

I am always wondering what my friends are reading, and I am always wondering why. How did they get from the book they were reading before this one to this one, even the book they were reading before that one to that one to this one? In short, how do they choose what they're going to read next? (How far do they plan ahead?)

I have a file folder into which I pitch all manner of things-about-books: notes from some of those friends, reviews, advertisements, must-read-lists, and the like. Every so often I go through the file and put my scraps in order: paper-clipping all the novels together, all the poetry books, all the biographies, all the theological and philosophical books. Sometimes I say, "Aha." I'd forgotten about that one, and I decide to go online, or to the bookstore, or to the library to get it. When it arrives, if I've ordered it, I try to remember why I did.

Increasingly, as I get older, I find myself reading, well, older stuff. I find myself wondering about the holes in my liberal arts education, and I find myself reading really old stuff: Greek philosophy—from the pre-Socratics to Lucian—and the Latin poets—lately Ovid and Horace, and Martial and Juvenal, the last two of which wrote in the late first and into the second century a.d., yet mention, as far as I know, nothing about Christ or the church: something to think about.

I have an even older friend who has made a list of all the books she intended to read but never got around to. I have one of those, too, full of European classics from Don Quixote, which I've started more than once, to Finnegans Wake, which I started once and I'm almost sure once is enough.

So, I have my list, but I'm not nearly as diligent about it as she is about hers. (I am, though, currently reading Byron's Don Juan, all seventeen cantos, to the dismay of another of my friends.)

Finally, I find myself looking through my shelves, at home and at the church, to

pull out something to reread, old in that sense. I find myself browsing my shelves and then also browsing anthologies, of which I have, it seems to me, an inordinate number, dating from the days of my liberal arts education (in that decade that ruined every decade that followed).

One anthology I come back to is Paul Ramsey's Contemporary Religious Poetry, a book still in print more than twenty years after it was first published in 1987. I go back to it as much for Paul Ramsey's own Three Epigrams as for anything else. Ramsey was born in Atlanta and studied at the University of Chattanooga, (among other places) where he later returned as Poet-in-Residence. His poetry, one critic says focused on "traditional values in an age of rapid social and technological changes." In that, he was like Juvenal or Horace or the great writer of epigrams, Martial.

Here's one of Ramsey's three, "The Exiles," suitable for Lenten meditation, or any other time of the year in which we contemplate our fallenness. (Indeed, I am not sure why Calvinists even think about Lent; since their entire year should be, must be, given over to such contemplation.):

The mayor has angrily banished the seven deadly sins from the city. He is proud of his achievement and the loiterers envy his style. The restaurant owners prosper at the celebration And the motel owners smile.

"The Exiles" needs little comment. What may be most interesting about the poem is that it demonstrates how we sin as much in the most pious of our acts as in the worst of them. Count how many of the seven cardinal sins are present in four short lines: the mayor's anger and his pride; the envy of the slothful loiterers; the restaurant owner's greedy rubbing their hands together at their profit from their patrons' gluttony; and what are the motel owners smiling at, if not their gain, too? In short, all seven of them.

But the motel owners are not only smiling at their own profit from lust; they're smiling at the mayor's achievement, which is no achievement at all.

Sin cannot be banished from the city. (At least not from Babylon, or not at all before the descent of New Jerusalem.) So, what's the point of repentance, this Lent or at any other time of the (Calvinist) year? For me, the poem reminds me that as I grow older I grow no wiser. My sins may be more anemic, but they also become more selfrighteous. Still, my only reliance always is on God's grace.

May the Lord smile upon me, then, and you.

Comment [D1]: