

Reading for Pleasure

Lyrics, love, and logic

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As a child I had a mild form of dyslexia and found reading difficult, with the result that at high school I concentrated on subjects such as chemistry and mathematics which required less of this skill. Nevertheless I was fortunate during my National Service to meet a young Cambridge arts graduate who introduced me to a whole new world—that of English literature. Under his tutelage I gained confidence in reading and, for the first time, began to appreciate the immense pleasure to be gained from books. Years later I even took a course in rapid reading which has been a boon in my work ever since. But for pleasure I rarely read about my own subject or about medicine. Otherwise, I am an omnivorous reader though my particular interests have always centred around poetry, music, and biography.

I tend to develop penchants for particular subjects or writers which may last for several months when I read all I can of relevance. Latterly, for example, I have developed a deep respect and admiration for Arthur Koestler, whose range of interests is considerable. On the one hand, there is the immensely funny, but discerning, novel *The Call-Girls*. The call-girls are the jet-setting academics who, at the lift of a telephone, will fly to a conference anywhere in the world to speak about their pet subjects. Koestler shows up their (?our) foibles and eccentricities only too clearly.

Creation in art and science

At the other extreme, we have *The Act of Creation*, a penetrating study of discovery whether it be in art or science. To Koestler the act of creation is very rarely spontaneous, and the mathematical genius Evariste Galois is an exception. Galois was killed in an absurd duel at 20, but the few notes he left behind completely transformed higher algebra. He postulated a theorem that could not have been understood by his contemporaries because it was based on mathematical principles which were to be discovered nearly a quarter of a century later. Koestler argues, however, that creation much more commonly includes selection, reshuffling, combining and synthesising of already existing facts, ideas, faculties, and skills. In this way, a paradox is often created: the more familiar the parts, the more striking the new whole. In the act of creation it would seem that at one end of the scale there are discoveries due to a conscious, logical reasoning, and one is reminded of George Bernard Shaw's aphorism "ninety per cent perspiration, ten per cent inspiration." At the other extreme we have the sudden insight and intuition, and

here one is reminded of Picasso's "Je ne cherche pas, je trouve." Darwin's theory of evolution would presumably fit somewhere between these two extremes.

It was through one of Koestler's books that I first became interested in haiku, a form of Japanese poetry, centuries old. A haiku may be defined as a "... seventeen-syllable poem arranged in three lines of five, seven and five syllables, having some reference to the season and expressing the poet's union with nature." (*The Haiku Form*; J Giroux):

Snowflakes on the sand,
The same today as ever,
Yet melts to nothing—

To me, haiku is the quintessence of poetry depending, as Giroux points out, on the reader's powers of awareness, bringing him close to simple, elemental truths, as well as on the ability of the poem to grow in meaning as it is read and reread.

In the last few months I have also read and enjoyed two strangely different biographies of that poetic giant Lord Byron (*Byron—A Portrait*, L A Marchand, and *Byron*, Elizabeth Longford), who, having been born of a Scottish mother and raised in Aberdeen, might well have been considered Scotland's other national poet. Interestingly, the place where he was born—16 Holles Street (between Oxford Street and Cavendish Square)—is now the site of the John Lewis store, which has a Byron room. While languishing in Missolonghi shortly before his death, the very last poem he wrote (the particular inspiration for which I think is unimportant) ends:

... and yet thou lov'st me not,
And never wilt! Love dwells not in our will.
Nor can I blame thee, though it be my lot
To strongly, wrongly, vainly love thee still.

which must be one of the saddest commentaries on a life of passion.

The *Pelican Biographies* paperback series are a treasurehouse of inexpensive authoritative biographies. Recently I have read a biography of another poet published in this series: *The Life of Ezra Pound* (Noel Stock). What a complex personality Ezra Pound was: brilliant, original, and a man of wide scholarship (he translated much Chinese poetry) but always teetering on the border of sanity. It was because of this, of course, that he was eventually considered unfit to plead against the indictment that he aided the Fascist cause in his broadcasts from Italy during the war brought against him in 1945 by the US Government. After the trial he spent the next 13 years in a psychiatric hospital before returning to Italy, where he died in 1972 at the age of 87. No doubt the psychiatrists can make much of this man's poetry in the light of his psychiatric illness, which can presumably be said of several other revered poets—John Clare and William Blake being two classic examples.

In the summer of 1910 Freud was on holiday by the Baltic relaxing after the second congress of the Psychoanalytical Society. He was always loath to interrupt his holidays for any

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professional work but when asked to see a distinguished composer he could hardly refuse, though he himself had little interest in music. Thus begins an interesting saga in the life of another complex individual, Gustav Mahler, whose biography by Kurt Blaukopf (*Gustav Mahler*) provides a fascinating insight. From Freud's notes it appears that he considered a crucial factor in Mahler's emotional life was a mother fixation. She bore 12 children under far from happy circumstances and, like Byron, she was congenitally lame. Freud believed that Mahler considered his mother a sort of feminine ideal and tried to find her care-worn features in his wife. In many ways this influenced not only his personal relationships but probably his music as well. Mahler himself appears to have had some insight into the emotional experiences which may have influenced his work:

Anyone who has listened to Mahler's music will know how frequently the expression of tragic feeling is interrupted by frivolous turns or simple melodic themes that appear banal. Mahler offered Freud a psychological explanation for this. He spoke of his father's callous attitude to his mother and of the ugly scenes he had witnessed. During one of their painful quarrels he had rushed out of the house. And outside he ran into an organ-grinder churning out the trivial tune *O du lieber Augustin, alles ist hin*. . . . The brutal dissonance of tragic events with the frivolous and commonplace haunted him all his life, dominating him even at moments of maximum inspiration.

