Why Read Old Books?

By Mitchell Kalpakgian

If some evil genius or demon wished to inhibit the transmission of wisdom from old age to youth, what would he do? The first thing might be to replace reading books with watching movies, even movies made from classic books. The film creates the illusion of knowledge, and viewing the movie creates the spell of authentic learning. Reading becomes optional or unnecessary if movies are the primary medium for transmitting education. If youth can become addicted to watching films as the quintessential form of recreational and educational experience, then the habit of reading and the cultivation of the intellect from good books suffer. A poem that will never become a film perfectly illustrates this point.

In Robert Frost's "The Mountain," a young traveler arrives at the small town of Lunenburg, population sixty according to the latest census, to visit a famous mountain known as Hor and to climb to the top. Meeting an old man driving a slow oxcart, the traveler asks, "Is that the way to reach the top from here?"[1] The old man notes that many in the past ("those that *have* been up") have used a trail five miles away. The old man admits that he has never felt any keen desire to ascend to the mountaintop: "It doesn't seem much to climb a mountain/ You've worked around the foot of all your life." The answer perplexes the tourist. Although the old man has traveled around the mountain many times and explored the sides in his deer hunting and trout fishing, he has never shown the curiosity to mount the heights or investigate the unknown. For him, the world below is a school and universe in itself.

In their conversation the young traveler not only learns about trails that lead to the pinnacle of Mount Hor but also gathers all the lore about the mountain that the old man volunteers: a brook originates somewhere on the mountain, a stream that is, amazingly, "cold in summer, warm in winter." The old-timer guesses that the spring must be near the top if not "on the very top." It is possible to walk around the mountain, he explains, and still remain in the town of Lunenburg, which is not a village, "only scattered farms." Throughout the poem the young visitor, impressed by the old man's fund of knowledge, poses the same question several ways:

You've never climbed?
You never saw it?
You've lived here all your life?

How can someone know so much about the top of the mountain when he has only traveled below on the sides? How can anyone who moves so leisurely ("so slow/ With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart") appear so well traveled, so well versed, about paths leading to the top, about deer and trout on the sides, and about brooks cold in summer and warm in winter? The young tourist remains puzzled by the wit and wisdom of his older companion, who remarks, " 'T wouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it," and does not understand why someone going around the mountain in the course of a lifetime would not venture to the top by the quickest path. The young man romanticizes the notion of climbing to the top and beholding a panoramic view of the wide world below: "There ought to be a view around the world/ From such a mountain." Driving a slow-moving oxcart around the base of the mountain, by comparison, appears inglorious and unadventurous, humdrum and uneventful. What does the old man know that the young traveler does not grasp? "As above, so below," as the proverbial saying goes.

In the poem, Frost contrasts the young and the old, knowledge and wisdom, surface and depth, information and mystery. The young man's desire to reach the top of the mountain in the most direct and quickest way leads him to knowledge: the path most people travel is "five miles back," the old man reports. However, the view from the top does not reveal the trout streams and the deer's hiding places on the side or the mystery of the brook above that steams in winter "like an ox's breath." The tourist discovers the surface and height of the mountain but does not penetrate the hidden, mysterious places, because he is in a rush and seeks the shortest and fastest route; he does not have time to go around the mountain several times. In the dialogue between the young man and the old-timer, the traveler is asking the questions, and the elderly man who has always lived in Lunenburg all his days is handing down wisdom from a lifetime of experience. The visitor knows so little, and the lifetime resident so much. To go leisurely around and around a mountain in an oxcart offers advantages that a straight, hasty course to the peak does not allow.. Recognizing the effects at the bottom of the mountain, the old man knows the cause

[1] *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 40.

behind the effect, for invisible things are known by the things that are visible, as St. Paul said. Living around the mountain all his life instead of being a tourist for a day, the old man possesses a profound knowledge of the mountain in all four seasons, both its interior and exterior. His knowledge is extensive and deep, not superficial. As an ancient philosopher said, "The way up is the way down."

