6

City of Books

“Books have made me what I am” – Doris Lessing[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Certain books are held dear because they are . . . psychic landmarks revealing

where and how they helped us come into consciousness” – Geoff Dyer[[2]](#footnote-2)

“I can measure out my life in books. They stand along

the way like signposts: the moments of absorption and empathy and

direction and enlightenment and sheer pleasure” – Penelope Lively[[3]](#footnote-3)

“It was in books that I encountered the universe: digested

classified, labelled, mediated” – Jean-Paul Sartre[[4]](#footnote-4)

“For him, books were like friends, and reading an extension of

companionship” – Michael Holroyd[[5]](#footnote-5)

“The best moments in reading are when you come across something - a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things - that you'd thought special, particular to you. And here it is, set down by someone else, a person you've never met, maybe even someone long dead. And it's as if a hand has come out, and taken yours” – Alan Bennett[[6]](#footnote-6)

“Book-burners try to destroy ideas that differ from their own.

Reading does the opposite. It encourages doubt” – John Carey[[7]](#footnote-7)

The holding power of a good book

This chapter is an indicative travel guide to my personal city of books – a large imaginary metropolis I retain within myself, but whose districts are unconsciously shared with many other people, thus helping to create an unseen cultural community. The most prominent features of this community map aspects of the world that are important to me, and how certain of my intellectual interests and personality traits have developed as a result.

Although this guide is not a precise ‘A to Z’, it does showcase certain books and writers, explaining their holding power on me. On the other hand, in his otherwise wonderful panegyric to the book, Joe Queenan is not quite right where I am concerned when he says a “reading life is an adventure *without maps*”,[[8]](#footnote-8) for mine has provided me with not just direction, but often purpose as well.

Reading has also been one of the chief means I have used, in the manner of Montaigne, to lighten the burden of troublesome ideas, in the sense I more often than not seek out a book, rather than another person, to assuage feelings of confusion.[[9]](#footnote-9) Accessing good literature, and certain works of fiction especially, has additionally enabled me to mediate between the material and spiritual worlds I routinely inhabit, offering moments even of transcendence, in the course of which I have been able to escape the constraints represented by convention. John Carey concurs, remarking that “reading makes you see that ordinary things are not ordinary, taking you into other minds, making them part of your own. Reading [thus] releases you from the limits of yourself.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Diana Anthill agrees: “books have enabled me to experience lives other than my own – to enter other places, other times, other genders. And that is what the written word is for.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

And my city of books of course also provides evidence of how I have constructed my mental history through reading, exposing gaps as well as strengths in it. Heather Reyes’ ‘little book about reading’ says much as I do here, particularly about personal development: “books change lives; they help to build an identity that encompasses what is initially outside the self, bringing it into the little room of one’s head, even making our own life ‘strange’ to us, learning to see it through others’ eyes.”[[12]](#footnote-12) And she should know, given her great passion for reading, which was severely tested during a period of near fatal illness.

The positive impact of reading on my developing personality was very apparent in each of Chapters 2, 3 and 5 of this book, where I revealed how studying particular political and religious texts pointed me in directions from which subsequently I have not significantly deviated. They had this impact because I allowed them to fill me with their thoughts, entailing a form of interior communion whereby I permitted myself temporarily to merge with the consciousness of each of their respective authors, allowing them either to influence me anew, or sometimes to confirm what I was already aware of. On such occasions, it was as if, to adapt the words of Alan Bennett which are banner headlined at the start, a hand came out and grasped mine, to either guide or shake it. Salman Rushdie puts this better: “What is forged, in the secret act of reading, is a different kind of identity, as the reader and writer merge, through the medium of the text, to become a collective being that both writes as it reads and reads as it writes.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

But this did not happen to me in a willy-nilly fashion. Like all significant human relationships, the positive links I forged with these books was the product of something else – a sense I was ready to read them, being open to the possibility they might change me for the better at a time in my life when I was seeking answers to key questions about the nature of the good society; about the role religion might play in living a purposeful existence; about the meaning of things in general. I am then writing here about the beginnings of a kind of love affair.[[14]](#footnote-14) Edward Said easily puts into words what I am struggling to get at here when he writes: “I pick up a book . . . What I find that inspires me, or moves me, animates me, gets me excited intellectually, is not simply a matter of information, it’s [rather] a kind of spirit that you feel through the words: a sense of discovery; a sense of making one’s way through material that suddenly impresses you as original or important or significant.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

It is often said, curiously to my mind, that “we are what we eat”. I think it is far more the case that “we are what we read”, or don’t read. As Alberto Manguel, the Argentinean anthologist, writes, “readers make a book theirs; the end is that book and reader become one”.[[16]](#footnote-16) And there is some neurological research that lends support to this. Psychologists from Washington University in St Louis, for example, used brain scans to see what happens inside our heads when we read attentively. It seems that, as we read, we are mentally simulated by the ideas we encounter, weaving them together to create new neural pathways, which reinforce or challenge the sense we have of who we are, and of other things, both specifically and generally.

By contrast, predictable opinions and hackneyed formulations in books merely flat-line in our heads, going along the boring mental pathways they thereby reinforce.[[17]](#footnote-17) Reading good literature thus seems literally to increase the size of our brains, which maybe helps us to understand better Shakespeare’s harsh description of poor Dull’s inferior intelligence in *Love’s Labour Lost*, which he puts down entirely to a lack of book-learning: “Sir, he hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book; he hath not eat paper, as it were; he hath not drunk ink; his intellect is not replenished; he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Meanwhile, Philip Davis, Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool, having productively fed off such dainties for many years, rightly commends them to the rest of us in his wonderful study, *Reading and the Reader*. Reading serious literature he tells us provides a ‘holding ground’ or ‘half-way reality’– “an invisible place of disposition”[[19]](#footnote-19) – for thinking anew about experience, constituting a form of mental travel that yields alternatives to any conventional view. Azar Nafisi concurs in her *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* in which she discusses the potential of literature to subvert readers’ usual ways of understanding the world, enabling them “to see beyond the pale . . . making them feel like strangers in their own homes.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

By regularly accessing this ‘half-way reality’, which Davis interestingly says “lies somewhere *between religion and secularisation”*, I often find myself momentarily stopped in my tracks by what I find there, which is a “means of opening and reopening innerly shifting and deepening mental pathways – a trigger for serious reflection and deep contemplation.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Salman Rushdie seems again to be saying roughly the same when he writes so approvingly of the novel as an art form, arguing that it “takes the privileged arena of conflicting discourses right inside our heads . . . [where] we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way”, which is why (like Davis) he thinks that literature operates as a means to bring together our spiritual and material worlds.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Although being held in this place and in this way has usually amounted to a temporary, sometimes very fleeting, state of affairs, its effects have often been fundamental and permanent, proffering new truths, of both reasoning and argument and of the imagination. And while both Davis and Rushdie are surely right to associate this experience with serious reading, I think, as I explain elsewhere in this memoir, it has relevance as well to explaining why certain kinds of music have particular effects and why non-realist ways of believing in God make complete sense. It interests me also to know that Donald Winnicott, the famous paediatrician, was an early champion of the term ‘holding’ in his own psychoanalytic work, which he used to describe the supportive environment that therapists should seek to create for their clients.[[23]](#footnote-23) Although I concede I could be comprehensively wrong about all of this, I am impressed by the synoptic application of the concept of holding, which suggests it is a powerful, even true, one.

