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Cultivating Love of Reading Using the Ignatian Method

By Matthew Fung

Given the emphasis on cultivating a love of reading in Jesuit education, I was not surprised by the discussions, in the Fall 2006 issue of *Conversations*, in response to the report *Reading at Risk*, published by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2004. What is a bit surprising is that when it comes to improving the reading skills of students the participants have confined their suggestions more on what books students should read than on showing them what is admirable about the books on their recommended reading lists.

For example, in his introduction to the issue, Fr. Raymond Schroth quoted Hemingway's list of recommended books for aspiring writers, "including *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Huckleberry Finn* and all of Turgenev." Although I have read all the specific books mentioned and some of the fictional works of Turgenev, I cannot tell from the list why Hemingway admired these books. In particular, if he thought that all the works of Turgenev should be read, I wonder why he found Turgenev that much superior to the other authors, some of whom have only one work making his short list.

For a beginner, sampling a part of a work can be a good entry to exploring the whole work. I first discovered the joy of reading literature in English, a second language for me, from a passage of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, read aloud to me in a dictation exercise by my secondary school English teacher. I was

Introduce students to good literature through short samples, the way St. Ignatius introduces retreatants to the scripture.

drawn to the book by sampling a part of it, pretty much like moviegoers are drawn to seeing some movies by first seeing a few scenes from them when they went to see another movie. My love of western classical music also came from sampling a little of the classics. In an introduction to music course I took in college, I had to listen to some records in which certain musical passages featuring a particular instrument was played. When I listened to the excerpt featuring the French horn from the second movement of Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony, I got so interested in the work

that I listened to the entire symphony on my own.

Some of the contributors to the issue of *Conversations* devoted to the topic of reading at risk talk about the short attention span of students living in an age in which the Internet and television compete with reading for their time. But attention span is limited for all beginning readers, and unless they can be guided to see that a book is worth reading, they will not have the motivation to read the entire book. My initiation into the joys of reading good literature and listening to good music suggests that in trying to cultivate a greater interest in reading, teachers should worry less about what books they should assign and more about how they can introduce their students to the merits of those books by helping them experience good samples of those merits.

What I am suggesting is a method similar to that employed by St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*. St. Ignatius has a goal of leading his followers to the point where they will be indifferent to worldly attachments and devote themselves entirely to God. In leading them toward that goal, he did not overwhelm

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Talking Back



A student studies in a quiet corner of Seattle University.

them with asking them to read the entire Bible. Instead, he designed a program of meditation in which, on each day of the exercises, the person doing the exercises would take a short passage from scripture and meditate on it. This arrangement helps those who undertake the exercises to focus on that short passage and see things that they would have missed if they had been asked to read much more.

As educators in Jesuit colleges, we would do well to follow the Ignatian method of leading the uninitiated into greater perception by asking them to explore the wealth of what is in store for them by sampling it a little at a time. As much as the entire body of sacred scripture is a treasury of spiritual

rewards, the entire body of good literature is a treasury of intellectual delights. But those who have not tasted such delights need time to develop a taste for good writing. By offering them only a short excerpt at a time and by showing them what is admirable in the excerpt, we can do more to nurture a taste for good literature than by assigning them long lists of entire books to read.

To provide an example of what I mean and to explore why Hemingway thought so highly of Turgenev as a model for aspiring writers, I would like to look at Bazarov's death scene in Chapter 27 of the novel *Fathers and Sons*. The following rendering of that scene has been taken from an electronic text of that novel available at the fol-

lowing web address: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/t/t93f/t93f.zip>.

Bazarov was not destined to awaken again. Towards evening he sank into a complete coma, and the following day he died. Father Alexei performed the last rites of religion over him. When they anointed him, and the holy oil touched his breast, one of his eyes opened, and it seemed as though, at the sight of the priest in his vestments, of the smoking censer, of the candle burning in front of the image, something like a shudder of horror passed through his death-stricken face. When at last he had stopped breathing and a general lamentation arose in the house, Vassily Ivanovich was seized by a sudden fit of frenzy.

"I said I should rebel!" he shouted hoarsely, his face red and distorted, and shaking his fist in the air as if he were threatening someone. "And I rebel, I rebel!"

