



The Vagabond's Bookshelf

A Reader's Memoir



Dawn Potter



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When I think of it, the picture always arises in my mind of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life.

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

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“That Unsettled Turn of Mind”

My kind may exist only in books. At least, books are the only place where we seem to meet. We are more than merely readers; we are obsessive readers. And we go further yet: we are obsessive *rereaders*, choosing to visit the same volume ten, twenty, fifty times—not because we are scholars or teachers but because the book itself has become necessary to us, like a cigarette habit.

And like a cigarette habit, our obsession with certain books can be a public sign that some aspect of life has slipped from our control. We are in the clutch of books and, at moments of stress or need, we behave badly about them. Rising from the page, my fellows speak to me ruefully about their adoration; like me, they are the first to wince at their own behavior. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for instance, recalling his early passion for a handful of books, allows his small self no quarter.

My father was very fond of me, and I was my mother’s darling: in consequence I was very miserable. . . . So I became fretful and timorous, and a tell-tale; and . . . read incessantly. My father’s sister kept an *everything* shop at Crediton, and there I read through all the gilt-covered little books that could be had at that time, and likewise all the uncovered tales of Tom Hickathrift, Jack the Giant-killer, etc., etc., etc., etc. And I used to lie by the wall and *mope*, and my spirits used to come upon me suddenly; and in a flood of them I was accustomed to race up and down the churchyard, and act over all I had been reading, on the docks, the nettles, and the rank grass. At six years old I remember to have read Belisarius, Robinson Crusoe, and Philip Quarles; and then I found the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, one tale of which (the tale of a man who was compelled to seek for a pure virgin) made so deep an impression on me (I had read it in the evening while my mother was mending stockings), that I was haunted by specters, whenever I was in the dark: and I distinctly remember the anxious and fearful eagerness with which I used to watch the window in which the books lay, and

whenever the sun lay upon them, I would seize it, carry it by the wall, and bask and read. My father found out the effect which these books had produced, and burnt them.¹

Such loving, hopeful parents! Confronted by an incorrigible rereader, what else could they have done? I say this with only slight irony. Even I, an obsessive reader myself, am frustrated by the readers around me. When I ask my twelve-year-old son to help me rake leaves and he, in response, glances up from his book, smiles sweetly, and tells me, "But Mom, I'm yearning for knowledge," I feel that prickling, eye-narrowing frustration that must have eventually driven Coleridge's father to hurl his son's fairy stories into the fire.

Parents dream of raising strong, lithe children who hit home runs and race across green meadows, not pallid hunchbacks coiled speechlessly over a page. The image of lonely little Charles Dickens huddled for hours over *Roderick Random* is not charming. It's pathetic. And if we can barely stand to recall ourselves as pathetic, how can we wish it for our children?

For there is a weakness about us—an inability to break away from a nonexistent world, from our passion for patterns and repetition. The desire to reread is so engrained among my literary habits that I sometimes panic at the thought of beginning an unknown book. Instead of immediately cracking open a birthday-gift volume, I'm as likely to drop the bright new paperback into my lap and stare down at its golden "Pulitzer Prize Winner" label, overwhelmed by a kind of horror. There's no rational explanation for this reaction; it's perfectly possible that I might actually like the book, and in fact I often do. More, I have a sense of being invaded from the outside, as if I risk toppling the wall I've constructed around myself and my familiars. For here we go again, wandering down the pages of our same old story: yes, it's Lizzie Hexam who rows me down the blackened Thames, Kitty and Levin who skate past me at the rink, the March girls who act *The Pickwick Papers* in my chilly attic. I know these characters, these settings, these writers as well as I know myself.

Yet what is knowing myself? The question hangs in the air, spectral, among these flitting literary ghosts—Heathcliff and Gabriel Oak, Dorothea Brooke and the Cheshire Cat. Like Isabel Archer, heroine of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, I've spent my hours pondering the vague permutations of self-knowledge, the soft borders between self and the imagined self. I don't make much headway, and neither does Isabel; indeed, we mislead ourselves constantly. Yet suddenly, one day, it occurs to Isabel "that her mind was a good deal of a vagabond, and she had spent much ingenuity in training it to a military step, and teaching it to advance, to halt, to retread, to perform ever more complicated manoeuvres, at the word of command."² And as soon as I read this sentence, I realize: "Isabel is thinking for *me*." The moment feels like a miracle.

Clearly, this is, from one point of view, a baldly unsophisticated reaction

to a work of literature. Isabel is the invention of her author, brought to me by means of an invented narrative persona. Yet from another point of view, this is exactly the magic of literature. Isabel lives inside my imagination; therefore, she is indeed myself. So when she puzzles over her vagabond brain, the free-thinking, unpredictable intelligence that she has so cleverly fettered and restricted, she puzzles over mine as well.

Why, then, on my previous dozen readings of the novel, have I never noticed this thought? Perhaps the answer is that I don't notice it till I *need* to notice it. Perhaps such accidental collusions are a version of that changeable, many-colored cloak we call self-knowledge. And for me, at least, such flashes of insight—those moments when my vagabond mind sees itself *as* itself—arise most often as I reread a book I've already read countless times, a book I may believe I nearly know by heart.

