Reading for Pleasure

Best of the bed books

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I remember being told during the war of a soldier who was referred to an ophthalmic specialist because he always read a book upside down. It turned out that he developed this habit in the London underground railway when he noticed that his early attempts to perform this feat attracted much interested attention from his fellow travellers. I find it difficult to read a book even the right way up in such crowded and noisy conditions, preferring to read in familiar surroundings, with some degree of comfort and an atmosphere of leisure. One place where these desirable conditions can (usually) be assured is in bed. But the selection of a suitable book is worth careful thought.

From windmills to medicine

I remember that Osler somewhere recommends a bedside library of some 30 volumes, including the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* and similar collections of great thoughts. Such profundities have no place at my bedside. I have just finished reading *Don Quixote* for the second time in Walter Starkie's translation, illustrated by Gustave Doré. This is the ideal bed book: there is no complicated plot to follow, no tense excitements, just a series of entertaining episodes. The absurd Don Quixote thrusts himself into one perilous adventure after another, never abashed by defeat, injury, or embarrassment. For him, every country inn is a castle with moat and battlements, and every country girl a princess; but in some ways he has the wisdom of the innocent and makes many sensible and sometimes profound remarks on the conduct of life. Sancho Panza, his squire, is an earthy character, constantly quoting country proverbs, whether appropriate or not, and living for the day when he will be governor of an island. When he does at last achieve his sublime ambition, he is half-starved by the court physician and obliged to give judgment in disputes—including a charge of rape, which he settles with true peasant cunning.

Don Quixote recovers his wits at the end and dies peacefully at home. Cervantes published the first part of this marvellous book in 1605—many years after the battle of Lepanto, when his left hand was shattered in the fighting. Some years after this battle he was captured by the Moors and spent five years as their prisoner. Perhaps during this time, as Chesterton suggests, he dreamt of the Spanish countryside and conceived the figure of the lean and foolish knight whose exploits have so much increased the gaiety of nations.

Medical books are not always written in a clear and witty style, but I recently found such a book in Malcolm Carruthers's *The Western Way of Death*. Here he seeks to establish that "the

combination of a high level of emotional activity, together with a low level of physical activity, deranges body chemistry and is the major cause of heart disease." He supports this hypothesis by evidence from other workers on the subject, and by his own original research. As an "exercise in losing friends and acquaintances" he persuaded racing drivers, television performers, public speakers, and others to submit to frequent blood sampling and to wear a minute radio transmitter attached to the chest wall. By these means he could record the heart rate (sometimes reaching 200 beats a minute in racing drivers) and measure the level of stress hormones and the release of fat into the blood stream. He discusses the stresses of different occupations and the merits of various forms of exercise. Children, he says, "can expect to carve their marks on their father's arterial tree," especially now that "the modern cult of the child demands that they should be both seen and heard at all times." On diet he advises that we should "usually avoid sweet things (not girls) but don't make a fetish of it, as some sweets are too good to miss." I do not know what cardiologists think about his conclusions but I enjoyed this book, and if Dr Carruthers writes another I shall certainly buy it.

Another vigorous and entertaining book is *Need your Doctor be so Useless?* by Andrew Malleon, a psychiatrist now working in Canada. He attacks paternalism of all kinds and recommends self-help as frequently a more effective method of treatment. He is both robust and iconoclastic. Lastly, most doctors would be much enlightened by reading Sir Martin Roth's wide-ranging Goodman lecture on pornography.

Fertile insights

Many contemporary books on philosophy—especially those dealing with the meaning of words—dispense more boredom than pleasure to ordinary readers. A notable exception to these are the works of John Macmurray, who died a few years ago, and whose lucidly written books such as *Reason and Emotion* and *Freedom in the Modern World* are expositions of a type of existentialism. Equally clear are the writings of Paul Roubiczek, a refugee from Czechoslovakia, who came here in 1939. I have found two of his books, *Existentialism for and against* and *Thinking towards Religion*, very helpful. His philosophy has much in common with Macmurray's, especially his insistence on the central importance of his feelings, of the emotional life. He thinks the influence of science has been unduly dominant over the past two centuries, partly because of its immense prestige in transforming industry, travel, and medicine. The scientist works from without, so to speak, with a basically deterministic philosophy; his conclusions must be independent of the observer and, in theory at least, repeatable by anyone else.

In his terminology Roubiczek calls this "external reality." But there is another world, the world of personal freedom, of participation, choice, and values, a world of "internal reality," and in a comprehensive philosophy this world must share an equal place with the scientific outlook. This inner world is the

most important part of our lives, but it is chaotic and relatively neglected. Art and religion are affairs of this inner world. Whereas scientific theories are subject to constant revision, the inner world has some absolute values which are independent of time and place. Science itself has no values. This has also been put clearly by Karl Popper: "No amount of physics will tell a scientist that it is the right thing for him to construct a plough, or an aeroplane, or an atomic bomb. Ends must be adopted by him, or given to him; and what he does qua scientist is only to construct the means by which these ends can be realised." This brief summary merely hints at some of the fertile insights contained in Roubiczek's two books.

