

The Library of Robinson Crusoe

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[*Ensaísta*]

«*Un vieil homme est toujours Robinson*».
François MAURIAC – *Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs*

On one of the early days of October of the year 1659, after being cast ashore on the coast of what he called «the Island of Despair», Robinson Crusoe returned to the wreck of his ship and managed to bring ashore a number of tools and various kinds of food, as well as «several things of less value» such as pens, ink, paper, and several books. Of these books, a few were in Portuguese, a couple were «Popish prayer-books» and three were very good Bibles. His «dreadful deliverance» had left him terrified of death through starvation; the tools and the food met his material needs, and then he was ready to seek something to mitigate the awful days that lay ahead. «*Erst kommt das Freßsen, dan kommt die Moral*» («First comes the fodder, then the morals»), Brecht was later to remark. So, his body looked after, Crusoe set out to tend to his mind, and sought moral entertainment in the ship's meagre library. Robinson Crusoe was the founder – the reluctant founder – of a new society. And Daniel Defoe, his author, thought it necessary that at the beginning of a new society there should be books.

We, the readers (compulsive creatures that we are), consider it obvious that, searching for bare necessities, Crusoe would rescue the ship's books, whether in Portuguese or in any other language; we are also tempted to guess what the «several Portuguese books» might have been. No doubt a copy of Camões *Lusiads*, a fitting book in a ship's library; perhaps the sermons of the illustrious Antonio Vieira, including the wonderful «Sermon of St. Anthony to the Fishes» in which Crusoe might have read a defense of the brothers of Friday; most certainly the *Peregrination* of Fernão Mendes Pinto which tells of strange voyages through the still mysterious Orient and which Crusoe's author, the omnivorous Defoe, knew well.

We can't, however, tell precisely what those books were, because in spite of keeping a diary in which he dutifully recorded the changes of weather and mood, Crusoe never wrote of the books he brought onto his island. Perhaps, true to the English conviction that English is the only language a gentleman requires, Crusoe was unable to read Portuguese. But imagine our despair, had we found ourselves in his goat-hide shoes, having at our disposal volumes of literature in a script that we couldn't decode; imagine flicking through the wilfully tongue-tied pages, willing the sense to come to us through the twenty-something letters we know so well, and yet set out in a meaningless arrangement that lent the page the quality of a nightmare. Poor us! Poor Robinson Crusoe! But of this calvary, which would be foremost in the mind of every one of us, his hypocritical readers, he tells nothing. (In fact, very soon Crusoe seems to have forgotten his books entirely; when he leaves the island on 11 June 1687 and makes a detailed list of his possessions, he doesn't breathe a word about those mysterious volumes.)

He does tell, however, of his uses of the Bible. The Bible is at the core of this new human society: it colours each of Crusoe's actions, it dictates the meaning of his sufferings, it is the instrument through which he will try, Prospero-like, to make a useful servant out of the savage Friday. Crusoe writes: «I explained to [Friday], as well as I could, why our blessed Redeemer took not on Him the nature of angels but the seed of Abraham, and how for that reason the fallen angels had no share in the redemption; that he came only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and the like.» And Crusoe adds, with disarming frankness: «I had, God knows, more sincerity than knowledge in all the methods I took for this poor creature's instruction.»

The book is an instrument of instruction; the book is also an instrument of divination. Some time later, when sunk in despair, Crusoe tries to understand, like Job, his condition, («Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus used?»), he opens the Bible and finds this sentence: «I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee», and immediately it occurs to him that these words are meant for him. On that faraway coast, starting over again with a few odds and ends from society's ruins – seeds, guns, and the Word of God – Crusoe constructs a new world at whose centre the Holy Bible shines its fierce and ancient light¹.

