Reading for Pleasure

Secondhand but not second-rate

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In spite of a generous husband and a minuscule salary earned by the vibrations of my own vocal cords, I always feel guilty about spending money on myself. I long to own books with pages smooth as silk and thin as Government-issue loo paper, but such pleasure would be undermined by guilt, for buying beautiful books now requires a healthy bank balance; *mens sana in corpore pecuniario sano*—the Latin has been inflated along with the currency. So, not for me the collection of first editions or even membership of the Folio Society. As I do most of my reading while peeling potatoes or soaking in the bath I have to confess that there are also practical reasons for eschewing the exotic and making do with baser materials. My desire to spend as little as possible has, however, led to one overwhelming benefit: I discovered secondhand bookshops. When I emerge laden with dusty tomes my Calvinistic conscience is salved by the reflection that I am not only acquiring vicarious experience and wisdom, but actually saving money in the process.

Looking along my bookshelves, I can see that where I buy books has an influence on what I read. In a high street bookshop I am tempted by the large displays of the latest promotion, and in this way acquired Crispin Gill's excellent *History of Plymouth*, which provides the answer to a lot of questions about local history. (No, I didn't blindfold my conscience and produce the necessary £14 for the two volumes; I persuaded two kind relatives that one of their present-buying problems was solved.) The multifarious nature of my more tattered volumes shows how impossible it is, in a secondhand bookshop, to follow any direct course of reading: other books exert an irresistible Lorelei force.

Laurie Lee's beautiful chronicles of his journeys through Spain, first as a young man—*As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*—and then when he returned in maturity to find the changed but still magical country described in *Rose for Winter*, made me determined to repair the gaping hole where my knowledge of Spain and its history should be. Did I keep this resolution? Of course not: if ever I got as far as entering a secondhand bookshop with such a resolve in mind, I probably emerged clutching E M Forster's *Howard's End*, or a couple of Hardy novels.

A chance find at a jumble sale drew a different picture of Spain in *This is the Hour*, a novel based on the life of Francisco Goya. The deterrent effect of a stilted translation is overcome by the magnetic story of the painter's life and his battle against deafness, depression, and the caprice of his wealthy patrons and friends. At a time when the upheaval of life and literature in the rest of Europe was being accompanied by scientific discovery and social revolution, it was possible for a Spanish cardinal to say, "The enlightenment hasn't as much as scratched our skins." In spite of the cat-and-mouse game it played with him, Goya had the courage and audacity to portray the horrors of the

Inquisition, whose ubiquitous power kept out the new enlightenment. I wish that I had read this book before going to the Goya exhibition at the National Gallery some years ago: how much better I would have understood the prints and paintings.

Charity coffee mornings and bazaars usually have secondhand bookstalls where I have found pleasures such as Alberto Moravio's *Two Women*. His sensitive story of the harsh life of a mother and daughter caught up in the outer eddies of the destructive whirlpool that the last war inflicted on Italy made me determined to seek out more of his work. The next bazaar, however, provided *The Magus*. I sometimes turn the last page of a book feeling like a junkie who has just ended his last trip and doesn't know when he'll get another fix. John Fowles's *Magus* has this ensnaring power, and his convoluted tale of a schoolmaster working on a Greek island not only kept me enthralled while I read it but also left me puzzling my way through its extended allegory. *Daniel Martin*, by the same author, while not as unputdownable as *The Magus*, managed to keep my attention when sunbathing on a Brittany beach last summer—a considerable tribute to John Fowles's ability to tell a good story. But Mr Fowles's talents are not restricted to the spinning of a good yarn, because his novels and short stories all give food for further thought; they also send me to the dictionary, thus increasing my vocabulary.

History here and there

William Hickey was born in 1749, the son of a wealthy lawyer. He misspent his youth by wining, dining, whoring, and gambling, until the repeated failure of his sincere but short-lived attempts to reform exasperated his father into sending him to serve with the East India Company's armed forces. At the age of 60, when ill health forced him to retire to the English countryside, he decided "to fill some tedious hours" by writing an account of these early years and of his subsequent travels. Edited by Peter Quennell, this is published as *The Memoirs of William Hickey*. Although almost all his possessions, including "a large book in which I had copied the journals of every voyage I had made" were lost in a hurricane at sea, Hickey succeeded in painting a brilliant panorama of English society at the time of George III. He loved good food, bad women, abundant wine, and travel: day trips from London to Portsmouth to see the fleet, weekends in Boulogne (I always thought *le weekend* was a twentieth-century phenomenon), and voyages in all parts of the then-known world. The effect of his adventures, both global and sexual, meant frequent recourse to the medical profession, of which he maintained a good opinion, in spite of being resuscitated from drowning by the application of leeches and of "undergoing a month of complete misery and pain" while taking a course of mercury, followed by "warm baths and drinking plentifully of sasparilla for a fortnight."

It is fortunate that my copy of Henri Troyat's *Tolstoy* was bought secondhand, or my guilt about the price of such a mammoth volume would have doubled when I dropped it in the