Contrary to what might be assumed, the life-changing and holding effects of books on my ways of thinking and acting have occasionally happened without much or any pre-planning. Indeed, some of my most exciting book-reading moments have been those where I have been taken totally by surprise, when I have discovered a book, often while casually browsing in a library or a bookshop, which I never previously realized I needed to read, and which radically opened my eyes when I did, making it an exciting moment of serendipitous juxtaposition. On the other hand, I do not share at all my hero William Hazlitt’s view that one should avoid reading new books, concentrating instead on a limited number of significant favourites.[[24]](#footnote-24) I think the exact opposite, believing, despite some personal backsliding, that it’s important always to increase the range and type of books one reads, in order to add to enlarge and enrich understanding, while conceding that the indiscriminate love of books is a sort of disease.

Owning books

While I do not suffer from this condition, both my children, and several of my close friends, say I own a lot of books, which behind their hands maybe means they think I possess too many. This is partly true to the extent I have regularly bought and collected books for over fifty years, largely because being a school and university teacher and professor required me to. But my personal library is not especially huge, compared to others with which I am acquainted, and despite the fact that the many thousands of volumes it comprises are dispersed over each of the three floors of the small house I presently live in, occupying yards of shelving in all of its rooms. And it is a ‘library’ of books, rather than simply a collection of them, being organised in a fairly systematic fashion.

The current scarcity of shelves for more recent purchases however means my books are beginning to occupy indiscriminately any available surface, including empty chairs, floors and stairs. It is this latest development, I suspect, that causes my children to think I have an unnecessarily big personal library. Even I occasionally worry I may trip over a pile of books sitting on a step or on the floor, with damaging results, as I recall to mind the sad fate of composer Charles-Valentin Alkan who legend has it came to a tragic end on 30 March 1888 when he was crushed to death at home by an unstable bookcase which accidentally fell on him.

Whether true or false, this story alerts me to the need to take more care about where and how I store the additional books which I anticipate buying between now and when I die. If all goes according to my genetic makeup and the law of ageing averages, and barring a fatal accident, this will be near 2032, my eighty-fifth year. Working on the basis that I purchase roughly fifty books every twelve months, this means I will need space for about one-thousand extra volumes, which will require me to install approximately thirty yards of new shelving. The trouble is I do not have enough empty wall space in my present house to accommodate this, which means I will have to move house, and sooner rather than later.

Of course, I could exercise discipline, and buy fewer books; or buy none at all; or re-read those I own;[[25]](#footnote-25) or, better still, cull certain volumes that rarely get looked out; or even start buying and reading e-books. But, as any serious book-owner will tell you, the latter are no substitute for the real thing. Like most book lovers, I always have to touch and feel them. And dumping books from my library, or giving them away, even to good new owners, is not lightly undertaken either, considering the close personal intimacy that prevails between a good book and its serious-minded owner. Books are like friends, and reading them is therefore an extension of companionship, which may explain why I always have a book on my person when I am out and about on my own, including when I am cycling, using breaks to skim a few pages. When this does not happen, I still find that the mere possession of a book on such occasions is very comforting. As Benjamin Disraeli once observed, “books are companions, even if you don’t open them”.[[26]](#footnote-26)

This accounts for why I enjoy the sight of my crowded bookshelves, delighting, to quote Manguel again, “in knowing that I’m surrounded by a sort of inventory of my life, with intimations of my future”.[[27]](#footnote-27) It also clarifies why I have always found very irritating Stephen Dedalus’ conceited observation in Joyce’s *Ulysses* that the books in Dublin’s National Library are so many “mummy cases” containing “confined thoughts”.[[28]](#footnote-28) The exact opposite is the case, if he took the trouble to borrow and release some of their ideas. But this is an unlikely outcome, for it would require Stephen, totally against the grain of his character, to suspend temporarily the sense he has of being a frustrated and undiscovered genius whose theories are superior to other people’s.

Books, then, are not separate from my love of life, but a massive extension of it, and to such a degree I cannot imagine passing a single day without reading something of significance, a compulsion informed by the knowledge that whenever I read I usually pick up at least one good new idea or quotable quote. Writing that last sentence of mine reminds me of what I said in Chapter 4 about my love of classical music, which, like my passion for books, is central to my functioning self, constituting a form of becoming. The sentence also connects with the actions of the book-loving Dorrigo Evans in Richard Flanagan’s award-winning novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* who “believed books had an aura that protected him, that without one beside him he would die.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

The failure of book owners periodically to prune their collections accounts I guess for the problem faced by inheritors, who often do not know what to do with a mass of books that, in most respects, is of no interest to them, and which takes up such a lot of room. Anticipating this eventuality, my children have each asked me what I want to be done with the books I own after I am gone. My answer has been, first, that they should retain those they want; then encourage particular friends of mine to take away what they like; and then give the residue to charity.

In deciding what to keep, it occurs to me my children might find helpful reading this chapter, which applauds certain books and particular authors. I don’t think they will fail to notice that James Joyce’s *Ulysses* has a special place in my reading heart, not least because I dedicate over two-thousand words later on to explaining why I think it is such a remarkable novel. And certain poets and other novelists and a host of writers of non-fiction also get special mention. But what follows, as I said at the start, is not a detailed street plan of my city of books, which would take far too long to sketch out, being rather a rough outline of its general territory. Indeed, my purpose in this chapter is less to write about individual authors and books I am impressed by, and far more to explain why being a reader of serious literature has mattered so much to me.

Building my city of books: novels, dramas and poetry

How did the volumes in my city of books get planning permission? The answer is by a combination of chance, systematic curiosity, and impulses generated by conversation and associated recommendation, or by reading itself. Either way, like most of the bibliophiles known to me, I prefer fully to own rather than to borrow (or ‘mortgage’) books. Indeed, on those few occasions when I do take home a library book, I often purchase it subsequently if I find out it is a good one. Such discoveries are complemented by the guilty habit I have of test-running books newly published by selectively skim-reading their contents in bookshops. In mitigation, I should state that I often buy the books in question. But not always, which is why I was once politely ticked off in Blackwell’s in Oxford by one of the sales staff for seeming to use the ‘just published’ table in its politics section as a personal reference library. Taking notes while sitting on the shop’s floor as I read on that occasion was probably not a clever move.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Many of the books I own connect with particular times in my life when I have found myself absorbed in a topic or the output of a particular writer. And the word ‘absorbed’ is very apt here, for I have regularly allowed myself to become infatuated as a reader by a theme, or with a single author, or both. This has been a feature of my reading life for as long as I can remember, especially where novels are concerned. Indeed the building of the fiction districts of my city of books has gone through a succession of compulsive phases, the dates of which can be set down fairly precisely. So, in the late 60s, as an undergraduate, for roughly one year, I read all the major novels of D H Lawrence; much of George Orwell’s oeuvre followed twelve months later; then, not long after, in successive years, it was Iris Murdoch’s, Graham Green’s, most of James Joyce’s, Paul Scott’s, William Golding’s, Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s, Doris Lessing’s, and John Fowles’. My last such binge, which was affected during 2003, involved me reading a clutch of novels and short stories by Italo Calvino. I am about to embark on a new one, which is focused on Anthony Powell’s 12-volume sequence of novels – his *Dance to the Music of Time*. And, to celebrate John Berger’s 90th year, I have started to re-read some of his story-portraits, beginning with my favourite *A Fortunate Man*.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In each case the drive to read was initiated by recommendation – by a teacher, a tutor, or a friend - though the desire to read a lot of books by the same author has always been more to do with personal obsession than invitation or calculation. The result is that, while I have read a lot of modern novels, they have been written by a small number of people. The same emphasis applies to my poor record of reading the classics. So, while many of the novels of each of Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, Hermann Hesse, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky were read by me in my middle years, others hardly featured in that period. Even now, my tastes in contemporary fiction overly centre on a limited number of writers, all male, which include James Salter, William Boyd and Ian McEwan. Pathetic, I know, given the wealth of excellent new fiction that continues incessantly to be published each year. As I write later on about other absences in my education, I may just have to sit these books out, given the shortage of time left to me.

