

# OTHER THINGS EQUAL

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## Reading I've Liked

When I told the economic historian Bob Fogel that since about 1980 I've been doing reading in the humanities, he asked me amiably whether I had "become a mystic." Bob, who should get the next Nobel Prize, whose brother was a professor of English, and who is a widely cultivated man, was nonetheless using the mental categories of 1955. In 1955, at the high point of Two-Culture thinking, you were either a scientist or a touchie-feelie. You could be rational, scientific, empirical; or alternatively you could be into Zen and emotion. Man of science or mystic. That was it.

The mental categories of 1955 are well summarized in a fact of geography. The world capital of rationality since about 1955 has been the RAND Corporation, which is located in the world capital of irrationality since about 1955, Santa Monica. (The "Randians" in another sense, followers of Ayn Rand, also have had their headquarters since about 1955, I am told, in Santa Monica; the coincidence is enchanting.) The RAND people have gotten along all right with the City, called in the old days "The People's Republic of Santa Monica." The getting along is another part of the categories of 1955. In 1955 you would choose sides, scientism or humanism, physics or tao, but then you were not supposed to bother the other people, or make them read your stuff. The ideal was an amiable lack of contact or understanding, which Fogel was reflecting. Humanities? You mean "mysticism." Hey, man, whatever turns you on.

Bob is mistaken about this (though not about anything else; well, maybe also about the wheat market in England in the 17th century being closed to European prices). The mistake is to believe that "the humanities" have nothing to do with "the sciences," of which economics is an example. A dean of research at a large university came to Iowa some years ago and said in her speech that the social sciences, of course, take up where the physical and biological sciences run out of explanations, and then the humanities take up where the social sciences run out. In her mind, and in Bob Fogel's, the three are arranged in lexicographic order, from most to least rational.

The dean's economics is not persuasive. Like most economists I view lexicographic orderings themselves as irrational. It's unlikely that what humanists do has no connection with the sciences except the crumb-picking-up, the dealing with the ineffable, that the dean had in mind. It seems more likely that an economist could learn a thing or two from an English professor, and vice versa. Trade is advantageous between people with different factor proportions. Millions of intelligent people have signalled with big investments in Homer and Shakespeare and

Hegel that they have found much in them. You can't know whether the humanities have something to say to you unless you try them.

I'd like to induce you to try them. You can't know your intellectual budget constraint before investigating the market.

Clifton Fadiman, a literary man of the 1930s and 1940s, published in 1942 an anthology called *Reading I've Liked*. In the introduction he tells how as a book-loving boy he experimented one summer *not* reading. "I felt I had grown too dependent upon other people's ideas. The only way I could perceive to cure myself of this dependence was to abjure other people's ideas completely." He reports that "the effect is purgative," that is, the mind "for a time seems vacant. Then gradually it fills up again, . . . with the few clear ideas." I would suggest that we economists have run Fadiman's boyish experiment far too long, out to the point of diminishing returns, spending entire decades without reading a book. Maybe that's why our ideas are so clear, and few. Time to read.

My proposal is that you join me in learning a thing or two from the English professors. The most boot-camp way of doing this is to start right now taking college courses in English, religion, philosophy, languages, film studies, feminist criticism. Go ahead. Pick one and start. The English poet Auden remarked that one could start reading anywhere in the history of poetry and, if you kept reading whatever seemed the next relevant piece, would arrive at the end with the same wide picture.

One way is to start with language courses, especially for reading literature rather than for ordering breakfast in Mexico City. A dean in a college in Connecticut, a sociologist I think, was asked why at age 40 he had started taking courses in Latin, a dead language with no possible use for business. You can't even ask the time of day in it. He said, "I was 40 years old and was ashamed I could not read the language of European learning." An economist owes it to her profession to be a learned person.

One does not need to be a professor to start taking courses, since American life is saturated with colleges. But it's so easy on a college campus that it's strange it doesn't happen more. Why don't the professors of English take from time to time a course in physics, or the professors of economics a course in philosophy? Tom Sargent for many years — I don't know if he's kept it up recently — did not let a term go by without taking another math course. My hat's off to him. Dick Posner, law professor, Federal appellate judge, and co-founder of law and economics, learned Greek as an adult. Two hats off. When Daniel Coit Gilman, the president of Johns Hopkins a century ago, was asked why the place had such a rich intellectual atmosphere he replied, "We go to each other's classes."

But if you want to keep it secret for a while, until you are hardened to charges of "mysticism" and are emotionally prepared for German vocabulary quizzes every Friday, the other route is reading on your own. I mixed the strategies, in middle age studying Latin a good deal, with smatterings of Greek and Italian, but at the same time reading literature I should have read decades ago. You can disguise yourself in dark glasses and a wig, procure a copy of Mann's *Buddenbrooks* in another town, and then read it on the sly, perhaps hidden between covers of an *American Economic Review*.

I noted that Armen Alchian had brought Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* [1775] to a conference on law and society a few years ago. The book had nothing to do with the conference (although I ask any economist who has read it whether she doesn't see in Johnson a fellow measurer and social scientist, before the name). In the breaks he would beaver away at it. In 1968 Steve Cheung told me that when Armen wanted to know about the history of law he read the two big volumes, 1379 pages, of Pollock and Maitland's classic, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I* [1898]. He liked it. Any economist would, since Maitland, the chief author, did not know economics technically but was so smart that he would reinvent it on the spot while discussing the Saxon law of murder. So when Armen finished he started over and read it again. Armen's a scholar. So should you be.