¹ A digression: Had Crusoe not landed on that island off the coast of South America, had his island been elsewhere, off the Pacific coast of what is now Canada for instance, one of the Charlotte Islands perhaps, inhabited by people whose tradition is not centred around a book carried through time and space but around the power

One can live in a society founded on the book and yet not read, or one can live in a society where the book is merely a prop, and be, in the deepest, truest sense, a reader. As a society, the Greeks, for instance, cared little for books and yet, individually, they were certainly great readers. Aristotle, whose books (as we know them) are probably lecture notes taken down by his students, read voraciously, and his own library is the first in ancient Greece of which there is any certain information. Socrates, who despised books and never deigned to leave a written word, chose to *read* the speech of the orator Lycias, not hear it recited by the enthusiastic Phaedrus. On the other hand, Crusoe; I believe, would have chosen to be *told* the text. Crusoe, the representative of a book-centred Judaeo-Christian society, was not a reader as we, in our so-called literate societies, are readers. Crusoe (even he though he «read daily the Word of God», as he tells us himself) was not even a *keen* reader of the Bible, the book that lay at the centre of his social life, his Book of Power (to borrow Luther's phrase). Crusoe would consult it daily, as he would have consulted the Internet had it existed, and would have allowed himself to be guided by it. But he did not make the Word his, as St. Augustine insisted we must do, incarnating the written text. He merely accepted society's word for it. Had Crusoe been shipwrecked at the end of our millennium, it is easy to imagine him rescuing from the ship not the Book of Power but a powerbook, which is not an instrument for reading but merely a tool for writing and consulting.

What distinguishes then Crusoe from Defoe, his author and voracious reader, both inhabitants of the society of the book? What distinguishes a reader of books from someone for whom a book is merely powerful or prestigious? Or rather: what distinguishes the importance of words rescued through the act of reading *from* the prison of the page, from the Word unread but revered *in* the prison of the page?

of memory and imagination and the gifted human tongue, had Crusoe not brought along his precious Bible and had he been willing to listen to the stories of those other inspired Fridays, no doubt the society described in his journal would have been very different: different, obviously, from his island that reflects that other island, the island of Britain from which he sailed on a fateful September day, but different also from any of our societies in which what we are and where we are depend on what was once recorded on a page. Our time is the time of the book, not the time of its telling: a cumulative time, full of foreshadowing and reflections, unfolding like a narration, progressing in geometrical fashion chapter after chapter, from the unimaginable opening sentence written in the desert of Sumer to the unimaginable final word that will be written as the last ink runs dry or the last word-processor breaks down. Unlike the time of the book, the time of oral societies is linear, its past is whatever the present wishes to preserve, its future is simply the next present. But that, as the poet said, is another story.

There is an unbridgeable difference between the book that tradition has declared a classic and the book (the same book) that we have made ours through instinct, emotion and understanding: suffered through it, rejoiced in it, translated it into our experience and (notwithstanding the layers of readings with which a book comes into our hands) essentially became its first discoverers, an experience as astonishing and unexpected as finding Friday's footprint on the sand. «The songs of Homer» – declared Goethe, himself a little-read classic today – «have the power to deliver us, if only for brief moments, from the fearsome load with which tradition has weighed us down over many thousands of years.» To be the first to enter Circe's cave or to be the first to hear Ulysses call himself Nobody is every reader's secret wish, granted over and over, generation after generation, to those who open the *Odyssey* for the first time. This modest *jus primae noctis* or «first night rights» assures for the books we call classics their only useful immortality.

There are two ways of reading the much-quoted verse of Ecclesiastes: «Of making many books there is no end.» We can read it as a mirroring of the words that follow, «and much study is a weariness of the flesh», and we can shrug at the impossible task of reaching the end of our library; or we can read it as a jubilation, a prayer of thanks for the bounty of God, so that the connecting «and» reads as «but». «But of making many books there is no end.» Crusoe pronounces the first reading; Aristotle (and St. Jerome and Erasmus and León Hebreo and Sor Juana and Dr. Johnson and Northrop Frye) pronounce the second. Beginning in some lost afternoon in Mesopotamia, every reader has found ways of picking his or her way through the infinite library of infinitely «many books», in spite of the «weariness of the flesh». Every reader has found charms by which to secure possession on a page that, by magic, becomes as if never read before, fresh and immaculate, all previous readings now incorporated into the very atoms of the text. The history of reading is, in some sense, the story of those charms.

At the other extreme of Crusoe – the man who venerates the Book but doesn't read the books, who accepts the verdict of tradition but is not moved to peer between a book's closed covers – sits the reader for whom every book is always open to his censure, and who believes that any interpretative reading must be erroneous. Discipline, not pleasure, dictates this reader's craft, and he finds occupations in the seats of academia and the office of the censor. For this hypersensitive soul, no text can be taken at face value. In fact, no text can be taken at all, unless expurgated and purified, sometimes to the point of destruction.

