Reading for Pleasure

A sense of time and place

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One of the many pleasures that I get from reading is an evocation of past time. A good novelist like Flaubert vividly recreates bourgeois society in provincial France in the 1850s. By contrast, Thomas Hardy's melodramas evoke rural Dorset about 35 years earlier: my favourite is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Jane Austen is, of course, unique. Her world is that of the parsonage and the county families with aspirations for their daughters. Their bible is the baronetage. Her novels convey so well the social nuances of an amazingly class conscious society and its preoccupation with balls, elopements, suitable marriages, all delivered in that measured Austen prose.

I have been an admirer of Isaac Bashevis Singer ever since I did a glucose tolerance test on a lady who was reading *The Slave* with such rapt attention that each time I went to take a blood sample I felt I was intruding. I bought the book on my next half-day off and it lived up to expectations. Singer originally wrote most of his work in Yiddish for the New York Jewish daily paper, and only comparatively recently was his work translated into English. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. Much of his writing is set among the Jewish communities in Poland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this traditionalist society superstition was blended with religion and Jews were considered to be infidel outsiders by the native Polish population.

Bloomsbury—English and French

Biography is another means of experiencing life in an era and Quentin Bell's superb biography of his aunt *Virginia Woolf* makes Bloomsbury sparkle on its pages. We share Virginia's childhood and observe her slowly maturing into a writer, finding contentment with Leonard Woolf, and starting the Hogarth Press with him. She suffered from recurrent mental illness and eventually committed suicide. But Virginia is not the only person portrayed: the whole Bloomsbury phenomenon is there too with all its personalities—Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Vanessa (Virginia's sister), Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, and Lady Ottoline Morrell at Garsington.

Several biographies impinge on Bloomsbury, but I especially enjoyed *Portrait of a Marriage* by Nigel Nicolson, which describes the remarkable marriage of his parents Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. She was the great friend of Virginia Woolf, and it was Vita and her husband who created Sissinghurst, the beautiful Kent garden now owned by the National Trust. Even Julian Huxley's biography *Memories* has Bloomsbury connections, because he was a visitor to Garsington with his brother, Aldous, and it was there that he met his wife, who was governess to Ottoline and Philip Morrell's daughter.

Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and their circle—Gide, Genet, Camus, and others—were probably the French equivalent of the Bloomsbury group, though they were not contemporaries. I have admired Simone de Beauvoir ever since I read *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, and have since enjoyed her three other autobiographical volumes. The life of an author fascinates me and it is difficult to imagine that she had to struggle for over 10 years to produce her first book *She Came to Stay*. After reading her biography I appreciated her novels more, because many of them are based on events in her own life. I consider *The Mandarins* to be one of the great postwar novels. It describes the dilemma of a group of left-of-centre intellectuals after the liberation and their coming to terms with political reality.

Victims of an inquisition

At present, I am reading a book called *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294-1324* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Montaillou is a remote Pyrenean village, and it was one of the last outposts of Albigenian heresy in France. Fournier, the local bishop, was determined to oust the heretics (the Cathars) from his diocese, so he instigated an inquisition and documented rigorously the testimonies of all those who took part. The accused usually spoke in the local language, Occitan, which was subsequently translated into Latin by the documenting scribes. Fournier later became Pope Benedict XII at Avignon. The surviving document—now in the Vatican archives—consists of one big folio ledger written on parchment and this is Professor Ladurie's source. Much of the testimony included details of the personal life of the villagers so that we get an unprecedented panorama of domestic arrangements, diet, family size, and practices such as delousing. The unit of society, then as now, was the family, but there were also the nomadic shepherds with few family ties who were of great interest to the inquisition, because they were suspected of spreading the heresy on their travels. Indeed, some of them were the "parfaits" or good men of the outlawed religion.

Then there are the individual characters like the priest Pierre, of the dominant Clergue family. He admits that the only reason he is a priest is because of the power and relative wealth that accrues from the office. Lover of the ex-châtelaine Béatrice de Plannissoles, seducer of most of the nubile women in the village, he is a double agent who eventually suffers the same fate as those whom he has denounced in the past and he dies in prison in Carcassonne.

And there is Béatrice, a member of the lesser nobility, who has been sympathetic towards the Cathars since her youth. She has been married and widowed twice and, in true troubadour tradition, not in love with either of her husbands. Even so, she was more or less faithful to them—mainly through fear. When her first husband died she had a minor affair with Pierre Clergue's cousin, Pathan. Then, one day she went to confession to the priest Pierre, who did not give her time to confess her

sins but said: "I prefer you to any other woman in the world." These words are translated from the Latin but would have been uttered in Occitan by Béatrice to the inquisition.

The affair lasted two years. Then Béatrice went down to the plains and made a respectable second marriage. When her second husband died, she had a passionate love affair with a young priest—Barthélemy Aurilhac, her daughters' teacher. This time it was she who initiated the affair, but in the end he left her, partly because he was afraid of her Cathar past, and partly because of her age. But the inquisition caught up with them and they were both imprisoned for a year.

Béatrice belonged to the lesser nobility of the region, but her life is typical of the place that women held in society. It was a male dominated society where wife beating was frequent. Marriages were comparatively stable and wives were virtuous until they became widows. Promiscuity seems to have been reserved for young girls, widows, and maidservants. Nevertheless, though concubinage was accepted, illegitimacy was not and there is quite frequent mention of contraception, though the method used was not specified. It is these details that make the book so fascinating. Béatrice and all the other characters exude vitality and it is interesting to observe so closely a society untainted by Jansenist Catholic or Puritan Protestant reformers of later centuries.

