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Why should I read the Great Books?

THERE'S A SET OF books that you've probably already heard of. These are the ones that've been extolled by professors and critics. They've been referenced in countless speeches and essays. And in school, your teachers most likely claimed that these books were among the world's greatest works of literature.

I'm talking about texts like Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Inferno*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and about a hundred others—most people have heard of these books, and most people have some preexisting ideas about them.

People like me, who love the Great Books, often worry that the general public has a negative impression of these classic texts. We worry that ordinary people think the Great Books are a tool of White supremacy.

And it's true; that belief does exist, among some readers. But when I talk to people about the Great Books, they usually *don't* say, "Oh, those books are racist." Instead, they quite frequently say something like, "I've always meant to read those."

So why don't they?

If I dig deeper, I find that these titles tend to arouse feelings of shame and inadequacy. The people I talk with, my friends and my peers, are usually very educated. They're writers, professors, and

intellectuals. They're not just avid readers; they're also people whose self-worth is tied up with their love for books.

But they're afraid to approach the Great Books.

Oftentimes that fear is rooted in negative experiences from college or young adulthood. Perhaps you took a class on Henry James, and you were inexpressibly bored by *Wings of the Dove*. Or you tried to read the *Iliad* and bounced off the seemingly endless catalogue of various kings with their "long black ships." Over time you felt increasingly ashamed of your lack of reading, so it became a sore spot, something you no longer wanted to approach. And now it feels too late. Serious reading is for English majors. It's for people with PhDs. It's for weighty, self-important, intellectual types.

Nobody can sympathize more than I do with these problems. For one thing, I still feel insecure. I write a newsletter about the Great Books, and about every two weeks some commenter with a PhD will imply that I'm a poor reader. They'll say I don't understand the book I've read. They'll say its meaning would be obvious if only I were aware of what F. R. Leavis said about it sixty years ago. Or they'll say that I'm not reading correctly, that I need to embrace the ambiguity of a particular passage, and that its seeming inscrutability is actually a major part of the effect intended by the work's author. You're not *supposed* to understand.

Sometimes, despite the tone, these comments improve my understanding of the text; other times, they just hurt my feelings.

These kinds of interactions are unavoidable when you read the Great Books. First, many people have spent their lives studying these books. And they have written many monographs about each of them. So any question you might have about a given work—it's probably already been discussed many times before. And you, as a nonspecialist reader, often have neither the time nor the ability to track down this previous discussion, so you come away feeling as if there's no possible way for you to understand this tome.

Second, these books carry a strong cultural connotation: If you understand Aristotle, then you're smart. If you love Proust, then

you have taste. If you vibe with T. S. Eliot, then you're sensitive. And people really want to feel as if they're smart, tasteful, and sensitive. Many folks not only have a lot of their self-image tied up with the books they love, but oftentimes they also have a lot of cultural and social capital tied up with being a great reader—there are many people, myself included, who've translated "being a great reader" into a considerable amount of online clout. And that means there are real stakes to the question of who gets to take credit for truly understanding the Great Books.

Those stakes are the reason I used to feel resentment toward these books. As a teenager in Washington, DC, I loved sci-fi and fantasy novels. I thought Isaac Asimov's and Robert Heinlein's works were the height of literature, and I really aspired to write books in that tradition. But I knew that these books had no place in our English class.

I went to a Catholic school that was quite high-minded and austere. We had a Latin motto, *Pax in sapientia* (Peace through wisdom). We were constantly informed that our purpose was to become genteel and inculcated in Christian virtue. We had to take five years of Latin, where we read Cicero, Catullus, Ovid, and Virgil in the original. In English class, we read *Pride and Prejudice* and T. S. Eliot.

I never did well in that class. I was bored by these books. There seemed no bridge between them and the sci-fi novels I truly loved.

One year, while on vacation with my family in India, my mom found a copy of *Gone with the Wind* at a used bookstore in Jaipur, and she told me the book was pretty decent; she'd enjoyed it as a teenager, growing up in India. And I devoured that book, reading it in a few days. I was so impressed with myself: here I was actually reading a Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, a work of realistic historical fiction. I came back after the summer ready to tell my English teacher about this great book I'd read, and he said, "Oh, I guess that's a great example of *popular* fiction."

