

The Farm Books: On Keeping, and Giving Up, a Book Collection

Neureuther Student Book Collection Essay Competition

Graduate Category

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“The reading of Dante is not only a pleasure, an effort, a lesson; it is a strong discipline of the heart, the intellect, the man. In the school of Dante I have learned a very great part of that mental provision, small as it may be, with which I have made the journey of human life until 73 years old. He who serves Dante serves Italy, Christianity and the world.”

—Gladstone

The epigraph above was inscribed in Ms. Laura I. Hill's copy of *Dante's Divine Comedy*, a gift from her mother on Christmas Day, 1896. I came upon it while sorting through piles of books in a spare bedroom on my family's farmhouse—navigating the islands of heirlooms and curiosities relegated to that small, drafty space. Fifty years ago, it had been the farmhand's "apartment," but that particular winter it became the storage room for much of the contents of the house that had been spared from auction. By the time I had made the journey back to my family's farm, which had recently become a "Centennial Family Farm" in the state of Ohio, much of the calamity had already come to pass: an impromptu estate sale to cover the expenses of moving my grandmother to an nursing home, then the weeks of heated and heartbreaking family discussions—over the telephone and across time zones—about the status of the farm. Finally, in an effort to both insure the future stewardship of the land and to please one branch of the family, my father and mother accepted a relative's offer to purchase those 150 acres. The house, the hills and fields that first helped to raise my grandmother, and then the rest of us, had left our hands.

I came upon the inscription in Ms. Hill's copy of Dante as I was sorting through what remained of the farmhouse's library—arranged in boxes and stacks, surrounded by a mold-generating dampness. If I could not save our farm, I thought, then at least I would save its library. As the reality of these events settled, in the weeks that followed, the importance of this book collection grew in clarity. Though I would no longer be able to return to the hills, the barn, even the high walls and strip pits that surround the farm on three sides, this motley gathering of well-read (and, for the most part, well-handled) old books would offer the consolation of an accessible, and pleasurable, homecoming.

Like most farm families in the Ohio Valley, we didn't have much other than our land; we didn't even own the mineral rights below the ground. Our family was no different—with the exception of our library, harvested from four generations of readers. With the land, these books stood for a certain set of received values and a way of standing in the world. My great-grandmother, once the principal of our town's high school and matriarch of the family, would

quote my father lines of Goethe when they waited at the bottom of the lane, next to the slag heap, for the kindergarten school bus. A generation later, my grandfather would wait for my school bus each afternoon, leaning against his walking stick—the slag heap replaced by a line of pine trees. During those quiet afternoons, my grandfather would read me stories from the shelves of the parlor’s library—the biographies of presidents, stories of Native Americans, dinosaur tales—those seeds which eventually pushed me toward becoming a writer and a student of literature.

Now in Saint Louis, hundreds of miles from the Ohio Valley, these books are housed on oak shelves behind a plate of glass, a separate—though not unconnected—part of my own larger collection of poetry and visual art books. In perhaps the one event of my life that feels like it has qualities of the miraculous, my family has recently been able to navigate the economics and family dynamics surrounding the status of our now unpopulated farm. In yet another series of cross-continental calls, we decided together to accept the responsibility and the risk of purchasing those 150 acres—and preserving the place for future generations.

In thinking about this tremendous shift, I can’t help but see something of that instinct in the books I’ve saved from this place. Like my lineage itself, these titles are the foundation, the exposed limestone blocks that sustain the higher structure. My interest in Irish Studies found its first expression in the exquisitely illustrated three-volume *Ireland: Its Scenery and Character* by Mr. And Mrs. S.C. Hall. The final volume still contains the scraps of legal paper my grandfather had used to mark the passages on County Galway, that hilly landscape that prefigured our family’s later home in Appalachia. Just as formative, I now keep the popular Macmillan edition of *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* nearby. The Yeats of the 1956 edition finds himself re-issued, with annotations, new artwork, and a heavily creased soft cover spine on the overstuffed particleboard shelves that surround the one respectable bookcase that protects what my wife and I simply call “The Farm Books.”