One evening of 1939, in Buenos Aires, the writers Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo, decided to immortalize this punctilious reader. They composed, in his honour, a list (his list) of things to avoid in literature. This is the list, according to Bioy Casares, very much tongue-in-cheek, of «the Things Literature Must Avoid»:

- Psychological curiosities and paradoxes: murders through kindness, suicides through contentment.
- Surprising interpretations of certain books and characters: The misogyny of Don Juan, etc.
- Twin protagonists too obviously dissimilar: Don Quixote and Sancho, Sherlock Holmes and Watson.
- Novels with identical twin characters, like *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. If the author invents a trait for one, he is forced to invent a trait for the other.
- Characters depicted through their peculiarities, as in Dickens.
- Anything new or astonishing. Civilized readers are not amused by the discourtesy of a surprise.
- Idle games with time and space: Faulkner, Borges, etc.
- The discovery in a novel that the real hero is the prairie, the jungle, the sea, the rain, the stock market.
- Poems, situations, characters with which the reader might – God forbid! – identify.
- Phrases that might become proverbs or quotations: they are incompatible with a coherent book.
- Characters likely to become myths.
- Chaotic enumeration.
- A rich vocabulary. Synonyms. *Le mot juste*. Any attempt at precision.
- Vivid descriptions, worlds full of rich physical details, as in Faulkner.
- Background, ambiance, atmosphere. Tropical heat, drunkenness, the voice on the radio, phrases repeated like a refrain.
- Meteorological beginnings and endings. Pathetic fallacies. «*Le vent se lève! Il faut tenter de vivre!*»
- Any metaphors. Particularly visual metaphors. Even more particularly metaphors drawn from agriculture, seamanship, banking. As in Proust.
- Anthropomorphism.
- Books that parallel other books. *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*.
- Books that pretend to be menus, photo albums, itineraries, concert.

- Anything that might inspire illustrations. Anything that might inspire a film.
- The extraneous: domestic scenes in detective novels. Dramatic scenes in philosophical dialogues.
- The expected. Pathos and erotic scenes in love stories. Puzzles and crimes in detective stories. Ghosts in supernatural stories.
- Vanity, modesty, pederasty, no pederasty, suicide.

At the end of this reader's demands lies, of course, the absence of any literature.

Happily, most readers fall between these two drastic extremities. Most of us neither shun books in veneration of literature, nor shun literature in veneration of books. Our craft is more modest. We pick our way down endless shelves of books, choosing this or that for no clear discernible reason: because of a cover, a title, a name, because of something someone said or didn't say, because of a hunch, a whim, a mistake, because we think we may find in this book a particular tale or character or detail, because we believe it was written for us, because we believe it was written for everyone except us and we want to find out why we have been excluded, because we want to learn, or laugh, or forget.

I have been talking about reading as if the different aspects of this craft were invariable. Perhaps, up to a point, they are. In Mesopotamia as in Greece, in Buenos Aires as in Toronto, everywhere readers and non-readers have existed side by side, and the non-readers have always constituted the vast majority. Whether in the exclusive scriptoria of Sumer or medieval Europe, whether in eighteenth-century London or twentieth-century Paris, the number of those for whom reading books is of the essence is very small. What varies, I think, is not the proportions, in very general terms, between these two groups of humanity, but the way in which different societies regard the book and the art of reading. And here the distinction between the book enthroned and the book read comes again into play.

If a visitor from the past arrived today in our civilized cities, one of the aspects that might surprise this ancient Gulliver would certainly be the reading habits of his future brethren. What would he see? He would see vast commercial temples in which books were sold in their thousands, immense edifices under such names as Waterstones or Books Etc., in which the published word would be divided and arranged in

arbitrary categories or fields for the guided consumption of the faithful. Here, in Books Etc. for instance, the gastronomic vocabulary developed to describe the art of reading since the angel ordered Ezequiel to eat the heavenly book, has acquired physical reality, and readers sip dozens of kinds of coffee and chew on various kinds of cake as they sit and read studious tomes and trashy novels, gossip magazines and learned journals that lament the death of the book. He would see libraries, with readers still milling about in these neo-classical edifices, still wandering among the stacks or among the half-mutated virtual collections into which some of the books have been converted, leading the fragile existence of electronic ghosts. Outside too the visitor would find a host of readers: readers on park benches, readers in the subway, readers on buses and trams and trains, readers waiting with books at airports and readers sitting in restaurants with books open before them. Inside apartments and houses (the visitor has piercing vision) he would see readers in bed and readers on the toilet, readers in armchairs by crackling fires and readers sprawled on the floor, legs in the air. Everywhere our visitor sees readers and he may be excused if he supposes that ours is a literate society.