All of these books sit comfortably on my shelves as I write, reminding me daily of not just the size and character of my city of books, but also the dates when I added to and increased its dimensions, including often the circumstances underway as I did so, making my books a form of memorabilia. For, like many owners of lots of books, I not only inscribe my name on their front pieces, but also the date when they were acquired and read. Accordingly, I am able easily to associate the reading of certain novels with the birth of each of my two children, and with the start of new jobs, and with particular holidays and journeys. Importantly, however, not one of these novels is an obvious fit for the particular occasion.

There is everything, then, *not* to link my reading of John Fowles’ Greek island sunny-weather novel, *The Magus*, with a family holiday undertaken in 1988, given that that excursion was located in a wind-swept area of Normandy! Similarly, there is no simple way to articulate my son’s birth with me reading the fourth and final novel that makes up Paul Scott’s so-called ‘Raj Quartet’ (*A Division of the Spoils*). It was simply the novel I was reading at that moment. Nor did I have even a special interest in the last years of British India, which is the backdrop to Scott’s series of books. I was merely advised they were a landmark of post-war fiction, having considerable entertainment value, which was more than enough encouragement.

Well, maybe not entirely. As I look back on my life as a reader of fiction I wonder if I was drawn to reading certain novels, and sets of them, and at particular moments in time, because their plots and characters and themes overlapped with aspects of my then emerging and changing character. I’d like then to think that what prompted me first to read D H Lawrence was a need to make fuller sense of my own emerging masculinity; and that what got me going on Iris Murdoch was a desire to discriminate better between good and evil and to appreciate more insightfully the power of the unconscious. But the truth sadly is much more prosaic. For sure, when I read these authors I was often able speedily to identify with certain of the main characters in their fiction, and to explore vicariously the decisions they make, and the emotions they feel as they do so, thus helping me to think reflectively about similar or parallel experiences underway in my own life. And also this reading alerted me to some unpalatable news, opening as well new doors in my mind.

However, these effects were largely incidental, inasmuch as many of the novels I read in my youth were poured over by me chiefly as a means of achieving a narrowly defined sense of self-improvement – to make me seem cleverer than I was at the time, thinking that being ‘well read’ was a superior way of living my life. Of course, in a fashion I was right to think this, as reading serious literature does expand one’s understanding of far-reaching things. But in my case such reading, particularly in my late teens and early 20s, was also about off-setting a feeling of intellectual and social inadequacy, having entered, via my grammar school education, and without adequate socialization, the life-world of the middle classes, which I mistakenly regarded as being highly literate, leaving behind the limitations of a working class home that did not put a high premium on bookishness. Ignorantly, because serious reading, like going to the opera, is not the prerogative of the middle classes, I persuaded myself that becoming a good reader in my 20s was a necessary, even sufficient, condition for successfully making me more socially mobile.

While that was an error of understanding, the increase in the size of the cultural capital caused by my late teenage bookishness was real enough. Undoubtedly in that period I felt more knowledgeable, and grew in confidence as a result, joining in serious discussion with a developed view of my own to share and defend. The process also rendered me a means therapeutically to accommodate successfully the loneliness of being an only and isolated child, including the frustrations of feeling a social class outsider. The internal communion I enjoyed with the authors of the books I read in those formative years, and consolidated subsequently, helped me in fact to make more than half a good job of being a loner, with the result I have never ever been psychologically disturbed by being in my own company for long periods. On the contrary, I rather enjoy my self-enclosed existence because it gives me opportunities to make more friends with even more friendly books. As I have already remarked, reading for me has always been a form of fellowship.

The process of discovering this however was not a comfortable one, for it frequently brought down on me the criticism of friends and family - the former, at school and at university, judging me to be overly egg-headed; the latter, believing me to be odd to want to read a lot and so often. “That son of yours reads and thinks too much”, my grandfather would say to my mother when he saw me reading, as if my silent activity contradicted his sense of what it meant to be a normal adolescent boy.

I concede there is something in the relationship between a reader and a book that might justify such reproaches. As Manguel observes, for some this link is “recognized as wise and fruitful”, while for others it is interpreted as “disdainfully exclusive and excluding, perhaps because the image of an individual curled up in a corner, seeming oblivious of the grumblings of the world, suggests impenetrable privacy and a selfish eye and singular creative action.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Nietzsche in his *Untimely Meditations* also cautions against a form of bookishness that leaves its adherents very learned, but ill-equipped to act on the matters they read about: knowing so much, they seemingly can’t see the wood for the trees.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Where I’m concerned, it’s more the other way round, for I often don’t notice the trees enough, with the result sometimes I can be insufficiently hesitant, being so caught up in my grand schemes. On the other hand, I am always suspicious of those who seek to drive a wedge between life and reading. They are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the quality of my life has been massively enhanced by serious reading, not prejudiced or threatened by it. It cannot be an accident then that demotic political regimes often brand books as superfluous luxuries or, worse, ban and burn them. They all know the truth: that book readers can be subversive, something Mussolini’s fascist regime clearly overlooked when it allowed Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist intellectual, access to trunk-loads of books during his eight-year long incarceration as a political prisoner from 1926, upon which he based his famous and influential *Prison Notebooks*. Salman Rushdie makes the related point that, “wherever in the world the little room of literature has been closed, sooner or later the walls come tumbling down”.[[34]](#footnote-34)

\*

My city of books also includes a good number of texts of dramas. Inevitably, Shakespeare’s works feature a lot, but not far behind there are numerous plays of modern dramatists - Ibsen, Beckett, Shaffer, Pinter and Friel, and many others. Each of these texts, which were read by me either before or shortly after seeing a production of the said play, possess a double-sided attractiveness: they provided a highly concentrated reading experience, because each was got through in one sitting and in just a few hours; and they excited my imagination in such a way I was able to film the play’s action in my head. Novels achieve as much as well, of course; but the text of a play, I have found, seems to cause this effect more immediately. A half-way-there kind of experience, I have also discovered, is to follow the action of a play as broadcast on the radio, or recorded on a CD, with its text close to hand. In addition, reading a play, without the benefit of an accompanying recording or live broadcast of it, has allowed me pleasurably to become its stage director, enabling me to work out ways in which the actors should say particular lines and interact, and how it all should be set, even lit.

Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is my favourite modern play. I have seen it in production over a dozen times, and read its text more often. I saw it first in my young twenties, knowing immediately that it was important, without then understanding really why. It possessed for me then, as now, the kind of aesthetic warrant which earlier I wrote so enthusiastically about in connection with classical music. As with challenging works of music, I just knew from the outset that *Godot* had to be worked at and met entirely on its aesthetic terms. I think I now know what the play basically means, despite always learning something new every time I see it. It’s a dream-allegory in which is explored our deepest repressed fears about how best to live an authentic life. Beckett of course does not tell us in *Godot* how to achieve this. What he does instead is dramatically put before us the sorts of questions we should ask about life’s meaning as we wait for the inevitable, and look for ways to pass the time as we do so.[[35]](#footnote-35)

\*

Many books of poetry also populate my shelves, including prominently a complete set of Seamus Heaney’s works, having first got properly into his oeuvre after hearing a reading given by him of some of his early poems in Belfast in 1977; and then later on Samuel Beckett, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin and Pablo Neruda; and lots of Thomas Hardy, W H Auden, T S Eliot, Louis MacNeice and W B Yeats; and R S Thomas subsequently; plus bits and pieces of George Herbert’s and John Donne’s differently devotional output. Between 2004 and 2006, because I was writing a book about the educational implications of British Romanticism, I also read closely for the first time since my school days many of the poems of William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron.