After that, I was like, "Oh well, I guess there's no pleasing these guys." This world is full of codes about which books are

worthwhile and which aren't, and there's no way of figuring out the rules, so why worry about it.

Similarly, in college I took a few English classes, but they all relied on this strange way of reading, close reading, where you put "pressure" on the text and pretended there was some meaning that, to my eyes, didn't really exist. I couldn't do it. Every time I wrote a paper, the professor would say, "Why don't you try doing some close reading?" But that's exactly what I had thought I was doing.

So I didn't bother. I majored in economics instead.

Meanwhile, I was writing my sci-fi stories. I had dreams of being a highly acclaimed writer, of having everybody say: "Naomi is doing something truly special. She is truly channeling greatness."

It's a long story, but when I finally started reading the Great Books, I was out of college, and I read these books in secret, without telling anyone. I had internalized a sense of shame, and I felt, instinctively, as if I weren't the right sort of person. These books were for other people—English major–type people, and if I started talking about the classics, then I'd only make a fool of myself.

Reading on my own, there was no need to engage in close reading. No need to write papers. No need to prove myself to anyone. Instead, I could truly interrogate my own reactions. I could ask, "Am I actually enjoying this?" Some books, I did not enjoy my first time around. I was quite bored by *Moby-Dick* when I first read the book at age twenty-five. If I'd been forced to write a paper about it, I would've failed the assignment. But luckily I didn't have to. Other books I loved: I absolutely adored *Anna Karenina*. From the first page, I was enraptured, fully transported into the world of Levin, Anna, and Vronsky. And their struggle, within their world, to lead a good life, to lead a life that has meaning—their struggle between whether to pursue romantic adventure or a staid, bourgeois life—felt very real to me, at age twenty-five. The book spoke directly to me in a way that was unlike anything else I'd ever read.

Over time I taught myself how to read the Great Books. I didn't need professors. I didn't need a lot of external guidance. I read these

books the same way I read everything else: I sank into the dream of the text, experiencing it with as much immediacy as I could. No papers. No discussions. No need to force myself to slog through a book if I didn't want to—if something wasn't for me, I put it down. Sometimes I came back to it five or ten years later, and sometimes I didn't. Some things I understood well, others I understood poorly, and some things I understood not at all. And that, too, was okay.

This way of reading, which a professor would call "lay reading," is completely different from how the Great Books normally get taught. And I would argue that lay reading offers a lot of advantages, for the average person, over professionalized reading. This book is, in part, a defense of lay reading.

Which isn't to say it's an attack on professionalized reading. But professionalized reading is for professionals, no? If you're an English professor or a humanities PhD, then you have a specialized way of reading, just as a race-car driver has a specialized way of driving. But even the race-car driver doesn't drive 150 miles per hour when they're taking their kid to school. Similarly, for most people, in most situations, lay reading is much more fruitful than close reading as a way of engaging with texts.

However, lay reading is not the way that people have, historically speaking, interfaced with the classics.

Once upon a time, learning the classics was a way to advance in the civil service and the learned professions. For centuries, to get into Harvard, Oxford, or Cambridge, you had to pass a test of proficiency in Latin and Greek. You needed to know these classical languages before you could even enter college.

It was the same in China; the civil-service exam was primarily a test of your ability to interpret the Confucian classics.

In India, classical knowledge was the jealous preserve of the Brahmanic caste. If you weren't a Brahman, there was no way to learn Sanskrit, no way to even access ancient knowledge.

Luckily, this situation is now in the past. You do not need to know the Great Books in order to enter Harvard, run a corporation, become a professor, write for fancy journals, or really do anything else you might want to do. The only people who truly *need* to know some subset of the Great Books are humanities majors, humanities PhDs, and humanities professors.

For everyone else, Great Books knowledge is optional; it also doesn't necessarily carry that much social cachet. Few are the drawing rooms where you will be mocked for your lack of Plato.

And yet the shame remains. It's an internalized, vestigial shame that, from my perspective, is the greatest barrier these days to people engaging seriously with these books.

It's a shame exacerbated by the fact that we tend mostly to approach these books in the classroom. Because there's something about the college environment that really inculcates hierarchy. At the top, you have the professors, who've studied these books for a lifetime and get the final say. And at the bottom, you have the students, who are raw clay, intended to be guided and shaped.

