Reading for Pleasure

The inner life

S L HENDERSON SMITH

To savour the full pleasure of reading one must be in tune with oneself and with what one is reading. The ambience must be right with regard to time and place. To my way of thinking, therefore, no novel should be read before midday: it would be an abuse of energy. The morning is for reading serious works. I always start the day with *Great Souls at Prayer* and the Bible. The early hour—often, alas, reduced to 20 minutes or so—of absorption in sacred literature is the habit of a lifetime. So many wonderful gems are to be savoured in this particular atmosphere—the *Imitation of Christ*, the *Little Flowers of St Francis*, Bunyan, and the *Religio Medici*, and even a page or two of Dante. Such works are also suitable later in the day, but it is when the sun rises blushing above the far hills that the heart is uniquely receptive to their peculiar wisdom and delight.

A time for poetry

If there is still a brief moment before work I snatch it greedily for the exploration of poetry. Nothing is more fruitful of ideas, ideas that may be worked out later in my own writing efforts; poetry, of course, may be read at all times and in all circumstances. Indeed, the more I read this particular literary form the more I become addicted to it for its economy and precision. A good poem has no single word that does not earn its keep, and a better poem is even more concentrated. Only the very best poems deserve that final accolade—committal to memory. It may take months to learn a masterpiece like D H Lawrence's "Snake" or T S Eliot's "Burial of the Dead," but the effort is infinitely worth while. The words become one's own in the way that prayers do, or remembered texts from scripture. What a boon to be able to quote them to oneself in heavy traffic, in conditions of stress, when trying to solve a deep personal problem or a diagnostic or situational conundrum. Great and nutritive words are as angels coming to the rescue at the point of need.

How well I remember Shelley's "Lines written in the Euganean Hills" coming to my help in a time of personal crisis in Hong Kong. As I crossed and recrossed that crowded harbour by ferry, not knowing what to do or where to turn, those marvellous words—

Many a green isle needs must be
In the deep wide sea of misery,
Or the mariner, worn and wan,
Never thus could voyage on
Day and night, and night and day,
Drifting on his dreary way. . . .

—were precisely and absolutely right in mood and effect.

Similarly, that inspired piece by Ernest Dowson "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae" has overtones of a quasireligious nature. It speaks of a love affair on the surface but, in "I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion," of deeper loyalties. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is a piece of pure music in words, but why so short? Why, oh, why did the "gentleman from Porlock" choose to visit the poet just then? But that is life. The rude telephone disturbs us just as we are reaching the seventh heaven. Pressing matters terrestrial have to be dealt with and inspiration is gone.

The later morning is for libraries. All true readers could happily spend their lives in libraries. Just to be there in the company of books is a healing restorative. I wrote of this thus:

It would be easy to be dead
In such a place, stillness
Is palpable, books turn their backs
On me though they keep a thousand
Shouted words within their breasts;
I take one down for the hell of it,
Read any page at random;
The spider's web I find behind
Speaks volumes, footprints I can
Understand prove life;
I worship it.

And there is the solace of the company of other readers. When the impulse to read, to study, wanes, one needs to have the habit rekindled by the example of others. It happened for me in Hyde Park, of all places:

She sits upon the grass oblivious
Of all the filtered elements
Millioned in this metropolis;
Bathing her eyes in print,
She might be formed of stone
Growing in loveliness like clouds,
Except the refinement of her breast and bone
Speaks of a demon in that high browed head;
I walk away before she moves
Treasuring the image of her like an icon.

To the devotee reading is the next best thing to being a monk. Though the practice of medicine may deny one that supreme vocation, with the help of books one may sustain the inner life. One can keep "hours" for reading. Journals, medical texts, correspondence even, can be the vehicles for "obedience." A medical man (or woman) must surely always be, secretly if not overtly, a kind of bookish recluse, a medium between the wisdom acquired from scholarship and the practical demands of the public. Alas, so often time for reading is dissipated in multifarious activities. There is an inevitable lessening of effectiveness. We must all have sensed this attrition in the power of our hands when we have neglected our reading, when we have ceased to be antiquaries at the source of knowledge in the printed word.

Lindley, Huddersfield

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A time for fiction and history

It is in the evening that one can return to silence with a well-chosen book of fiction. My own favourites are still the great classics. Who can read Hugo's *Les Misérables* without being stirred? That superb story of repentance stimulated by the sheer goodness of a man of God, that reminder of indomitable perseverance and faith—can anything equal it? The rich cameo of Dickens lifts the heart. The perception into human motivation of Hardy awakens sympathy with the multifarious characters whom we are fortunate enough to meet in the course of our job.

Experience of reading may be enhanced by knowledge of other languages. A period of mission service in what was then Belgian Congo forced me to revise my French. It was a blessing

in disguise. As a result, I have been able to savour Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in the original—that and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot being surely the greatest novels ever written about doctors. How often a holiday in France has been enriched by a Simenon, and here is a legitimate excuse for the luxury of a morning novel.

In another mood I lean on Macaulay's *History*. The sheer style of his writing makes the duller page a miracle of craftsmanship. The same applies to Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Stevenson. And what wit is theirs. If only we were more faithful to our reading, the quality of our practice would benefit beyond any audit to assess. We would continue to prescribe for our patients but that would take second place to an almost indefinable influence, which would set them right on the "Road that leads them to the Lamb."