The special appeal of several of these poets is not difficult to explain, and Hardy and Heaney in particular. Each of these last mentioned speaks directly to my circumstances in a recognizably familiar way, offering a unique kind of holding ground to explore crucial aspects of my inner life - to do notably with loving, grieving and regretting. Many of the novels I have read do this as well, of course, but their plots and dialogues give less priority to thought-provoking allusion and ambiguity, which are two of the hallmarks of the kind of poetry I like the most.

Philip Davis, discussing Hardy’s poetry, puts all of this better: “What Hardy seeks, within the external vocabulary of mere meaning, is an internal dictionary – a language-within-language – to provide individual meanings too deep, subtle, and interrelated for simple common nouns.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Here, to illustrate, is Hardy’s subtle detailing of the absolute, transcendental, quality of still moments of perfect silence, entailing the possibility of recovering lost time:

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,

And the drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,

I look behind at the fading byway,

And see on its slope, now glistening wet,

Distinctly yet

Myself and a girlish form benighted

In dry March weather. We climb the road

Beside a chaise. We had just alighted

To ease the sturdy pony's load

When he sighed and slowed.

What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of

Matters not much, nor to what it led

Something that life will not be balked of

Without rude reason till hope is dead,

And feeling fled.

It filled but a minute. But was there ever

A time of such quality, since or before,

In that hill's story? To one mind never,

Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,

By thousands more.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Unlike Hardy, Seamus Heaney self-consciously theorises a strong case for his art over and above his actual production of it. In his 1995 Nobel Lecture he says this, for example, about poetry’s ‘truth-telling’ qualities: “I credit poetry . . . both for being itself, and for being a help, for making possible a fluid and restorative relationship between the mind's centre and its circumference.”[[38]](#footnote-38) In the same lecture, he speaks of the "temple inside our hearing", which the passage of a poem calls into being. This all makes total sense to me, as does Heaney’s remark, made subsequently in another context, about poetry’s “ratification of the impulse towards transcendence” – a “form of redemption”.[[39]](#footnote-39) This ‘temple’ and its ‘making good’ aspects are surely other ways of accounting for those ‘holding grounds’ about which I wrote earlier, and by which I place so much store. And nowhere more convincingly does Heaney better succeed in arresting this appreciator of his art than in his series of so-called ‘marriage poems’, of which ‘The Otter’ is a special favourite:

When you plunged

The light of Tuscany wavered

And swung through the pool

From top to bottom.

I loved your wet head and smashing crawl,

Your fine swimmer's back and shoulders

Surfacing and surfacing again

This year and every year since.

I sat dry-throated on the warm stones.

You were beyond me.

The mellowed clarities, the grape-deep air

Thinned and disappointed.

Thank God for the slow loadening,

When I hold you now

We are close and deep

As the atmosphere on water.

My two hands are plumbed water.

You are my palpable, lithe

Otter of memory

In the pool of the moment.

Turning to swim on your back,

Each silent, thigh-shaking kick

Re-tilting the light,

Heaving the cool at your neck.

And suddenly you're out,

Back again, intent as ever,

Heavy and frisky in your freshened pelt,

Printing the stones.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Such poetry, to quote Heaney again, “holds [my] attention, functioning not as distraction, but as pure communication - a focus where [my] power to concentrate is concentrated back on [myself]”, offering a vital invisible place of disposition in which to recreate my thoughts.[[41]](#footnote-41) Put another way, by activating the mental pathways of my brain’s right hemisphere, poetry opens and deepens my thinking thoughts, enabling me, in the words of Iain McGilchrist, “to step outside the flow of experience and experience my experience in a special way: to re-present the world in a form that is less truthful [in a scientific sense], but clearer existentially.”[[42]](#footnote-42) It is observations like these which alert me to the overlap between psychoanalysis and poetry, as both possess the potential to help people intelligently to speak to themselves.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Building my city of books: non-fiction

The reading of non-fiction can also be easily fitted into my life calendar, but with more cause-and-effect than is the case with novels and collections of poetry and drama texts. The start of my love affair with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s posthumously published books of philosophy, for example, can be dated exactly to the second half of 1974 when I was involved in writing a dissertation for my masters degree; Michel de Montaigne’s and William Hazlitt’s writings began to work their magic on me not long after, following attendance at a public lecture, given in Bath, on the history of the essay as a literary form; Jurgen Habermas’ critical sociology and Raymond Williams’ cultural materialism each first took me over during the summer of 1982, as I was writing my doctoral thesis; the corpus of writings that make up European Utopianism and British Romanticism properly made itself felt in my life from about mid-1999, as I began research for two academic books about education I wanted to write; and my need to know about modern China found its initial bookish outlet in 2002, when I first visited the People’s Republic.

Running parallel with these reading adventures are a host of others which include political biographies and diaries, implicating Labour Party leaders and other Leftist luminaries; literary lives, which encompass Michel de Montaigne, William Hazlitt, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, George Orwell, Iris Murdoch and Harold Pinter; many writings by and about Marx and Freud; studies in social theory, implicating modern sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Stuart Hall, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman; books of literary theory written by Richard Hoggart, Edward Said and Terry Eagleton; theological texts, largely of a philosophical nature, many authored by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, with some commentaries on various books in the bible; utopian texts of all guises; numerous collections about British Romanticism; works about different aspects of education, focusing mostly on teaching and learning in schools and the education policy-making process; and studies of modern British and European history, which have spread in the last few years, chiefly because of my son’s influence, into works about other regions of the world such as the Middle East, where he works as a diplomat. More recently, since my retirement in 2006, I have embarked on a career as a reader of books about aspects of classical music, which include studies of Bach, Beethoven and Britten.

\*

Two writers just referenced who have each made a distinctive and very deep impression on me are the essayists Michel de Montaigne and William Hazlitt.

As with classical music, I am very affected positively by non-fiction which successfully uses the short form to make a point. My liking of Chopin’s famous etudes and preludes thus has its literary equivalent in my appreciation of the essays of each of Montaigne and Hazlitt, which I have been reading on and off for over forty years. During that time, but specifically in the past ten years, I have even penned a few essays of my own which react to theirs.[[44]](#footnote-44)

I came to Montaigne slightly after first reading Hazlitt. Indeed, it was the latter that made the formal introductions in his 1819 essay, ‘On the periodical essayists’, using these words of commendation, which I first read in 1975, aged 27:

“The great merit of Montaigne . . . was that he may be said to have been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man . . . He was, in the truest sense, a man of original mind - that is, he had the power of looking at things for himself, or as they really were, instead of blindly trusting to, and fondly repeating what others told him what they were . . . In taking up his pen he did not set up for a philosopher, wit, orator, or moralist, but he became all of these by merely daring to tell us whatever passed through his mind, in its naked simplicity and force . . . He did not . . . undertake to say all that can be said upon a subject, but what, in his capacity as an inquirer after truth, he happened to know about it. He was neither a pedant nor a bigot. He neither supposed that he was bound to know all things, nor that all things were bound to conform to what he had fancied or would have them to be. In treating of men and manners, he spoke of them as he found them, not according to preconceived notions and abstract dogmas. . . . He was, in a word, the first author who was not a book-maker, and who wrote not to make converts of others . . . but to satisfy his own mind of the truth of things.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Hazlitt is writing here as much about himself as about Montaigne. For, like his Sixteenth Century hero, Hazlitt had an original mind, refusing always to repeat what others told him, without first subjecting this to questioning. And, similar to Montaigne, Hazlitt wrote and spoke about things chiefly as he found them, rarely relying on preconceived notions and abstract dogmas, except that of justice and liberty, the nature of which he derived not from membership of any political party or movement but from his appreciation of literature, and Shakespeare’s plays in particular. Here (in his ‘Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays’, which appeared in 1815) Hazlitt writes about *Coriolanus*, a drama concerning an arrogant, obstinate autocrat who loathes the common people, who return his hate, and who, eventually, is stabbed to death:

“Shakespeare has in this play shown himself well versed in history and state affairs. *Coriolanus* is a store-house of political common-places . . . The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher . . .”[[46]](#footnote-46)

In hating the corruption and hypocrisy of the members of society’s dominant class, in particular its religious and royal elites, Hazlitt is enthusiastically recalled by me as an unequivocal critic of the ways in which powerful minorities seek to subjugate majorities, limiting their freedom of expression and livelihood.

