Reading for Pleasure

Contributions to this column are always welcome

Preference for paperbacks

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Sunday afternoon has a unique quality. It is for strenuous exertion or relaxation, or for gentle exercise; for cultivating plants or burning them; for reading or for writing. Sunday afternoon has the most unique of qualities, plasticity: the perfect material for life. And that's why I am sitting in my study, a pot of pekoe to my left, a ballpoint pen to my right, and paper in front of me. Five minutes ago I was absorbed in my favourite Sunday activity, lounging immersed in stereophonic sound and indulging in the well-written word. This time it was Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and I was surprised to be finding the going hard because I have devoured just about everything else of his. I think my trouble with *At Swim* is its form rather than its depth: the integration is so intricate that it needs to be taken in blocks large enough to contain the origin and insertion of at least some link threads, and just lately my reading time has disappeared and I have once again become a 15-minute three-page man.

Many years ago I decided that I wouldn't be a great writer, but I could at any rate become a great reader, and so I shall begin by explaining why I am not. Two monstrous facts are responsible, facts which dictate my literary territory. Firstly, there is my primitive attitude to books: I have to possess them, to own them. I hate borrowed books and library books. It is not just other people's coffee splodges, nor is it the occasional opinion-forcing margin marks. It is partly the time limit, against which my temporary ownership rebels—I am intolerant of the forced rate and sequence of reading that a loan implies—but it is mostly the need to feel the book is personal to myself. My books must therefore cost little. The second constraining item is that, with the exception of plastic Sundays—which are mostly for newspapers, anyway—I read either before I go to sleep or on return rail journeys (when I feel able to reward myself for the hard work done on the outward journey, while others have chatted, slept, got plastered, or read). This second fact means that my books have to travel. It follows from these twin needs of personal ownership and portability that I rarely read anything but paperbacks.

Influence on fashion?

No problem, you might think: there are enough paperback editions to keep the full-time reader going for life. But here both you and I are thwarted by the logic of consequence. My stars having dictated the anatomy of my books, they retire knowing their choice leads on to an inevitability of contents. Indeed, the

great range of paperbacks serves only to remind me of the narrowness of my choice. Like most middle-class upper middle-brows, I suffer greatly from the colour-supplement syndrome. By that I mean that when once in a while I get a really good idea—then, come Sunday it is splashed right across the glossy pages, as if it really wasn't me who had thought it up. It becomes a piece of personal property made public without my permission. All of which explains the inevitability of the link between my choice of books and that of next week's review. Whatever the obscure corner from which I rescue an interesting title, I find the book in front of this week's recommended reading in my paperback shop window. The colour-supplement syndrome would be bad enough if it was only unidirectional in time. Alas, it is not and many's the time I've discovered and bought books that seemed unique, only to find that the reviews recommending them had been written weeks before. This must be an experience shared by us all as we both respond to and encourage the fashions of the day.

I'll give you two recent examples. Earlier this year I bought the three-volume Picador edition of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* to be read in the summer (the summer's not over but, of course, it will be before I start them), only to find he had been last year's cult figure among the local art students. A more sinister example: a few months ago I decided to make a comparison of the techniques of Flann O'Brien, S J Perelman, and Beachcomber. This was forced on me by my new paperback *The Most of S J Perelman*, which I'd put by my bedside on top of Flann O'Brien's *The Best of Myles* (he goes by the name of Myles na Gopaleen). I couldn't find my old Penguin Beachcomber anthology and made a mental note to visit the bookshop to get a new one. Now I have no proof that J B Morton's almost immediate death and the consequent disappearance of his books from the bookshelves (by legitimate purchase) were related to my resolve; I merely recount it as the obverse of the phenomenon.

What I was trying to say when my humorous friends changed the subject is that, despite all efforts at individuality, my reading material lies fixed at the slightly less popular end of the popular paperback range. My only attempt to climb out of the straits of this book-jacket is by reading my books a few years after most other people. (That also is the time when the noise of their discussion fades and has less influence on my own opinions about the work. For the same reason, I rarely read introductions until after I have read the book—even when they are written by the author. I like my response to be personal and I don't want to be directed to it. But I have a totally different attitude to reviews of books that I don't intend to read: I enjoy them in their own right. Reviews are an art form to which their subject is largely irrelevant and my delight in reviews of books, plays, television, or even sport, would only be spoilt by reading or seeing them for myself.) My seven-year-old Penguin reprint of Borges's *Labyrinthes* is one example. I reread it intermittently—particularly for the well-distilled and almost sparse language; the deliberate mixture of real and pseudo-scholarship; and the handling of mystery, especially the wonder of infinity as in *The*

Library of Babel with its infinite regressions typified by the great circular book with its continuous spine, and the infinite library in which nothing is repeated (tantalisingly impossible unless infinity is simultaneously finite). A new edition of his stories came out a few months ago in hardback, but I am happy to wait until the autumn when Penguin will be bringing it out for softback readers.

Penchant for life and humour

I rarely go for history or biography, because, having almost no memory, their essence is lost as soon as the printed word passes. I find light reading almost intolerable and I hate detective stories, even though I'd like to try to write one (I have a general theory about how to set one up). I mostly go for life as it is wrapped up in novels, short stories, and humour. I think I like novels because of their power of invention, certainly not because they explain reality. Novels are ingenious ways whereby one can believe reality might have happened, but their credibility and ingenuity mustn't be confused with truth. If subject A kills subject B, there are hundreds of thousands of millions of ways in which that one story can be written. And, of course, some will "feel" more valid to a particular group of people in the light of both them and the artistic styles of the time and place. The idea that the novel is a serious account of the truth is an untruth, which, surprisingly, seems to have taken in the novelist as well as his reader. In this sense, the novel is a con: it works by simulation. It's as if there is a story centre in the brain which responds to invoked "enovelins." Release them and you feel you've read a novel—a little for an Iris Murdoch, and a lot for a Dostoevsky. The point is that everything has a cause, but not necessarily an explanation.