What to read? In a way it's obvious — on the whole, no fiction or poetry from last year, since we won't know for decades whether a book is worth reading. We do know about Jane Austen (see if you don't find economic man, and especially economic woman, in her minor characters), Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe* is the type of bourgeois myth), and Dickens (I'm assigning *Hard Times* to my course on the Industrial Revolution). The trick is to exploit survivorship. There's a reason that books last. The old and famous books are old and famous because the growth from reading them has proven to be high. My mentor the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron read *War and Peace* (in Russian) six times, four of the times in a pair of readings. When he got to the end of the book, like Alchian with Pollock and Maitland, he did not want to leave its world, and so he turned back to the first page and read it again. Stop looking at the *New York Times* bestseller list and start with the Bible and *Don Quixote* and get to work, or rather to pleasure, or rather to Z-good production.

It can be disorienting, though, and discouraging, to simply leap into the world of Horace or the Bhagavadgita. All credit to those take the leap unaided, but another route to the same end is recent books in the humanities. It's how I got started. The suggestion violates my rule against recent books, I admit, but has the advantage that the people speaking come from (roughly) the same culture and give you a reason to leap. I think most economists are like me in being clumsy at story reading but already pretty good at metaphor using. The literary "theory" (most of it is not theory in our sense) tends towards models and metaphors.

You will have heard, though, from the deep literary thinkers at the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* that recent books in the humanities are deconstructionist, politically correct, jargon filled, red under the bed, and in other ways ignorable. If you want to remain as ignorant as the editorial writers, let them shortcut your education right here. But if you take the view that most things believed by editorial writers are wrong, such as that foreign trade "creates" or "destroys" jobs or that companies will pay 80 percent of health insurance costs if the law specifies that they will, then stick around.

Here are twenty accessible books to choose from in beginning your study of the humanities. The list reflects of course my tastes, or rather my ignorances (which come to think of it, are economically the same). I'm a dunderhead at classical music,

a nitwit at painting, so be warned. I confine the list to books you can pick up and read with understanding without already being a literary person. You can't start with Kenneth Burke, the great American critic, any more than you can start with Samuelson's *Foundations* [1947], as against *Economics* [1948].

**Reading I've Liked:  
Twenty Books Recently in the Humanities  
That You'll Like, Too**

- Booth, Wayne C.** *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974: a readable use of modern rhetoric, philosophy, and literature.
- Booth, Wayne C.** *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988: how stories make ethical judgments. You see I admire Booth. In the professorial line, he's what I want to be if I ever grow up.
- Frye, Northrop.** *The Educated Imagination*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964: text of six radio talks by the Canadian critic. As *College English* said, "Read this book."
- Lodge, David.** *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990: the same David Lodge who writes fine novels that get turned into TV series was until recently a professor of English, who writes front-line but highly readable criticism.
- Herrnstein Smith, Barbara.** *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978: one of a handful of literary people thinking in other than Marxist terms about economics and literature.
- Todorov, Tzvetan.** *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977: even a Bulgarian-French literary critic can be a model of perspicuity.
- Kennedy, George A.** *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984: the best short introduction to what one sort of "criticism" might mean, applied to a familiar text.
- Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark.** *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980: by a linguist and a philosopher, explaining why models are metaphors.
- Fish, Stanley.** *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989: the *bête noire* of anti-deconstructionist journalists turns out to be a sensible, readable, and amusing critic, here of law and literature.
- White, James Boyd.** *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984: White is a professor of law and of English at Michigan, adjunct in the Department of Classics, and believes that we economists have picked up the wrong end of the human stick.

- Jonsen, Albert R. and Toulmin, Stephen.** *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988: ethical theory is more than warmed-over Kant and Bentham, contrary to what you might think from the journal *Economics and Philosophy*.
- Passmore, John.** *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*. New York: Basic Books, 1966: brings you up to speed in modern philosophy; his *Recent Philosophers* [1985] continues in the same format.
- Putnam, Hilary.** *Realism with a Human Face*, edited by J. Conant. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992: lucid essays in modern philosophy, such as "Beyond the Fact/Value Split" and "The Craving for Objectivity."
- Goodman, Nelson.** *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978: a philosopher who was also a professional art dealer, shows that we make worlds with our words of art.
- Austin, John L.** *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1975: a great little book, spawning libraries on "speech acts" (a good follow up is Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990).
- Berger, John.** *Ways of Seeing*. London and New York: BBC and Penguin, 1972: an easy way to start reading this Marxist but penetrating historian of painting.
- Gombrich, Ernst H.** *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960: you can see that I do not keep up in art criticism; a stunningly good book, shaming our narrowness.
- Brolin, Brent C.** *The Failure of Modern Architecture*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976: ever wonder why downtown Dallas reminds you of the Arrow-Debreu theorem?
- Feyerabend, Paul.** *Against Method*. New York: NLB, 1975: read this and you will never read science the same way again.
- Rorty, Richard.** *The Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays 1972-1980)*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982: a good way into this elegant but allusive stylist of philosophy.

These writers are pros, on the level of Fogel, Arrow, Coase, Friedman, Becker, Tobin. I'll wager that you can't read any of the books without deciding that the humanities are worth looking into, big time. The next step would be to read other books by the listed writers whom you find most interesting, then explore the less transparent but still instructive ones (Alasdair MacIntyre, Hayden White, and, yes, Kenneth Burke). None of this is nursery-school stuff (Berger is a TV script and comes the closest). You have to pay attention. But like comparable books in economics (Olson's *Logic of Collective Action*, Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Schelling's *Micromotives and Microbehavior*), if you pay attention you learn a lot, even a lot relevant to economics. I promise.

*Other Things Equal*, a column by Donald N. McCloskey, appears regularly in this *Journal*.