Montaigne’s influence on me has been more to do with personality than politics. His essays constitute a form of ‘wisdom literature’, a label I also apply later on to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. For there is a sense in which Montaigne creates a literary mirror in which I am able easily to recognize my own humanity and simultaneously reflect on how to live better and more worthily. “Read Montaigne”, said the novelist Gustave Flaubert, “[and] he will calm you down . . . [But] don’t read him as children do, for amusement, nor as the ambitious do, to be instructed. No, read him *in order to live*.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Montaigne helps in this regard by writing candidly and naturally about *himself* and how he leads *his* life, commenting reflectively on both very serious and very mundane facets of *his* daily existence, from how to cope with the fear of death, to how to be successful and lazy at the same time, providing indirect insights into how we might generally reconstruct our own lives in ways that enable us better to flourish as individuals. Montaigne’s conversational prose style, which is a mixture of the intimate, polemical and colloquial, helps in this regard, as it easily draws readers of it into the author’s personal and emotional life-world. The result, as Sarah Bakewell, one of Montaigne’s most recent interpreters puts it, is that “readers keep seeing themselves in [Montaigne]”. She goes on immediately to quote the experiences of various illustrious readers of the *Essays* who confirm this view, notably the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (“it seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life”); the novelist Andre Gide (“that it seems he is my very self”); and the journalist Bernard Levin (“I defy any reader of Montaigne not to put down the book at some point and say with incredulity: ‘How did he know all that about me?’”).[[48]](#footnote-48) I can say all of these things as well, which is why I habitually read Montaigne, always finding new things to underline in those of his essays I return to the most, ranking his ‘Of experience’ my favorite.[[49]](#footnote-49)

\*

While I rarely mark up any of the novels or books of poetry I own, I frequently write in the margins of many of my texts of non-fiction. Writing and underlining in books is a taboo for many modern readers, despite it being acceptable practice a century ago. I have always done it, chiefly because I ‘use’ many of my books as well as read them.[[50]](#footnote-50) My marginal comments and underlining accordingly tend to take the form of narrative reading aids. Featuring down the sides and tops and bottoms of most pages, they tell the story of a book having been read to pieces. Utilising a unique-to-me system of abbreviations and symbols, these annotations help me both to follow the argument of a book and to re-read it, when required, in double-quick time. On the other hand, I am told by readers who borrow my hard-used books that my marginal comments inhibit rather than aid their understanding of them.

\*

My City of Books is criss-crossed by avenues of reference aids. Many of these help me to use other books and to write ones of my own – style guides; surveys of academic conventions; thesauruses; language dictionaries, including classical Greek and Latin and modern slang; dictionaries of literature; dictionaries of quotations, classical mythology, literary terms, clichés, epigrams, aphorisms, palindromes and anagrams, phrases and sayings; dictionaries of art, sociology, postmodernism, psychology, music, theology, politics, Marxist terms, economics, China, philosophy and history; and concordances of the bible and other religious texts. Others help me to access facts – about the results of general elections; about members of the House of the Commons; about classical music compositions (the famous *Da Capo*); about chess openings (the equally famous *Batsford*); about soccer results; about the history of Le Tour. And then there are the atlases – of the world; of specific regions; and of the Holy Land. And the guides – to architectural terms and British buildings, including churches and famous houses (my *Pevsners*); to British birds, trees and wild flowers; and even to clouds.

Does the internet render these books less useful? In some ways it must, but not always, to the extent I still enjoy looking things up in the old fashioned way. Indeed, I find some reference books difficult to close and put down, for having found in them that for which I was first looking, I end up glancing at and making a mental note of adjacent entries.

\*

A book of wisdom

It is a very fitting act of creative invention on my part that this chapter, whose banner title and account relies heavily on the metaphor of the city, should conclude with discussion of a novel, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the setting of which is an actual one - its author’s birthplace, the “lovely and filthy” Dublin,[[51]](#footnote-51) which he wished fully to present to the world.[[52]](#footnote-52) And he succeeded, Edna O’Brien proclaiming that “no other writer effulgently and so ravenously recreated a city”.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Of all the many books of fiction I own, *Ulysses* is the one I would never want to be parted from, for reading it has enabled me to contemplate experience and transform it in a very special way, initiating fundamental alterations in how I think and act as a result. It is one of the best illustrations in my own reading life of the holding power of good literature, although getting to grips with *Ulysses*, and allowing it to hold me, was all a bit hit and miss.

The particular urban location of *Ulysses*, and the novel’s precise timing, Thursday the 16th of June 1904, as everyone knows, are each important – the latter, because it flatteringly coincides with the date on which Joyce first went out with Nora Barnacle, his eventual wife[[54]](#footnote-54); the former, because it allowed him to draw into his fiction the deep knowledge he had of the ordinary lives of his fellow countrymen which he once ungraciously described as “the most hopeless, useless and inconsistent race of charlatans I have ever come across.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

At which point the difficulties of reading *Ulysses* begin. Again, as most people who have attempted to do so will caution, these very simple and basic facts do not background a novel that is straightforwardly easy either to follow or understand. Its narrative account of the commonplace comings and goings of a small group of people, notably two central characters - Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus - during a hot summer day at the turn of the Nineteenth Century in central Dublin, ought, on the face of it, to present few complications. But it does, and entirely because Joyce accounts for their ordinariness and humdrum behaviours using an exceptionally unusual and diverse collection of prose styles. His regular use of the interior monologue also takes some getting used to. Indeed, in my case, *Ulysses* is a fiction that confirms totally Colin MacCabe’s assertion that reading it is more than “passive consumption”, but also an “active metamorphosis”.[[56]](#footnote-56) Derek Attridge explains why: “Joyce’s unprecedented freedom of technique, his unashamed appeal to the intellect, his elaborate and unorganic construction demands new modes of reading and new ways of understanding the processes on which reading depends.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Both comments underscore a point made by Richard Hoggart in a lecture I once heard him give - that one never stops learning to read.[[58]](#footnote-58) In saying this, Hoggart was drawing attention to an important, but often underplayed, truth - that each new book we read holds out the possibility of challenging our competence to get through and understand it, with the result that being a regular and successful reader of serious books is inevitably a continuous process of intellectual development.

*Ulysses* certainly challenged my competence as a reader when I first encountered it in 1970, aged 22, and in three ways especially. Its stylistic contrasts unsettled me totally; its lack of conventional plot, despite being a highly organized book, threw me even further off course; and its cornucopia of literary allusions mostly perplexed me. The consequence: I didn’t get very far, abandoning the book after one day’s effort, reaching the end of just the novel’s first part – the last page of its third episode (‘Proteus’). This was an embarrassing initiation made all the more so by the fact, learnt much later on, that the first three episodes of *Ulysses* are “the acorn to the oak of [its] other fifteen”.[[59]](#footnote-59) I should, back then, have persevered, having got properly started. But, lazily, I didn’t. A lost opportunity, if ever there was one.