I know that seminar-style classroom discussion is meant to overturn this hierarchy, but I never experienced it that way. I always felt as if, in the classroom, I were only being humored. Yes, everyone gets to offer their opinions, but you know that the professor is the true expert, the true arbiter of meaning.

It's a contradiction we see even in Plato. There is a dialogue, *Meno*, where Socrates insists that all knowledge is implicit. Everyone knows everything because knowledge flows not from direct experience but from our intuitive understandings. Knowledge is just remembering things that you already know. To demonstrate this, he calls in an untutored slave boy, guides him through Socratic questioning, and gets the boy to derive the Pythagorean theorem.

But . . . the slave boy doesn't even get a name. If everyone truly knows everything, then why is Socrates privileged over the boy? Why do we need a teacher at all?

Similarly, there is a cottage industry these days where people argue that it's essential for the average person to be exposed to the

Great Books. My own book belongs to this industry. But these defense-of-the-humanities books are usually written by college professors, and they deal explicitly with liberal-arts education. For instance, Roosevelt Montás's *Rescuing Socrates* is a defense of Columbia University's Core Curriculum. Montás closes by saying:

> The animating argument of this book is for liberal education as the common education for all—not instead of a more practical education but as its prerequisite. Though I love liberal arts majors and was one myself, I am not advocating for more students to major in the liberal arts, but for liberal education to serve as the foundation for every major. . . .We—by which I mean college faculty and administrators—should eliminate the opportunity costs of liberal education by embedding it in every undergraduate degree.[1]

At its core, Montás's book is a policy document. It is asking other colleges to increase their Great Books offerings.

But this approach treats "reading the Great Books" as synonymous with "learning about them in college." And with that message you turn off millions of people who are interested in literature but who worry that it's too late—that because they didn't get the right education, the Great Books are forever beyond their reach.

Yes, there are continuing-education classes you can take and online lectures you can listen to. But the message conveyed by a lot of writing on the subject is that learning on your own is distinctly inferior, distinctly secondary. That if you didn't learn at the feet of a professor, then you've missed out.

I think many people feel this way about the Great Books—why should I read them when I can never really possess them? Why read them if my learning will always be seen as inferior and secondary, not just in other people's eyes but in my own as well?

My viewpoint is that most of you are already curious about the Great Books, or you wouldn't have picked up this book. Some of you were probably assigned this book in class or directed to it by your college, but even so, I imagine you have wondered on occasion about whether the Great Books might be worth reading.

And I'm assuming you've already been exposed over the course of your life to a lot of high-minded rhetoric about the power of reading and the power of the liberal arts. I'm sure you already know that reading is good.

Most people understand that reading is good and that reading classic books is even better. But we also understand that the Great Books are not the only good things. My wife has an MD and a PhD and is a professor of immunology who runs a lab dedicated to finding the cure for HIV—I like to joke that she and I have two doctorates between us. She does not do a lot of pleasure reading. It is hard to fault her judgment that finding the cure for HIV is a better use for her time than reading *Anna Karenina*. Most of us have a lot of things we could be doing, and it's not unreasonable for a person to believe that reading the Great Books isn't the best use of their time.

Yes, reading classic literature is a worthwhile pursuit. But exercising, socializing, meditating, traveling, making friends, finding love—these also are pretty good things to do. So where does reading the Great Books fit in? How good is it?

That's why I harp on lay reading so much. Because most people think reading the Great Books is *much* more difficult than it actually is. And it's really this perceived difficulty that prevents people from doing it—not any doubts about the value of the underlying activity.

As an aside, this book has two audiences. Yes, it's addressed primarily to people who are somewhat interested in the Great Books but wonder whether a deeper investigation is truly worth their time. However, this book is also addressed to people who already love the Great Books and are perusing my book because they enjoy works in its genre: apologias for the classics.

I'd say the most influential American defense-of-the-humanities book is Allan Bloom's 1987 polemic *The Closing of the American*

Mind, and since then every year has seen the publication of another book that attempts to make some fresh argument about why we need to study older books. This genre has certain tropes, certain maneuvers, so in order to make an impact in this genre, you need to do something slightly different from what anyone's done before. When my book gets reviewed, it'll be reviewed against the canon of other books like it. Critics will ask, "Is Kanakia's book saying anything new?"

