

THE GREAT BOOKS: A JOURNEY THROUGH 2,500 YEARS OF WEST'S CLASSIC LITERATURE

Excerpt from *The Great Books* by Anthony O'Hear.
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BY ANTHONY O'HEAR

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins."
Thus T. S. Eliot wrote at the end of *The Waste Land*. The fragments are fragments from the literature of the past. Eliot contrasted the wholeness of past eras in our heritage with what he saw as the fracturing of feeling, sensibility and belief in his own day, the 1920s, a time of public and, for Eliot himself, personal collapse.

Eliot wrote in the expectation that his readers would have some inkling of the texts he was referring to, as did his contemporaries Ezra Pound and James Joyce, who also filled their works with references to the great works of the past. This expectation may have had a degree of disingenuousness about it, particularly when, as was often the case with Pound, the references were to highly obscure events and texts.

Nevertheless, when Pound transcribed a fragment of Book Ten of Homer's *Odyssey* and presented it as his First Canto, he could reasonably have relied on most of his readers recognizing what he was doing, just as a couple of generations earlier Tennyson's

readers would have understood what he was up to in his poem "Ulysses," and may even have recognized that the Ulysses/Odysseus figure he was imagining owed as much to Dante as to Homer.

No longer. At the start of the twenty-first century, even for educated people, Homer, Greek tragedy, Virgil, Ovid, and Dante no longer form an instantly recognizable cultural background, as once they did. Their absence from modern sensibility means in turn that we miss a great deal in writers closer to our time and language, such as Milton, Racine, Goethe, and even Chaucer and Shakespeare. These more modern writers, too, can seem forbidding to generations unschooled in entering worlds and cultures remote from their own. And we do not realize that even though the Greek and Roman classics and the medieval world are truly remote from us, our own minds and feelings are stocked with themes and attitudes rooted in those classics. So a journey through the ancient classics is a journey of discovery, to be sure, but it is also a journey of self-discovery (which was part of what Eliot and Pound were getting at in their superficially forbidding works).

To admit that the great books of the past may be difficult for today's readers is emphatically not to say that these books are not in all kinds of ways rewarding, once the initial hurdle of unfamiliar background and myth is overcome. Today's readers can read Homer and the rest not just with profit, which is certainly there, but even more with enjoyment, fascination, and pleasure on all sorts of levels, from the most sublime to the most earthy. It would

be an exaggeration to say that someone who has not read these books is a stranger to the human condition; but there is certainly much about our condition, and particularly our condition as Westerners, that he or she will not be aware of.

Mentioning our condition as Westerners suggests a necessary qualification. I do not claim that the only great books of the world are those within the Graeco-Roman Christian tradition. There are doubtless great books from Persia, from the Indian sub-continent, from China, from Japan and from other places besides, and doubtless we could read some of these books with benefit. But they have not fed into our thought and traditions in the same way as Homer and those works in some form of descent from Homer, the works in our list of great books.

Homer and the rest are not all the great books there are, but that they are great books can hardly be in dispute. Some might quarrel with omissions from our list, and we might agree that some books we have not included have as much merit as some of the ones we have included. And, with the exception of Goethe's *Faust, Part Two*, we have not included works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because, for the most part, works from the past 200 years do not have the particular difficulties of background and reference of those from earlier times. However, these books we are to study have all survived the toughest test of all, the test of time.

In the words of the philosopher David Hume ("Of the Standard of Taste," 1757):

The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may be able to give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which they meet with.¹

That the works on our list of great books should be on that list is no decision of ours. They are there because they have appealed in many different times and places, and also because they have influenced the writers who have followed them. In that sense, they are cornerstones of our literary and cultural heritage, and there are continuities of theme and influence which run through our selection, and which will guide our commentary.

We start with Homer's *Iliad*, his account of The Trojan War, and we end with Goethe's *Faust, Part Two*. Artificial or not, there is a sort of symmetry about this, for Homer's tale begins with the abduction of Helen of Troy, and Goethe's conjures up visions of the same Helen. Over and above the personality of Helen, we might be led by the symmetry to see what Goethe calls the "eternal feminine" running through much of our story, the feminine as creative force, but also at times as leading to destruction.

Homer's myth refers back to the judgment of Paris, when one of the princes of Troy chooses the goddess of love above the goddesses of marriage and of wisdom. He wins Helen for himself—and plunges Troy into war. In the fallout from the war, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, incurs the mortal enmity of a woman, his wife, and pays the price. Odysseus, another of the Greeks, spends ten years traveling back to the wife he has left, a tale enlivened by amorous and other dalliances en route. In the Greek tragedies we look at, we see the maiden Antigone putting family piety before political necessity, and the mother of the King of Thebes more responsive than her son to the call of Dionysus, the god of nature, wine, and frenzy.

In Homer, the Greeks defeat the Trojans, destroy Troy, and enslave their women. But in *The Aeneid*, the Roman Virgil's myth, the outcome is reversed. Aeneas the Trojan escapes from Troy and wanders until he finds what eventually becomes Rome. He escapes from the mad love of Dido the Carthaginian queen to wed the daughter of the King of the Latins. In Ovid, Virgil's near contemporary, we find a host of stories of the power and attraction of love, from the most profane to the most faithful.

A different atmosphere enters with Saint Augustine, for whom sexual love is the root of corruption. But in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as deeply a Christian work as Augustine's *Confessions*, the creative love of a woman for the poet incarnates divine wisdom itself and leads Dante to the beatific vision, arguably the most sublime of all interpretations of the eternal feminine. By contrast, Milton, Pascal, and Racine take a more Augustinian view of femininity, by turns seductive and destructive, a theme we also find in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (though much of the fault there is Hamlet's own). Chaucer and Cervantes take us down their own by-ways, but we end with Goethe, for whom a synthesis of Gretchen, Helen, the Christian Marys, of the Gospels, and the nymph Galatea rising from the waves is the source of life, creativity, compassion, and redemption.

It would be absurd to pretend that there is a single theme running through all our great books, and also far too reductive an approach to the books themselves. But as our sketch of the eternal feminine might suggest, there are criss-crossing and overlapping currents, and also (as we will emphasize) many references in the later works to earlier ones, which at the same time throw light on the earlier ones. No doubt we could also develop sketches of the way in which the themes of war, peace, social order, nature, piety, crime and punishment, forgiveness, homecoming, work, and much else besides move in and out of focus in our great books, and also how our own attitudes to these and other things are rooted in these earlier treatments of which we are no longer fully aware.

In reading the great books, readers of today will come to enjoy what they read, and at the same time gain a less fragmentary sense of their own cultural roots.

THE SHORT LIST OF RECOMMENDED GREAT BOOKS

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| Homer | THE ILIAD THE ODYSSEY |
| Aeschylus | ORESTEIA: AGAMEMNON |
| Sophocles | THEBAN PLAYS: ANTIGONE |
| Euripides | THE BACCHAE |
| Virgil | THE AENEID |
| Ovid | METAMORPHOSES |
| St. Augustine | CONFESSIONS |
| Dante | THE DIVINE COMEDY INFERNO PURGATORIO PARADISO |
| Chaucer | THE CANTERBURY TALES |
| Shakespeare | HENRY V HAMLET THE TEMPEST |
| Cervantes | DON QUIXOTE |
| Milton | PARADISE LOST |
| Pascal | PENSÉES |
| Racine | PHÈDRE |
| Goethe | FAUST, PARTS 1 & 2 |

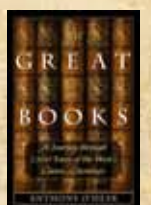
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