It was another eighteen years before I had another go – specifically in 1988, aged 40, by which time I was located in Bristol, where I was employed as a Lecturer in Education at the then local polytechnic. I spent the whole of the Autumn Term that year working my way through the novel, but not in an urgent fashion, reading when the fancy took me, which meant some weeks I got through hardly a page. Despite this failure of will, I recall being impressed by the novel, but not in any way that now I can describe accurately. I merely had the sense that it was very unusual and often very startling. Equally, I remember being regularly confused and frequently bored, at times wondering what all the fuss was about.

I was able, even so, to follow easily the novel’s sequence of reported events – from Stephen’s assertive departure from the Martello Tower, with which it begins; his subsequent uneasy encounter with Mr Deasy at the school where he works; his musings as he wanders along the mud-flats of Sandymount Strand; Bloom’s breakfasting at Eccles Street; his attendance later on at Paddy Digham’s funeral; his visit after that to the offices of the Freeman’s newspaper; the debate Stephen has on the same premises about the emptiness of political oratory; Bloom’s parallel revulsion at the eating habits on show in the Burton Restaurant; Stephen’s pompous literary theorizing in the National Library; the filmic montage of interactions underway in down-town Dublin that features next; the musical goings-on in the bar of the Ormond Hotel; the drunken interpolations which take place in Barney Kiernan’s pub; Bloom’s masturbatory fantasy about Gerty MacDowell on Sandymount shore; the riotous party in the Maternity Hospital that follows; the nightmarish madness that accompanies Bloom’s and Stephen’s visit to Dublin’s red light district; their subsequent stopping-off at the cabman’s shelter, which is the prelude to them returning together to Bloom’s home; to Molly Bloom’s deliciously sexy monologue, which is the book’s ending. And I was able too to pick up on important thematic details, notably the novel’s exploration of the nature of fatherhood,[[60]](#footnote-60) but not in any systematic fashion, or in a way that I made my own.

More positively, I remember laughing to myself as I read, finding amusing both Joyce’s clever punning and his gift for perceptive lop-sided comment. I even wrote down at the time particular quotes I especially liked, such as[[61]](#footnote-61):

“See? It all works out” (p.194)

“You can’t bring time back. Like holding water in the hand” (p.213)

“Shite and onions …. life is too short” (p.160)

“It was blue o’clock in the morning after the night before” (p.300)

“Don’t cast your nasturtiums on my character” (p.415)

“I’ll tickle his catastrophe, believe you me” (p.110)

“With a face on him as long as a late breakfast” (p.420)

“[I’m] beholden to you …. May your shadow never grow less …” (p.429)

“You know I [always] had a soft corner for you” (p.574)

“He knows more than you have forgotten” (p.623)

“Death is the highest form of life” (p.622)

“Liquids I can eat” (p.734)

“A nation is the same people living in the same place” (p.430)

“I have the impetuosity of Dante and the isosceles [of a] triangle” (p.737)

“We can’t change the country. Let’s change the subject” (p.748)

“I don’t care a continental” (p.750)

“Do you know that some mornings he has to get his hat on with a shoe-horn?” (p.416)

“Shakespeare is the happy hunting ground of all minds that have lost their balance” (p.320)

“Every life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.” (p.273)

If I have a favourite quotation, it is Bloom’s despairing and disparaging comment about himself in the ‘Circe’ episode:

“I am exhausted, abandoned, no more young. I stand, so to speak, with an un-posted letter bearing the extra regulation fee before the too late box of the general post office of human life." (p.642)

This second excursion into *Ulysses* was a kind of success; but it left me still a long way short of really grasping what the novel is all about, and why it warranted such lavish praise. The truth is I still had not really given it my undivided attention. Another wasted opportunity, in other words, though not as bad as the first one.

It took a further twenty-five years to make good this omission. The year was 2014. I was 66, and retired, and on an extended two-month reading and biking break in Lanzarote, which I dedicated partly to working through the book properly, by which I mean in a very prepared and organized kind of way. Before getting started, I re-read the two novels of Joyce that anticipate *Ulysses* - his *Dubliners* (1914) and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916); and I had to hand a pair of published ‘guides’ to help navigate me through its complexities – Harry Blamires’ brilliant 263-page paraphrase and commentary, *The New Bloomsday Book* and Weldon Thornton’s very fat labour of love, *Allusions in Ulysses*.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Joyce, if he was in a position to comment on these two source books, would probably mildly condemn my need for them. When he was once asked, for example, why he did not supply help to readers of *Ulysses*, he said: “You know people never value anything unless they have to steal it. Even an alley cat would rather snake an old bone out of the garbage than come up and eat a nicely prepared chop from your saucer.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Joyce has a point, which entails being wary about overly relying on such sources, which can stand in the way of getting on with the novel and appreciating its form and flow rather than focussing on its detailed content. Also, guides, as Derek Attridge cautions, may “create a spurious sense of rich complexity by reducing differences and distinctions, [turning] it into a text that confirms us in our satisfied certainties instead of one that startles and defies us and thus opens new avenues for thought and pleasure.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

To be fair, Blamires says as much as well, believing that “it is better to allow the reader’s interest to be fully engaged before pressing [the novel’s symbolic correspondences] upon him.”[[65]](#footnote-65) That was my approach – to make a very strong effort to enter fully into the novel’s life-world, mostly untrammelled by source books, only deferring to these when I became very lost and totally confused, or when I needed an initial starting point. Blamires’ book, in this connection, proved then a very digestible entrée; while Thornton’s was a nice, but not compulsory, desert.

In Lanzarote, it took me fifteen consecutive sessions to read the whole thing, which is the equivalent of about sixty hours. And I read to a plan – roughly seventy pages at a time – writing marginal notes and queries to be followed up later, mostly about allusions that were lost on me. Occasionally, because I was told it aids understanding, I read some passages aloud, particularly from the ‘Circe’ episode, which easily lends itself to such treatment because it is written in the form of a dream-drama with parts that are ‘spoken’ on the page, reminding me of the narrative style of Beckett’s *Godot*.

I became totally absorbed, by which I mean ‘held’. Indeed, as I walked and biked about between reading sessions, I began to think Bloom-like thoughts, wishing also I was more like him: to love without being possessive; to be generous without being prompted; to be magnanimous without being sycophantic; to be sincere without being bigoted; to be strong without being assertive; to be simultaneously cosmopolitan and supremely local; and to be practically-minded as well as intellectually driven. The novel became for me a kind of moral primer, with Bloom as my ethics teacher, which explains my definition of it as a ‘bible in fiction’, connecting with the comment made about it by one of its most insightful friends, Professor Declan Kiberd, who writes admiringly of *Ulysses*’ role as a ‘wisdom literature’ which teaches us how better to conduct ourselves, giving us “advice on how to cope with grief; how to be frank about death in the age of denial; . . . how to purge sexual relations of ownership; how women have their own sexual desires and so also do men; how the way a person approaches food can explain who they really are … and how to walk and think at the same time.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Sean Latham echoes this view when he says that *Ulysses* “puts hard and urgent questions to us.”[[67]](#footnote-67)

