Reading for Pleasure

Chance acquaintances

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It was out of politeness, really, that I came across it. "Going to Sicily?" they said, a rhetorical question natural to the course of the conversation. "Then you must read *Sea and Sardinia*." "I have a copy," said one. So I borrowed it; reluctantly, for D H Lawrence has never held my attention. All those lovers, *Sons*, *Lady Chatterley's*, even *Women in Love* have been opened, attempted, shut. But as I had borrowed the book—only too obviously a cherished early Penguin edition (ads at the back of recent fiction included *I Claudius*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Moon and Sixpence*)—so, in deference, I must read it. I was immediately enchanted. Even in the squalor of a British Rail commuter train, transportation was complete, away from seedy suburban destinations into trains, boats, and buses in Sicily, Sardinia, and, above all, into the writer's presence, into the intimacy of his very mind, his thoughts shared only with me—not even with the queen bee, referred to as the qb after the first reference who, though his wife, was held outside the intimacy à deux of just him and me (with me listening).

Lawrence's ability to speak with the written word is captivating as he paints each successive scene in a motion picture, in lively conversation in the bus which twists its way up Sardinian mountains; in the overnight ferries, which carry him (with the qb at arm's length in the background) from Sicily to Sardinia and later to Naples. His ink is indelible: the qb and he buy their provisions before going aboard and brew up in the knapsack kitchenino under a tarpaulin on deck; one can see that ordinary occasion of half-a-century ago as clearly as he did then. He conjures up—particularly for the older reader—frequent moments of déjà-vu, not of a particular scene but of sensation aroused by conjunction of colour and form in landscape.

He eases the descriptive dialogue along by giving vent to his emotions and prejudices. He reacts to those who pass by; they are numerous and he nicknames them in a way that illustrates Sicilian and Sardinian character, and thus contrasts them. He is at his best when venting his spleen about the inhospitable innkeeper, the boastful passenger, the tense busdriver, even the unpunctual train; he expresses an irritation with which we may all-too-easily identify, the strings of potential anger we possess within us reverberating to his words. Sometimes he cannot contain himself, and the object of his displeasure receives the brunt; the urchin who carries knapsack from train to ship at Naples, asks for an exorbitant five francs and gets a flea in his ear. Then you can feel the Lawrentian guilt when he relents for a moment and the boy gets what he asked for. He

frequently expresses nostalgia and deplores the invasion of modernity brought about by social changes in the aftermath of war—just as we do today.

"But the hateful, unmanly insolence of these lords of the soil, now they have their various 'unions' behind them and their rights as working men, sends my blood black. They are ordinary men no more: the human, happy Italian is most marvellously vanished. New honours come upon them, etc. The dignity of human labour is on its hind legs, busy giving every poor innocent who isn't ready for it a kick in the mouth." That "etc" jars, a sudden discordant note, uncharacteristic in a flowing euphonious text presenting an aquarelle that has not faded with time.

Contrasting views of life

I can never be sure whether the pleasure I have obtained from a book is wholly intrinsic. It may be due either to the fact that I have read it on holiday, or to its juxtaposition with the last book that I have read. In this particular case, the contrast was frivolous: light but good. Again, a chance recommendation through opening gambit between a fellow examiner and the senior tutor of my college during Cambridge MB social sherry conversation. Yes, the tutor had said, *Porterhouse Blue* was supposed to be based on Corpus and Peterhouse, and very funny. It took me a little time to track down Tom Sharpe in paperback editions, of which I bought two; then I set about *Porterhouse Blue* and began to chuckle aloud for the first time for many years. Brilliant caricature laces well constructed plan; extremely funny scenes follow one another in unforeseeable actions. All conceivable, but more than improbable in the Cambridge scene.

And so I laughed aloud, to the irritation of those around, as I had not done since reading Heller's *Catch 22* and, momentarily, with Donleavy (but then only in muted chuckles), whose *Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B* still seems to me to be his best work, for Donleavy here contrives to mix pathos with ridiculousness as he follows his hero through a student career in Dublin with its improbable vicissitudes and absurdities.

Catch 22 for all its belly laughs is a more serious work with deeper implications and startling moments, as when the swimmer standing on a float ready for a dive in pleasure is bisected by a plane diving in jest. In my memory of that work there is a feeling of underlying macabre. But for really deep exploration of man and life treated with understanding and sensitivity, and communicated in the finest language, I turn to Patrick White. I know that I shall be entering the presence of a master, and when I read his books I, too, must work hard—no sitting back in an armchair and passing the idle moment. I go into retreat with Patrick White, and may not emerge for several months. Such is the degree of concentration and assimilation needed that my associations with him are both lengthy and infrequent. *The Solid Mandala*, the first I read, carries one straight into a

recognisably Australian scene; the purpose of the book becomes apparent more slowly, the interrelationship of a saintly simpleton and his intelligent brother. Slightly reminiscent of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* but with a considerable difference, for White's intelligent brother is eventually maddened by his protege to the point of murder.

There is also a hint of pastiche in Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*—a sense of chaos that recalled something from Bernard Shaw. What was it? I had read most of his plays avidly in the 1930s as a student; but could hardly remember the titles. Who reads Shaw today? I don't any more, not since *The Adventures of the Black Girl in her Search for God* drew the scales from my eyes. A pity he ever wrote it—by then he had lost the touch. It must have been *Heartbreak House*, depicting the chaos of Europe before the first world war that I am thinking of. *The Aunt's Story* presents a similar feeling 25 years later—chaos before the second world war—and Patrick White includes a sort of Captain Shotover in a crazy character, a retired Russian general.