The curious traveler's approach to knowledge in "The Mountain" corresponds to the great temptation of youth: to seek short cuts to truth and ignore the slow, arduous process of acquiring wisdom by discovering the perennial truths of the past. It is commonplace today to hear high school and college students assert that they would rather see the movie adaptation of a book rather than read the story, and it is all too typical for high school English teachers to show a film and then assign an essay on the movie rather than require the students to read the book. A two- or three-hour film or video, of course, is direct and swift compared to the slow, interrupted pace of leisurely reading a novel. The movie, however, no matter how well adapted, remains superficial compared to the original novel or story itself. It is impossible to explore the sides of the mountain or detect the cool spring in the summer if the primary object is simply to reach the top in the most expeditious manner. Likewise, it is impossible to appreciate the power, beauty, eloquence, and art of words and to penetrate to the depths of a great story in all its universality through a film version. Even filmed versions of plays offer a palpably different experience than viewing a live production.

Modern students (and adults) complain that life is too short, and therefore reading is too time consuming, an onerous activity that interferes with the life of excitement and pleasure. It spoils the passionate desire, in Walter Pater's famous words, "to burn always with this hard gem-like flame." Because reading is as leisurely and as unspectacular as the old man slowly driving his oxcart around the mountain, it encourages reflection and contemplation, the art of being still and recollected and the ability to experience wonder and to behold a miracle or touch a mystery. Reading cultivates the interior life and develops the imagination, making present what is absent and translating the author's words into pictures. Reading sensitizes the mind, heart, and conscience in a way that the sensations, images, and music in films fail to move the soul. Movies—for all their devices, technical effects, and cinematography—may stir the passions and move the emotions, but they do not plumb the depths of the person like a literary work of art. Most movies today (there are exceptions, of course, like *The Passion of the Christ* and some classic films like *Babette's Feast*) simply provide a momentary relief from boredom—from the modern malaise that stems from the absence of a vital intellectual, spiritual, or family life. The chronic non-reading moviegoer is listless and craves excitement. Sensationalism is equated with action, drama, violence, and forbidden knowledge, and real life is expected to imitate art, that is, to copy Hollywood—its style, language, manners, and morals. As Oscar Wilde illustrates in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, aestheticism is the philosophy that attempts to make daily, humdrum life imitate art (always full of thrills) instead of imitating nature or reality, as Aristotle argued in the *Poetics.* To the young intoxicated with movies and to the aesthete longing to burn with a "hard gem-like flame," going around and around the mountain is unromantic, unpoetic, and unadventurous. Reading the classics page after page appears tedious and lackluster, unlike the flashiness of films.

Students lament that reading is laborious, almost implying that reading is an unnatural activity compared to the ease of watching videos. However, learning to swim and learning to ride a bicycle are also time-consuming and demanding, as opposed to, say, playing video games. Just as it is easier to make one trip to the top of the mountain than to circle around the base many times, watching films does not require the effort, concentration, or patience that the exercise of reading prescribes. In short, people nowadays are tempted to believe that seeing the movie is tantamount to reading the book; some even judge the film a greater work of art than was the original novel. They fail to discern that viewing a film amounts to a tourist's ephemeral experience of one part of the great Mount Hor, never the old man's lifetime of wisdom about the whole. Especially when one is young, it is easy to confuse the ephemeral with the substantive, the superficial with the essential, and naively equate film watching with true education and high art.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, everyone is addicted to the drug "soma" and to the film entertainment called "the feelies" as books disappear and the classics are prohibited because "We haven't any use for old things here," as the book's Controller says. An Indian called Savage protests that "Othello's better than those feelies." Exasperated, he demands of his addicted contemporaries: "But do you like being slaves? ... Do you like being babies?"[2] They have no answer. They have never learned to understand such questions. Instead, as the Controller explains, they have grown up

