Reading for Pleasure

Before and after a heart transplant

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For the examiners in gynaecology Cambridge finals are occasions to be anticipated with pleasure. Away from a busy London hospital for three days, there will be a sumptuous examiners' dinner at one college, and lunch at the maternity hospital each day is almost invariably convivial. Afterwards there should be a chance to browse in a good bookshop. Thus it was that I emerged from Heffer's in June 1979 with *A Reader's Guide to Proust*. At last the secrets which had eluded me were to be revealed and as I sat by the Cam in the sun before returning to London and work, turning over the pages and seeing such names as Albertine, Charlus, and Odette, I decided that this winter I would read Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. My winter reading began in September and coincided with a magnificent Fauré series at the Wigmore Hall. Proust died in 1922 and Fauré in 1924, and I hoped that with their similarity and setting, including perhaps a penchant for the salon, the music would enhance my reading. Unfortunately this was not to be; neither the voices of Elly Ameling, Ian Partridge, Régine Crespin, and Gerard Soussay, nor the several performances of the Nash Ensemble made any difference, and paragraph after paragraph seemed as banal as ever, though there were moments of pleasure, such as when Professor Cottard ordered "purgés, violent and drastic purges; milk for some days. No meat. No alcohol." With slackness of style and construction, and the interminable sentences, *Swann's Way*, *Budding Grove*, and half *Guermantes Way* took four months. Although no long book was to be embarked on until my task was finished I had to read some short pieces from time to time to remain sane, including stories by Marquez and a few by V S Pritchett, Roy Hattersley's usually entertaining articles in the *Listener*, and some of Arthur Waley's brilliant translations of the timeless poems by Po Chu 1 (772-846).

By Christmas, however, a change from Proust was indicated and although the next four weeks were not slack (a caesarean section during Christmas lunch, and the MRCOG with a co-examiner with whom I did not always agree about the marks for the oral and clinical examinations), I finished Pritchett's lively and superbly constructed autobiography *Cab at the Door and Midnight Oil*. On 26 January after dinner in Wimbledon I developed a severe pain in the chest, which I had never had before, and my hostess drove me to Barts.

Thirty hours after I was admitted to the coronary care unit with a myocardial infarct my condition apparently deteriorated alarmingly with the development of "cardiogenic shock." I was to learn later that this state, which lasted five days of which I

have little clear recollection, has a mortality approaching 90%, but fortunately I was treated vigorously and efficiently and survived. Later, after I was transferred to the ward, my cardiologist explained gently but firmly the seriousness of my condition and prognosis, neither of which pleased me. "I know several people who have had coronaries who led normal lives afterwards," I said. "Yes, but yours is rather different."

Somewhat crestfallen but not deterred I was determined to enjoy my enforced leisure and began reading, but both in hospital and later at home I needed the reassurance of books that I knew well. Nothing with which I was not familiar could be attempted, and possibly for the fifth time I read Duff Cooper's *Old Men Forget*, probably the best autobiography since the war, and then went on to his *Talleyrand*—to me the most talented and likable of foreign ministers. Both are written in limpid prose. Eliot's *The Waste Land* read by Alec Guinness on a record displayed many and varied voices—the adenoidal and genteel Madame Sosostriis, Lou talking about Lil who is worn out by childbearing and wants Albert to "leave her alone," and the barman's "Time gentlemen please." Next—with his phenomenal skill, edge, and presence of mind—came Graham Greene and the *The End of the Affair*, followed by *May we Borrow Your Husband?*, and works of Henry James and D H Lawrence. The scene in the farmhouse parlour with the young soldier and the two restless girls in *The Fox* is some of Lawrence's best writing. Not only was there pleasure in reading, but afterwards I could lie back on the pillow and marvel at his craftsmanship.

Chantemesle by Robin Fedden, a piece about his enchanted childhood near the Seine, was followed by *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man* by Sassoon. It was now the end of March and I gradually became too apathetic to read even the familiar; I was breathless and occasionally vomited, and went into hospital again where they found that my cardiac output had fallen to less than two litres a minute. Even to me it was clear that I had not long to live and that a heart transplant was the only hope. I accepted this suggestion readily: only a few days later after a traumatic night I became doubtful, however, but was persuaded to stick to my original agreement. Within 40 minutes of a telephone call from Papworth that a donor heart was available I was in an ambulance and had left Barts with two drips running to maintain my cardiac output and a police escort all the way to Papworth and the operating theatre.

Apart from a feeling of wellbeing the most noticeable change after the operation was a tremendous improvement in cerebral function, owing presumably to the increased blood flow to the brain, and from the third postoperative day I read *The Times*—not from cover to cover, because I cut out the boring bits like sport, the business news, and the law reports, but most of the rest. The paper had to be sterilised like everything else that came into my room, including cutlery, letters, and books. I was surprised to receive well over 400 letters and cards, and

completely overwhelmed by 38 books that came from my patients during the first few weeks. Never before had all my reading material been chosen for me, which was exciting because I met authors I might have avoided. Of course, the choice was not entirely random; patients often knew me better than I knew them, and some must have suspected my secret vice of rarely leaving a bookshop without making a purchase. Outpatients is always more fun if there is just one patient with a good book in her basket, as is the management of labour when the epidural is in and both husband and wife have settled down with a novel to await the baby's arrival. What did I choose to read from this newly acquired library during the 10 weeks in hospital and six weeks of convalescence?

