Reading for Pleasure

A touchstone for the 1980s?

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Even the most casual reader of nineteenth-century English fiction will have noticed the frequency with which innocent and lovable children people the novels of Dickens and George Eliot, all three Brontë sisters, Mrs Gaskell, and Thackeray. The plight of the child as helpless victim can be counted on to arouse salutary anger in all right-thinking adults, and serves to focus their attention on the pressures within family or society itself that allow the young and powerless to be exploited, deformed, and exposed to the possibility of corruption. American writing of the same period has *Huckleberry Finn*, while in Russian there is a whole range of characters from Dostoevsky's Sonya, the near-child prostitute supporting her brothers and sisters on her earnings, to Tolstoy's younger Rostovs, and the little son and daughter of *Anna Karenina*. At the high watermark of the European novel Henry James's *Nanda and Maisie*, pawns manipulated by scheming adults, grow through their experience to compassion rather than cynicism; Proust's childhood self regains a whole interior world in *Remembrance of Things Past* when the aftermath of the Great War has blighted his adult life; and Thomas Mann's Hanno *Buddenbrooks*, carrying burdens too great for him with courage and humour, testifies to the continuing power of those who have none to enlist the genius of great writers on their behalf.

Things past

Though the touchstone as a device of narrative fiction is as old as storytelling itself—consider all those myths where a foundling or an old crone begging at the roadside turns out to be a devil or a god in disguise—the nineteenth-century development stems in essence from the Romantic movement, and in Britain especially from Wordsworth. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, most notably in *We Are Seven* and *The Idiot Boy*, he struck a note which has resounded ever since in the heads of the literate; he made educated fashionable people aware of what it must be like to be neither the one nor the other, establishing empathy, rather than sympathy, as a compelling force towards a responsible awareness of the pain of others. From that time on the reader and the characters about which he reads are to share this grace of the imagination. We recognise the good girl, the fit consort for the redeemed hero, because she is kind to babies, or nurses the sick and dying, or treats a lunatic with respectful tenderness; and, on the other hand, adults who are indulgent, capricious, or offhand in their response—especially to children—are never to be trusted.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen writes with calm good sense of Lucy Steele's hypocritical adoration of Lady Dashwood's spoilt brats and allows us to agree with Elinor that we

"never think of quiet children with any abhorrence"; that coolness of touch would have been impossible even 25 years later. For there had been children in fiction before Wordsworth's time, and there are plenty of them still; it is the rhetoric of their presence that concerns us, the use to which their creators put them, to point out and point up the sicknesses that they diagnosed in their own time. Because we know that the true state of the child in Victorian society was as bad as the novelists' imagined conditions, we accept that *Oliver Twist* and *Smikey*, *Little Father Time* and *Arthur Huntingdon*—whose drunken father in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* actually sets about making him into a copy of his dissipated self—are victims of perennial evil in mankind, and that we, as well as the adults of their stories, are to be judged by our response to their sufferings, our effective practical determination not to allow little children to be treated in such inhuman ways.

Writers, then, were in the vanguard of the movement towards the recognition of the child's claim to adult concern; and writers, I submit, are currently ahead of the field in picking out the natural successor to the child in his role of superfluous and irritating burden on the working adult. I refer, of course, to the aged, whose numbers are increasing disproportionately; who are consigned as soon as possible to idleness in order to open up channels of promotion to younger people; whose role as a storehouse of traditional wisdom and valued experience has been lost with the advance of technology; who use up a high proportion of the resources of the health and social services; who, in a word, clutter up the place when, "if they are like to die they had better do so, and so reduce the surplus population," as Scrooge, following Malthus, succinctly puts it in *A Christmas Carol*—though naturally the reference then was to the unwanted children of the poor.