[2] Alduous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 225, 226, 218.

on a diet of "agreeable sensations" dictated by "Emotional Engineers." Because old things perpetuate the culture of the past and transmit the wisdom of earlier ages, they threaten the zeitgeist of the modern age. In Orwell's *1984*, old things have been banished from Oceania. The hero Winston nevertheless finds a pawn shop with antiques like a mahogany bed, an old-fashioned glass clock, and a coral paperweight in the shape of a rose, and they evoke a sense of wonder for the beauty of traditional art: "[T]he room had awakened in him a sort of nostalgia, a sort of ancestral memory." Later in the novel, when Winston reads "the forbidden book" that states the ideology of Big Brother, he discovers a radical agenda:

The alteration of the past is necessary for two reasons, one of which is subsidiary and, so to speak, precautionary. The subsidiary reason is that the Party member, like the proletarian, tolerates present-day party conditions partly because he has no standards of comparison. He must be cut off from the past, just as he must be cut off from foreign countries, because it is necessary for him to believe that he is better off than his ancestors and the average level of material comfort is constantly rising.[3]

Thus the past must be censored because it provides "standards of comparison" to judge the contemporary and the fashionable, or the past must be erased because the brainwashed person must think that "he is better off than his ancestors"—that is, wiser, bolder, more emancipated, more enlightened, and less puritanical.

In short, everyone is better off watching modern films than reading old books: so we have learned to think. When the film watching of contemporary movies supplants the reading of good books, then the young lose an awareness of normative, universal experience. As Russell Kirk explains in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*,

Every major form of literary art has taken for its deeper themes what T.S. Eliot called "the permanent things"—the very norms of human nature. Until very recent years, men took it for granted that literature exists to form the normative consciousness: that is, to teach human beings their true nature, their dignity, and their rightful place in the scheme of things.[4]

Given the nature of too many Hollywood productions—with their penchant for violence, prurience, sensationalism, and banality—the common standard of culture degenerates to the level of the lowest common denominator, while exciting aberrations and perverse forms of cruelty begin to seem almost normal. In a culture ruled by the dictatorship of relativism, no moral consensus, authority, tradition, or religion has a right to judge "the normative consciousness." Institutions hallowed by time, such as fatherhood, church, and the traditional family, are dipped in the acid bath of postmodern skepticism—and few survive fundamentally unchanged. Again, Orwell prophesies the impending evil: "And when memory failed and written records were falsified . . . there did not exist, and never again could exist, any standard against which it [propaganda] could be tested." (79) As contemporary movies assume a predominant cultural influence in the formation of young minds and sensibilities, they subvert traditional norms and moral ideals. Older classics pale in comparison with the previews of upcoming films. Even in the Hollywood production of *The Lord of the Rings*, the movie becomes the work of art, the novel a secondary version of the film. The addiction to light and sound erodes the docility of the student who expects learning always to be thrilling, dramatic, colorful, and emotional. What teacher or book can compete with the images, colors, music, and glamor that appear on the screen? How can the serenity of a Homer, a Chaucer, or an Austen compete with the shock and sensationalism of Hollywood fare? The consumption of movie after movie habituates the young mind into associating learning with passivity and effortlessness instead of discipline and willpower. In *The Scholemaster*, Roger Ascham, a famous teacher of the sixteenth century, describes one of the essential virtues of the student: *philoponos*, an aptitude for learning. Such a student "[i]s he, that hath a lust to labor, and a will to take paines." Instead of seeking to labor and discover knowledge through discipline and the patience to overcome difficulties, the moviegoer expects knowledge to be served in sweet and satisfying snack-food portions. Stephen King is easy to read, but Charles Dickens is ponderous, J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, is fascinating; Jane Austen, boring. The moviegoer, in short, does not realize that he is being indoctrinated, desensitized, pandered to, and "dumbed down" to the point where he cannot discriminate between the excellent and the banal, the beautiful and the flashy, the universal and the bizarre, what is noble and what is vulgar. While the moviegoer's eyes are being glutted, his mind is starved and deadened. While his mind feasts on novelties and oddities, it never transcends to the universal and eternal. There is only one standard—the one low enough to sell sufficient tickets.

