstructed in a work of moral inquiry, but not moral position. The structure is utterly remarkable: the first part, published in 1605, tracks his chivalric adventures; the second, published in 1615, is predicated on the Don being aware that his adventures have been printed and made him famous – those characters he meets now know him from Part One. An outrageous construct, its profound discussion counsels me on how we are perceived by others. Kundera called it the founding of the modern era of European art, centred on man's being.[23] The Don sallies forth in a world of ambiguity, from which a directing God of values and rules had fled.

It is heroic, it is tragic, it is wise; it is the greatest friendship in literature. It is the funniest book I have ever read, and I ache with happiness to think of it. Herodotus taught that knowledge may give weight, but accomplishments give lustre, and many more people see than weigh. We delight in seeing the Don's adventurous travels, but through their unburnished truths we are given the weight of their knowledge, and we are ennobled.

More than any other work of art, it teaches me what it means to be human: our frailties, our foibles, our suffering, our greatness. Borges said 'to fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god'.[24] We love Cervantes for gifting the Don to humanity, and we fall in love with the Don for being that most fallible of gods. A hero of our time, of all time.

Declaration of interest

The author has no interests to declare.

References

1 Goethe JW. *Faust, part 1* (original 1808). Oxford World's Classics, 2008.
2 Pater W. *The Works of Walter Pater: volume 5: Appreciations, with an Essay of Style* (original 1889). Cambridge Library Collection, 2011.
3 Bloom, H. *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*. Harcourt Brace, 1994.
4 Whitman W. *Leaves of Grass* (original 1855). William Collins, 2015.
5 Eliot TS. *Four Quartets.* Harcourt, 1941.
6 cummings ee. *Selected Poems 1923–1958*. Faber & Faber, 1977.
7 Milton J. *Paradise Lost* (original 1667). Penguin Classics, 2003.
8 Kazanstakis N. *The Last Temptation* (original 1955). Simon & Schuster, 2005.
9 Steinbeck J. *Grapes of Wrath*. The Viking Press, 1939.
10 Aurelius M. *Meditations* (original c.167 AD). Modern Library, 2003.
11 Forster EM. Aspects of the Novel. Edward Arnold, 1927.
12 Tolstoy L. *War and Peace* (original 1869). Wordsworth Editions, 2001.
13 Fielding H. *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling (original 1749)*. Penguin Classics, 2005.
14 Dostoyevsky F. *Crime and Punishment* (original 1866). Penguin Classics, 2005.
15 Woolf V. *The Waves* (original 1931). Wordsworth Editions, 2000.
16 Woolf V. "Modern Fiction". In *The Common Reader*. Harcourt, 1925.
17 Joyce J. *Finnegans Wake*. Faber and Faber, 1939.
18 Joyce J. *Ulysses* (original 1918). Oxford University Press, 2008.
19 Deming RH. *James Joyce. The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1970.
20 Frye N. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton University Press, 1957.
21 Alighieri D. *Inferno* (original 1320). Penguin Classics, 2001.
22 de Cervantes M. *Don Quixote* (original 1605 and 1615). Penguin Classics, 2001.
23 Kundera M. *The Art of the Novel*. Harper Collins, 1986.
24 Borges JL. The Meeting in a Dream. In *Other Inquisitions* (ed JL Borges, trans RL Simms) 1937–1952. Souvenir Press, 1952.

Derek K. Tracy, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, UK. Email: derek.tracy@nhs.net

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2021.32 Published online by Cambridge University Press