

[Three Books], from *For the Love of Books. 115 Celebrated Writers on the Books They Love Most*, ed. Ronald B. Shwartz, New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1999.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* -- for demystifying shame and sacrifice.

Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* -- for design, for the city, for materials.

Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts* (abridged by Dwight MacDonal) -- for pleasure in ideas and people, for courage in exile, for Russia once upon a time.

1. Forty years ago *On the Genealogy of Morals* set me free to plot my life. I could be a writer, I thought. The next week it was probably some other book. Yet Nietzsche's guilt exposé felt like a coup at the time, and I still find it wildly exhilarating. Themes familiar in Freud -- instincts discharging themselves inward to create bad conscience, sacrifice, soul -- are in Nietzsche's shorthand a mobilizing jolt. The human animal turned against itself claims not only a god-staged drama but a mysterious future.

The impact of all this and more remains, though more than Nietzsche's particular views it's the boldness of attack, the impatience, the swift prose. His passages and fragments rush me along like a wonderful gravity rushing from within, and give me hope. He's so severely encouraging I have to not re-rank courage and love so much as rethink them. He takes aim at the history of religion, he seeks out the roots of asceticism and master/slave, the uses of forgetfulness, what comes between the desire and the act. He's no system philosopher, this psychic historian, this character, this demolisher of scripture. Zen of all things comes to mind, Nietzsche's so quick in his analysis and range. Zen! he retorts --he doesn't put up with you, or even himself. He's less really reactionary about women and law than willing to hear himself say whatever comes up. Great on resentment, his final analysis nonetheless doesn't mean you won't live through it again and build on it. Where did all that belittlement of self come from, what was the mere origin of that controlling habit of mind?

Rereading Spinoza, another great guilt dissolver with a geometrically laid-out (though immensely moving) system, reminds me how personal *Nietzsche* gets, how local and racy. The *Genealogy* doesn't hold up from beginning to end; anyway, it's three inquiries continuing an earlier book. No matter. The passages and pieces of this book point me to materials of myself inseparable from action.

2) Sigfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*, celebrates hard and heavy materials and the design thought inspired by them. Cast iron and concrete, to name two -- their revolutionary effect upon building and community. Recommended to me twenty-five years ago by an architect friend, Giedion remains a source book of themes and examples, the history of practical thought finding a way between geometrical and organic methods of mastering the environment. The collaboration of architecture and engineering and politics and feeling. The bridges of Eiffel. Haussman's Paris. Research into space-time. The demands of community, the risks of organization. For years I have consulted and luxuriated in this heady analysis of real and imaginary but mostly real structures, and infra-structures my own narrative about people might move parallel to. Materials resistant and grand. The adventure of this book takes me into the shadowed volumes of Chicago and New York. Russian plans for the stratified city. I open to pictures of Alvar Aalto's free, "irrational" forms, from whole buildings to undulating ceilings made from the wood of Finnish forests, to furniture in a home. Giedion makes me think of all the things a book might make you want to do; how John McPhee's *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* led me to visit McPhee's subject, the maker himself, and buy a Henri Vaillancourt canoe that turned out, I realized much later from a reference in the text, to be one used in the trip McPhee's book recounts; though I think here of the diagrams of Malecite Indian canoes and of how Henri made these noble boats: "anatomical" diagrams of process beautiful in themselves, cedar ribs, the original outline stakeout in the dirt.

It has been a theme of mine, I am not sure why, that materials should keep

their honor and identity, not be totally transformed in a work: they should show through, as in the Japanese term *wobu*, in the finished work -- original and resistant.

3) A book of “materials” often better than a novel, *My Past and Thoughts*. *The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* stared at me from a bookshelf for years before I read it. What’s your “favorite” anything panics me. Too much to pick from; too light a word. Yet this could be it, something more useful and satisfying than many of the books that always were my imagined Russia. A vast, rational, narrative compendium of the heroic, messed-up intellectual and social history of 19th-century Russia. A book I was sorry to finish and have never finished since, though I open it at random like a believer in bibliomancy.

What an interesting man, this Herzen, who seems to know everyone important in mid-nineteenth century Russia and western Europe. He lived most of his life in familiar, busy exile that his book understands as a disaster at the same time that Herzen is absorbed in intellectual and political culture -- in action, in pleasure. Founder of an emigré magazine, a graduate of Siberia, a gregarious polymath, Herzen is sometimes a solitary wanderer in strange cities -- reflecting upon an improvised life cut off from his people. A story not in competition with *The Possessed* or *Hadji Murad*; yet containing anecdotes about bureaucracy as good as Gogol; sometimes a devastating intimacy like Babel; a population of amazing people, and above all an original grasp of events and ideas. “The reflection of historical events on a man who has accidentally found himself in their path” – Herzen’s disclaimer hardly suggests his art. Father of revolutionary socialism as Lenin may have seen him, Herzen keeps us close to the scene where ideas are acted forth. Witness his ambivalence about nihilism. Or the opinion of a fellow traveler who, listening to the minor-key sadness of the post-chaise driver’s songs, decides the government should be “founded on this musical inclination of the people’s ear.” the exile asks. One answer is his enormous story, of which I his admirer have for some reason read only the one-volume abridgement. He puts me almost to shame. But not quite.