But the primary audience, possibly including you, will mostly likely *not* have read a lot of the other books that my book is in conversation with, so you won't necessarily know the ways in which my treatment of the subject differs from other books of this nature.

Briefly speaking, I find that apologetics for the Great Books tend to

1. conceptualize the Great Books as being under threat, in a modern society that is more concerned with skills acquisition than with the transmission of knowledge;
2. engage in a lot of high-flown rhetoric about how the Great Books can bring us closer to universal truths (in particular, universal conceptualizations of truth and beauty and goodness);* and
3. root their vision of the Great Books within the broader idea of the liberal-arts education: a university-based education that uses the classic texts to advance liberal ideas of freedom of thought and freedom of inquiry.

I'm not saying every apologetic for the Great Books traffics in these arguments, but I do think the above describes a fair number of them. In any case, this book will try to avoid these three pitfalls.

* This point is probably the most mysterious to my readers, but a lot of polemics about the Great Books tend to speak of them as a path to understanding truth, goodness, and beauty. For instance, Jessica Hooten Wilson writes, "However, with or without institutions, liberal arts education is fundamental for forming civil amateurs—or lovers—of truth, goodness, and beauty" (Bilbro et al. 2023, 190).

I don't think the Great Books are under threat: Plato, Aristotle, Tolstoy, Jane Austen—they're doing fine. You can buy their works in any bookstore. Plenty of people are reading them.

As for universal conceptions of truth, beauty, and goodness, I certainly believe that there's some substantial reality to those things and that this reality underpins all human experience—but I think that's also a very hard thing to prove. People have argued for millennia about the existence of universals. You can spend your life studying this point and still not come to a conclusion, much less one that will be convincing to another person. In my experience, saying, "You will gain insight and enjoyment from reading old books," is a much easier sell than arguing, "There exist universal values for truth, beauty, and goodness, and reading old books will bring you closer to these values."

And, finally, I am not a professor, and I am not involved in university education. I have no opinion about what people ought to learn in college.

But although my rhetoric is different from theirs, I am in fundamental agreement with most of the other polemicists and apologists who've written on this topic. Reading the Great Books would be an extremely good use of most people's time.

Personally, I feel that my encounter with the Great Books has altered my life immeasurably. I am a different person because of these texts. But . . . I have also grown up with these books. My twenties and thirties were defined by my attempts to wrestle with literature. For me, the effect of the Great Books is inextricable from the process of getting older and gaining maturity. I literally have no idea who I'd be without these books—that version of me would probably be very different, but I can't say how.

In the subtitle to this book, the one you're holding, I joke that you should read these books "even though it might destroy you." There is certainly a sense in which the Great Books ruined me. At

fifteen, all I wanted was to write adventure stories about a chosen-one hero who saves the universe. Now, at forty, I am writing a book where I argue that everyone ought to read Proust.

But if I was destroyed by these books, it's a destruction I chose. These books don't act mechanically on the nervous system, forcing people to adopt certain viewpoints. Instead, when you open the Great Books, you enter into a conversation with the past. You experience a much broader diversity of opinions than is possible if you stick primarily to contemporary literature. And from that diversity, you start to see possibilities that you hadn't previously perceived. Whatever is best and most appealing in these books becomes a part of you, inextricable from your sense of self. And in the end, when you look back on these books, it's impossible to say what came from them and what was inside you all along. That's one of the paradoxes of the Great Books—everyone who's read them has felt altered by the encounter, but they've often been altered in very different ways. Some people read Plato and become skeptics, while others become Neoplatonists.

My aim in this book isn't to tell you exactly what'll happen if you read the Great Books, it's just to convince you that there is a good chance *something* will happen. Because I think the real fear isn't that the Great Books might destroy us—we long to be destroyed, long to be altered. The real fear is that we'll spend a lot of time slogging through these old tomes and experience nothing at all. And *that*, I think, is a fear that is usually without merit. If you spend enough time with the Great Books, I am certain that you will be altered by the experience.

The structure of this book is simple. I assume that you're already somewhat interested in the Great Books. Then, in each chapter, I address one possible concern you might have about reading the classics. I hope that, by the end of the book, I will have addressed all your concerns and you will be convinced that if you're

interested in these books, then reading them is definitely something you can profitably do, even if you don't have much education in the humanities.

