

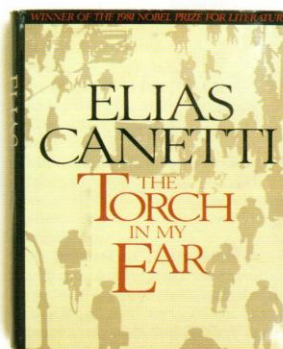
frieze, *Ideal Syllabus: Gabriel Lester*, P34-35, June July August 2011, Issue 140



Ideal Syllabus: Gabriel Lester

In an ongoing series, *frieze* asks an artist, curator or writer to list the books that have influenced them

Gabriel Lester started out as a musician, stumbled into literature, studied cinema and finally became a visual artist. Most of his films and installations have an implicit narrative and are influenced by cinema. Lester explores architectural design, writing and performance. His new film The Big One (2011) was premiered at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Amsterdam as part of his solo exhibition 'Suspension of Disbelief', which included themes of superstition, ritual and belief. Lester's recent solo exhibition at Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam, 'It is no great wonder if in the long process of time, while fortune takes her course hither and thither, numerous coincidences should spontaneously occur about' (2011), investigated the multiple meanings of 'chance'.



Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*

(Penguin Classics, London, 2010; first published 1726)

This political and social satire chronicles the four fantastic voyages of Lemuel Gulliver. Each part of the novel describes a different place inhabited by bizarre creatures and their bewildering societies and customs. Growing up in a cooperative commune in a tiny village in the north of the Netherlands, and as the son of immigrants from big cities in faraway countries, *Gulliver's Travels* fuelled my early imagination with its world full of exploits, exotic places and mysterious civilizations.

Elias Canetti, *The Torch in My Ear*

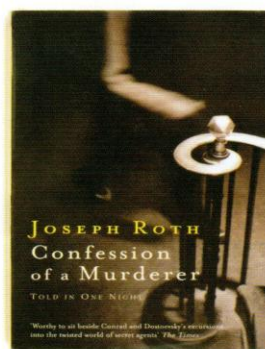
(Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1982; first published in German in 1980; translated 1982)

Recommended by my mother at a time when I had just started out as a visual artist, *The Torch in My Ear* is the second of three volumes of Canetti's memoirs. It describes the beginning of his career as a writer, set against the backdrop of the artistically vibrant Vienna and Berlin of the 1920s. The book as a whole is a great read, but the best part is set in Berlin in 1928. At that point, Canetti, still an unpublished writer, was fortunate enough to move in the inner circles of the avant-garde. His accounts of meeting with Bertolt Brecht, George Grosz, Isaac Babel and many others are exceptionally witty and clever. Reading this book is like having a good time and making friends along the way.

Joseph Roth, *Confession of a Murderer, Told in One Night*

(Granta Books, London, 2003; first published in German in 1936; translated 1937)

The narrator who opens and closes the novella (Roth himself) recounts the story told by Russian exile Golubchik. One intoxicated night, in a Russian bistro in Paris, Golubchik confesses his crimes to a table of strangers, alternately fascinating and horrifying his audience with a dramatic and compelling story of collaboration, deception and murder. The book's wonderfully effective and cinematographic plot, filled with intrigue and moral doubt, inspired my first screenplay, *Death of a Murderer* (1997/2003).



Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*

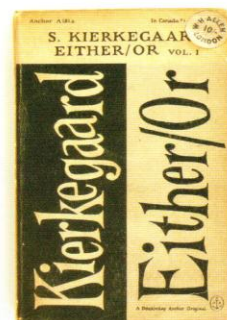
(Penguin Classics, London, 2009; first published in Russian in 1862; translated 1894)

Evgeny Bazarov is a nihilistic young man whose contrasting ideas and ambitions clash with the dominant values and mores of his time. In a manifest anti-authoritarian and intelligent manner, without apparent animosity or violence, Bazarov and his 'student', Arkady, search for a precise and moderate way of living. To me, the austere end of the novel is especially tragic because of Bazarov's arrested development and the consequent sudden loss of a mind that always seemed destined for great things.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

(Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1959; first published in Danish in 1843; translated 1944)