---

[3] George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet Classic, 1989), 82, 175.
[4] Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1969), 41.

In his essay "On the Reading of Old Books," C. S. Lewis warns of the dangers of reading only new books: "It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one until you have read an old one in between." Acknowledging that every age needs correction of its own particular forms of blindness, Lewis sees an effective cure to these prejudices: "And that means the old books . . . The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books."[5] Lewis's distinction between old and new books does not even hint at the enormous gulf between old books and modern films. If reading only new books intensifies what Lewis calls "chronological snobbery"—the presumption that everything modern is ipso facto superior to everything traditional—modern films teach people that error even more quickly. Without authentic standards of comparison, quality and excellence give way to style and trendiness; the shocking, the avant-garde, and the risqué determine the norm. There is no "normative consciousness" without the perennial wisdom of the past and the universal truths passed on to us in print. The young person who learns to treasure such ancient things is depicted in Chaucer's portrait of the true scholar in the Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Clerk of Oxenford: "He would rather have twenty volumes of Aristotle and his philosophy, bound in black or red, at the head of his bed than rich robes, or a fiddle, or a gay psaltery."[6]

One of the habits of mind the ancient world cultivates is *equanimity*, the virtue that Matthew Arnold attributed to Homer and the Greeks: "to see things steadily and as a whole." Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University* also identified this ability as the crowning achievement of liberal education at its best: "true enlargement of mind which is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole" and "the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things." This poise Newman compares to "the repose of faith, because nothing can startle it; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres."[7] The old man in "The Mountain" epitomizes this repose, equanimity, and clear vision of seeing the entire mountain as a whole from the top to the bottom and from the exterior to the interior. Because of this self-possession he is not in a state of bustle to climb to the top. The young traveler, on the other hand, is impulsive and impatient, desiring the sensation of reaching the heights immediately. Restless by nature and prone to *Sturm und Drang*, the young do not need the overstimulation of the senses, passions, and appetites that the film industry indulges. Without the counterpoise of old people, old books, and old-fashioned manners and morals, the young will learn to live only for instant gratification and the excitement of sensation. No one is born appreciating the importance of serenity and the value of contemplation, qualities that apprehend the eternal and the universal. The old man's slow repetitious travel around the mountain does not tap into the thrill of the moment or the drama of the unknown. All great art and true education order the passions, achieve a temperance and moderation of the emotions, and instill a repose in the mind. As Newman explains, a liberal education forms this balance: "A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom."[8] Corrupt art and false education, on the other hand, arouse the passions and agitate and confuse the mind—a view that L'Abbe Dubos in *Reflections on Poetry and Painting* (1719) summarized as follows: "[N]othing is in general so disagreeable to the mind as the languid, listless state of indolence into which it falls upon the removal of all passion and occupation."[9] That is, the mind is always bored and hence demands arousal—not equanimity or repose. It craves what it does not need: a new movie instead of an old book.

Old men and old books speak with conviction and authority and transmit a perennial wisdom of the ages: there is nothing new under the sun. Many new movies and new books, however, teach that constant change is the only reality and that nothing is universally true or right for all people in all times and in all places. In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, the devils concur that the strategy of "inflaming the horror of the same Old Thing" in humans actually captures souls for hell. As Screwtape informs Wormwood, "Finally the desire for novelty is indispensable if we are to produce Fashions or Vogues."[10] Modern films are notorious for inciting revolutionary changes in manners, morals, language, and good taste—which is precisely why Christians reacted to them in the 1930s with organizations like the Legion of Decency and

---

[5] C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eeerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 200 ff.

[6] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*,ed. R. M. Lumiansky (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 8.

