



# How to Be Alone

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*Three years ago I came across the book – How to Be Alone – from which this collection takes its name. I was deeply troubled by the questions it raised, and since then I have read widely and eclectically in the hopes of finding an answer to them. The books in this collection have been chosen on the basis of their contributing to the answer I've finally come to. The opening essay is the story of how that answer came about.*

Jonathan Franzen is a gifted novelist with the unfortunate tendency to publicly bemoan the failings of, among others: women writers, women in general, people who like sports, non-readers of Henry James, women again (for good measure), people who like television, and his dead best friend. Collectively this is enough to put him, as far as I'm concerned, somewhere on the moral scale between Henry Kissinger and a tarantula.

I owe Franzen, however, for the best thing he's ever written, which is neither a book nor an essay nor a poem, but a title: *How to Be Alone*. That title contains two implicit questions - should we be alone, and how should we endure it? – which must be hugely important to any literature-loving, loneliness-prone introvert like myself. For if your life takes place largely on your own, these questions amount to: is your life a good one, and how should you endure its hardships? In *How to Be Alone*, however, a good answer to either question is not to be found. Franzen's argument, such as it is, is that though we are all terribly lonely, that loneliness can't be cured by metamorphosis into a social butterfly. Rather, the loneliness is the fault of our being in the *world*; only encounters with rich, nuanced, full-blooded people can cure loneliness, and such encounters take place only, or at least almost only, in our reading.<sup>1</sup> So, says Franzen, to endure life we must read; and since reading is best done alone, we should be alone, too.

Conversion to Franzen's cult of solitude - with its preaching that the world is the reader's sickness, and solitary communion with imaginary persons the cure – is the easiest thing in the world for reader and introvert. I like what you're doing, says Franzen: do more of it! But Franzen's cult's prescriptions contain the seeds of its demise; for, while Franzen prescribes constant reading, some of the greatest writers ever to live have roundly rejected his doctrines. To cite only a few: *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard's brilliant dissertation, examines different portrayals of the historical Socrates to compellingly demolish any project of knowledge through introspective means alone; *Philoctetes*, whose hero Sophocles portrays as a man whose *only* companions are the richly realized characters of his memory, provides Franzen's theory with a devastating counterexample; and *The Plague*'s eponymous apocalypse exposes the worthlessness of lives

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<sup>1</sup> I don't want to claim that this is totally absurd. There are less than two dozen people, perhaps, about whom I can tell you more than I could say about Dorothea Brooks or the Underground Man.

free of social entanglement. The point is that in following Franzen's dictates one finds good reason to reject them. And, fairly quickly, that's what I did.<sup>2</sup>

It used to be that I would never have bought into Franzen's line, since I used to have a very different answer to his questions - but he caught me at a bad time. When I started college I believed the *religious* answer to his questions, which is say I believed they are meaningless. We aren't alone, said I (and the Western, Abrahamic religions): instead we are, like it or not, surrounded by the presence of the omnipotent omniscient omnipresent *et cetera*. But reading wrecked this, too: within a few years I found this religious answer impossible to give. Skeptical books like Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* made me come to think of my feeling of divine presence as vestigial sentiment, the beguiling residue of a juvenile belief in the world's benevolence, while James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* pointed out my beliefs' provincialism: of all the vast range of spiritual experiences James described, how likely was my having stumbled upon the right one? The only refuge from these critiques, it seemed, was the kind of unquestioning faith that Kierkegaard advocated in works like *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness Unto Death* - but Kierkegaard's system purchased consistency at the price of conscience. If being religious required Abraham's unthinking brutality, then I didn't want to be religious. As Freud and James pulled me away from religion, then, Kierkegaard pushed me; by the time I transferred to Reed I had fallen out of faith entirely. And it was around this time, robbed of the answer I would have previously given, that I read Franzen.

Still, though his two questions seemed terribly important, it seemed at the time that I'd actually found another, better answer to them than religion: love. Having just begun one of what turned out to be a series of long relationships, I was rarely alone - so, I thought, Franzen's questions didn't apply! But relationships, it turned out, don't often do much for feeling lonely: though I could lose myself briefly, the loneliness always returned, regardless of another's presence. And though I resisted this conclusion initially - society does a pretty good number on you when it comes to making you believe relationships fix

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2 A related reason to reject Franzen's view has to do with one of its initial attractions. The sad, Romantic figure of the manic intellectual is a very appealing one to try to embody, and Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the paragons after which those who try to embody that figure try to hew. Here Ray Monk's *A Duty of Genius* was helpful to me in distinguishing clearly between admirable creativity on the one hand and mental illness on the other. One needn't be tragic or depressed to be creative, so someone who seeks to be the latter by being the former is wasting their time.