Fiction and biography

By the end of the first week I was well into Piers Paul Read's *The Married Man*—on the recommendation of my Cambridge cardiologist, who had been a contemporary of Read's at St John's. This stylish novel, about a barrister who underestimates the two women in his life, reports dialogue with the accuracy of Henry Green, but the characters and plot are much richer. Except for Simenon I have read little crime so I was inclined to put two vintage Dick Francis stories *For Kicks* and *Enquiry* at the bottom of my list. "Very soporific," wrote the kind patient who runs a stockbroker's office. This was not my finding: they were much too gripping and well written. But though Simenon makes me yearn for France, Dick Francis does not make me want to go to the races. Nor did I know E F Benson, though I had teased a patient about reading trivia. Now I was to see that this was apparent only in *Miss Mapp* and *Mapp and Lucia*, the activities of a joyfully malevolent maiden aunt in a small Sussex town in the 'twenties which are described with adeptness and wit. V S Naipaul's *Guerrillas* is a masterpiece concerning people and problems of the third world in a small West Indian Island. The writing is so precise and aristocratic; the book demanded a second reading.

Two early books of Susan Hill—*Gentlemen and Ladies* and *A Change for the Better*—were a pleasure to discover, as I was under the misapprehension that I had read them all: unfortunately there will be no more, because the demands of a family have made her give up her remarkable creative writing, with its qualities of perception, compassion, and humour. In some women other factors affect literary creativity: one patient was unable to write a television script when she took the contraceptive pill, but another, after hysterectomy, gave up writing children's stories and was so successful with adult novels that she was a runner-up for a well-known prize. Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories—long and short—about Polish Jews in New York show his genius, but is it only my Jewish patients who read him? *The Enemies* and *A Friend of Kafka* were masterly. Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, which I first read nearly 30 years ago, brought back memories of the war in London. In a story of espionage and personal relationships Miss Bowen had an incisive perception and sensibility.

The otherwise normal occasionally preen themselves saying that they never read fiction—only biography—as if novels and the narrative imagination are slightly sinful. I enjoy both, and Rubinstein's *My Young Years* and *My Many Years* are irresistible, colourful, and sometimes very funny. I could not agree with *The Times* reviewer who said that the second volume showed "all too little depth." Fortunately for us Rubinstein was not a music critic. His talent has taken him everywhere to meet everybody and he has shown a zest for living. Much less interesting is *Notes of Seven Decades* by Antal Dorati, who gives away little of his personal life or musical interpretation. One wants to know, for example, much more about the interpretative problems with Haydn's 104 symphonies, which he has recorded, and much less about his American orchestral managers. Why does he need so much more time for rehearsal?

Does he just go over a piece again and again? The memoirs of Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte (published in 1830), and a recent well-researched biography of Vivaldi by Alan Kendall, are fascinating. Vivaldi is a much more elusive character than the flamboyant Da Ponte, but both books describe Venice in the eighteenth century, where life could occasionally be difficult. Both Da Ponte and Vivaldi's brother were banished from the city. Accounts of wartime intelligence and resistance have intrigued me since national service in Berlin with the British Military Government in the early 'fifties. *Very Special Admiral* is Patrick Beesley's life of John Godfrey, who was director of Naval Intelligence from 1938 to 1942, when he was brusquely dismissed, and *Six Faces of Courage* by M R D Foot traces the secret lives of six members of the resistance.

Places and prayer

Books on three capital cities arrived during my stay at Papworth. *The Streets of Paris* came, not from a patient, but from my bookseller in Curzon Street, who knows of my regard for Richard Cobb, the Oxford historian with a "great sense of place." This is not, as one would expect, about the French Revolution but a photograph album of streets, secret, modest, and bizarre in the French capital, discoverable only to the pedestrian. In Vienna in 1888-9 suicide became almost fashionable and *A Nervous Splendor* by Frederic Morton describes life in the seething capital of the Hapsburg empire when Crown Prince Rudolf killed his teenage mistress and then shot himself at Mayerling. More interesting, perhaps, are the intellectuals and musicians—Freud, Mahler, Klimt, Hugo Wolf, Johann Strauss, Bruckner, and Brahms—who were then living there. In *London Particulars* C H Rolph depicts the customs and children's games, lavender sellers and muffin men in London streets in the early years of this century.

Fortunately the *Letters of Henry Root* arrived after the sutures had been removed: these insolent and impudent letters to important people convulsed me with laughter. But is there really a Henry Root, or is it a nom de plume?

Having been very close to death I was pleased to be sent at the time of *The Times* correspondence on church liturgy the *Letters of Pope John Paul I*, written when he was patriarch of Venice. They came with a message that it was not an attempt to convert me to Catholicism. The letters, which formed a series of newspaper articles, are vivid, humorous, and happy. Later too, I read *A Cloud of Unknowing*, an all-English devotional classic written in the fourteenth century on mysticism and contemplation.

At Papworth there was much to occupy my time; during the first four weeks a nightly infusion of antithymocyte globulin via a central venous line took three to five hours and there were daily x-ray examinations, ECG, and cardiac phasing as well as physiotherapy—which became more and more vigorous. An endocardiac biopsy was performed every two weeks, and in the last three weeks daily visits to the gym for exercise on the static bicycle were permitted, and there was, of course, Radio Three. After 10 happy weeks, however, I was allowed to return to Barts for a few days and then to my mother's home in Bristol for six weeks' convalescence. This was the longest stay there since I was a schoolboy. She had studied the cholesterol-free diet that I needed. There is a large open space near the Clifton Downs where I could cycle 5-10 miles each day as well as a piano where with scales, Hanon exercises, and some Bach inventions I could make my fingers supple again. But I carried on reading too. *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* were the first Shakespeare plays that I had read closely since school certificate days in 1945, and they gave me immense pleasure.

A new translation of *Remembrance of Time Past* comes out this autumn. If you had a heart transplant would you read it? Or lay down 1978 claret?