

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On the Classics

Robert Wood · Wednesday, July 25th, 2018

The first book I ever wrote I put in a drawer and forgot about it. I did the same with the second, third and fourth. I self-published the fifth anonymously. It did not occur to me to send it to publishers, partly out of shame and partly out of pride. Still, I had all kinds of influences in writing it, and there was an introductory note, some numbered aphorisms, poems, an essay and a publisher's afterword. It was, to put it kindly, a dog's breakfast, and, to put it less so, a confused shitshow. In the afterword, I tried to cast doubt on who the mysterious unnamed author of this publication was, claiming that the book had been sent to 'my publishing company' without a return address or name attached. There was not even an ISBN.

What was surprising was that nothing changed when I put it into the world, only the fact that I found my pockets somewhat lighter and my relationships undiminished further still. This may have had something to do with the fact that I had no distribution network and simply sent it out to a small group of readers who were, essentially, friends. I also mailed it blind to a number of independent bookstores and small journals in the naïve hope it would be reviewed or read or simply placed on a shelf next to a real book. But one of the reasons nothing changed was also because I could not claim it as my own. This was for the simple reason that I was anxious about being a writer, hoping that I could kick this habit and get on with living a good life. I did not know what that meant, but it had something to do with books.

Growing up, I was surrounded by books. My parents were open and supportive, but when it came to schooling and expectation I internalised a sense of pressure and status. From my environment, I thought it was better to be a politician than to be a writer, to be a doctor of paediatric trauma than contemporary poetry. Over the years, I had to learn to follow my interests and to know that one can still make a contribution to the world at large no matter what field you work in (chemical weapons excluded). This was about realising that words, ideas, art all matter. They can help us reconcile ourselves by hard work and design to a better place that treats the poor, the sick, the weak better than it did the day before. A writer belongs in a community with a collective hope about the future of our world.

To become a writer meant reading more closely what I had read growing up in the suburbs of Western Australia. I had to learn how to think for myself, which meant returning to the books I thought of as classics. I had to see them as a starting point for what I wanted to write. Italo Calvino's essay 'Why Read the Classics?' was a classic to me and it is still a recognisable touchstone that has 'never finished saying what it has to say'. Calvino's essay rewards re-reading. But his examples are, with the sole exception of Murasaki's *Tale of the Genji*, all Western

European with a dash of the Russian. They are the dead white men whose bones become straw men in our arguments today. As someone growing up in isolated Australia with a white father and an Indian mother, I was sure Calvino was missing out on great literature. This is not to deny the importance of his library or these classics, but to note that I wanted to share my library with him, to take him to all my favourite minor writers and argue about why they were major to me. For that, I needed to look to the whole of my world. This means I read what Calvino suggests as well as a whole host of Othered texts.

What a classic is depends on the book itself as much as the interpretation and definition; definitions that includes what the world might become if writers put their shoulders to the wheel with truck drivers and fishermen, bricklayers and nurses, teachers and cleaners. We might add to Calvino's definitions that a classic depends on collaboration, that through voting and jockeying, pork barrelling and branch stacking, a book becomes a 'classic'. The classic needs the critic and the reader to help make it what it is.

As a writer, I have learnt that classics come back for you even when you think they have been left for dead. They are books that haunt you when you rest your head; books that make you dream of tigers and fires and horses and lyres in a suburban home. They are part of a tradition where the ghosts speak to the living and suggest words and sentences from thing air alone. In Jorge Luis Borges' essay 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition' he argues that:

I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have.

When I read this, I want to ask Borges: what is 'tradition'? What is 'the West'? What is 'greater than'? But, of course, we must not get bogged down in basics – that horse has bolted back to the stables in the philosophy department where it belongs. We are heavy journalists in literary territory where the jockeys are telling stories. It might be worth listening.

Our tradition might be one we share as readers, and writers. For Borges, who was dedicated to his home country of Argentina, this meant looking at Jose Hernandez's epic poem *Martin Fierro*, which extolled the myths of the pampas in much the same way that Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson cemented the reputation of 'the bush' in Australia in much the same era. But tradition changes. Here, now, there is a greater appreciation of Indigenous myths and legends, and a still living practice of oral storytelling. Our classics must respond to that local inflection and also become part of a tradition that is a part of something bigger, a part of world literature. It is, after all, world literature that we are speaking to and for, what we are reading when we read these classic books together.

The idea of 'world literature' or *weltliteratur* is something Johann Goethe discusses in his conversations with John Peter Eckermann. He thinks of this as the epoch that came with the rise of the nation state in nineteenth century Germany. For Goethe, one could read and digest what was from 'out there' even as he knew that one should always come 'home'. As he said:

While we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or

the Serbians, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented.

The Greeks are the oft-told origin of ‘the West’. But they are still only one part of ‘the world’ and not the mythic basis for a world literature in a true sense. My world literature reads the classics as the literary expression of the true consciousness of world historical spirit. It offers enlightenment and is, in others words, a type of *tarruru*. That might not come in any single origin story, or group of people, but in the eternal questions that come from looking more deeply in the library that has books from everywhere and everywhen.

This is about that universal library, about the books that have kept me company as I emerged from the chrysalis of writerly reluctance into someone who believes in the enduring value of books. It is about replying to the classics, to tradition, to world literature. It is about writing back to the books I read on my way to becoming the writer I secretly wanted to be when I placed that self-published book on the shelf next to Jane Austen and Germaine Greer, Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf, Sappho and Maya Angelou. It is about coming to terms with the heaviness of those shelves, about realising that history is liberating, about being thankful for the task of translating thought to text in the hope that we can make one person’s life better, if not forever then at least for a minute. That is the hope of these books that I share with you now, which have given me so much pleasure over the years.

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