Reading for Pleasure

An awe-inspiring collection

HILLAS SMITH

British Medical Journal, 1979, 2, 197-198

Although reading and writing are for the most part private activities and share many similar attributes, a major distinction that has always seemed valid is that, whereas reading is the most inconspicuous of pleasures, writing is in large measure a form of exhibitionism. It is as if the author is saying, "Look here chaps, see what a fine fellow I am, parading my well-turned phrases, pushing my opinions, and there you are reading it all"—the ultimate ego trip. Quite clearly some authors, like some individuals, are more exhibitionist than others; but, knowing all this, how is it that the product of other people's exhibitionism can delight so many?

I think a great deal of it has to do with upbringing and schooling and how one is introduced to the pleasures that may be experienced from reading, as opposed to the distress which may be induced by *having* to read certain texts. School usually forces this distinction, which is probably a bad thing; it certainly did for me. Later, I had the good fortune to do my medicine at Trinity College, Dublin, where all medical students were required to take an arts course simultaneously with the first three medical years, leading eventually to a BA. Alas, this is no longer a requirement, but in my time it brought medical students and arts undergraduates together for some courses and lectures. A minor moment of triumph came to me in some such mixed seminar when, to my delight, I was the only student able or willing to comply with the lecturer's request to finish Goldsmith's couplet:

"Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

Somewhere about that time the thought first came to me, frequently reinforced since, that many people have only limited pleasure from a restricted range of books which may not include anything that could be graced by the term "literature." There followed a time where I became hypnotised with words; it has taken me a long time to try and reconcile the Celtic extravagance in words with an Anglo-Saxon asstringency in meaning.

Recent reading

Of several biographies read in the last six months, one which gave me particular pleasure was Richard Holmes's life of Shelley. Years ago I read Maurois's charming *Ariel* and so I had some idea of Shelley's extraordinary life. Richard Holmes has produced a volume of more than 700 pages (in paperback—what value at £2.95) in which he does something similar to Robert Gittings's treatment of Keats—that is, he tries to give almost a day-by-day account of the poet's activities. This is modern

biography at its most skilful. This depth of detail is made possible by reconstructing incidents described in Shelley's own letters and journals and those of contemporaries. The whole work is an astonishing achievement: Shelley comes across as a human individual, rather than as an idealised, ethereal being whose feet seldom touched the ground. There were two surprises in this book for me: firstly, Shelley's acute political sense—for example, his commitment to Irish revolutionaries in 1812, and later his attempts to form an "ideal community" centred on building an embankment across the sand-bound estuary at Treath Mawr in North Wales. Although he was not always practical in these ventures, Shelley put in a surprising amount of time and effort not only with written support, but also in physical commitment to these projects. The second surprise is the truly extraordinary number of changes of abode to which Shelley subjected his ménage. I am surprised that he produced any writing at all with continuous shifting to new digs, houses, hotels (using every conceivable means of transport). This applies particularly to his time in London—as well as to his later well-known Continental journeys.

Two books, read recently, advocate change—*The Dilemma of Democracy* by Lord Hailsham, and *The Other Revolution* by Arianna Stassinopoulas. Lord Hailsham defends his political credo, but analyses our current malaise with wit and skill, and suggests decentralisation of government, including devolution for the regions of England as well as for Scotland and Wales; all this to be combined with some sort of proportional representation. He has many interesting things to say about what he believes to be the ultimate choice in Government—"In my own terminology the choice is between elected dictatorship and limited government."

Arianna Stassinopoulas's prescription for a better world is simply that we should give up chasing the chimera of economic success and allow an individual's spiritual values to exert themselves. The argument is pursued at great length with breathless prose, written for effect in a sort of undergraduate style. It is, however, a superbly sustained intellectual exercise—strong on diagnosis, but weak in treatment.

For pure escapism I have read Graham Greene's new novel *The Human Factor*. This is a good but simple story, beautifully told. I am amazed at the way Greene is capable of writing intricate plots by using the simplest language; big words are noticeably absent. You get the impression that each word has been specially made and "shoehorned" into its own niche. To alter a single word would change not only the sense, but the rhythm and cadence of the language as well. Part of the pleasure of reading comes, for me at any rate, from saying the words aloud or, more often, hearing them within my own head.

Style and ideas

This brings me to the vexed question of style, and style as applied to medical writing is a subject that has occupied me recently. It seems legitimate to ask if style in medical writing

exists. I think it is often possible to note style in articles, as for instance in the leading articles of the major journals, but what of short articles and case reports? Here, all too often, style has been removed and everything has been sacrificed to getting a message across with the minimum number of symbols producing terse, telegraphic prose. If you doubt this read (or better still, write), any case report in the *British Medical Journal* or the *Lancet*. In many cases clarity of meaning has been ousted by the demands of brevity. I think that the answer to this difficulty which authors and editors have to face in contemporary scientific writing is to find a compromise between brevity and comprehension. Jargon, clarity, and brevity are difficult bedfellows.

My last book is *Men of Ideas*, based on the television series in which Bryan Magee interviewed several outstanding thinkers. The result is a marvellously readable dialogue touching on a

vast range of philosophical questions—the ideas of Marx, linguistic philosophy, logical positivism, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of literature, and many others. For those with a philosophical bent it is impossible not to be interested in and, indeed, excited by many of the ideas and words that come sparking out of this vade-mecum. I also find it daunting. I read Plato's *Republic* at university and can remember nothing of it; I have read no Marx, I can't tell the difference between the views of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and I would not like to be asked to explain the difference between linguistic philosophy and the philosophy of language. I could go on.