Responses to old age

Very few men and women, active and independent in their 60s, look forward with equanimity to the prospect of becoming increasingly dependent on their families or on the provision made for them by society. Alas, they are not as pretty and promising as children, and time can only increase their need for help where it diminishes the infant's irksome claims. The old, and the way we see and feel about and treat them, test our compassion today as children did in that earlier time; and it should not surprise us that there is growing up a rich and varied narrative literature of senescence. I am not thinking now of the later volumes of long novel sequences, such as Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* or Paul Scott's *Staying On*, the beautiful sequel to his *Raj Quartet*, where many characters' entire passage through life is charted, and the final books like Proust's *Time Regained* are therefore much concerned with protagonists now elderly. Nor do I have in mind novels which include an old person or two, appropriate to the setting and action, for these are no new phenomenon. There are elderly

characters in the major books of all considerable novelists and some of these are important to the action—as is Mr Harding, for instance in Trollope's *The Warden*, or Mrs Moore in Forster's *A Passage to India*.

The books that have meaning, I think, are still few but share a high degree of excellence. Pre-eminent in the genre is Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, with William Trevor's *The Old Boys* running it a close second. Paul Bailey's first novel *At The Jerusalem* is highly regarded, but his more recent *Old Soldiers* falls into the trap of imprecision and hence of sentimentality, from which sharp observation and a closer attention to accurate detail would have redeemed it. That sensitive and underestimated writer Elizabeth Taylor made a fine contribution with *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*; but Angus Wilson's *The Old Men in the Zoo* is as much fable as novel and perhaps falls outside my brief, as, for a different reason, does his *Late Call*, where the effect of elderly parents coming to share their son's home casts light on his predicament at least as much as their own. But it is so well observed and so truthful that it brings me naturally full circle, to the point where I see once again how Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, misread in the first half of this century as silly and patronising, are to be seen as the great source of this long delayed departure.

I submit that in the quiet stoicism of *The Leech Gatherer* or the shamed dependence of the once physically powerful Simon Lee in his eponymous poem we have the mainspring of that immensely witty, moving, savage book of Muriel Spark's, *Memento Mori*, which I urge you to read if you have not already done so.

To be fully victims, children must not be protected by loving parents or soundly managed social institutions: many, perhaps most, of the children of Victorian fiction are orphaned; if they go to school, it is to Lowood or the academy of Wackford Squeers; if they have a step-parent, he is Mr Murdstone. To arouse our full sense of the piteousness of their state, old people must be similarly isolated. They may never have married, or they may have lost their spouses: or, if they have a living husband or wife, as do Geoffrey Colston in *Memento Mori* or the terrible Basil Jarraby in *The Old Boys*, there is no sympathy between them. Both pairs have sons in middle age, who loathe them, and are loathed in return, though not equally by both parents. Elizabeth Taylor's Mrs Palfrey has just lost her husband; her only daughter lives in Scotland and is content to

let her mother move into a private hotel in London, where she knows nobody. There is one grandson, whose sole reluctant visit to his grandmother is a failure.

The Claremont is a hotel which caters for elderly residents, smuggling out one arthritic octogenarian when the awkwardness of her incontinence outweighs the advantage of her custom. Like the *Home* of David Storey's play—for dramatists as well as novelists are working this seam—or the geriatric ward of *Memento Mori*, it is the icy environment that calls out admiration for the stoicism of those who survive and equals the Lowood or Marshalsea, Fagin's Lair, or Wuthering Heights of Hindley's time. For the neglectful or bullying step-parents and teachers of the novels of suffering childhood, substitute callous nurses, officious social workers, parasitical paid companions, the rapacious or coldly dutiful offspring of aged protagonists. For the inherent pathos of littleness in the neglected child we have the pathos of diminution, as bodily and intellectual function deteriorates, and helplessness undermines the brave enduring spirit. When Charmian Piper, the bully Colston's wife, struggles to make herself a cup of tea unaided after the stroke which puts her with her husband into the power of the credibly evil Mrs Pettigrew, we feel much the same delight in her achievement as we feel when David Copperfield at last reaches Dover. Against enormous odds the spirit has prevailed. Only it will not prevail for ever; it is hard for the literature of senescence to close on any note but that of qualified despair.