On the contrary. We are not a literate society. Our society accepts the book as a given, albeit antiquated staple. But the act of reading, once considered useful and prestigious, if not dangerous and subversive, is now condescendingly accepted as pastime, a slow pastime, that lacks efficiency and does not contribute to the common good. As our visitor would eventually realize, in our society reading is nothing but an ancillary act, and the great repository of our memory and experience, the universal library, is considered to be less a living entity than a cumbersome storage room. A superfluous storage room, because it merely contains the past.

During the student revolts that shook the world in the late 1960s, one of the slogans addressed to the lecturers at the University of Heidelberg was «*Hier wird nicht zitiert!*», «No quoting here!». The students were demanding original thought; they were forgetting that to quote is to continue a conversation from the past in order to contextualize the present; to quote is to make use of the Library of Babel; to quote is to reflect on what has been said before, and unless we do that, we speak in a vacuum where no human voice can make a sound. «To write history is to cite it», declared Walter Benjamin (1999). To write the past, converse with history, was, as we know, the humanist ideal, the ideal which Nicholas de Cusa first put forward in 1440. In his *De docta ignorantia* [*On Learned Ignorance*] he suggested that the earth was not, perhaps, the centre of the universe and that outer space

could be infinite, rather than bounded by divine decree, and he proposed the creation of a semi-utopian society that, like the universal library, would contain all mankind, and in which politics and religion will have ceased to be disruptive forces. It is interesting to note that, for the humanists, a correlation exists between the suspicion of unbounded space that belongs to no one and the knowledge of a wealthy past that belongs to all.

This is, of course, the very reverse of the definition of the World-Wide Web. The Web defines itself, on the contrary, as a space that belongs to all, and precludes a sense of the past. There are no nationalities on the Web (except, of course, for the fact that its *lingua franca* is English) and no censorship (except, again, that governments are finding ways to ban access to certain sites, a censorship by omission). The past (the temporal tradition that leads to our electronic present) is, for the Web-user, inhabited by no one. Electronic space is (apparently) frontierless. Sites – that is to say, specific, self-defined locations – are set up on it but neither limit nor possess it, like water on water. It is quasi-instantaneous, it occupies no time except the nightmare of a constant present. All surface and no volume, all present and no past, the Web aspires (advertises itself as) every user's home in which communication is possible with every other user at the speed of thought. That is its main characteristic: speed. The Venerable Bede, lamenting the brevity of our life on earth, compared it to the passage of a bird through a well-lit hall, entering from the darkness at one end and exiting through the darkness at the other; our society would interpret Bede's lament as an act of boasting.

The electronic media is impermanent. The life of a disk is about seven years; a CD-ROM last about ten. Virtual collections, where they exist, must be backed up several times to save them from total destruction in case of an electronic glitch. But how many times can you back up these virtual collections? A few years ago, in the Archeological Museum of Naples, I saw, held between two plates of glass, the ashes of a papyrus rescued from the ruins of Pompeii. It was two thousand years old; it had been burnt by the fire of Vesuvius, buried under a flow of lava – and you could still read the letters written on it as clearly as a page of today's newsprint. The electronic media, on the other hand, is impermanent, of the moment, useful above all to communicate in this very instant and to retrieve information updated in the second you seek it. Why then do we ask it to do what it is so evidently ill-suited for?