Indeed, the titles contained behind glass, those indomitable texts I admired from afar as a child, find their more modernized selves scattered throughout our home. The Farm Books include

an illustrated multi-volume set of “Poetical Works” published in 1839, with those familiar names of Wordsworth, Burns, Scott, Coleridge, Pope, and Shelley. Next in line, by order of its descending height, stands a four volume 1848 “Edition de Luxe” of Pepys’s diaries and a much more recent edition of *Leaves of Grass*. I’ve allowed the historical studies to occupy the second shelf, hoping that John Marshall’s two volume 1839 *Life of Washington*, and two bound collections of Putnam Magazine from the mid 1850s, find their poetic summation in Whitman’s verse.

As an appropriate bookend, and perhaps a postscript to the first shelf’s *Stories from Virgil*, the twelve-volume edition of Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 1791, anchors the bottom tier. I am perhaps more intimidated now, as a graduate student and a scholar-in-the-making, by the long row of Gibbon’s work than I was as a beginning reader, frustrated with the vocabulary. But this is an intimidation born out of respect. I suppose that’s what my grandparents, and their library, ultimately imparted to me—indebtedness to the hard work of writing, an understanding, through literature, of how learning can articulate the ethics of an individual and a community. Born into the depleted hillsides and coal seams of Appalachia, this was my abundant, unshakable inheritance.

This leads me back to Ms. Hill’s Dante, and to the close of her mother’s inscription: *He who serves Dante serves Italy, Christianity and the world*. Regardless of the issues of nationalism or faith, I’m sure that few of my graduate school colleagues would disagree that the reason they read and teach literature is to serve a larger good, to teach a respect for a writer’s words—which, as readers, leads us to respect both ourselves and the world. Long before I had uncovered this old, musty copy of *The Divine Comedy*, I had unknowingly taken that lesson from my grandparents’ library. In retrospect, I find that The Farm Books I most cherish are those that I’ve already tried to “serve” and to share. When I studied in Ireland toward a Masters in Creative Writing, I would bring my modern, portable copies of Don West and James Still out to a poetry gathering or a *céill*, and I would hear—in reverse—what I felt myself when my grandfather would open up his Irish

books: the landscape, the troubles these Appalachian poets put to verse weren't so far from the craggy points of Connamara or the boglands of the North. My grandparents, in their own words, would have been "tickled to death" to have heard Don West's mining poems uttered in an Irish brogue. These cross-cultural exchanges that first occurred in their bookcases have continued, despite their new location. A few of my prized books of Irish poetry have joined that select company behind the protective glass. If my grandparents began a book collection that celebrated the land and investigated our cultural roots, I've added the next chapter with my coveted Faber and Faber edition of Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf* translation, Roy Foster's two-volume Yeats biography, and a well-penciled edition of the Loeb Classical Library's *Eclogues* of Virgil—three books that chart the course of my research and an interpretation of landscape, community and art that I hope to pass along to both my students and my family.

This is perhaps one of the ways in which The Farm Books have enhanced my understanding of learning, and of libraries. Those books, by their very history, resist the idea that we can ever truly cultivate anything close to a "permanent collection." Somehow, either by a gift or an estate sale, my grandparents came into possession of Ms. Hill's copy of *Dante's Divine Comedy*, her mother's gift from Christmas Day, 1896. As this volume and my great-grandmother's beloved collection of *Goethe's Works* have come into my library, I recognize that this is really only a temporary placement. My duty—and my pleasure—will be in *servicing* and *preserving* all of these pages, sharing them with students, friends and neighbors, holding on to them until the next inheritor steps forward. The Farm Books, as I understand them, are like the ideas contained within—on loan. They are waiting for the next child to come up the lane, ready to choose from those weathered covers, ready to listen to the story.

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