Like so many other enthusiastic readers of *Ulysses*, I became infatuated by Bloom, finding him a very sweet man. As Leo Bersani asks, “has any fictional character ever been so completely known? Warm-hearted, commonsensical, and appealingly unfanatic in politics and religion; a loving son, father and even husband; slightly, but not unappealingly, pretentious intellectually; horny and a bit guilty sexually; garrulous, but a stylistic outsider in a city of besotted skilled rhetoricians; something of a loner, with his day dreams of travel in exotic Eastern lands – Bloom is eminently appealing and eminently ordinary”.[[68]](#footnote-68) George Orwell agrees: “Bloom is a rather exceptionally sensitive specimen of the man in the street.”[[69]](#footnote-69) His creator thinks the same. Writing to his confidant, Frank Budgen, in March 1920, about the novel’s ‘Oxen of the Sun’ episode, which is set in Dublin’s Maternity Hospital, which he is busy drafting, Joyce uses a set of vivid embryonic metaphors positively to describe Bloom, who “is the spermatozoon, the womb, the ovum”.[[70]](#footnote-70) In a subsequent letter to Budgen, Joyce goes further, declaiming Bloom to be “as immortal as Falstaff”.[[71]](#footnote-71) Richard Ellman, Joyce’s greatest biographer, is equally blandishing, but in a more elaborated fashion, telling us that Bloom is “a humble vessel elected to bear and transmit unimpeached the best qualities of the mind. Joyce’s discovery, so humanistic that he would have been embarrassed to disclose it out of context, was that the ordinary is the extraordinary.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

Joyce’s *Ulysses,* like my equally beloved edition of Montaigne’s *Essays*, is for me therefore a very special study of character, a linking assessment that would not be lost on Joyce, given that he was a keen admirer of the French sceptic, who like him sought to represent in writing the process of thought, not only about, but very much to do with, the question of ‘how to live’. As Stephen Dedalus muses early on, “thought is the thought of thought”.[[73]](#footnote-73)

When I first read *Ulysses* I did not anticipate any of these effects. My desire to get fully to grips with it was not at that time motivated by a wish to learn better about how I should live my life. Far more ordinary concerns were at work. I wanted to read a novel that had elicited from certain critics the astonishing applause of being one of the greatest ever written;[[74]](#footnote-74) I wanted to impress myself and my friends by my ability to get right the way through it; and I wanted to read a book that had been banned, assuming that attempts to frustrate its publication by anti-vice crusaders was an exercise in narrow-mindedness, which I was resolved to ignore.[[75]](#footnote-75) But, once properly launched, the novel’s intrinsic merits were speedily felt.

It is sometimes said that *Ulysses* is a book in which a key theme is the coming into being of the book itself. This is effectively what Stephen Dedalus is tasked with: to write *Ulysses*. “I want you to write something”, Myles Crawford, the editor of the Freeman’s newspaper says to him. “You can do it . . . Put us all into it, damn its soul.”[[76]](#footnote-76) In my case, *Ulysses* is more of a book which brought me into being as a new kind of reader, particularly of fiction. As Joyce’s most recent biographer, Gordon Bowker, says, “Stephen’s philosophical meanderings, Bloom’s day-dreaming, and Molly’s nocturnal reveries, require a new kind of reading, and a new kind of readership”.[[77]](#footnote-77) Bowker here is leaning on Ellman’s earlier observation that Joyce “requires that we adapt ourselves in form as well as in content to his new point of view”[[78]](#footnote-78), which is to do with privileging the commonplace, using prose that mimics its interior and exterior dynamics. For sure, *Ulysses* presents itself as the most difficult of novels, but it is undoubtedly also, to quote one of its best interpreters, Richard Ellmann, “the most entertaining of difficult ones”.[[79]](#footnote-79)

*Ulysses* took me out of my comfort zone as an appreciator of the novel, prompting me to reconstruct what I imagined to be its limits, including of written language itself, and the risks that can be taken with it. It reminded me too of the constraints of all particular styles of writing, each having its assumptions and limitations. Joyce also spurred me on, though not for the first time in my life, to break down language in order to scrutinize its relationship to consciousness and to reality. Aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, for example, had taught me about this process many years before I properly read *Ulysses*, which therefore confirmed its worth. To that extent, both novelist and philosopher, in their very different ways, helped me to appreciate more profoundly than any other pair of writers before or since the poetics and dignity of everyday living and of ordinary language.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Conclusion

Leopold Bloom’s fictional collection of books is very small, occupying a mere two shelves in the small dining room of his Eccles Street home. Joyce ‘catalogues’ all twenty-two of them in the ‘Ithaca’ episode of *Ulysses*, drawing attention to the “significances . . . of symbolism, of circumstantial evidence” of their “scintillating titles”, which relate to their owner’s character and career and to overtones relevant to the day’s activities.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Without a lot of effort, I can do the same, matching and anchoring my city of books to those aspects of the world that most matter to me – society, political economy, the arts, literature, music, philosophy, psychology and religion in particular. There are obsessions on show as well, notably a preoccupation with particular authors and associated discrete themes, such as Marx and Utopia, Hazlitt and Contrariness and Montaigne and The Art of Living. And there are gaps too. Science-fiction, thrillers and comedies are nowhere to be found. Such ‘escape or lounge literature’, including what Orwell once described as ‘good bad books’,[[82]](#footnote-82) have rarely taken my fancy. There is not much real science either; and hardly any mathematics; and even less technology. What exists then is mostly on the serious side of the arts and humanities, containing few laughs – even my books about chess and biking lack flippancy – which means there is hardly anything in my library that’s easy-going. A lot like me, in other words, for I am, as I have tried to explain, very much the books I have read.