But Arina Vlasievna, all in tears, flung her arms round his neck and both fell on their knees together. "So side by side," related Anfisushka afterwards in the servants' room, "they bowed their poor heads like lambs in the heat of noon-day. . . ." But the heat of noonday passes and is followed by evening and night, and there comes the return to a quiet refuge where sleep is sweet for the tormented and weary...

The scene is admirable for the aptly chosen details with which Turgenev gave us a description of Vassily Ivanovich's agony. Not only did he have to lose his only son at the prime of his life, but in that loss he was also deprived of any hope that his son might find happiness in the next life. The shudder of horror that passed through the death-stricken face of his son when he beheld the last rites being

administered to him was a cruel reminder of the opposing views of religion that had divided father and son. When the silence of the dying son's room was broken by the lamentation that announced to Vassily Ivanovich that all hope was lost, the reader can sense that the grief that he had been struggling with was too much to hold back any more. And yet his was not a simple cry of pain.

Even when, with a red and distorted face, he shook his fist as if he were threatening someone and cried out "I said I should rebel," his very language conveyed the inner conflict between his outrage that the God he had believed in had allowed his son to die and his habitual reverence toward that God. The utterance "I should rebel" implied that he found it hard to rebel, and he had to repeat "And I rebel, I rebel!" to reassure himself of his act of defiance. The fact that he controlled his anger when his wife flung her arms around his neck and they both fell down on their knees conveyed how costly it was for him psychically to rebel against the God he so longed to reverence. And it was in the vivid portrayal of this conflict in him that Turgenev managed to convey to us the fullness of his anguish at the death of his son.

Perhaps no other writer exercised as much control over the pathos of a scene as Turgenev. Just when the emotional tension he had so skillfully rendered was on the point of becoming too much for the reader, he switched from direct narration to a report by the servant Anfishushka, given at a later point in time that day. "So side by side," related Anfishushka afterwards in the servants' room, "they bowed their poor heads like lambs in the heat of noon-day..." Turgenev is also a master at the use of ellipsis points to allow his readers to fill in the picture

that he had only suggested. Only when there is enough psychological time for the reader to regain some degree of calmness did he bring out his belief in the beneficence of nature by his remark "But the heat of noonday passes and is followed by evening and night, and there comes the return to a quiet refuge where sleep is sweet for the tormented and weary..." Whether the reader shares his belief, Turgenev has supplied a natural fact that sleep comes to relieve the sufferings of the tormented and weary.

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urgenev's writing is controlled, economical, full of concrete descriptions of actions that express the feelings of the characters performing those actions. These are virtues that Hemingway admired and achieved to a remarkable degree in his own writing. Thus it is no accident that Hemingway advised aspiring writers to read all the works of Turgenev. But without discussing the merits of Turgenev's writing our students will not see the reasons for Hemingway's preference of Turgenev over other writers.

I do not expect that all my readers will agree with my observations about the virtues of Turgenev's writing. But in articulating them I hope to begin a discussion that is important for a proper appreciation of good writing. Through discussion we learn about what is admirable about books we think our students should read, and by means of concrete discussions of specific excel-

lent passages we can more effectively initiate our students into great books than by just giving them a list of great books and leaving them to struggle with them on their own.

It is quite possible to design a course in which all students, in addition to reading specific excerpts from great books, also have to read one of them in its entirety and write a paper about it. The requirement to write a paper is important because writing forces them to think about what they have read. But in order to making their writing a rich learning experience, students should be required to read each other's papers, and that reading should be followed by a group discussion of the papers, with suggestions for improvements and a requirement to rewrite the paper after it has been discussed by the group.

To be most effective, the excerpts we present to our students should not be haphazard but careful components of an integrated program in which we help them to see the value of reading. In this I again draw an analogy between what I am proposing and the method employed by St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*, in which the founder of the Jesuits used a carefully structured program of daily meditations to lead the novice to a deeper relationship with God.

Perhaps there is no better way to close my argument than with the following lines from William Blake, who understands that by minute attention to small and seemingly insignificant things we can come to probe the mysteries of things that are far greater:

*To see a World in a grain
of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild
flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm
of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour. ■*