everything - once again, it was reading that let me come to accept what was true: experiencing second-hand the erosion of Lydgate's dreams (in *Middlemarch*) and the simultaneous decline of Anna and gradual self-realization of Levin (over the course of *Anna Karenina*) gave me the confidence that what I felt wasn't crazy, and through sympathizing with the fickleness of Alyosha (in Dostoevsky's *Humiliated and Insulted*) I came to appreciate how ordinary my own limitations were. But in coming to this acceptance I was once again left without an answer to Franzen's questions. Providing such an answer became my project.

First I needed the tools necessary for even thinking about the questions. Bacon's *New Organon* and Paul Tomassi's humble *Logic* were crucial to me here, both because they gave me systematic ways to think about the world but also because they showed me *how* to think systematically, whether I liked Bacon's and Tomassi's systems themselves. And John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* explored found a fundamental method of thinking - Rawls' "reflective equilibrium" - which I still think is the right one. And as I grew familiar with these and other<sup>3</sup> methods, I also sought out the metaphors and images which would come to guide my understanding of other people. From Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Plato's *Gorgias* I took the image of our minds as reservoirs of desire which we endlessly but fruitlessly seek to empty, and from William Gass' "Finding a Form" I took the images of the self as a person trapped behind a window and self-reflection being the attempt to glimpse the window itself. In the poems of Frank O'Hara I found the words to capture the disjointedness of my experiences, and in Elizabeth Bishop's poetry I found words which suited the wonder those experiences evoked. From Joan Didion I learned the fruitlessness of trying to express a feeling without the right words, and from Dave Eggers' *Heartbreaking Work* I learned how to use so many words the feelings were forced from hiding.

It was with the aid of these tools and through the lens of these metaphors and truisms, then, that I finally came to the *theories* of selves in which I found the resources to answer Franzen. In trying to synthesize a view of my own I sought radically opposing views: where Kierkegaard's "Rotation of Crops"

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3 In particular a language, Greek, which a passion for tragedies and lyric poetry convinced me was absolutely necessary to acquire. My tattered and scrambled *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* ("Middle Liddell," after one of its authors) is testament both to the love I have for Greek and the terrible anguish it has given me as I've flipped through the *LSJ* in the quick dark hours before exams.

adopts an arbitrary solution to the antinomies of practical reason, Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* embraces those paradoxes and shrinks from any solution; where Kant's *Critique of Judgment* maintains a strict dualism of subjective and objective properties, Heidegger's *Being and Time* tries to deny the possibility of such a distinction; and while Frankfurt's *The Importance of What We Care About* builds a beautiful (but implausible) theory of our selves' unities, Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* refuses to assume that unity but rather treats it as an ideal towards which we can (and must) strive.

It's in these works that I find the key to answering Franzen's questions; the books here have been chosen because they all contributed, in one way or another, to my answer. I say that being alone *doesn't matter at all*: what matters – what lets us endure our circumstances, whether we're alone or not - is having a purpose. I understand 'purpose' through the unity of Nietzsche's idea of a unifying style, and Kierkegaard's of an arbitrary but essential task, and Kant's of an immanent purpose in nature; I know what it is to be a purposeful person through the images of human nature given by Plato and Bishop and Didion; and I believe in my answer on the strength of the tools given me by Rawls, Bacon, and Tomassi. And the dominant emphasis of these writers upon the particularity of each person's experience has led me to believe that my own answer to Franzen's questions is deeply subjective: the answer, I think, is a matter only of what works. What I have found is that having a purpose works for me. How couldn't it? Loneliness wilts in the face of my doing something about which I'm passionate. Despair despairs. When you're content with what you're doing and where you're going, why mind being alone?

And even though answering Franzen's questions to my satisfaction has robbed me of one of my purposes (to answer Franzen's questions!), the books that led me to my answer have given me new purposes all my own. Presently my purpose is in no danger of being achieved soon: I hope to keep going to school and eventually teach in college myself. And, wonderfully enough, I hope to teach just the subject – philosophy – which has most inspired my answer to Franzen. I think it's appropriate that, in finding the *importance* of having a purpose, I also discovered the purpose I hope will occupy the rest of my life.

## Note on the Annotated Bibliography

In the following I do not attempt to sketch the whole of any of the works included. Rather I take the majority of each entry to note, in the context of the collection's theme, what seems to me most important about the corresponding item.