With its audio and writing functions, the electronic text straddles the oral tradition and the tradition of the book: eventually (one can

only hope) it will free itself from both, developing its own, technology-specific vocabulary. To read the whole of *Crime and Punishment* or *Gone With the Wind* on a computer screen or downloaded on a rocket-book is a strainful business, since no ordinary person can sit for hours on end in front of an illuminated screen behind which scrolls, like in the days of Greece or Rome, a text that is not solid but made of flickering dots. And readers of books on CD-ROM (now reserved mostly for works of reference) must be submitted to the humiliation of being taken through a story as if they were children, requiring illustrations, a guiding voice or pretty moving images. To demean a CD-ROM, so full of possibilities, to the mere function of an ancient codex, albeit illustrated and read aloud, is to willfully ignore its richness, something akin to using a jet plane to drive down the street to the mall. This misuse, I believe, will not last long: only until the artists take over the new medium and grant it its own vocabulary, as artists did with the invention of photography, of radio, of cinema, of video. Only then will we realize that a CD-ROM is not a book, just as a photograph is not a painting. Until then, its function will hover somewhere between chatting and leafing.

One other failing: the Web is not universal. Only the richest societies possess it. For millions of human beings on this planet, the Web is as inaccessible as the universe's farthest moon.

We who do possess it however, think of it as all-reaching, and speak of it as if it were to replace every other technology, including the technology of books. North American publishers today assume that at least 30% of a future book's print-run will be electronic, as a text on the Web, to be down-loaded at will into one of several kinds of digital books, already on the market. Our future paperless society (defined by Bill Gates in a book, I wish to point out) is a society without history, since everything on the Web is instantly contemporary and since, thanks to our word-processors, there is no archive of our notes, hesitations, developments and drafts. Walter Benjamin noted, sometime in the 1930s, that «Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.» (BENJAMIN 1955) To this self-alienation we have now added the alienation of our own ideas, and enjoy watching the destruction of our own past. We no longer record the evolution of our intellectual creations. To a future observer, it will appear that our ideas were born, like Athena, fully developed, from her father's brow – only that, since our historical vocabulary will be forgotten, the cliché will mean nothing.

The proposed paperless society, that would enhance the illusion of a borderless world, may be global but it is certainly not cosmopolitan, since it can be no one's home, since no one can actually inhabit a Website. But a paperless society can increase the already gargantuan profits of the multinational companies that own and manoeuvre in this virtual space. Not only do they control the systems that allow these sites to exist, encroaching on the written patrimony of the world, but they are now purchasing our iconographical inheritance as well. The figures on Achilles's shield and the ever-unweaving picture on Penelope's tapestry would, if fashioned today, be subject to a fee pocketed by one of the multinationals. Corbis, the company founded in 1989 by Bill Gates, has acquired non-exclusive reproduction rights of many works in the collections of the National Gallery in London, the Barnes Foundation, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Ermitage Museum and the Far Eastern collection in the Royal Ontario Museum. Other companies acquiring massive iconographical rights are Disney, CNN, Spielberg's Dreamwork, the Bertelsmann Group, Sony and Conrad Black's Hollinger Inc. (MELANSON 1999).

On 18 January 1949, an American by the name of James T. Mangan filed a charter with the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, and under the state attorney's authority claimed ownership to the whole of space. After giving his vast territory the name of Celestia, Mr Mangan notified all countries on earth of his claim, warned them not to attempt any trips to the moon, and petitioned the United Nations for memberships (*The Herald Tribune* 1999). Mr Mangan's ambitious enterprise has now, in a more practical sense, been taken over by the multinationals. Their methods have been extraordinarily effective. By offering electronic users the appearance of a world controlled from their keyboard, a world in which everything can be «accessed» and everything can be had, as in fairy tales, by a simple tap of the finger, multinational companies have ensured that, on the one hand, users will not protest against being used themselves, since they are supposedly «in control» of cyberspace; and that, on the other hand, users will be prevented from learning anything profound about themselves, their surroundings or the rest of the world. This sleight-of-hand is achieved by stressing velocity over reflection and brevity over complexity, preferring snippets of news and bytes of facts over lengthy discussions and elaborate dossiers, and by diluting informed opinion with reams of inane babble, ineffectual advice, inaccurate facts and trivial information, made attractive with brand names and manipulated statistics. The fastidious Florence Nightingale once declared that «To understand God's thoughts we must study statistics, for these are the measure

of His purpose» (PEARSON 19--: II, 13, 1). They are also the measure of the unholy purpose of these ever-encroaching multinationals.