Events in history have causes which are so multiple that a satisfying explanation (that is to say, one that will permit prediction, as in a science) can rarely be found. The causes operative in many branches of human activity are too multifactorial for scientific explanation though cause and effect operate for each. I believe the "explanations" of the novel are creative myths where the verbal creation itself is the reality, like the entertaining and imaginative mythology of contemporary psychiatric aetiology. Problems arise only if you confuse the real life of these purely verbal and speculative creations with reality.

Perhaps that is why I feel much safer with humour. Humour is there because it is there. It has no pretence. To me, the police sergeant's explanation of "the molecular theory" in Flann O'Brien's *Third Policeman*, with the gradual interchange of molecules between a man and his bicycle (so that the sergeant classifies people by the degree of change over: "He's a 70%"), is as compelling a myth as the heavy novel writer's intricate psychosocial "explanation" without its turgidity. Humour is pure, an ethereal asceticism compared with the novelist's heavy romanticism, and it has the perverse virtuosity of independent thought. Not anarchic, but well organised; and not the patterned variety with its weight-handicapped fairness to ensure that everyone and everything gets to the winning post at the same time. (The humorist will arrive at the post late, early, or not at all, and will win or lose as he chooses. In fact, most often he will arrive at a different post to which, once you've joined him, you wonder why the whole race hadn't been rerouted.) Get *The Most of S J Perelman* (just out in paperback, of course) and see how the controlled form allows the bubbling of wildly creative stories. If you compare him with Myles na Gopaleen and Beachcomber he is overcontrolled with too literary a humour. But he is the master of the literary see-saw, the send-up and put-down, particularly as a commentator on the celluloid arts: "Diamonds of the finest water gleamed at the throats of women whose beauty put the gems to shame, and if each was not escorted by a veritable Adonis, he was at least a Greek."

Detractors say all humorists are really dead serious. That's funny enough to be true, but even if it is, they are not as pathetically comic as those who pose as serious writers. Who can

bear Solzhenitsyn's appalling writing, other than by grimacing at his grotesque misanthropy both to the left and right, and by laughing off his attempts to drown us in his miseries? Or, to quote the other trendy work of a few years back, *Zen And The Art Of Motor-Cycle Maintenance* which my son gave me, insisting that it would do me good. The first 100 pages or so did: it was an exciting journey of ideas. In these times of fuel shortage, the rest should be burnt—page after page of boring self-indulgent pomposity, unrelieved by the slightest touch of humour or wit. I can think of no deeply serious work without humour. Hot tears of humour are there even in the intense and depressing gloom of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger*.

But humour, of course, like everything else can easily go over the top, as I believe have the authors of my two favourite modern books *Catch 22* and *The Tin Drum*. I am saddened by the progressive wildness of Günter Grass's genius, though I still read each new novel as it is paperbacked. Similarly, *Something Happened*, Joseph Heller's second, which I read at the beginning of the year (Heller is a slow writer, and I am sure he doesn't object to people being five years late reading him). The jokes were all there, rather like the static set-pieces of Monsieur Hulot—hilarious in isolation, yet failing in toto. The humour which was so integral to *Catch 22* made *Something Happened* painful to read. I hope for a return of the old Heller in his latest (out earlier this year) but I am less optimistic about Günter Grass.

Feet on ground, head in clouds

As a professional scientific speculator I enjoy watching others doing it, particularly those who do it well. And yet I dislike science fiction, even though some of my own scribbles are close to it. In sci-fi there are so few ground rules that almost anything is possible, and blowing-up bubbles of that sort of fiction is just too easy (perhaps that's really why I dislike crime fiction—there are so few factual limits from which your fantasy must escape). Take, by contrast, the short stories of Bashevis Singer and see how the creativity gains tension by the trap of a tight environment. Stories about how the body might work, however fascinating, are never as compelling as those about how it does work (to paraphrase Borges, life unlike hypotheses has no need to be interesting), and stories about what man might do in an infinity of open space are invariably less compelling than those about men trapped on earth. Only the mighty have the stature to have their feet on the ground and their heads in the clouds, simultaneously. It is this firm earthy root in reality that gives Bashevis Singer's light impressionistic touch such a homely and gentle compassion and makes even his deep mysticism appear natural.

There is a seam of tangible imagination in folk stories and, perhaps more surprisingly, in fairy stories and myths. I find them infinitely delightful provided they aren't tampered with—when, like folk songs that are "arranged" and "orchestrated," they lose their vigour. In this respect, I am not entirely happy with the *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*, the W B Yeats collection which has just come out in paperback, and I am just a little worried by the inappropriately contemporary feeling to some of Joachim Neugroschel's translation of *Great Works of Jewish Fantasy*. But these books will serve as a substitute for the delightful fairy stories that I can no longer read to my own children. I hope to read them this autumn, if I have time, between my three Musils, my new Hamsun (*Mysteries*), my second Mandelstam (which I still haven't read), the new Borges that will be out shortly,* and the new Beachcomber edition which surely somebody will bring out soon, together with the dozen or so new paperbacks I'm bound to pick up only to find them recommended the next Sunday. But then that is what our plastic Sundays are for, and I'm going off to use what's left of mine for some quiet reading.

**Book of Sand*, just out.