Nobel prizewinners

Patrick White's novels take so long to read that you might think his short stories more appropriate for pleasure, but somehow I cannot bring myself to concentrate on them. I have tried but the depth of his extraordinary understanding and vision seem to me to need the wide deployment of a full-length novel.

There is another Nobel prizeman whose short stories give me great delight; a chance acquaintance this, found while browsing in an airport bookstall to fill a fruitless hour. But the discovery of Luis Borges converted it to a shining hour. Among the prizemen, Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn have also provided hours of pleasure; the insight into medical minds in *Cancer Ward* astonished me. But neither are in the same class as Patrick White. Would I have ready any of these four authors had they already received their accolades at the time I was prepared to broach their works? I doubt it, for there is something of the royal warrant holder about the Nobel Prize; thereafter, it is "by appointment" and though very occasionally I may procure wine at Berry Bros & Rudd, official warranty usually scares me off.

So much reading for pleasure is no pleasure; it is simply exploratory in the hope of finding pleasure; there are many failures. How do I discover new authors—new to my experience, that is, and not necessarily new to the world of letters? Through sons-in-law, who seem to know and are certainly better informed than me. Radio readings often whet my appetite but they may delude. Only when I read White's *The Sword and the Stone* did I become aware of the skill of those who abstract from novels for broadcasting. Perhaps I should now go back to all those "lovers," try again now that I know DHL personally through *Sea and Sardinia*, and see whether he should have been a Nobel prizeman. But before I do so I will have another laugh with Tom Sharpe in *Wilt*, the second of the two paperbacks that I ran to earth—or maybe with Donleavy.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Silver teaspoons

Unlike my younger son who acquires beer mats—he now has over two thousand and calls himself a tegestologist—I have never been a collector. However, I now possess a few antique silver teaspoons.

It began when an elderly aunt gave me three silver teaspoons engraved with the initials of my elder son. Although they had been in the family for over a century, no one had any idea of their origin, their real age, or where they were purchased. This led me to the local library and to a book on old silver. It also opened up a new world. Hall marks, which in the past I had never really noticed, now take on a new significance. The Lion Passant I now know attests the standard of purity of the silver. Then the assay marks which indicate the town of manufacture—a leopard's head for London; a crown for Sheffield; an anchor for Birmingham; and the tree, fish, and bell of my own Glasgow. These are but a few examples. There is a letter which pin-points the year the silver was made and (until 1890) the head of the sovereign in profile. Finally, there are the silversmith's initials. Tracing these requires a reference book about the size of *Gray's Anatomy*.

The fascination of hall marks, the research required, together with an increasing appreciation of the intrinsic beauty of old silver teaspoons has now made me something of an enthusiast. I have a mini-collecting mania and have taken to visiting antique shops—an experience quite new to me.

I am constantly learning, not only about spoons in their different periods and styles, but of the mechanics of making a purchase. A little gentle haggling is *de rigueur* and 50p off the asking price is certainly a victory. My last foray, however, was disappointing. My opening gambit of saying authoritatively that I collect antique silver spoons went down rather well and a few specimens were produced. One took my fancy and, in the tradition of buying, I threw some doubt on its attribution. The reference book was produced and together we poured over it in the friendliest possible way. In the event, it turned out to be from the hand of an uncommon lady silversmith called Hester Bateman. When I said I would buy it, I was informed that now it had been identified, the price would have to be increased substantially. In this case serendipity was on the side of the dealer. However, my wife has given me a King's Pattern William IV teaspoon as a consolation. This brings my collection up to seven.—WILLIAM THOMSON (Chief Administrative Medical Officer, Lanarkshire.)

Friday 13th

Friday 13th has always had a distinctly distasteful reputation of presaging doom. It was, therefore, with some trepidation that I undertook a journey on the second Friday of July on 200 km of depressingly dangerous road between Kargil and Leh in Northern India. My transport, a lorry carrying wood, wheat, and weary wanderers, crawled out of Kargil at 4.30 am. Having prepared mentally for almost any catastrophe, I was ready for the petrological problem which presented itself some 20 km from Kargil. We approached a line of "public carriers" snaking back along the road, at the head of which was a majestic piece of Paleozoic pottery. The descent of this prehistoric pebble had obviously been interrupted by our road, as it still had 300 feet of potential energy to lose in the ravine below. The rock was being attended to by a clutch of brooding Indians, ineffectively pecking away at it with tommy bars, sledge hammers, and offensive language (I think).

Like all workmen worldwide, our Kashmiri drivers and aids required refreshment before considering the problem. Once we had taken our place in the queue a collection of utensils was spread on the ground and breakfast smells soon pervaded the scene. Breakfast consisted of tea and vegetable curry. As the last grain of turmeric slipped over the constantly mobile Kashmiri tongues, a group decision to circumnavigate the offending obstruction was taken. I retired to a point well beyond the potential disaster area to view the proceedings. The spectacle of a lorry with the more lateral of its two offside wheels in free air, over the edge of the ravine, caused little disturbance amongst the local populace.

Regaining my position above the cab, I was treated to magnificent views of the Indus valley. The harsh landscape of towering pinnacles, sun-baked ridges, and barren cliffs contrasted with the occasional lush green oases around the river. These emeralds on a brown and purple backcloth consisted of cultivated terraces supporting a handful of houses clustered around the flat land. The scenery was breathtaking—literally, since the road rose to 14 000 feet. Fourteen hours later the lights of Leh appeared in the distance. A sunburnt, tired, dusty, yet overjoyed apparition raised his rucksack to his shoulder, his hand to his money belt, and his eyes towards the nearest teahouse.

It had been a good day. Forty-eight hours later a bus plunged into one of the many ravines, killing many of the occupants.—P R EDWARDS (Canterbury).