

Finding a Great Getaway From Our Crazy Time

“You have to be always drunk,” [wrote the French poet Charles Baudelaire](#). “That’s all there is to it—it’s the only way. So as not to feel the horrible burden of time that breaks your back and bends you to the earth, you have to be continually drunk.”

“But on what?” Baudelaire asks. With “wine, with poetry or virtue, as you wish. But be drunk.”

Though afflicted by some of the normal pains of growing old, I rarely feel the “horrible burden of time” crushing me. The news of the day, however, is another matter altogether. Every morning various online sites bring word of the latest disasters, the triumph of acrimony and misguided idealism over common sense, the political push-and-shove, and the next act of government tyranny.

My work permits no escape from the baying of the media, but two weeks ago I came to the point where I needed to find some means of relief, if only for short periods of time. Consequently, I decided to take Baudelaire’s advice, at least in part, and get really and truly hammered for an hour or so every day.

I gave up all spirits and wine months ago, so Baudelaire’s Door #1 was closed to me, and I had no idea whatsoever how one gets sloshed on virtue. I therefore chose Door #2, selected the vintage bottle of prose rather than poetry as my beverage of choice, and so slipped away into a quieter past.

Though I’d both read and taught [Pride and Prejudice](#), Jane Austen’s [Persuasion](#) was new to me. The story centers on love and second chances, with this question hanging over the narrative: Will 27-year-old Anne Elliott, who had broken her

engagement with Frederick Wentworth years earlier, find happiness with him when their lives again become entangled?

The plot and the characters were finely done—I was especially taken with Anne’s older friend and confidant Lady Russell—but what appealed most of all was Austen’s language and the subtleties it permitted in conversation and thought. By comparison, we are a blunt spoken crew, a habit which allows for more direct communication, but which also removes some of the emotional padding and sophisticated repartee found in the language of Austen’s day.

As I read, I wondered whether Austen wasn’t simply following some sort of stiff literary convention to dress out these conversations and descriptions, but research for an article took me to William Bennett’s [*Our Sacred Honor: Words of Advice from the Founders in Stories, Letters, Poems, and Speeches*](#), in particular to the chapter “Love and Courtship.” There I found the founder’s writings in the same exalted language and emotion as Austen’s, who was their contemporary. John Adams, for example, writes to Abigail shortly before their marriage, “You shall polish and refine my sentiments of Life and Manners, banish all the unsocial and ill natured Particles in my Composition, and form me to that happy Temper, that can reconcile a quick discernment with a perfect Candour.”

You can’t get more Austenian than that.

On the heels of *Persuasion* came William Somerset Maugham’s [*The Razor’s Edge*](#), which I read 40 years ago. Written more than a century after Austen’s death, Maugham’s prose sounds more familiar to the modern ear, yet eloquence again was what I found most enchanting about this story. With the exception of a long and strange digression on Hindu religious beliefs, the rhythm and voice of Maugham’s sentences sang to me.

The dessert to this feast of fine language came with M. F. K. Fisher’s *The Art of Eating*. I found this plump volume—it is a

five-book compendium—on the cart of giveaways at our public library, carried it home, and immediately discovered why the poet W. H. Auden once wrote of Fisher, “I do not know of anyone in the United States today who writes better prose.” Fisher’s words and sentences glitter like jewels in sunshine or candlelight, and though I’ll never read *The Art of Eating* from cover-to-cover, I’ll dip into it frequently, taking delight in its sparkling descriptions.

The grace and elegance I found in these books was metaphorically akin to watching a performance of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers after sitting through an interminable spectacle of twerks and drag queen shows. Even better, immersing myself in these books, usually during moments snatched from work and other obligations, did indeed lower my blood pressure and raise my spirits.

Try it yourself and see what you think. Read some Dickens or Twain, some George Eliot or Agatha Christie. The experiment’s free of charge, and you can do it in the comfort of your favorite chair. And here’s a guarantee: you won’t once find the words COVID, Critical Race Theory, or transgender anywhere in those pages (though Maugham does give us a scene of scandal in a dirty French café).

We all need some R&R from our crazy age. We can find it between the covers of a good, old book.

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