## Annotated Bibliography

1. Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Paperback.  
In a little over 200 pages Bacon demolishes the Aristotelian method of the last two millennia and provides the most influential model for what would come to be called 'the scientific method'. In the first part of the book (which Nietzsche was later to echo in his *Twilight of the Idols*) Bacon sets up and then tears down the "idols" - bad philosophical assumptions, dubious methodologies, commercial corruptions, etc. - which he says impede the possibility of scientific progress. That being done, he lays down the features of experiments - "instances" - of which to take note in order to draw proper scientific conclusions. The coherence and rigor with which he develops the system of instances is astonishing; suitably translated into contemporary English, Bacon's work could pass as a good set of lab notes for a college science course. But it's in the very *idea* of instances that I found the most value; Bacon's careful consideration of just which features are crucial to drawing the right conclusions is a paradigm.
2. Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. Paperback.  
I find Bishop's work occasionally maddening but mostly wonderful. From time to time ("The Gentleman of Shalott," "The Table") she lapses into lovely abstraction too remote for me to follow, but in the rest of her work she squeezes extravagant loveliness from tightly packed prose. In "Roosters" (the totality of which I've memorized), "A low light/is... gilding the tiny/floating swallow's belly/The day's preamble/like wandering lines in marble"; in "A Cold Spring," "Fireflies/begin to rise:/up, then down, then up again:/lit on the ascending flight/drifted simultaneously to the same height/ - exactly like the bubbles in champagne." Her poems to her friends, too ("Letter to NY" and "An Invitation to Miss Marianne," in particular) perfectly express the longing to be in the physical presence of someone loved and absent. This edition of *Poems*, in fact, was the product of a trip with a dear and now-absent friend with whom I used to wander Washington, D.C. on weekends and scour the used bookstores for scraps. On a whim I bought this fancy new book; that trip turned out to be our very last book-hunt together. Now when I read "Letter to NY" I read it with her in mind.
3. Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage, 1991. Paperback.  
I came to *The Plague* late, and having disinterestedly read some other Camus before I had low expectations for it. I'm glad I did. *The Plague* is a selective and devastating reconstruction of a natural disaster which is really, at its end, an indictment of both religion and individualism. Camus' own experiences as a Resistance-affiliated publisher during World War II surely informed his critique of the ways in which his characters let themselves slip, in the face of catastrophe, into alienation and disaffection.
4. Didion, Joan. *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction*. New York: Everyman's Library, 2006. Hardcover.  
This book was stolen. I bought it over the Internet from an anonymous vender, having been unable to find it anywhere else, and when it showed up on my doorstep it was marked:

WITHDRAWN FOR FREE USE IN CITY CULTURAL AND WELFARE  
INSTITUTIONS. NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY.

I have no way of knowing who stole it, or why. I guess they needed the money. It's a beautiful book: it holds every piece of nonfiction Joan Didion wrote from 1968 'til *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In the brilliance and horror of *Miami* and *Salvador*, Didion achieves real anger and power, but the best bits of the book are the small moments in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album* when she turns her scary eye back to individual people and casually vivisects, among others, Joan Baez and Nancy Reagan. The passage in "Slouching Toward Bethlehem" where she discusses "an army of children waiting to be given the words" haunts me, too; it should be burned into teaching diplomas and handed out as a pamphlet at airports.

5. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Humiliated and Insulted*. Trans. Ignat Avsey. London: Oneworld, 2008. Paperback.

This isn't well-known, but it's one of my very favorite Dostoevsky's. When I was going through my Dostoevsky binge I could only find find this cheap translation from a not-totally-reputable publisher, and I didn't have high hopes for it. Yet reading this, as I did, while going through a difficult time in a relationship, I found enormous solace in the fickle and pathetic confusions of the spoiled Alyosha, and simultaneously came to understand - through the suffering Natasha - the effects of such romantic immaturity, and the need to either get away from it, or to get out of relationships until one has the ability to do better.

6. Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 1993. Paperback.

I actually lost my first crumbling copy of *Notes*, so I had to make due here with its shinier but less-loved replacement. Regardless of its newness it would have been impossible to leave out of the collection: *Notes* is for me one of the most important books in the world. The narrator - the Underground Man - spends the first half of the book on a dyspeptic screed against philosophical rationalism, passages of which I think are themselves as philosophically creative and sophisticated as anything I've ever read, and which have inspired me to do my own original work on their basis. But the second, heartbreaking half of the book is something utterly different: a chronicle of the Man's feeble, groping attempts to reach out and make real human contact with someone else, first with an old acquaintance and then with a haggard prostitute. His self-inflicted failures in both cases tell deeply against the possibility of living out the rationalism against which he rails for *Notes'* first half.

7. Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000. Hardcover.

The horror at the center of Eggers' story - both his parents died of cancer in the same month, forcing him to drop out of college and raise his young brother - is suppressed throughout, with Eggers' manic affectedness circling the emotional drain without ever quite falling in (and being all the more powerful for it). Eggers' prose is like the frisbees he loves to write about: it spins high in the air, arcs, curls, threatens never to come down, and then lands awkwardly. Sentences sprawl for pages; paragraphs require small chunks of the Amazon timber reserve to be put in print; etc. But the graceful reminders of the pain and fear a man my age hides behind walls of words were instructive with respect to my own logorrhea and insecurity, and the sweetness with which Eggers cares for Toph gave me a deeper love for my own younger brother. This was, actually, another D.C. book, one which I read just as my last year of school there ended. While I was reading it, even though he was 3,000 miles away, I had my brother beside me.

8. Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. New York: Penguin, 1994. Paperback.

George Eliot ended one of my relationships. I recall compromising, weakening, being unhappy but soldiering on - and then I recall the exact moment I read about the young scholar Lydgate's total capitulation to the beautiful Rosamond, for the sake of whom he'd eventually give up his studies entirely and die wealthy and depressed. *Middlemarch* is really an interlocking set of love stories, but for me Lydgate shown out like a sad beacon, warning me not to follow him. I didn't, and George Eliot is the source of my stubbornness.

9. Frankfurt, Harry. *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Paperback.

This is a collection of essays attempting to give a coherent account of the nature of a self.

Frankfurt's crucial idea is that we have, not just desires, but desires about our desires: I desire that I desire my parents to be well, or that I not desire others harm, and so on. With this idea of a "higher-order desire" in hand, Frankfurt proceeds to give ingenious and ever more complicated analyses of what it is to be morally responsible, possessed of free will, coerced, and more. Ultimately the account collapses: Frankfurt has no coherent account to give of what ties together the second- (and third- and fourth- and so on) order desires other than "wholehearted identification," which if we accept it makes all the rest of his account superfluous. The lesson I took from Frankfurt is that an elegant, quasi-mathematical theory of the self will probably be wrong.

10. Franzen, Jonathan. *How to Be Alone*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Hardcover.

Apart from the questions it raises that form this essay, *How to Be Alone* is an unremittingly terrible book. In it Franzen learns that America has always been dominated by commerce, claims that he isn't a smoker despite working through a pack a day (since he doesn't identify as one), and actually writes:

It's possible to have a general sense of history's darkness, a mystical Dionysian conviction that the game ain't over till it's over, without having enough of an Apollonian grasp of the details to appreciate its consolations.

Despite my dislike of the book, however, I reiterate my gratitude to Franzen for his questions. And I will spot him this: the front cover, with its small bookshop and pleasant but solitary woman, is elegant. So there's that.

11. Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Avon Books, 1989. Paperback.

I chose this book for the power of its central metaphor, but I actually think that it's where the viability of Freud's project collapsed utterly, since it's in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that he introduced the "death drive." The importance of explaining psychic phenomena purely by reference to the erotic drive, as Freud did from *Interpretation of Dreams* through *Totem and Taboo*, can't be overstated; not only does it have the virtue of simplicity, but it's also (as Karl Popper points out) *falsifiable*. Once the second drive is added, the theory leaves the realm of science and becomes mythology (as Freud himself seems to admit in other work). Still, this little blue book contains makes explicit the metaphor of mind-as-reservoir which was the implicit backdrop for all Freud's theorizing. As an interesting addendum: I once heard a fascinating paper given on Freud's debt, on this point, to the pneumatic innovations of the 19th century. It's sobering to think that contemporary Freudians are working from a theory modeled on a 200-year old physical theory.

12. Freud, Sigmund. *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1989. Paperback.



Another elegant blue book: the Standard Edition of Freud rests on a shelf like a line of slim postal workers, back to back to back. Reading *Future* was the first time I actually felt *shamed* by a book: here was a man, perhaps incorrect but evidently much smarter than me, openly mocking my beliefs. His strategy is simple enough: he assumes religions are false and offers a thorough psychoanalytic explanation of their development while throwing around 'narcissism', 'delusion', and 'infantile' as much as possible. But, though I got over Freud's theories, I don't think my faith ever quite recovered from his boldness in *Future*. And I'm okay with that: if my beliefs weren't going to hold up to some name-calling, then they weren't going to hold up anyway.