My ignorance is great, and the chance of filling the void, even minimally, unlikely, but some of the pleasures of reading must derive from having at our disposal such an awe-inspiring selection of literature. In some ways reading is like breathing; too much can become tiring, too little finishes life.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Tate Gallery extension

Ascension day 1979 and the extended Tate Gallery received a royal opening with a light jest from the Queen about not dropping bricks in this gallery. For the notorious bricks are there, just as you would see them stacked in your back yard waiting for the handyman builder who never comes; all that controversy has forced the Tate authorities into defensive defiance. And for good measure a sizable area of adjacent floor space has been devoted to loose tiles, placing the gallery trotter in a painful quandary as to whether or not one should "keep off the grass"; and yet another floor has been given to stones collected by Richard Long in his peregrinations.

But the extensions appear to have been used more to avoid treading on corns than dropping bricks—artistic corns that is. The general arrangement is sound: the small spaces into which the main gallery area is divided, presumably in order to provide more hanging surface, are each devoted to a different period or trend within a period or even to an individual artist. But the devotion seems overdue in respect of the number of works on display. The walls are overcrowded even to the point of giving the impression of that amateurism to be seen in the hanging of any local art show, where most or all of the work submitted must be displayed so as not to cause offence. One suspects the reason to be much the same; down in those cellars in the Tate much has had to be stored and many of the works have been generously presented. It would hardly be tactful now to have to admit that the new building still provides too little hanging space. Many pictures hang cheek by jowl so that it is difficult to concentrate on any single work without the sense of impingement and intrusion from its neighbours. To wander through the galleries is to feel overwhelmed and even oppressed, except on the lower floor, where the excitement of optical art and the ingenuity of kinetic devices (there is one which responds to your voice with sensual movements) are given proper spatial freedom.

One can appreciate the dilemma faced by the curators—should the display be permanent and inclusive or should they show selections in rotation (as is perforce their practice with Turner)? Their possession contains much fine work, some of lesser quality and a few so experimental as to rest almost beyond the fringe of art (some might think beyond the pale). Perhaps they intend a happy compromise of permanent display for their greatest works, with the three galleries designated for special exhibitions after 1980 to be used for occasional exposure of others.

Creative art, it seems to me, creates its own honour and transcends honours. Conversely honours diminish the integrity of the artist. I see no objection to recognition by the State of an artist as a man, but somehow this becomes inappropriate within the artistic milieu itself, partly perhaps because the attainment and distribution of honours are so capricious as to be a condescension, an intrusion by the State in creative activity which transcends, or should transcend, mundane vanity. If an individual artist wishes to accept an honour that is his affair. But should such honours be noted on the ascriptions labelling each picture? You can, as I did, derive some entertainment counting up the OMs and CHs amongst the British artists on display, to say

nothing of the knighthoods. But you may also feel as I did, that this bow to the establishment by the Tate is irrelevant, to say the least, in a gallery of art, and something of an offence to those artists who did not thus achieve the approval of the State.

Despite all this, the newly refurbished Tate Gallery is compulsory visiting, for the collection is unique and at last provides for London what the Museum of Modern Art does for New York, albeit in a much smaller way. Go soon so that you can spare a moment as you hand in your umbrella at the cloakroom alongside the octagon and admire drapeau art, a development unique to Margaret Treherne, which appears to combine optical, sculptural, and, in a sufficient draught, kinetic art, which I fear will not be part of the permanent collection.—BRYAN N BROOKE (professor of surgery, St James's Hospital).

Gardening without green fingers

It is hard to garden without green fingers. In fact one only learns slowly that one has not got them. The first hint was when I was in India and asked my father to send some seeds for a rock garden. Six expensive-looking packets arrived—I knew they were expensive because they had no pictures on. I planted them carefully, and watered and watched them. Not a single one came up.

Back in this country I thought, "Perhaps it is flowers I am not good at." So I planted cabbage seeds, and they came up beautifully. I did not, however, realise that they should be thinned, so they grew into a forest of useless spindly stalks. I started watching gardening programmes, and learnt about thinning out and things. I grew cabbage seedlings on the window sill and brought them on in a plastic greenhouse. I planted them out on 1 June and they looked magnificent. On 4 June I went to admire them and found them stripped totally bare of all leaves. "Perhaps pigeons like them," I thought. I planted more seedlings between the ruined ones, and bought plastic netting to put over them. The ruined seedlings revived and the new seedlings did well too, so of course they were too close together and never came to much—all except the sprouting broccoli, which grew enormous. We like sprouting broccoli, and waited for the spring. Unfortunately someone thought they were worn-out cabbages and pulled them all up.

Next year I grew my seedlings, planted them out, put netting over them and fertiliser around them, and waited. At last, I thought, we shall have a good crop. Then one by one the half-grown plants withered, and when I pulled them up there were nasty-looking grubs feasting on the roots. So this year I have grown them, planted them out, netted and fertilised them, and sprinkled Bromophos around the stems to discourage the cabbage root fly. Surely nothing can go wrong now. But I am uneasy. On my last visit to the patch a woman asked pleasantly, "Do you have much trouble in keeping children from running over your vegetables?" "That I don't know," I replied.—T PETER SNELL (general practitioner, Chester-le-Street, Co Durham).