A philosophy, or at least an attitude, may be vividly conveyed without tiresome abstractions. In Norwich Cathedral at present there is an imaginative exhibition which includes an enlarged photograph of Mother Teresa cutting the fingernails of a ragged starving Indian who is looking up, watching her intently. It is a picture of acceptance and reconciliation and is informed with a touching beauty. One has something of the same feeling when reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, which I am doing at present. The sordid picture of drunkenness, cruelty, and crime in nineteenth-century St Petersburg is relieved by Dostoevsky's compassion and occasional humour. He is well qualified to write this book, because his tortured and introspective mind and the tragic experiences of his life did not harden his feelings; or deprive him of sympathy with the underdog. Joyce Cary, in one of his essays, says "it is the unique quality of the great writers that they throw their minds, their souls, wide open to our exploration." Dostoevsky certainly did this and he had much to expose. His narrative may move slowly, but a lot is happening in the minds of his characters. After his penal servitude and life as a private soldier in Siberia, he returned to Russia, but, driven by poverty and debt, he was several times obliged to live abroad.

Mediterranean world

A visit to Constantinople last year made me resolve to learn a little about the 1000-year Byzantine civilisation. An opportunity

came when Anthony Bridge published his book on *Theodora*, the wife of the Emperor Justinian. This extraordinary woman was born in the Hippodrome, the social centre for the common people of Constantinople, the daughter of a poor bear-keeper. The Hippodrome was the centre for chariot races, exhibitions of bear fighting, and other popular attractions, and was often the scene of violent clashes between rival groups of supporters. Theodora spent her early life with her widowed mother in great poverty, but later came under the benign influence of Timothy, Patriarch of Alexandria, and underwent a religious conversion. Justinian was captivated by her beauty and, after some legal difficulties had been overcome, married her in 524. Thereafter, until her death in 548, she was his indispensable support in the tangled politics of the time, in the constant warfare and religious controversies which raged with savage violence.

This book gives a vivid picture of the Mediterranean world at a time when such was the obsession with doctrine that the baker, the moneychanger, and the bath keeper would engage their customers in religious discussion instead of attending to their business. In present times, interests have turned elsewhere, and discussions in bakers' shops, at least in Norfolk, are likely to be more mundane. (There is a story of an elderly Norfolk widow who told her vicar how her dead husband had visited her in a dream, and how he had sat at the bedside and spoken to her gently and with feeling. Then he slowly drifted away. The vicar said some people were fortunate enough to have such comforting visitations and then added: "And what do you think this visit means?" "Well," she said, "I've been thinking about that, vicar, and do you know what I think? I think that means rain.")

I said at the beginning that I had finished my bed book. Now I must find another. I thought of Surtees, but he might make me laugh too much. I then considered a contemporary novel, following Dr Johnson's advice that "we must read what the world reads at the moment." I have no desire to brood on present world problems before going to sleep, so I think I shall read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* once again: this, with its English rural setting, will be a worthy contrast to the exotic landscape of Don Quixote.

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

Taking up a reference

I am always vaguely disquieted when the request for my opinion of a candidate's suitability for a job takes the form of a printed or photocopied "letter," with a facsimile "signature" printed, photocopied, or rubberstamped on it, or even no pretence at all of a signature but in its place merely the typeset name of some official. How may one be sure that such requests are genuine? In practice, that question is seldom asked: experience shows that these documents are what they seem—I have never heard of a contrary experience. Yet so depersonalised a system is open to abuse; it also invites error. There is no reassurance in the fact that the document is signed, or initialled, *per pro* by some one thus apparently acting for the official named: who is this agent whose mark implies, but does not prove, authority to serve as proxy?

Sometimes it is not only the official who may be unidentified: occasionally, the candidate's name is omitted, and even the job to be filled is not disclosed. A telephone call or, perhaps preferably, a letter (reply paid) may uncover the candidate's identity and that of the job, but I have known the only outcome to be a sharp reply that so many applications for jobs are dealt with in the year that such information cannot be provided unless a note of the name of the candidate and of the job for which he is an applicant accompanies the inquiry; often, all attempts to get an answer are ignored.

Once, I was told eventually that the interviews had already taken place before there was an opportunity to send me the information I

had asked for—"We are exceptionally busy and short of competent staff" was the explanation offered, and in part confirmed by five mistakes in typing my name and address. Once, I was told that the interviews had already taken place before the requests for referees' opinions could be posted.

Sometimes, and it should never happen, a referee is unaware that he has been named for this usually important and often crucial role. Sometimes, a referee cannot place a candidate in his memory and suspects that he has been named by a stranger: such may even be the case, though this must be a rarity.

Usually, the explanation turns out to be that a clerk has mixed up different candidates' referees, or has miscopied a candidate's name, or entered his home town in place of his surname, or named the area medical officer instead of the candidate. A woman practising in her married name may omit to tell her referee that she has nominated him as such, and compounds her error by forgetting that he knew her only as Miss Somebody Else.

Once, soon after completing two contented decades in a nice job, I received a letter that asked, in confidence, that I give my opinion on my suitability for appointment to that job. To have applied myself honestly to such an unexpected exercise might have been a salutary and valuable experience; alas, before I did so I learnt that the clerk who made out the pro forma letter was new to the work, and unsupervised, and had misunderstood the difference between a candidate (for job 'A') and a referee (whose tenure of job 'B' the candidate had noted when indicating the identity of his referees).—WILL MACREDIE.