13. Gass, William. *Finding a Form*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. Paperback.  
Gass' book is another collection of essays. Many are simply collected reviews from the philosopher-author's work in the literary mags, but "Finding a Form" is a great heap of the modes of expression and theories thereof which Gass trashed on the way to find the right ones for himself. Gass' crucial points are the identities of thought and language and the rootedness of literature in conscious experience: granting the former, the latter follows naturally (since the rootedness of literature in language is obvious enough), but the latter means that literary art is essentially the crafting of thoughts, whence the lovely metaphor of man and window I mention in the essay. As it happens I disagree with Gass about the identity of language and thought, but if his view is wrong, it is wrong in such a lovely way I don't care.
14. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. Paperback.  
*Being and Time* is a bear of a book, and my multiple copies are littered with notes in monastic miniature. Heidegger's key insight in the first of the book's two "divisions," which is the one I care about, is that there might be a way to readhere the severed halves of subject and object by showing that the structure of the former, if inspected closely enough, is actually just as much a part of the world as anything else. If those sounds obscure, it's worse: Heidegger's prose, though better here than later in his life, includes gems like, "An entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure." But if Heidegger is *right* he can show something spectacular about the rootedness of ourselves in culture, and our inability to escape it - and therefore, I think, the impossibility of being really alone.
15. James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. Paperback.  
James' book, which I present in the form of the ugly but earnest Barnes & Noble Edition which I first read, is a synoptic (albeit with a Western-biased orientation) overview of religious practices across the world and throughout history. I read James at the same time I was reading Kierkegaard, and remember actually being impressed by the devout (though insane) mysticism of some of the ascetics. But I can't fathom the man or woman who could read this and come away thinking that their faith is somehow special. I didn't.
16. Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987. Paperback.  
I own two copies of the third *Critique*: the copy included here has been read so many times that several parts have fallen out, has criss-crossed the country, and is filled with delicate pencil notes (from my I-can't-bear-to-mark-it-permanently phase: I've since moved on to pen). The second half of the book - a defense of the existence of teleology in nature - I don't actually care so much for (though perhaps studying Aristotle will make me appreciate it more). But the first section of the book is a careful and fascinating defense of the possibility of *objective* beauty, which Kant attempts to derive simply from the conditions of the possibility of our taking pleasure in perceiving objects.

And this argument is actually given in terms of purposes: for Kant the apparent purposefulness of natural events can actually give rise to beauty being part of the natural world, too. It's a dense and extraordinary argument which I don't ultimately think works - but the *idea* of understanding the objective world through facts about our subjective selves is extraordinary, and the idea that it's a harmony between our purpose and a thing that gives us a sensation of beauty is strange and powerful all on its own.

17. Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. Paperback.

In Kierkegaard's enormous and brilliant and unfairly neglected doctoral dissertation he explores different literary portrayals of Socrates in order to show the uselessness of a purely negative Socratic method and of coming to self-knowledge by introspection alone. After that he plunges into a discussion of Hegel and German Romanticism that's still too abstruse for me to grok, but the discussion of the historical Socrates prompted me to read Plato for the first time. Moreover the elegant Hong translation contained the first Ancient Greek I ever saw, and the beauty and alienness of those long passages of untranslated Attic were the inspiration for my ultimately learning the language.

18. Kierkegaard, Soren. *Either/Or: Part I*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987. Paperback.

*Either/Or* is a sprawling work; Kierkegaard has a pseudonymous editor reconstruct the works of various other pseudonyms into one great pseudonymous jungle in which Kierkegaard hopes to include every way a person could live. In selecting only *Part I* (the Hong translation is too massive to fit into a single volume), I choose the sexier side, which contains popular Kierkegaard works like "The Seducer's Diary." But setting aside the multivalent and brilliant discussion of how to live for the sake of pleasure that runs through the books, I think that some of the greatest pages Kierkegaard ever wrote are contained in "The Rotation of Crops," the short essay in which Kierkegaard condenses all he has to say about aesthetic life. Kierkegaard's point is that, like a farmer rotating his crops at the mercy of the market's desires, the aesthete must live his life at the mercy of his own arbitrarily changing tastes. Kierkegaard's is a powerful formulation of the consequences of the image of the desire-driven human in Freud and Plato: what he is counting on is that there is another way to live, one which subsumes those desires into a higher purpose and therefore avoids (what Kierkegaard thinks is) the aesthete's unlivable life.

19. Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling and Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. New York: Doubleday, 1954. Paperback.

My whole life changed when I read *Fear and Trembling*: it changed my religion, my major, and my relationship to my family. The text itself is, largely, a series of variations on the Abraham story: Kierkegaard considers various interpretations of what Abraham might have thought and felt before the sacrifice of Isaac and rejects all the views on which his sacrifice is compatible with any kind of universal ethic or obligation to others. Instead, Kierkegaard advocates a radically demanding religion of absolute obedience; nothing else, thinks Kierkegaard, can do justice to the Abraham story. In *Sickness Unto Death* and elsewhere he provides a cryptic metaphysical basis for the view of the world on which this makes sense, as when he writes, famously, that:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but that the relation relates itself to its own self.

I won't venture trying to explain this here. But even *Sickness*, metaphysical complexities aside, is a compelling and powerful diagnosis of the dread and sadness created by a lack of unity between our mental and physical parts; if, thinks Kierkegaard, our values and thoughts can't be squared with our desires and physical failings, the result is anguish. Whether his divine solution is good or not, his analysis is compelling. And my love for both *Sickness* and this accompanying version of *Fear and Trembling* is increased by their coming in a fraying, half-century old Walter Lowrie original. (Lowrie was the first translator of Kierkegaard into English.) I read it one too many times, I guess; now I have other copies covered in pen, and this one can rest in happy retirement.

20. Lange, Willem. *Intermittent Bliss: Reflections on a Long Love Affair*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2003. Paperback.

My grandfather, who among other things is a writer, published this series of essays about his meeting my grandmother and falling in love. Knowing them and their genuine history as I do, I was both affected and amused by the book's (sometimes fantastical) romanticism. It was partly in the throes of this book that I decided to embark on a series of relationships in order to get out of my head. Perhaps, knowing my real grandfather, I should have known better.

21. Liddell, Scott, and Jones. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010. Hardcover.

I've spent more hours with the pages of the Intermediate *LSJ* ("Middle Liddell," pronounced rhymed) than with those of any of the others in this list. More succinct than the sprawling full *LSJ*, the Middle Liddell was my guide in my first forays into Plato's *Republic*, *Euthyphro*, and *Symposium*. Now, as you may be able to see, it is falling to pieces; the jacket is torn, the front cover has fallen off entirely, and the middle of the book is coughing up the last vestiges of its internal binding. Soon it, like the Lowrie Kierkegaard, will be not a dictionary but a dust-gatherer. But in its time it has known libraries, coffee shops, bars and dance clubs. It deserves the chance to rest.

22. McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Paperback.

This is Cormac McCarthy's semi-autobiographical account of a young man, Suttree, in Tennessee. It is not his best book: he's too close to the source material here, and I prefer the books (*Child of God*; *Blood Meridian*; *All the Pretty Horses*) where he takes his subject's measure more harshly. But *Suttree* is McCarthy's most intimate account of a person. Suttree himself is a man who, in the wake of the dissolution of a relationship and the death of a child, has taken refuge in the accommodation of an old houseboat and the company of the hardscrabble and insane. The parts of *Suttree* that are the most important to me are those which portray the peaks of shock and confusion which punctuate his life and shove him onto new paths: the sudden death of a lover; a crazed wandering through the woods; the deep shame in encountering the mother of his child, who can't stand Suttree. In portraying someone so particular McCarthy manages to capture something not particular at all.

23. Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: Penguin, 1990. Paperback.

Unlike the hagiographers who were the first to document Wittgenstein's life, Monk does an honest and impartial job of chronicling the genius, passion, and deep mental illness that were Wittgenstein's enduring characteristics. I value this tattered, doubly used book for its sketches of Wittgenstein's philosophy and life, but I value it more for finally dispelling whatever Romantic ideas Byron, Pushkin, et al. had given me about the convergence of genius and sad tormentedness. Of course, Wittgenstein had both traits: but *Duty of Genius* shows that his greatest moments came when he was relatively free of such problems, and that his worst moments stymied all work. If one wants to think deeply or clearly, romanticizing sadness and misery and isolation will only get in one's way.

24. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Josefine Nauckhoff. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Paperback.

