

Don't Read the Whole Thing

John Rawls, introducing his influential *A Theory of Justice*, does a remarkable thing for an author. “This is a long book,” he writes, and then proceeds to explain how you can get the theory he presents along with explanations of terms and pertinent examples by reading sections of the book that amount to only about a third of his 600 pages! It would be churlish not to take this advice, I thought, choosing the 200-page option. Plenty of other books, in my opinion—famous ones, classics, and supposed must-reads—should be preceded by Rawls-like advice about how to read them without reading all of them.

According to Sir Francis Bacon, “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” Yes, even the classics may need some selective tasting. By all means read every word of *The Odyssey*, the master narrative of Western literature, because it will entertain, and, if you are a storyteller, train you as well. But *The Iliad* is another matter. When Homer describes encounters between Paris and Hector or Hector and Andromache, still more when he turns his merciless attention to Trojans and Greeks killing each other, he will keep anyone’s interest. But if you read every item in his catalogues of which country sent how many ships to Troy, only if you have a map of ancient city-states before you and a passion for ancient geography will you stay awake. By all means, skim Homer’s lists as you would the begats in Genesis. Just keep in mind that Homer’s catalogues really did interest his first readers and still command the attention of students of the ancient world.

The Aeneid requires cutting on a different plan. Here it’s pretty much a matter of checking out after the councils of the gods in Book 1, the escape from Troy in 2, Aeneas’s travels in 3, the romance of Dido and Aeneas in 4, and the

trip to the Underworld in 6. In 6 we get a prophecy of what happens until the founding of Rome, but we don't have to actually live through the enactment of the prophecy.

Authors may not be as helpful as John Rawls, but they do sometimes signal where your attention can wander. When a shepherd in *Don Quixote* begins to tell a story peopled by no one we've yet met but rather folks with conventional Romantic names, it's safe to skip the rest of that chapter and possibly the next; the chapter titles will tell us when the main narrative resumes.

The point is that life is short and some books—even some very good books—are too long. A lot of selective reading is just taste, of course. At the halfway point in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* I realized that Hitler's monomaniacal hobbling of his generals' freedom to act and other aspects of the war's progress were going to be far less interesting to me than the story of Hitler's complicated and politically astute climb to power had been, and I just stopped reading. It's your reading life, after all, and no one else's; find the good parts and leave the rest unread.

The Cross and the Windmills

Drivers on Interstate 40, coming over a low hill on the Texas plains east of Amarillo, see on the horizon a white cross. The town nearby is Groom, with about six hundred residents, located on a bypass from the interstate, a little piece of the old Route 66. The cross, when it suddenly appeared on the horizon and grew gradually bigger as I approached, was until recently an imposing and isolated sight, dominating an otherwise empty landscape. Since the cross is visible for nearly ten miles, there is a lot of time to wonder at its presence, to speculate on exactly how big it is and who erected it. I discovered the answers to these questions by pulling into the small park next to the cross and reading the information posted there.

The cross is almost sixty meters high—190 feet to be exact, or as tall as a 15-story building. Its arms stretch 110 feet. For comparison, the statue of *Christ the Redeemer* that looks out over Rio de Janeiro from the top of Corcovado Mountain is only 30 meters tall, though it has the advantage of Corcovado's 700-meter height to give it prominence. The stylized corrugations representing folds in the robe in Paul Landowski's Art Deco design for *Cristo Redentor* may possibly have suggested the fluting or channeling in the skin of the Groom cross. Two Texas millionaires are responsible for the cross. Chris Britten, who owned the large, now defunct gas station, curio shop, and restaurant nearby, donated the land, and Steve Thomas had the cross built in sections in Pampa, Texas, before it was transported and assembled at this site in 1995. Bronze statues representing the stations of the cross and other sacred subjects ring the white metal cross. These include a *pietà* copied from Michelangelo, a St. Michael and Lucifer that could be mistaken for St. George and the Dragon, a fountain, an empty tomb, an anti-abortion

monument, and the ten commandments. But the main player is the cross, dwarfing all the bronze below. Yet it is almost an anticlimax to arrive at the cross, since we can only imagine its size, with nothing to provide scale, during our approach to it, and it could, for all we could guess from ten or five miles away, be four hundred feet tall.

Not long ago as I drove on I-40, approaching the cross at Groom, I saw on the horizon white shapes of a very different sort, dozens of them, and all larger than the Groom cross. They were the huge three-bladed windmills or wind turbines that we have become accustomed to seeing over the last few years on the windy plains of America. Cross and turbines have in common a certain mysteriousness of scale: I find it difficult, even when I am within a few hundred yards, to guess how large they are. But I have often seen on the road trucks transporting the blades of turbines, and with cars for comparison I have no trouble comprehending that each blade is over a hundred feet long.

In fact the blades are 130 feet long, and the tower that supports them is over two hundred fifty feet high, so the structure, when a blade is pointing straight up, is easily four hundred feet tall, or more than twice the height of the Groom cross, and there are dozens of them in view as one approaches and drives by the cross. The wind turbines (so-called even though they are not actually turbines but simple generators powered by the geared-up turning of a wind fan) are often arranged along the fronts of mesas so that they look like modern equivalents of the windmills of La Mancha, and I can imagine that some wizard—Frestón, for instance—had replaced the old landmarks with these three-armed white giants. Wind farms, they call these collections, and some in America have almost five thousand of the turbines.

I have to think that at least part of the intent and effort of the two millionaires who put up the cross has been frustrated. The intent, I imagine, was at least partly to create a particular moment of contemplation of Christianity's central symbol and of what it means to those speeding toward it over the plains of the Texas Panhandle at seventy-five miles an hour.

Whether our thoughts were contemplative and religious, or whether, like me, you were merely marveling at the scale of the cross, it captured your thoughts for the time it took to reach it. It gestured upward from a terrain of flatness and clear views to a far horizon. Like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, the cross organized a natural landscape with the insertion of a man-made object and perhaps pointed thoughts toward a third realm beyond the physical.

But no more. What has happened here is partly dilution and partly distraction. Attention that once had been trained solely on the cross is now divided among a number of monumental shapes on the plain. An added distraction is the movement of the new shapes. An aesthetic question arises: is the cross more beautiful than the windmills, or vice versa? And beyond aesthetics is the question of meaning and meaningful activity: the cross does symbolic work while the wind turbines do real work. The many questions the turbines raise do not touch the metaphysical. Who put them up? Where does the electricity they generate get distributed, and how much juice is there? Does the wind always blow here? How long does it take for the electricity generated to pay off the cost of these huge machines? Wind turbines call us to the things of this world.