But the Web is not to blame for our lack of interest in exploring the past, nor for our superficial concern with the world in which we live. Its virtue, as I've said, is in the brevity and multiplicity of its information; it cannot also provide us with concentration and depth. The electronic media can assist us (does in fact assist us) in a myriad of practical ways, but not in all, and it won't be held responsible for that which it isn't meant to do. It will not be the container of our cosmopolitan past, like a book, because it is not a book and will never be a book, in spite of the endless gadgets and guises invented to force it into that role. Nor will it lend us bed and board in our passage through this world, because it isn't a resting-place; it is neither a foreign country nor a home, it is neither Circe's cave nor Ithaca. We alone, and not our technologies, are responsible for our losses, and we alone are to blame when we deliberately choose oblivion over recollection. We are, however, adroit at making excuses and dreaming up reasons for our inabilities. The Abnaki Indians of North America, for instance, believe that a special group of deities, the Oonagamessok, presided over the making of petroglyphs, and then explained the gradual disappearance of these rock engravings by saying that the gods were angry because of the lack of attention accorded to them since the arrival of the whites (MALLERY 1893). The petroglyphs of our common past are fading not because of the arrival of a new technology but because we are not moved any more to read them. We are losing our common vocabulary, built over thousands and thousands of years to voice and help and delight and instruct us, for the sake of what we take to be the new technology's exclusive virtues. Virtues they may be, but they are not exclusive. The world, as Crusoe discovered, is large enough to accommodate always one more marvel. In this sense, being a cosmopolitan today may mean being eclectic, refusing exclusion. Our tendency to build walls is useful only to provide a starting-point for self-definition, walls that contain the bed in which we are born, in which we dream, we breed and we die; but outside the walls lies Siddharta's realisation that all human beings grow old, all are prone to nightmare and disease, and all must ultimately come to the same implacable end.

Our existence flows, like an impossible river, in two directions: from the endless mass of names, places, creatures, stars, books, rituals, memories, illuminations and stones we call the world, to the face that stares at us every morning from the depth of a mirror; and from that face, from that body which surrounds a centre we cannot see, from that which names us when we say *I*, to everything that is Other, outside, beyond.

A sense of who we are, individually, coupled with a sense of being citizens of the inconceivable universe, collectively, lends something like meaning to our life – a meaning put into words by the books in our libraries.

I am convinced that reading will carry on and survive, as long as we persist in lending words to the world that surrounds us. So much has been named, so much will continue to be named, that in spite of our foolishness we will not give up this small miracle that allows us the ghost of an understanding. Books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or what is beautiful, books will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us the possibility of these things, the possibility of change, the possibility of illumination. It may be that there is no book, however well written, that can remove an ounce of pain from the tragedy of Kosovo, but it may also be that there is no book, however foully written, that does not allow an epiphany for its destined reader. On page 162, Robinson Crusoe writes this: «It may not be amiss for all people who shall meet my story to make this just observation from it, viz., how frequently in the course of our lives, the evil which in itself we seek most to shun, and which, when we are fallen into it, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very same means or door of our deliverance, by which alone we can be raised again.» This, of course, is not Crusoe speaking; but Defoe, the reader of many books.

Histories, chronologies, almanacs offer us the illusion of progress, even though, over and over again, we are given proof that there is no such thing. There is transformation and there is passage, but whether for better or for worse merely depends on the context and the observer. As readers we have gone from learning a precious craft whose secret was held by a jealous few, to taking for granted a skill that has become subordinate to principles of mindlessness or efficiency, and for which governments care almost nothing. We have gone from one to the other many times, and will no doubt do so again. We can't be spared from this erratic course which seems to be an intrinsic part of our human nature, but we can at least sway with the knowledge of our swaying and with the conviction that, at one point or another, our craft will once again be recognized as of the essence. The library of Robinson Crusoe was (or rather, should have been) not merely an idol or a prop but his new society's essential tool.

The apostle Paul (the only apostle *not* to have known Jesus face to face) would boldly say to those he encountered, men and women seeking the Scriptures, «Do you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me?», knowing that having read the Word, the Word was now lodged inside

him, even if he had not met the Author; that he had become the Book, the Word made flesh through that little bit of the divine that the craft of reading allows to all those who seek to learn it. This is the wisdom of the Essene sect, the devout people who gave us, so many centuries ago, the Dead Sea scrolls: «We know that the body is corruptible and the stuff of which it is made, impermanent. But we also know that the soul [and I, their future reader, will interject, “the book”] is immortal and imperishable.»

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