*The Gay Science* is one of the most important books in this collection. Nietzsche's central point here is about the cultivation of a style: he thinks that a worthwhile life is lived only if someone is able to consider themselves as a kind of unified work of art. Since for Nietzsche (at least during the writing of *Science*) human beings are reducible in some way to collections of instinctual drives, this unity is only possible if what we are doing (which for Nietzsche is just who we are) satisfies all our urges and impulses at once. The practical impossibility of this kind of goal makes it only an ideal, but the idea is powerful: and though I try to remain uncommitted to any one way of thinking about the world, Nietzsche's view here comes the closest of any I know to satisfying me. I guess you could say he's my style.

25. O'Hara, Frank. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen. London: University of California Press, 1995. Paperback.

Under the influence of more literary friends I spent half a year trekking through the less forbidding parts of 20th century surrealism. Though Ashbery et al. confused me more than anything, in O'Hara I found the perfect mixture of passion and perplexity. In "Morning," my favorite of his poems, he writes: "At night on the dock/the buses glow like/clouds and I am lonely/thinking of flutes." He is at turns cutting ("1951": "Alone at night/in the wet city/the country's wit/is not memorable") and sultry ("Gamin": "All the roofs are wet/and underneath smoke/that piles softly in/streets, tongues are/on top of each other/mulling over the night."). But in every one of his poems there is something human and true. Under those literary friends' influence, again, I actually brought along Big Frank (the book is enormous) to a community O'Hara reading, where I chose "How Roses Get Black," which reads in part:

First you took Arthur's porcelain  
pony from the mantel and! dashed  
it against the radiator! Oh it was

vile! we were listening to Sibelius.  
And then with lighter fluid you wet  
each pretty pink floored rose, tossed

your leonine head, set them on fire.  
Laughing maniacally from the bath-  
room. Talk about burning bushes!

My sincerest thanks to my literary friends for bringing Frank into my life.

26. Plato. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Gorgias, Menexenus*. Trans. R.E. Allen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Paperback.

The summer after my freshman year of college was when I really began to read. Inspired by *Concept of Irony*, this was the very first Plato (excluding the *Republic*) that I ever read. Though I could now have submitted a collection of just 30 works by or about Plato, this smooth black collection is still my favorite of all the Plato I have. I was home for the summer, and a local philosophy professor asked me to do some yard work in exchange for his talking to me about Plato. In retrospect, I don't know whether Socrates would have approved of the transaction - he was famously opposed to taking any payment for teaching philosophy - but it was wonderful: we scratched out the geometric proofs from Plato's *Meno* in the dirt of the professor's garden, walked through the paradoxes of the *Euthyphro* while pulling weeds, and pondered whether there was

actually any alternative to the powerful image in Plato's *Gorgias* of desires as wine leaking from bottles in the cellar of the soul. On the view of Socrates (Plato's mouthpiece in the dialogues), the absurd thing to do is to try to satisfy one's desires, since more will always follow that satisfaction. Instead, one should try to cultivate stability, contentment, and the absence of overwhelming desire. The professor and I never quite managed to agree on whether this made sense, but that's okay; I found stability and contentment in the simple task of pulling weeds.

27. Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971. Paperback.

I won't go into the whole of Rawlsian theory, though coming to take it seriously and even love it is essential to who I am and to my coming to Reed and a whole lot else. Instead, let me introduce the idea of *reflective equilibrium*, which Rawls borrows from Nelson Goodman. And start small: suppose we're trying to figure out whether some  $x$  is an apple. Well, we'll have certain judgments (based on our experiences, say) about whether  $x$  is an apple, as well as certain criteria (say, from science) for  $x$ 's being so. If our judgments and our criteria harmonize, that's great. But if they don't, then we have to appeal to something else to resolve the dispute between our judgments and our criteria. In this case, that's easy: since we also believe in the criterion by which science is right about what apples are, we can appeal to that criterion to justify believing a scientist about whether  $x$  is an apple. But in many cases there's no such easy move: science can't tell us, for example, about what it is to be true or beautiful or just. In those cases, the best we can do is come to some kind of *reflective equilibrium* for our judgments and criteria. Suppose, for example, someone judges that Oregon's Death with Dignity law is immoral but also believes in the general principle that people should be able to do what they want with their bodies. Well, they'll have to look to their other principles and judgments and see whether those favor, on balance, their judgment about the law or the criterion they want to apply to it. I think that in reflective equilibrium Rawls has discovered something deep and important about the way we reason, and that's remarkably rare in philosophy (or anywhere, really). Whenever I think about thinking, I use Rawls' picture.

28. Sophocles. "Philoctetes." Trans. David Grene. In *The Complete Greek Tragedies*. Vol. 2. *Sophocles*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1959. Hardcover.