Though admittedly perhaps a little naive, I have always found such possible explanations for the work of creative artists intriguing. Philip Barford's *Mahler Symphonies and Songs* is a readable, short and non-technical account of his music. It is one of the *BBC Music Guides* series of short monographs, each dealing with one aspect of a composer's work and which I would highly recommend to anyone who, like myself, enjoys music but has little technical knowledge. And, while on the subject of music, I would also strongly recommend Lionel Salter's *The Gramophone Guide to Classical Composers and Recordings*. It is beautifully illustrated with over 130 biographies, each followed by details of recommended recordings of works by the composer in question.

Two men and a woman

There are three other fascinating characters whose recent biographies I have found particularly interesting: Marie Stopes, Francis Galton, and Bertrand Russell. Ruth Hall's *Marie Stopes—A Biography* is a highly readable and well-researched study of perhaps one of the most intriguing women of our time. Born in Abercromby Place, Edinburgh, of a Quaker and Nonconformist father and a mother of the Free Church of Scotland it would not be surprising if there were not many contrasts in her attitudes to life. Though a feminist and prime mover in birth control, nowadays she would hardly be considered a free thinker for she was strongly against abortion, extramarital and premarital sex, masturbation, and lesbianism. Of course, she did far more than advocate birth control. More than almost anyone else she helped to transform the “. . . apparently immutable nature of the sexual relationship between men and women . . . that women must be taught how to regain the instinctive delight in physical passion that society has succeeded in repressing; and that men must learn to recognise these unacknowledged needs and to substitute, for immediate sensual gratification, a greater understanding and sensitivity.”

I doubt if anyone could be further removed emotionally from Marie Stopes than Francis Galton (*Francis Galton: The Life and Work of a Victorian Genius*, D W Forrest). Like his illustrious cousin, Charles Darwin, Galton started out as a medical student and, also like his cousin, forsook medicine on being left a considerable legacy. Apart from a spell at Cambridge, where he contented himself with a pass degree in mathematics, he spent

the rest of his life in travel, exploration, and genetic studies. His interest in human heredity included the study of twins, as a means of attacking the problem of nature versus nurture, the study of hereditary genius and, of course, eugenics—a term he first coined in 1883 in his book *Human Faculty*.

But he was essentially a polymath and his interests extended widely and included parapsychology, the nature of sensation, photography, dermatoglyphics, anthropometry and, in common with Mendel, even meteorology. He was plagued by recurrent “breakdowns”, but it seems unlikely that these episodes were anything more than a simple reaction to overwork in an individual, again like his cousin, with more than a tendency to hypochondriasis. These episodes were quickly remedied by trips abroad. He may not have been very happily married. His wife liked children, he did not, and, in fact, the marriage was childless. She enjoyed music, which he actively disliked, and she was a practising Christian, while Galton was an agnostic, though oddly enough he attended church and conducted daily prayers for the household. He died a rich man and left £45 000 to the University of London to endow a chair of eugenics. But to Giff his servant “. . . in return for forty years' devoted service he left £200. Francis Galton was not only a genius, he was also unmistakably a Victorian.”

Of all the books I have read in the last year or so, the one from which I have perhaps derived most pleasure is the recent biography of Bertrand Russell by Ronald Clark (*The Life of Bertrand Russell*), which I read on holiday this summer. I enjoyed it for three main reasons. Firstly, it is written in a lucid and attractive manner. Secondly, it is detailed and authoritative. Finally, it is about a fascinating and brilliant man who, by anyone's standards, would have to be considered among the greatest intellects of this century. Russell admitted to three consuming passions: love, humanity, and knowledge. Marital and extramarital episodes occupied most of his long life and, because he was a compulsive letter writer, much of what he felt at these times is available for study by biographers. In these letters he expressed his feelings with considerable candour and sincerity. He was also a great humanist, and it is quite possible that some of his negotiations and machinations later in his life might well have helped to avert an atomic war between the great powers.

His name will always be associated with the Aldermaston marches, the Committee of One Hundred, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and, of course, the Pugwash conferences. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, but perhaps it will be his contributions to mathematics (with Whitehead he wrote the classic *Principia Mathematica*), philosophy, and logic which will survive longest. I am not qualified to judge his standing in these subjects, though clearly Clark considers these the hallmarks of his career.

I hope, therefore, that I may be excused for ending this brief essay on books that I have enjoyed with a short jingle of my own which I will call “The Paradox” (with apologies to Epimenides):

“All Cretans are liars!” or so he said,
And left us all to consider,
For ever after to argue this
To try to solve the riddle.

“Is this a fact or is it not?”
The Cretan posed the puzzle,
For if it is, then it is not,
So creating an awful muddle.

And so since then the debate raged on,
Each philosopher taking fright,
For when he thought he'd solved it all
It did not prove quite right.

Then Bertrand Russell with his maths,
And logic strained belief,
Dispatched the riddle, it seems for ever,
To everyone's relief.