Yet even as I acknowledge the gifts of rereading, I discount myself. What a dolt I am to keep returning to the same predictable tales—*Nicholas Nickleby* and *Persuasion* and *Barchester Towers* and their staid cohort. Get with the times; read the new books; surely a story must wear itself out eventually. And I'm not alone in self-deprecation: even Coleridge, even Samuel Johnson seemed embarrassed by their lifelong pleasure in certain books. According to Bishop Percy,

when a boy [Johnson] was immoderately fond of reading romances of chivalry, and he retained his fondness for them through life, so that . . . spending part of a summer at my parsonage-house in the country [this was when Johnson was fifty-four] he chose for his regular reading [the old Spanish romance of FELIXMARTE OF HIRCANIA, in folio, which he read through. Yet I have heard him attribute to these extravagant fictions, that unsettled turn of mind which prevented his ever fixing in any profession.³

Oh, I could make the same claim for my own scrappy, indefinite career. But just the same, I find myself, in a half-idle hour, propped over Dr. Johnson's well-thumbed biography, imagining him, porpoise-like in his garden chair, balancing that folio on his knee. A robin hops over the sheep-cropped grass; a squirrel shrills in the hedgerow. The doctor lifts his eyes to the band of sunlight trimming the portico. He sighs. He drops his tired eyes back to the story, the same old story, blundering down its dear familiar road.

And then a line leaps forth, and it speaks to him.

The novels and stories I write about in this memoir are not, by any means, the only books I regularly reread, but all have triggered my need, sometimes a desperation, to offer up an articulate response—to converse with their authors, their characters, their words. Early into the project, I began jotting down a shortlist of the novels that matter most to me. Making that list was

easy enough, yet once I began purposefully rereading them for the tenth or thirtieth time, I found I could not predict which ones I would actually be able to write about. A few—for instance, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*—had, over the course of many readings, begun to evoke so much sadness in me that I could not manage to speak cogently about them. Though I continue to reread the novel, I find I can no longer finish it because I cannot bear to keep facing Maggie's doomed and accidental romance, which leads so inexorably to her death by drowning. Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is a similar case: in many ways I love it more than *War and Peace*, but watching Anna abandon her bewildered son for that idiot Vronsky, only to end up throwing herself under a train, has gotten to be too much for me.

Other novels pose different problems. Iris Murdoch's, for instance, have consistently eluded my pen. First, I couldn't settle on a favorite; then I couldn't seem find anything to say. I was intimidated by her philosophizing, which I didn't know how to penetrate; yet I found that I had nothing very interesting to posit about her handling of melodrama, which is, for me, the primary attraction of her novels. Apparently, despite my long affection for Murdoch's books, I have not yet figured out how to talk to them.

My glibness of speech has been another unpredictable variable. As I wrote about the novels that have ended up in this memoir, a few chapters—for instance, the one on *War and Peace*—almost seemed to invent themselves. As soon as I opened my laptop, words would leap from my fingertips, sentences transform into paragraphs, paragraphs metamorphose into pages. The voyage from first word to final draft lasted an incandescent two days, and afterward I felt purged and weak, as if I were recovering from brain fever (which, as any devoted Victorian-novel reader knows, is a mysterious illness that temporarily incapacitates heroines while making them more beautiful than before). In contrast, the chapter on Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* took me five years to write. I started draft after draft, deleted draft after draft, despaired, reread the novel, began again. Unlike my Iris Murdoch trouble, my difficulties with Bowen's novel never stemmed from philosophical vagueness or any uncertainty about which book to choose. Rather, I could not seem to zero in on the essence of my bond with it. But in retrospect, I think that, despite my long acquaintance with the novel, I needed those five years to educate myself, to become more aware of Bowen's language and my own, more attuned to our shared and divided subtleties of grammar and syntax. She required a sophistication, a technical severity; she forced me to search myself for a grown-up reaction. I could not, as I did with *War and Peace*, ride the wind of my emotional attachments.

In other words, writing this memoir has not been at all equivalent to rereading the books. Like Isabel Archer, and Coleridge, and Dr. Johnson, my mind is "a good deal of a vagabond," accustomed to wander its byways, to bask along the riverbanks, to nod fleetingly at its familiars. Rereading a well-loved novel suits this "unsettled turn of mind" because I can dip

in and out of the world of the book without fretting overmuch about my destination. I know the plot, I know the characters, so what takes me by surprise is now most often myself. The sensation is comparable to living on the same five acres of land for fifteen years and then suddenly spotting an oak tree you'd swear you'd never seen before. Noticing the tree doesn't change the landscape, but it does adjust your relationship to that landscape. Moreover, it adjusts your conception of yourself. "Why didn't I see that tree?" you wonder. "What was I looking at instead?"