Sophocles is my least favorite of the three Greek dramatists, but his "Philoctetes" is very special to me: I spent some of this last summer, actually, trying fruitlessly to crystalize my feelings about it into a short story. The play is about the warrior left to die of snakebite on a lonely island in the middle of the Aegean. After learning that Philoctetes is necessary for victory at Troy, the Greek leaders send back Neoptolemus and Odysseus to bring him to the war. Now, one of the key themes of the play is the coming to moral maturity of Neoptolemus, who learns about the virtues of Greek culture through Odysseus' negative example - and this theme is fascinating. But what captures me about the play is the power of the metaphor of the snakebit man wandering around the island, obsessed with those who left him behind and yet unable to follow them. There are actually echoes of Philoctetes, I think, in Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*: both were early successes abandoned by peers on the way to greater things, and both have been left to rot with illness and despair. In both can be found wrenching illustrations of the uselessness of isolating oneself, of living in the past and

29. Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Penguin, 2000. Paperback.

*Anna* came to me in a summer where I, in the wake of a breakup, decided to give in and just read all the great 19th century Russian authors. In *Anna* I found the highest example of novels as "heightened reality" I've ever encountered: my little problems and woes were echoed in its grand scope, and that scope was the mirror by which I came to understand what I'd experienced. Yet, though *Anna* is the more compelling character, it was the story of Levin - the irascible atheist who finds God and love and happiness, that I found the most challenging and interesting. Both in *Anna*

and *War and Peace* Tolstoy argues that it is only in following Levin's path that humans can genuinely find happiness. And though the logic of Tolstoy's arguments is at best weak, the power of his language and conviction is impossible not to feel: as a kind of gentle agrarian Kierkegaard, he presents a very appealing picture of the life of faith. (The contrast between Kierkegaard and Tolstoy's heroes is striking: whereas Kierkegaard chooses knights, Tolstoy prefers farmers.) I always have to remind myself that as a wealthy Count, Tolstoy's appreciation of the pastoral life and its hardships was probably a little questionable.

30. Tomassi, Paul. *Logic*. London: Routledge, 1999. Paperback.

This was the very first book from which I learned formal logic. It's neither sophisticated nor difficult, but I owe it everything. Those who decry the formalization or mathematicization of ordinary reasoning should think of it not as math but as jazz: only with an appreciation for the formal complexity of scales and rhythms can a musician improvise beautifully and well. Tomassi taught me scales (conditional proofs, *reductios*, formal semantics), but he also gave me a feeling for an argument's rhythm, a sense for where it should go (and therefore a sense for when it had gone wrong). After reading Tomassi I couldn't *not* see logic everywhere, and it was directly after reading him for the first time that I decided to change schools. Last summer I finally read him through, cover to cover, doing every exercise, and now he'll be forever with me. Tomassi died young, actually - he wouldn't even be retired were he still alive - but his big blue book lives on with me, and from time to time I still reach for my shelf to see what Paul has to say.

### Wish List

1. Gass, William. *The Tunnel*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007. Paperback.

I've read the rest of Gass' work, but not his magnum opus, and getting it would give me the excuse to take the time to read it through. It is, by the scuttlebutt, a disturbing exploration of a neurotic bigot's gradual degeneration into madness. But regardless of the subject matter I have faith in Gass, whose best fiction is positively luminescent, to make it work.

2. Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Alfred Hofstadter. New York: Harper, 2001.

Heidegger's last writings are deeply obscure but, in their ponderous German way, very beautiful. I would love to be able to spend the time unraveling that obscurity, and should I have the book I would make the time.

3. Kierkegaard, Soren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Though Kierkegaard's most beautiful work is surely in *Fear and Trembling*, I have never had the chance to actually read his full *summa*, which is contained in the massive "Postscript" (which is at least five times as long as *Fragments*). I've also never had the ability to justify getting it. But this would round out my reading of Kierkegaard and perhaps let me sympathize more with a man whose views I admire but reject wholeheartedly.

4. Lewis, David. *Philosophical Papers Vol. II: Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Paperback.

David Lewis is one of the most brilliant philosophers ever to live. I own and love his first two collections of papers, and would love to read this (which is actually the *fourth* collection of his papers), owing to my passion for its subject. Lewis' books are expensive, though, so I can only get them rarely.

5. Liddell, Scott and Jones. *A Greek English Lexicon, Ninth Edition with a Revised Supplement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Hardback.

As I move deeper into Greek my need for a real lexicon only grows. My time spent with the glorious full *LSJs* of the library only makes my desire for one grow, too. Should I finally get one I might never have to leave my room again. This is a good thing.