[7] John Henry Newman, *The Uses of Knowledge*, ed. Leo L. Ward (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1948), 40, 42.

[8] *The Uses of Knowledge*, 10.

[9] Quoted by David Hume, "Of Tragedy," in *Criticism: The Major Texts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), 193.

[10] *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 116, 117.

guidelines like the Production Code. While such institutions are widely derided today, in fact they proved a prudent and partly effective measure for restraining the amoral, sometimes propagandistic power of cinema. Not incidentally, they forced filmmakers to resort to a subtlety in expressions of violence and sexuality that even made for better movies: hence Hollywood's "golden age."

When students read only new authors like Stephen King or J. K. Rowling, or when the re-creation of films replaces the reading of classics, both Screwtape and Big Brother taste victory. The devils agree that "it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the other" (129). Tyrants of every sort take satisfaction that students and "great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant mechanic who holds that 'history is bunk.' "

While the young traveler in "The Mountain" was skeptical of the old man's knowledge of a mountain he had never climbed to the top, the youth nevertheless showed curiosity and asked questions. The old man was no fool but a sage who piqued the interest of the tourist in the greatness and wonder of the mountain. A student who only watches movies instead of reading will not pause to listen to such old men. He has been taught that "real life" in all its moral relativism, brutal honesty, base vulgarity, and frank sexuality is learned from modern films and best-seller books—not from the past. The classics are the works of "dead white men," mere idealistic nonsense, or works in some dead language. In fact, they are what Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* calls "the collected reason of ages" and "the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages." It is true that old books do not provide "the myriad sensations" or "the fiery colored life" of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, who aspired to make his life a dramatic production. Rather, like the old man in "The Mountain," the classics slowly travel around a subject and behold its many facets, exploring the outside and the inside and penetrating to the heart of reality. Without exaggeration or distortion, old books reveal the nature of things and the mysteries of life. Without spectacular sensationalism, they penetrate the human heart and the depths of spirituality. The way up is the way down and around. No film can equal Homer as he teaches the profound truth that life goes on ("rose-fingered rose once again") no matter how horrific or heartbreaking the tragedy. No movie can illuminate the truth about "the tears of things"—the inherent sadness that permeates all of life because of the inevitability of loss and death—as well as Virgil does in the *Aeneid*. No Hollywood romance can teach the hard truths about marriage—its economic, social, moral, and romantic aspects—as intelligently or as elegantly as Jane Austen does in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth falls in love with Darcy: "She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in his welfare."[11] No Hollywood version of the relationship between the sexes approaches Tolstoy's depiction of "real life" in *Anna Karenina*, a life grounded in married love, extended family, and the blessing of children. As Tolstoy writes of Levin, the noblest man in the novel, "He could not imagine the love of woman without marriage. . . . [F]or Levin it was the chief thing in life, on which the whole happiness of life depended."[12] No Walt Disney version of "The Snow Queen" captures the magic and innocence of childhood as eloquently as Hans Christian Andersen in his description of little Gerda's childlike power to melt hearts. As an old woman says of the girl who charms everyone in her search for her lost companion,

> I can't give her greater power than she has already! Can't you see how great that is? Can't you see how she makes man and beast serve her, and how well she's made her way in the world on her own bare feet? She mustn't know of her power from us—it comes of her heart, it comes of her being a sweet innocent child.[13]

The task in this collection of insights gleaned from a wide array of old and great books is to help modern readers employ the wisdom of the ancients to free themselves from the tyranny of the moment and recover a measure of such blessed innocence for themselves. END

Mitchell Kalpakgian is currently a Visiting Professor of Literature at Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in New Hampshire. He is the author numerous books, including *The Marvelous in Fielding's Novels*, *The Mysteries of Life in Children's Literature*, and the recently released *The Virtues We Need Again: 21 Life Lessons from the Great Books of the West*.

[11] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 216.
[12] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 94.
[13] *Fairy Tales: A Selection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 264.