1. Doris Lessing, *Time Bites*, London, Harper Perennial, 2005, p.212. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Geoff Dyer, ‘Raymond Williams was one of the Left’s greatest thinkers – he deserves to be rediscovered’, *New Statesman*, 12 March, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Penelope Lively, *Ammonites & Leaping Fish: A Life in Time*, London, Fig Tree, 2013, pp.161-162.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Reading*, London, Reaktion Books, 2004, p.340. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: A Biography*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p.? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*, London, Faber & Faber, 2006, p.56. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Carey, *The Unexpected Professor: An Oxford Life in Books*, London, Faber & Faber, 2014, pp.350-351. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, NY, Penguin, 2012, p.193. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In his essay ‘Of three kinds of association’, Michel de Montaigne writes: “To be diverted from a troublesome idea, I need only have recourse to books. […] They always receive me with the same expression”. See: *Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, London, Everyman’s Library, 2003, Book 3, Chapter 3, p.762. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Carey, *The Unexpected Professor*, pp.350-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Diana Anthill, ‘A book that changed me’, *Guardian*, 5 September, 2014, p.36. See also Frank Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015. And Edna O’Brien as well in ‘Islands of privacy and silence’, *Guardian*, 7 May, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Heather Reys, *An Everywhere: A Little Book about Reading*, Hutton, Brentwood, Oxygen Books, 2014, p.99. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Salman Rushdie, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ The Herbert Read Memorial Lecture, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 6 February, 1990, published by London, Granta, p.13. See also Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, p.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The joys and vices of book love are wonderfully surveyed in these three edited collections of literary extracts and quotations: Julie Rugg, *Buried in Books: A Reader’s Anthology*, London, Francis Lincoln, 2010; Julie Rugg & Lynda Murphy, *A Book Addict’s Treasury*, London, Francis Lincoln, 2006; and *The Book Lovers’ Anthology: A Compendium of Writing about Books, Readers & Libraries*, Oxford, The Bodleian Library, 2014. Another engaging edited collection which reviews the reading habits of forty leading writers is Antonia Fraser’s *The Pleasures of Reading*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015. A fascinating history of book-buying is provided by Margaret Willes, *Reading Matters: Five Centuries of Discovering Books*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008. An infectious autobiographical account of one person’s love of books and book-reading is Joe Queenan’s *One for the Books*. And an enjoyable survey of interesting bookshops, in the UK and overseas, is Jen Campbell, *The Bookshop Book*, London, Constable, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Daniel Barenboim & Edward W Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*, London, Bloomsbury, 2003, p.73. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, London, Flamingo, 1997, p.173. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For further details of this research, see Nicholas Carr, ‘The Dreams of Readers’, in *Stop What You’re Doing and Read This!*, London, Vintage Books, 2011, pp.151-167. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour Lost*, Act 4, Scene 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p.45.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books,* London, Fourth Estate, 2004, p.94. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, pp.2 & 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Salman Rushdie, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’, p16. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Adam Phillips, *Winnicott*, London, Penguin, 2007, especially pp.11, 66 & 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Hazlitt’s essay ‘On Reading Old Books’, in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt* (ed. Duncan Wu), London, Pickering & Chatto, 1998, Volume 8, pp.206-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. On this, see Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, pp.7 and 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Letter to Lady Bradford, 29th August 1878, in Marquis of Zetland (ed.) *The Letters of Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield & Lady Bradford*, *1876 to 1881*, London, Benn, 1929. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *A History of Reading*, p.237. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Penguin Classics Edition), London, Penguin, 1968, p.248. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2013, p.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Chapter 4 of Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, for other examples of negative experiences of shopping in book stores. - especially hostile and quite feel that it has in some way changed my life." p.?and to make a [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. John Berger, *A Fortunate Man: The Story of a Country Doctor*, Harmonsdworth, Penguin, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *A History of Reading*, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (ed. Daniel Breazeale), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Salman Rushdie, ‘Is Nothing Sacred?’ p.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. One of the best studies of *Godot* I have read is Lois Gordon, *Reading Godot*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002. It first gave me the idea that *Godot* is best read as a dream narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Reading and the Reader*, p.19. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Thomas Hardy, ‘At Castle Boterel’, in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Armstrong, Harlow, Pearson, 2009, pp.165-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Seamus Heaney, ‘Crediting poetry’, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, London, Faber & Faber, 2008, pp.470-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Seamus Heaney, ‘The Otter’, in *Field Work*, London, Faber & Faber, 1979, p.47. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T S Eliot Memorial Lectures & Other Critical Writings*, London, Faber & Faber, 1988, pp.107-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and the Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, p.93. My quote here is slightly adapted. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. In the preface to his *On Flirtation* (London, Faber & Faber, 1994), Adam Phillips, the child psychotherapist, interestingly defines psychoanalysis as a “kind of practical poetry” (p.xi). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See David Halpin, ‘Education, criticism and the creative imagination: the legacy of William Hazlitt’, *London Review of Education*, 2, 1, 2004, pp.17-33; ‘Hazlitt’s learning: a real and negative education’*, Hazlitt Review*, 2, 2009, pp.49-66; ‘Hazlitt’s contrariness and familiar prose style: lessons on how to be critical’, *London Review of Education*, 9, 3, 2011, pp.293-304.; and ‘Essaying and reflective practice in education: the legacy of Michel de Montaigne’, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49, 1, 2015, pp.108-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. William Hazlitt, ‘On the periodical essayists’, in Duncan Wu (ed.) *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, Volume 5, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1998, p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. William Hazlitt, ‘Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays’, in Duncan Wu (ed.) *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, Volume 1, London, Pickering & Chatto, 1998, p.125.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Cited in Donald Frame, *Montaigne in France,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, p.61. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2010, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Donald Frame’s English translation of Montaigne’s complete works (*Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Works: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, London, Everyman’s Library, 2003), Book 3, Chapter 13, pp.992-1048. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. So did Samuel Beckett, as reported in Dirk Van Hulle & Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, especially pp. 1 & 4. See also Joe Queenan, *One for the Books*, pp.14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* [Revised Edition], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982, p.53. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. On this wish, see Joyce’s letter to Grant Richards, the eventual publisher of *Dubliners*, dated 15 October, 1905, reproduced in Richard Ellmann (ed.) *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975, pp.78-79. Over twenty years later, Joyce’s brother Stanislaus writes this in a letter to him (dated 7 August 1924) about the portrayal of Dublin in *Ulysses*: “Dublin lies stretched out before the reader, the minute living incidents start out from the page. Anybody who reads can hear the people talk and feel himself among them”, in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.578. Relevant here is the helpful little book Robert Nicholson, *The Ulysses Guide: Tours Through Joyce’s Dublin,* London, Methuen, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Edna O’Brien, *James Joyce*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, p.100. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. A very good biography of Nora Barnacle is Brenda Maddox, *Nora: A Biography of Nora Joyce*, London, Minerva, 1988. Nora’s first date with Joyce is described on pages 41-43.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Quoted in Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.217. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, Houndmills, Palgrave-Macmillan, 1978, p.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory & History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.183. The novelist, David Lodge, says much the same about his first serious encounter with *Ulysses*, as reported in his memoir *Quite a Good Time to be Born* (London, Hervill Secker, 2015), pp.192-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. I am not able accurately to reference this lecture, except to say that it took place at Goldsmiths College, University of London, sometime in 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Harry Blamires, *The New Bloomsday Book: A Guide Through Ulysses* [Third Edition], London, Routledge, 1996, p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The episode in *Ulysses* where this theme is taken up directly is the very difficult-to-read ‘Scylla and Charybdis’. See especially pages 266-67 of the Penguin Classics edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The page numbers that feature in the list of quotes that follows refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Ulysses*. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Weldon Thornton, *Allusions in Ulysses: An Annotated List*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1968. Another useful secondary source book is Don Gifford, *Ulysses Annotated* [Second Edition], Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988. Another excellent guide is Terence Killeen’s, *Ulysses Unbound: A Reader’s Companion to James Joyce’s Ulysses*, Dublin, Wordwell, 2014. A further collection which I have found especially helpful is Sean Latham (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ulysses,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014. Its four chapters on some of the novel’s episodes are particularly illuminating.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Quoted in Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.495. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects*, p.185. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Blamires, *The New Bloomsday* *Book,* p.xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living*, London, Faber & Faber, 2009, p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Sean Latham, ‘Why read *Ulysses*?, in Sean Latham (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ulysses,* p.xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Leo Bersani, ‘Against Ulysses’, in Derek Attridge (ed.) *James Joyce’s Ulysses: A Case Book*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p.204. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. George Orwell, ‘Letter to Brenda Salkeld’ (December 1933), in Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus (eds.) *The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age Like This 1920-1940,* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p.150. A marvellous appreciation of Bloom’s character is also provided in Andrew Gibson, *James Joyce*, London, Reaktion Books, 2006, pp.123-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Richard Ellmann (ed.) *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, p.252. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Richard Ellmann (ed.) *Selected Letters of James Joyce*, p.278. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Ulysses*, pp.30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Malcolm Bradbury, for example, describes *Ulysses* as “the greatest literary text of modern times” in his *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers*, London, Seeker & Warbourg, 1988, p.170. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. The story of how *Ulysses* struggled to be published against the wishes of such crusaders is vividly told in Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce’s Ulysses*, New York, Penguin, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Ulysses*, p.171. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A Biography*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011, p.239.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Richard Ellmann, *Ulysses on the Liffey*, London, Faber & Faber, 1974, p.xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. My very positive evaluation of *Ulysses* is not shared by everyone. For an especially hostile reaction to it, see Wendy Lesser, *Why I Read: The Serious Pleasure of Books*, NY, Farrer, Strauss & Giroux, 2014, who argues it is the product of a literary poseur. More nuanced critiques – feminist, Marxist and intra-cultural - are briefly reviewed by Derek Attridge in his *Joyce Effects*, pp.171-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. See *Ulysses*, pp.832-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. George Orwell, ‘Good Bad Books’, in Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus (eds.) *The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters of George Orwell, Volume 4,*  Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, pp.? [↑](#footnote-ref-82)