Fascination of the Raj

Ever since I read *A Passage to India* by E M Forster, the Raj has fascinated me, and it has produced many excellent novels which portray well the lives of those generations of younger sons who went to India. The claustrophobia of the cantonment, the

gleam of regimental silver, the long absences from husband during the hot season and from children when they went back to school in England, are all vividly depicted. But, above all, they evoke the shimmering breathless heat of India, the longing for an English garden.

Nightrunners of Bengal by John Masters and *The Siege of Krishnapur* by J G Farrell give a terrifying impression of that fateful year 1857 when the whole continent was awash with blood. The cruelties perpetrated by both sides almost defy belief. The much-acclaimed *Raj Quartet* by Paul Scott brilliantly depicts India during the years of the second world war before independence. Above all, the author highlights the dilemma of Hari Kumar, a man caught between the two cultures, who has been educated at a British public school and then cast penniless home to India, where he is rejected by his own race. Despite his education and his accent, he is also rejected by the cantonment.

The Raj, the Pyrenees in the thirteenth century, and all those other eras are far removed from my own life. I had the same sort of Catholic upbringing as Simone de Beauvoir and Mary McCarthy, and their books *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* and *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* made a profound impression on me. I read them when I was 18, having spent the previous five years in a convent boarding school. I grew up in rural Ireland in the 1950s and early 60s so I know the sort of society that John McGahern describes so well in *The Dark* and *The Barracks*.

Berlin in the 1920s beckons me now. Since visiting the Paris-Berlin exhibition in that amazing building, the Beaubourg, in Paris, it has seemed full of interest with its mixture of artistic talent and sheer decadence. I am starting with Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and his Kind*.

Is there any risk from tabs pyridoxine 100 mg taken on three or four days in the first six weeks of an unsuspected pregnancy?

There is no definite evidence to indicate that excess pyridoxine, vitamin B₆, is teratogenic in man or animals. Nelson and Forfar¹ have implicated vitamins as possible teratogens when taken during the first 56 days of pregnancy, but in their retrospective study the increase in fetal malformations in the abnormal group over controls was significant only for nicotinamide, another vitamin B complex. Adenine, vitamin B₄, has been shown to be teratogenic in rats and mice. In this particular case 40 times the recommended daily dose was ingested (2.5 mg/day for pregnant women), though only for a very short period. The time of the drug exposure is important since the critical period for fetal exposure is from about the third to tenth week of intrauterine life.

¹ Nelson MM, Forfar JO. Associations between drugs administered during pregnancy and congenital abnormalities of the fetus. *Br Med J* 1971;i:523-7.

What is the present consensus of opinion for treating classic sciatica—that is, pain beginning in the lumbosacral region and extending down to the foot? In cases of severe pain what analgesics are recommended for long-term usage? What are the indications for surgery? Should laminectomy be recommended only as a last resort? What are the possible undesirable effects of surgery?

Acute sciatica should be treated initially with bed rest and analgesics. Failure to respond within a matter of weeks is indication for lumbar spine radiographs and myelography, and patients with a definite disc protrusion require lumbar laminectomy. Occasionally, it may be justifiable to operate on patients with a negative result of the myelogram or even without specialist radiological investigation. The presence of an appreciable neurological deficit (particularly sphincter disturbance) or any progressive neurological deficit indicates the need for urgent investigation and treatment in a specialist unit. Chronic sciatica poses one of the most difficult pain problems clinicians have to face. All such patients should have radiographs of the lumbar spine and most eventually will require myelography. A definite disc pro-

trusion is an indication for surgery, but the chances of improving patients with negative results in the myelograms is so slight that surgery should not be advised in such cases. Analgesics alone rarely help these patients, and certainly any potentially addictive drugs should be avoided. Otherwise, the choices vary among lumbar support, manipulations and other forms of physical treatment, epidural injections, heat and ultraviolet lamps, and, where indicated, specific psychiatric treatment. Complications of laminectomy include lumbar root damage, arachnoiditis and persistent pain, intervertebral disc infection (discitis), and the risks of the anaesthetic and associated bed rest.

What might cause unilateral swelling of the leg over several months in a long-standing case of osteoarthritis? The skin has become highly sensitive and two ulcers have developed.

Unilateral swelling of the leg below the knee may be associated with osteoarthritis of the knee joint. This may be an inflammatory oedema occurring especially with an acute exacerbation of the arthritis. Another possibility is that with gross osteoarthritic changes the development of a Baker's cyst in the popliteal fossa may cause venous obstruction due to direct pressure on the popliteal veins. A swelling in the popliteal fossa would suggest this diagnosis, and slight cyanosis of the skin associated with varicose veins and oedema would suggest venous compression. Osteoarthritis of the hip joint would not be particularly associated with oedema unless there was some immobility leading to stasis oedema. That the skin has become "sensitive with ulceration" would possibly suggest a venous cause for the oedema. The osteoarthritis might not be related to the oedema if the conditions above are not met, and might mask the true cause of the swelling. Unilateral oedema developing in the elderly patient must be investigated thoroughly. A full clinical history and examination are mandatory followed by appropriate investigations, which may include phlebography or lymphography. Pressure on veins or spread to lymphatics of a malignant process must be excluded. In an elderly man prostatic carcinoma must be considered, and in a woman carcinoma of the ovary or cervix.