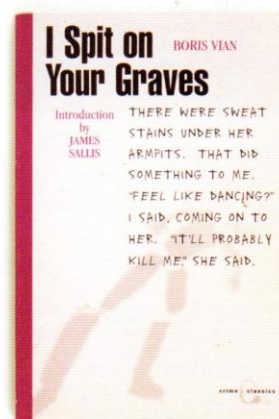
Together with the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard's brilliantly written and lyrical *Either/Or* was one of the first works of philosophy I read and felt I could relate to. Kierkegaard's approach – juxtaposing ideas and concepts by explicitly analyzing aesthetics and ethics from two different points of view, narrator A and narrator B – reflects the duality of life, where what is pleasurable is often the opposite of what is sensible.



Boris Vian, *I Spit On Your Graves*

(*Canongate Crime, Edinburgh, 2001; first published in French in 1946; translated 1948*)

Originally published in Paris in 1946, this thriller follows Lee Anderson, the first-person narrator, a very light-skinned African-American, as he sets out to avenge the racially motivated murder of his darker skinned brother. Allegedly censored in the US and 'translated' into French, *I Spit On Your Graves* is pure mystification and a hoax. Vian was a French chronicler, critic, poet, trumpet player, singer, actor, inventor, engineer and jazz fan (a close friend of legends such as Duke Ellington and Miles Davis), who, by the way, never set foot in the United States. The book reads like a long poetic rap set to the rhythm of an improvising jazz band.

**Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem***

(*first published in German in 1915; translated 1928*)

Reading this book feels like hallucinating; its vivid images echo random thoughts and delirious dreams. An anonymous narrator has a visionary dream in which he assumes the identity of Athanasius Pernath, a jeweller and art restorer who lived in the ghetto of Prague 30 years before. The fantastic and expressionistic story unfolds like a recurring nightmare, where time shifts, sites mysteriously appear and disappear, and the characters interchange and transform. The central figure of the Golem occasionally appears as the personification of the ghetto's superego.

Willem Frederik Hermans, *De tranen der acacia's*
(*The Tears of the Acacias*)

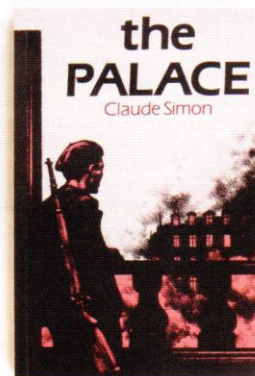
(*De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 1949*)

One of my favourite Dutch authors, Hermans, reveals his excellent understanding of linguistic logic as well as the functioning of the human psyche in this bleak and existential novel. The main character, Arthur Muttah, comes of age during World War II, where he finds himself caught between a dysfunctional family and the unpredictability of war and resistance. After the war ends, Muttah experiences an identity crisis and a sequence of disappointments and disillusiones that drive him to commit suicide; an action that embodies the novel's theme of how mankind is endlessly tied up in existential chaos and confusion.

Claude Simon, *The Palace*

(*John Calder, London, 1987; first published in French in 1962; translated 1964*)

Like the works of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett and William S. Burroughs, Simon's *Le Palace* is one of those mesmerizing and lucid novels that reads like listening to one's own rambling thoughts. Written as a kind of delirium endlessly circulating around a set of recurring memories, *Le Palace* is built out of an increasing amount of associations, deviations and digressions. While visiting a large hotel - The Palace - in Barcelona, vivid and violent memories from his past haunt the narrator as he tries to solve a string of mysteries.

**William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape***

(*Viking Press, New York, 2002*)

In a frantic plea against the growing use of mechanical reproduction in the arts, Gaddis' final work successfully summarizes his beliefs and worldview. Using the metaphor of a pianola as the quintessential example of an apparatus that replaced the artist, he voices his concerns about an increasingly dehumanized and alienated society. The stream-of-consciousness reflections of a sick and dying man, confined to his bed and desperately trying to collect his thoughts before illness overwhelms him, creates a delicate sense of urgency. This short novel provides remarkable reflections on art, the creative impulse and the influence of mechanization on contemporary society.