bath and become insupportable when the dog chewed off the cover. It deserves better treatment, for it contains not one boring page and its obesity is due to the wealth of personal information that Tolstoy left for posterity. He wrote a daily diary and made copious notes about every experience, "an incorrigible professional, he would have jotted down his impressions under the very nose of God." It is intriguing to read of the real-life counterparts of fictional characters, and Tolstoy drew closely on his family, friends, and the incidents of his own life. His mercurial temperament pushed him into situations worth immortalising. One experience, when he was struck by an inexplicable terror and presentiment of death while on his way to buy land for his estates with some of the proceeds of *War and Peace*, was so bizarre that, when using it as a basis for a short story, he felt it necessary to entitle it *Notes of a Madman*. I relish the picture Tolstoy recorded in his diary when his intermittent friend and rival, Turgenev, was visiting him and the two great writers, "to amuse the children, sat one on either side of a seasaw, the author of *Smoke* counterweighting the author of *War and Peace*, the descent of one causing the rise of the other." Tolstoy's wife, Sonya, has received much condemnation for her lack of sympathy with Tolstoy's ideals, but a woman with the intelligence and self-assertion to run the family estates and start a publishing business for her husband's work, in between bearing him 13 children, could hardly be expected meekly to follow when his convictions changed from extreme atheism, through passionate orthodox Christianity, to an idiosyncratic form of Christian Marxism which induced him to adopt a peasant lifestyle that prohibited such refinements as taking a bath, making his physical presence as unacceptable as his philosophy. Sonya bemoaned to her diary: "He smells like a goat, I shall never get used to the smell."

A penchant for poetry

When I confess to reading poetry for pleasure, I meet a shifty embarrassment, implying that I have confessed to a nasty habit that should have been left behind with my schooldays. I enjoy poetry for many reasons: because I like words and the good poet has the enviable ability not only to find the mots justes among the available thousands, but also to arrange them to make expressive rhythms or evocative sounds; because poetry contains images and metaphors that give a new perspective to familiar events and ideas; and because most poems are short enough for me to read in bed and reach the end before being overwhelmed by sleep. Elizabethan poetry fills all my criteria and the dis-

cipline of reason, humour, and a gentle cynicism prevents the emotion, however heated the argument, from overflowing into the flowery language beloved of the Romantics and despised by the twentieth century. Even Jimmy Porter could not accuse John Donne of sentimentality when he wrote;

I am two fooles I know
For loving and for saying so
In whining poetry.

The cover of the *Penguin Book of Elizabethan Verse* shows the design of a sixteenth-century appliqué cushion, as attractive to look at as it is interesting to read within.

Many modern poets take a sideways look at a familiar scene, creating a new perspective. Richard Freeman's *Lift Going Down*, from the fifth publication of Dr Dannie Abse's annual choice of poems and essays, *The Best of the Poetry Year*, gives a new dimension to an everyday experience:

I enter on the seventh
The doors close like eyelids . . .
When we get down, the eye
Will open. We shall be removed
With the corner of a handkerchief.

Sylvia Plath believed that "personal experience shouldn't be a kind of shut box and a mirror-looking narcissistic experience, it should be generally relevant. . . ." She drew the horrors of a nervous breakdown in pictures from the concentration camps—"my skin, bright as a Nazi lampshade"—unspeakable images that are used calmly and objectively to create an insufferable tension that could, but never does, disintegrate into hysterical self-pity. The bitter sadness of life in the trenches of the first world war permeates the sound and rhythm of Wilfred Owen's *Futility*, but its desperate questioning of the reasons for such suffering has a relevance beyond the conflict.

Learning how to cope with suffering is the theme of Jon Stallworthy's poem *The Almond Tree*, where he tries to come to terms with the birth of a mongol son. These three poems illustrate another of the virtues of poetry: that in the space of a few lines the reader may share ideas and experiences that could take a volume to describe. The poems by Sylvia Plath and Jon Stallworthy may be found in Penguin's *British Poetry since 1945*.

Having thought back over some of the reading that has given me pleasure in the past 12 months or so, and come, like John Ebden on Radio 4, "to no very definite conclusion," I now resolve to head for the nearest secondhand bookshop to find something about Spanish history. If I stop my ears with wax I may even be able to resist the call of all those other titles. . . .

A woman of 33 with two teenage children develops a profuse secretion of colostrum during intercourse. What might be the cause of this and can it be prevented?

It is important to be sure that the secretion does not occur at any other time. If it does, or if it is associated with other symptoms such as amenorrhoea, endocrinological investigation including tomography of the pituitary fossa is indicated. Galactorrhoea may also be caused by the oral contraceptive pill. Unilateral or bloodstained secretion or the presence of a breast lump suggests local disease of the breast. In the absence of such factors, however, the cause presumably lies in the hormonal response to coitus. Masters and Johnson reported an increase in breast size during intercourse—probably indicating an increased blood flow. In one study¹ intercourse did not affect plasma steroid or gonadotrophin concentrations, but a few women showed a pronounced increase in serum prolactin. Among lactating women² coitus may stimulate milk-ejection, and there is evidence that oxytocin is released during intercourse in non-lactating women.³ (Presumably this patient has had no children since her two teenagers were born.) As to prevention, it is worth inquiring whether she is taking the pill or any other drugs. Nipple stimulation evokes the milk-ejection reflex and may cause continued production of secretion: she should be

advised that this should be avoided during loveplay if she wishes to minimise the discharge. Bromocriptine lowers plasma prolactin concentrations but as the drug is expensive and has side effects I would be reluctant to use it. If the secretion occurs only when she is enjoying intercourse the best treatment is reassurance from the doctor that it is not a sign of disease and reassurance from her partner that he does not find it repellent.

¹ Stearns EL, Winter JSD, Faiman C. Effects of coitus on gonadotropin, prolactin and sex steroid levels in man. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 1973;37:687-91.

² Harris GW, Pickles VR. Reflex stimulation of the neurohypophysis (posterior pituitary gland) and the nature of posterior pituitary hormone(s). *Nature* 1953; 172:1049.

³ Fox CA. Recent studies in human coital physiology. *Clin Endocrinol Metab* 1973; 2:527-43.

Correction

Asbestos fibres and the environment

In the article by Daphne Gloag (21 February, p 623) the hygiene standards given in the box are those recommended by the Advisory Committee on Asbestos in 1979; the current standard for chrysotile and amosite is 2 fibres/ml.