

A Few Books that Helped me Understand

by [Esther Cameron](#) (January 2025)



Study of Vanessa Bell Reading (Roger Fry, 1912)

The biography of an intellectual is the list of the books he has read. –Ossip Mandel'shtam

I must have been in high school when I read Catherine Drinker Bowen's *Miracle at Philadelphia*. I think I borrowed it from the library after reading an article by her in the *Atlantic*, which I'd subscribed to on the recommendation of my twelfth

grade English teacher. I don't remember specifics, just the general message: In a certain year when the future of the loose federation of states that had won independence from England seemed uncertain, representatives of those states got together and agreed on a plan of government that would bind them closer together and give them greater collective strength. There was widespread doubt that these people who represented very different interests and opinions would succeed in forging a Constitution together, but they did. Through the years, that message has stayed with me and kept alive some hope for us all.

Fast forward to the late '60's. I'm a graduate student now, uncomfortable in the academic world and struggling to get started on my dissertation. At this juncture, someone directed me to Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidism*, which was supposed to help me with my dissertation subject. It didn't help me get started on my dissertation, but it did help me to understand what I myself wanted.

As portrayed in Buber's selection of stories, the Hasidic masters and their followers were caught up in a common quest for truth and redemption, where they drew strength from one another. Any word, any thought, that occurred to one of them enriched the common store of wisdom, brought them all closer to the goal.

This was entirely different from my experience with literary research in academia. Sometimes the work of analyzing a text was interesting in itself, but in the end it achieved little beyond proving one's own intellectual superiority. One was always trying to say something different from what someone else had already said (which often involved a bit of cheating). If the department where I was studying wasn't yet completely mired in pessimism and cynicism, this was perhaps due to the presence on or near campus of the Counterculture, which had not yet quite wilted. The '60's are accurately, remembered as a time when childish Utopian illusions presided

over the destruction of the behavioral norms and social structures that had made life more or less tolerable. But along with all the demolition something else was going on, scarcely noticed at the time and almost never remembered now: a kind of general conversation about the fate of the world, of which every seemingly significant conversation (often assisted, I regret to say, by controlled substances) seemed to be a part. As part of this conversation, a lot of people wrote poems and showed them to their friends, without thought of getting them published. Later a couple of the poets I knew then did get published, but I didn't like their published poems as well as the ones they had shown me; it was like those pebbles that gleam when pick up on the shore, but then dry out and are no longer magical. Perhaps I wouldn't even have remembered that evanescent exchange, if *Tales of the Hasidim* had not resonated with it.

Something similar happened to me with *Black Elk Speaks*. I met this book a couple of years later, just after fleeing my first and only tenure-track position. I had taken refuge in a commune house, run by a couple of friends of mine, and this book was lying around there.

Black Elk Speaks is the life story of a Sioux "holy man" as related to the poet John Neihardt. Black Elk's career begins with a vision that comes to him at the age of nine. The description of the vision is stunning, but what really caught my attention is what happens afterward. After his vision, Black Elk attracts the notice of a relative who tells his father, "That boy of yours is sitting in a sacred manner." The child is encouraged to relate his vision and later to "dance his vision before the tribe" – to put on a kind of pageant based on the vision. He has one more visionary experience and is again helped by older visionaries to act it out. It appears from this narrative that the visionaries of the tribe share a common symbolic language, a depth psychology that creates a common inner space. (Sort of like the "psychedelic" era, if

the latter had happened under less tumultuous conditions.) The scattering of the tribe, in the later chapters, is also the destruction of this common language. To say this resonated me would be like saying that a bridge shattered by soldiers marching in step over it, felt a slight vibration. At that time I felt a vision coming on, and when it in fact burst forth I wanted the members of the commune to help me “dance my vision before the tribe.” They, of course, had no clue what I meant, and I crashed and burned. A wise man once concluded a conversation with me by asking if I had read *Don Quixote*, the title figure of which, of course, comes to grief by trying to act out scenarios from books. But *Black Elk Speaks* continues to stand in my mind for something desirable that would be possible, if the right conditions for it could again be created.

Tales of the Hasidim was one of number of threads that had started pulling me towards Judaism. A few years later, after I'd already learned some Hebrew, somebody gave me a Jewish prayerbook and opened it to a text called *Sayings of the Fathers*, which is included in the prayerbook for study on Sabbath afternoons in the spring and summer. It turns out that lot of what had attracted me in *Tales of the Hasidism* ultimately stems from *Sayings of the Fathers*.

Sayings of the Fathers is a collection of maxims compiled in the Second Temple period. Most of them are attributed to one or the other of the “Pharisees” –the sages whose teachings are recorded in the Mishna and the Talmud. Most of *Sayings of the Fathers* is a section lifted from the Mishna, which is the great compendium of *halakhot*, or rules derived from the commandments in the Pentateuch. The *Sayings* aren't rules but mostly pieces of advice on how to live your life, and as such they could be compared to wise sayings from other cultures. Someone in fact has written a book drawing such comparisons; I have it somewhere but can't put my hand on it at the moment and have forgotten the title. However, *Sayings of the Fathers*

is more than a collection of advice on how to live your individual life. It is rather an instruction manual on *how to live your life as a member of an intellectual and spiritual community*. For instance: "Find yourself a teacher, and get yourself a companion, and give everyone the benefit of the doubt."

The rabbis who put this collection together were in a situation just a little like that of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, only worse. At the time when the first sayings in the collection (it goes partly in chronological order) were formulated, the Jewish people were again in their land, after returning from the Babylonian exile, and precariously independent. By the time the collection was completed, the Temple had long since been destroyed and the Jews were once again exiled, with no restoration in sight. The Jewish people could have melted into the various nations among which they were scattered, and nothing would have remained of them but their stories and prayers appropriated by other cultures. But the rabbis would not have it. They collected their traditions in a set of texts which they carried around for the next two thousand years, and their society was held together by the study of these texts. The attitudes that helped them do this are held fast in *Sayings of the Fathers*. (A couple of years ago I wrote a commentary on *Sayings of the Fathers* for this time; it is posted [here](#).)

A decade after first reading *Sayings of the Fathers*, I was in Jerusalem. I had a lot of questions, and someone referred me to a rabbi who was knowledgeable not only in Torah but in secular culture. At a certain point he said that what I was saying to him made him think of a book called *The Forgotten Language*, by Erich Fromm. This caught my attention, partly because one of my first poems, written at age 11, is called "The Forgotten World." The salient part of Fromm's book for me was a discussion of the Oedipus complex, from a different

angle than Freud's. Whereas Freud views the Oedipus complex as a rivalry between father and son for possession of the mother, Fromm sees it as a conflicted nostalgia for the world of the mother, a world ruled by love rather than competition. (Fromm argues this quite convincingly through an analysis of Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy). Perhaps every attempt at community, of a common inner life, is on some level an attempted to project the coherency of the small sphere ruled by the mother onto the adult world. Mother-like figures that stand for community crop up in various traditions. There is one in *Black Elk Speaks*. Perhaps some understanding of this would be helpful in rebuilding community. Feminism unfortunately did not go in this direction.

One more. I forget who or what drew my attention, sometime around 2000, to Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. The title says it all really, but I wouldn't have missed the loving detail with which Rose documents the efforts of working class people, from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, to educate themselves and to give literary shape to their lives. Rose mentioned one work of working-class literature which I had read—Flora Thompson's lovely trilogy *Lark Rise to Candleford*. Rose's book reminded me, again, of the '60's and early '70's, when with all that was going on people were reading and discussing. Once when my younger brother, on a walkabout, visited me during my brief tenure as an assistant professor, he was joined by a friend who was also hitchhiking around the country. Before they parted they exchanged reading lists.

Rose's book had a sad ending: this democratic intellectual ferment came to an end early in the twentieth century, without ever receiving recognition from the intellectual elite. In fact writers like T.S. Eliot and E.M. Forster were quite snotty about the lower classes; E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End* contains a working-class youth with intellectual aspirations who is described contemptuously and eventually

killed off.

I don't know if it was the primarily the scorn of the likes of E.M. Forster that killed off the intellectual culture of the working classes. I think it was probably the electronic media, which made it possible to enjoy songs without singing yourself or applauding your neighbor, to have virtual experiences without using your imagination as it was all there in moving pictures. I think of that scene from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where the hero's siblings sing together to comfort themselves at a moment of stress for the family. Ten years later, someone would have turned on the radio.

However, if I am remembering correctly, Rose's book also suggests that the intellectual life of the works had an effect on elitist culture. Whereas Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Longfellow all wrote from a sense of values that were shared with the common people, in the early twentieth century the literary avant-gardes, evidently wishing to prop up their sense of superiority, deliberately turned away from the values of the people, creating a highbrow literature that was often life-denying, nihilistic, and plain nasty. I got a large dose of this in my literary studies; it was part of what made me flee academia as from a burning building. Since then the smoke has gotten a lot easier to smell.

If we hope to reconstruct the family, the community, and the individual soul from the ravages of wokeism and media addiction, we might devote some effort to reconstructing an independent intellectual life. A sort of extramural academy. Perhaps I have suggested a few textbooks.

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