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Normandy 1980

Normandy is no great distance for a short holiday, especially if you live near a Channel port. With no more than 70 miles covered on the road since leaving home we turned into the yard of the admirable Lion d'Or in Bayeux.

There were four of us: myself, my wife, my sister, and her husband. His last trip to the area was in the summer of 1944. He left from London and disembarked at the Mulberry Harbour about two weeks after the first landing. He was a troop leader in a reconnaissance regiment, and on moving up to the front was briefed the night before their attack. He had recently unearthed his own handwritten orders, later damaged by whatever hit him, but quite legible, in a firm clear hand.

We drove along the road he had travelled 36 years before towards a spot height which had figured in the orders. He could well remember dead and bloated cattle lying about the place, and, worse, in a wood our dead infantry black faced and grotesque after a withering mortar attack during the night. His troop was to lead the advance, and they set off across fields riddled with German gun pits. Because of these it was sometimes necessary to dismount and deal with them on foot. During one of these engagements a bomb exploded very close. He was wounded and unable to continue; bleeding and confused he was put on the bonnet of a truck and taken back. He was then evacuated to Bayeux, where he spent an uneasy night next to a German prisoner. The wounded were transferred to a tank landing craft and returned to England. At length he went to Birmingham for definitive treatment, which seems to have served very well. During his rehabilitation he met my sister, then a nurse.

We found his divisional memorial and cemetery nearby. To judge from the visitors' book many relatives and old comrades still come. One girl had made a simple, moving entry about her father-in-law whom, of course, she had never known. The flowers there were like an English country garden and it was beautifully kept. Several years after the war my brother-in-law entered the Church, and the remembrance service he took on his return was a poignant one for him. He had, I think, laid a few personal ghosts to rest. Can we ever justify the slaughter of so many of our young? Where would we be had they not made their sacrifice?—JOHN MAINWARING (Cosham, Portsmouth).

A gift to Africa

I thought of Yeats the other day as I watched, in an evening of luminous stillness, the terns fishing. We had sailed the narrow gut of Pye Channel, past Crab Knoll and High Hill into Hamford Water. Arthur Ransome's "Secret Water," and still very much as he must have known it, remote and tranquil. "I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea." Indeed, he would no such thing. He would have hated it. Nose diving into the cold salt waves for his food, and romantic passion reduced to an annual bow, chatter, and rush to the nearest female, though there, at least, he might have more success than he ever had with Maud. But then most of what Yeats

wrote was nonsense, and in his fine disregard for reason or truth he must surely be the most licentious of English-speaking poets. For me his verse always raises the wrong questions. Nine rows might give an adequacy of beans, but what else did he propose to live on. And what were the linnets, seed-eating birds, doing there, or the bees? Buzzing with frustration, I would guess. Why on earth was the noon purple, a most unlikely colour, and how did he know there were 59 swans at Coole, when they had flown off before he finished counting them, and, and. . .

I collect slim volumes of poetry as mementos of places visited, so I wandered one day into an Umtata bookshop to see what they could offer, and there, shelf upon shelf, was the Matric set book *Selectep Works of W B Yeats*. What on earth, I wondered, would the local children make of such a convoluted Hellenophilic Celt. By pure chance I was to find out. On a lonely stretch of road in the barren Eastern Cape I picked up a hitch-hiker, a Xhosa going home. He was an English teacher, now doing a postgraduate degree at Fort Hare University. I put my question to him. "No, he is easy. A man in tune with our own thinking. Was he not a revolutionary?" And then he quoted, how could he not, that bit about the centre falling apart. I dropped him at Idutwya, for I had three hours to wait for the petrol pumps to open, and he was in a hurry. As I sat in the sun and watched the passing traffic I considered our European gifts to Africa. Feeding bottles, brandy, light-sensitising soaps, tobacco, and Yeats.—ANNE SAVAGE (London).

Paintings

Modern art has never really appealed to me, so when my younger son invited me to an exhibition I was less than enthusiastic. Not so my wife. She said we must keep up with the times and learn to see things as the next generation does. So we made the journey. It was certainly interesting. A large blue canvas with a small red spot could be had for a four-figure sum, as could, for slightly less, a disjointed man (or woman); an intricate pattern of rectangles in various shades of brown; a multicoloured mélange of lines and splashes; and a collage of spent matches, bus tickets, and feathers. Although he urged us to consider one as an investment—he is training to be an accountant—we had to disappoint our son. The only thing we praised was the wine we bought when we entered. And even that not too much.

Last summer my wife and I chanced into a gallery in the north of Scotland. It is run by a lady who cares for the local artists: the good, the indifferent, and the well-intentioned. We spent a happy half hour browsing around, but nothing took our fancy. As we chatted with the owner before leaving, a young man arrived with a canvas. "I don't really want to part with it," he said. "It's the best thing I've ever done. But the cottage roof is leaking." Who could resist such a remark. We asked to see it. It was a simple scene of fields, a small stream, and a track leading from a half-opened gate. In the background the Cairngorms brooded in the light of the dying day. Traditional perhaps, hackneyed even, yet it struck an immediate chord. We bought it, there and then. It hangs in our living room giving us a great deal of pleasure. Needless to say, our son studiously ignores it.—WILLIAM THOMSON (chief administrative medical officer, Lanarkshire).