It is part of the splendour of *Memento Mori* that the novel altogether avoids that ultimate sterility. Only Henry Mortimer, of all the ancient characters, has children and grandchildren living and loving him. He has worked hard all his life, and has a wife who will survive him. Both know that his death is imminent. All the principals are receiving telephone calls from a mysterious stranger, who simply says, when they lift the receiver, "Remember you must die." Each perceives the caller according to his or her own nature: the voice threatens, scolds, is obscene, insinuating, coercive, kindly, terrible; only the profoundly religious Jean Taylor, dying in hospital, has received no such call: she needs none. And only Mortimer, the expoliceman, husband, father, and grandfather, has heard the voice as that of a loving woman. That Muriel Spark can produce so overwhelming a sense of what is absolutely truthful in so witty and cool a book is a mark of her individuality as a writer, and a tribute to the vitality and authenticity of this new genre.

Are there any harmful effects of ultrasound? Is there any difference between the type of ultrasound used in imaging techniques and those used in industrial "sonic bath" cleaning procedures and laboratory liquid mixing devices? I ask because industrial and laboratory equipment often emits a high pitch sound that sets one's teeth on edge and is unpleasant to work with for more than a few minutes.

Ultrasound is by definition a sound of such high frequency as to be inaudible. It is a form of energy and therefore is a potential source of harm to living cells if they become exposed to sufficient energy. Diagnostic imaging techniques use high frequencies in the Megahertz range to obtain greater resolution. The sensitivity of modern apparatus enables satisfactory results to be obtained from the use of minute energies when the region under examination is subjected to pulses of ultrasound using a radar technique to obtain an image by the reflected waves. Industrial and laboratory procedures, on the other hand, generally use lower frequencies, typically 20-80 kHz, with much greater energies being applied to disturb the receiving materials sufficiently for the desired effect to occur, and with continuous radiation by ultrasound. Great differences in the acoustic properties of the liquids in the ultrasound apparatus and of the surrounding air that separates workers from the apparatus ensures that the workers are exposed to only a very small proportion of the total acoustic energy generated. Manufacturers of industrial ultrasound equipment normally provide absorbing enclosures to reduce the escaping ultrasound still further. In these circumstances, there is so little airborne energy that the extra attenuation that occurs in its passing through the middle ear

reduces still more the risk to the structures of the internal ear. Evidence of damage to hearing by industrial use of ultrasound is rare. Nevertheless, at times complaints are made regarding the unpleasant high pitched sounds heard from apparatus operating at the lower ultrasound frequencies, and the World Health Organisation has proposed limits for safeguarding hearing, based on an extrapolation from the known damaging effects of intense audible sound.

Most medical physicists who use ultrasound diagnostically believe that the dose received by patients during medical examination is harmless to them and their offspring. Some clinicians, however, have reservations, and the Food and Drug Administration in the United States has recently produced a discussion document that cites recent evidence of apparent adverse biological effects from low energy ultrasound on the neuromotor system of developing rodents but which expresses some reservation that the findings may also apply to man. It appears that apart from the unpleasant character of the noise omitted, no permanent effects of importance to those occupationally exposed has been documented.¹⁻⁴ In diagnostic applications over many years great care has been taken to minimise the energy applied to patients. So far as is known, no deleterious effects in man have been detected, but the problem continues to be scrutinised.

¹ Acton WI, Hill CR. Hazards of industrial ultrasound. *Protection* 1977;14:12.

² Knight JJ. Effects of airborne ultrasound on man. *Ultrasonics* 1968;6:39.

³ Liebeskind D, Bases R, Elequin F, et al. Diagnostic ultrasound: effects on the DNA and growth patterns of animal cells. *Radiology* 1979;131:177-84.

⁴ Parrack HO. Effects of airborne ultrasound on humans. *Int Audiol* 1966;5:294.