This first chapter is the introduction, which, of course, you're reading right now.

In the next four chapters, I'll explain the Great Books concept by attempting to answer four questions: "What do you mean by 'The Great Books'?" (chapter 2), "Have people always read the Great Books?" (chapter 3), "Isn't it true that the Great Books are too difficult to read on your own?" (chapter 4), and "Where did your list of Great Books come from?" (chapter 5). These chapters will delve into the history of the Great Books concept and why I believe in it so strongly.

The rest of the book will address various objections to the Great Books. In chapter 6 ("Aren't the Great Books kinda problematic?"), I examine whether the Great Books are associated with regressive ideas. In chapter 7 ("Why not read other books that are equally beautiful but have better politics?"), I argue that we read the Great Books in part *because* of their problematic content. In chapter 8 ("Does it matter what we read? Isn't it more important to develop our thinking skills?"), I try to defend the specific practice of reading these great classics and argue that it does something more than merely improve our reasoning skills. In chapter 9 ("How do we know if a book is 'Great'?"), I look at the history of how we have conceptualized "greatness" in a literature. And in chapter 10 ("Why do we need a list at all?"), I look at various arguments against the idea of greatness.

Then in chapter 11 ("When we say, 'The Great Books are worth reading,' do other people hear, 'White men are inherently superior'?"), chapter 12 ("Can't reading the Great Books be psychologically damaging for marginalized people?"), and chapter 13 ("Weren't some of the Great Books written by reprehensible people?"), I try to examine whether these books might cause harm to society, cause harm to your psyche, or provide support to people who've done terrible things. And in my final chapter ("What if, at the end of the

day, I simply prefer to read other books?"), I try to summarize the benefits that I personally have received from my seventeen years of engagement with the Great Books.

If you want more guidance about what to read next, I've included a list of Great Books in the appendix, along with some notes about why I chose that particular list. The appendix also has a list of the literary works mentioned in each chapter.

In each chapter, I try to take the titular question seriously. They're all valid questions to ask, and I cannot definitively refute any of the objections I've raised. I'm sure people will be upset that I don't argue more forcefully for reading these books—I cannot claim that reading these books is the right thing for every person in every situation. But, honestly, I don't believe that sort of argumentation is necessary. I trust people to read the books that are worthwhile and life-giving to read. Because if you get out into the world and start writing online about the Great Books, as I did, you will realize that there are millions of people who are interested in the classics. They don't need to be sold on the idea that it's worthwhile to read Tolstoy—all they need is to be reassured that reading these books is a realistic goal even for a person who doesn't have much formal education in the humanities.

And I'm here to say that if you're capable of reading this book, then you're also capable of reading the Great Books and profiting from reading them.

When people ask whether they should read these books, I have two answers. The first is "Why would you *not* want to read all these old famous books that you've heard about all your life?"

The second answer is that the Great Books tend to share one quality. They have a lot of integrity. They tend to be unflinchingly honest about whatever their subject happens to be. And this means that even when they come down on one side of a question, they usually make a fair case for the opposite side.

In this book, I hope to model that same integrity. That's why I've structured this book as a series of questions. In each chapter, I consider both sides of the question and examine the ways that both contain a strong element of truth. And the real answer to these questions lies not in one position or the other, nor somewhere in the middle, but in what Hegel would call the process of *aufheben*. The answer to the question is the entirety of the position. It's not a solution you come to at the end of the book, as in a logic problem—instead, you "solve" the problem through the process of working out the question.

And in the conclusion to each chapter, I show you how the question in the heading can be answered in two ways that are equally true. Which is to say, I want to channel the intellectual rigor of the Great Books in order to answer the question "Should we read the Great Books?" These conclusions will look something like this:

Response: I think most people are somewhat curious about the Great Books, and I believe that these books have an astounding intellectual integrity that becomes apparent to most who read them. However, it would be somewhat disingenuous for me to say that your life would be poorer if you didn't read them. I cannot say whether that is true. You have a wonderful life to lead, and I trust that you'll use your time as profitably as you can. In this book I want to help you imagine what it might be like if you chose to use some of that time to read the Great Books: How might reading them change the way you look at the world? Then, even if you don't decide to go forward with this course of reading, you'll at least have a sense of why other people do it and what they tend to get out of it.

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