As a rereader, I often advance no further than to note the existence of such questions, but writing this memoir has pressed me to hunt for answers—as Isabel would say, "to advance, to halt, to retreat, to perform ever more complicated manoeuvres, at the word of command." This is a fairly alarming undertaking for a vagabond mind, yet I have discovered that the simple act of talking back to my books has become, curiously enough, its own version of an answer. As the writer Wendy Lesser notes, "nothing demonstrates how personal reading is more clearly than rereading does."⁴ These novels I love—these public fora, these open dollhouses—are the story of my own most private life: a world so hidden that my rereading self unwraps it only word by word, line by line, year by year by year. In talking to my books, in writing about my books, I am forced to collect these scraps, to position them on the page, to link one perception to the other. I stand back, then, and discover that the books have drawn a portrait of me.

Self-Portrait, with War and Peace

I'm forty-three years old, and to date I've read *War and Peace* eight or ten times. I've worn out one cheap paperback copy and am now working on wearing out an elderly Modern Library hardback I unearthed at a yard sale. My guess is that I'll reread the novel a few more times before I die, though how many more times is impossible to calculate. As Arlo Guthrie says, "I'll wait till it comes round on the gui-tar"—till I'm browsing along my bookshelves and am suddenly smitten with longing for the sight of Natasha dancing in Uncle's hut, for fat Pierre innocently disrupting a fancy tea party, for Petya shyly asking a Cossack to sharpen his sword, for Nikolay stomping in to rescue Princess Marya from her confused serfs.¹ One doesn't plan ahead for infatuation; though after thirty years spent with the novel, I'm no longer surprised that it keeps appearing in my lineup.

On its simplest level, rereading books is a childish habit, like biting my nails or agreeing to play Monopoly only if I can be the dog. But children understand there's satisfaction in familiarity. When I reread a book, I'm already prepared for all sudden deaths and thwarted romances. The shock of the new is not, to me, a literary recommendation. It's not that I dislike discovering unknown books. I just like reading them again better. Sometimes my desire to reread a well-loved book erupts twice in one year, sometimes once in a decade. Often I reread books I only sort of enjoyed the first time through, and fairly often I reread books that actively annoy me but that I hope will have a medicinal effect on my character or my brain. I've been known to reread books that have no good qualities whatsoever, just for old times' sake.

Yet this clingy, childish attachment to books—this cozy insularity, this familiar pacifier—constructs its own lived history. That is particularly true of my inner circle of favored works, primarily novels, which have come to constitute an alternate lineage of near-equal reality. Among backward-looking literary types, it's a common-enough list, including, among other works, most of the novels of Dickens, Eliot, Austen, and the elder Brontë sisters; several Gaskell, Bowen, Woolf, and Murdoch novels; and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. Probably the only unusual factor is that

I've reread each of these books ten or fifteen separate times without any intention of teaching them in an English class.

Lately I've learned that a new translation of *War and Peace* has been published, and by all accounts it's a far better effort than the old Constance Garnett standby: more accurate to the rhythm of Tolstoy's sentences, so the experts report, more attuned to the nuance of class-inflected language. The reviewers' explications make good bedtime reading; and flipping languorously through the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, I've enjoyed various compare-and-contrast-the-translation extracts, easily convinced that the new edition would be a shiny addition to a bookshelf.

I'm relieved, however, that no one thought to give it to me for Christmas. For when it comes to my inner circle of books, I'm not all that interested in accuracy, or readability, or accessible notes, or pertinent introductions, or any of the typical reasons that drive a serious reader to purchase a new edition of a classic work. I do prefer to read a book that doesn't fall apart in the bathtub; and since I've read many of my favored books to rags, I'll occasionally acquire sturdier copies if I run across them at the Goodwill. But the idea of reading a new translation of a book I know intimately makes me anxious. I haven't yet gotten used to the idea that Anna's last name now translates as "Karenin," not "Karenina," or that the English title for Proust's linked novels is no longer *Remembrance of Things Past* but *In Search of Lost Time*. What if a new translation of *War and Peace* spells Prince Andrey's name in a new way? The thought is distressing in the way that any rupture in a comforting routine is upsetting. It opens a scary door. If Prince Andrey's name has changed, will he be different from the man I love?

On one level, it's troubling to admit that I foster these babyish mannerisms. I should know better than to cling to the familiar for its own sake, and in fact I *do* know better. Seamus Heaney's version of *Beowulf* makes me much happier than its stilted predecessors ever did. But would Keats be willing to give up Chapman's Homer for Robert Fagles's Homer just because the newer translation is a snappier read? I don't believe he could. If one ages alongside a book, even its flaws become precious. And though Keats didn't have the chance to grow old, he pored over his favorite works with what his biographer, Walter Jackson Bate, calls "an adhesive purchase of mind." Bate explains, "What strikes us most in his capacity for sympathetic identification . . . is its inclusiveness. This is not the volatile empathic range of even the rare actor. For the range is vertical as well as horizontal." Thus, it didn't so much matter how many books Keats read; what mattered was how intensely he read a few. Those that he loved were as constant as brothers; and "when he picked up styles in the writing of poetry, it was not as a mimic or copyist but as a fellow participator."²

But I bring up Keats only as an after-the-fact excuse for my reading habits, not as their guiding rationale. I just happen to read books over and over again; and among those books, *War and Peace* is not even the one I've read most