



MAGIC LETTERS

Reading as Therapy

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My seventy years love affair with fiction

READING AS THERAPY

In our life, imagination has a great place. Since the import of the ancient cultures, works of fiction, novels and plays, have given people balance and healing. The therapeutic value of fantasy develops in different levels, from play to esthetics to spiritual ecstasy, depending on the depth of the works and the breath of humanity of the writers. In this article, the experience of a reader addicted to fiction becomes a parable of discovery, purification and wholeness.

I have memories from boyhood and adolescence of being wrapped up in books. Books were a way of escaping the world but also of entering it in a manner that was more intense; a way of discovering feelings, of working out how to live. Or simply the way to enjoy the world's greatest pleasure: reading.

The attention is on fiction. I remember how I was waiting eagerly for the arrival at the parish of the weekly cartoon magazine and then the joy of sitting with it in a corner and flying with the imagination to the equatorial forest or the mountains or the desert, following the vicissitudes of the heroes. The ideals of the fictional characters became my ideals and prepared me to embrace missionary life.

In the course of my adventurous life across the continents, works of fiction have accompanied me every single day of my life, even when I was on safari in Africa, sleeping in a grass hut at the light of a candle or a kerosene lamp. Unconsciously, I have always felt that this consuming passion for reading fiction was bringing balance and healing into my life. Books have done me good, not only to my knowledge of language and capacity of expression and communication, but also to my physical and psychological health.

The importance of imagination

I was surprised to find that the intuition I always had i. e. that imagination is important in life was already formulated by Albert Einstein: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while

imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand. I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination”.

“Perhaps imagination is the basis for all knowledge due to the fact that any kind of invention or theory is either created or purposed as a result of an idea formatted from imagination. It can't be denied that everything that has led to great discoveries is part of someone's imagination. For me imagination is a way to unlock hidden doors”.

Imagination is not important only for knowledge, but more so for mental health and wholeness. The conviction of the therapeutic value of works of imagination goes back to the experience of the ancient world. Catharsis (from the ancient Greek word meaning "purification" or “purging”) is the cleansing of emotions—particularly pity and fear—through art that result in renewal and restoration.

It is a metaphor originally used by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, who compared the effects of tragedy on the mind of a spectator to the effect of a cathartic on the body. It is a medical metaphor. It describes a spiritual therapy. It is generally understood that Aristotle's concept of mimesis (the intellectual pleasure of learning) and catharsis is a response to Plato's negative view of the effects of art on an audience.

Plato argued that the most common forms of artistic performance were designed to evoke from an audience powerful emotions such as pity, fear, and ridicule which override the rational control that defines the highest level of our humanity and lead us to wallow unacceptably in the overindulgence of emotion and passion.

Aristotle's concept of catharsis contradicts Plato's view by providing a mechanism that generates the rational control of irrational emotions. All of the commonly held interpretations of catharsis, purgation, purification, and clarification are considered by most scholars to represent a homeopathic process, a healing process, a therapy.

Play, esthetics, consumption

The production of fiction in our contemporary world is enormous. Fiction books are bought at stalls in railways stations or airport lounges together with cigarettes and packets of chips. They are object of consumption and the catharsis is full stomach, satisfaction. To follow an author is to become familiar with a formula which is repeated and expected to appear: the catharsis is play. More profoundly, it is the language of the writer, his style that we admire and enjoy; then the catharsis is esthetics. All these aspects do have a therapeutic value even if superficial.

I started my reading adventure with action books. Alistair MacLean, the author of “The Guns of Navarone” (1957), was my favorite writer. Many years later, I now understand

that his works were in fact romance novels for boys, which means very little romance and lots of danger, complicated weaponry and battle-forged camaraderie.

MacLean's heroes were all loners, strong and mostly silent. They didn't chase women or even miss them. Sometimes, in the middle of a covert operation or a terrorist heist, a beautiful girl would come along and briefly win the hero's heart. But soon he had to shove his feelings back in the glove compartment, pick up a marlin spike and rounds of ammunition and save the world, while making the occasional wisecrack.

Then came the passion for Dick Francis. His first thriller: "Dead Cert" published in 1962, like its successors, is set in the world of horse racing. Subsequently he regularly produced a novel a year for the next 38 years. All the novels are narrated by the hero, who in the course of the story discovers himself to be more resourceful, brave, tricky, than he had thought, and usually finds a certain salvation for himself as well as bestowing it on others.

Details of other people's occupations fascinated Francis, and I found myself immersed in the mechanics of such things as photography, accountancy, the gemstone trade, restaurant service on transcontinental trains—but always in the interests of the plot. It is a teeming fictional landscape of doping, bungs, intrigue and betting scams, and it appears that much of them was due to the pen of his wife Mary who was rather frightened of horses. Many a night I have slept late because of the lean style of Dick Francis and his plots. But it did me so good, it brought with it the sleep of the just.

Modern Qoheleths

With age came the discovery of more sophisticated writers whose outlook did not include the mystic dimension, but who had a cheap philosophical grin, mostly more cynic than otherwise. Yet their works had a more stringent taste and their style matched their outlook. Their view of human nature reminded me of the disenchanted expressions of the preacher, Qoheleth, in the Bible. Raymond Chandler is the most remarkable of them.

The Little Sister, published in 1949, is not the best or worst of his seven novels, but its first page contains perhaps the most characteristic opening in all his work. We are in the "reasonably shabby" office of his iconic private detective, Philip Marlowe, whose name is flaking away from the pebbled-glass door, and the private dick, fly-swatter in hand, is watching intently a patch of sunlight at the corner of his desk, where he knows a bluebottle fly will sooner or later alight.

Outside, it is "one of those clear, bright summer mornings we get in the early spring in California before the high fog sets in. The fur stores and brothels of Los Angeles

are doing brisk business, and in Beverly Hills the jacaranda trees are starting to bloom". Back in the office, a ringing telephone, and a nervous woman on the line...

To my taste, his most meaningful character is the mysterious Rusty Reagan of his first novel "The Big Sleep" (1931). Everybody is looking for him. He has already disappeared before the story starts and only at the end of the book his fate is revealed: he has fallen victim of one of the deadly female characters typical of Chandler's stories. So, the cynic, philosophical conclusion, where however there remains a certain nobility in the fact that the detective does not disclose the fate of Rusty so that the old man, the unknowing father of the killer, may maintain a good memory of the young man he admired and loved with fatherly affection:

"What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn't have to be. He could lie quietly in his canopied bed, with his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting. His heart was a brief, uncertain murmur. His thoughts were as grey as ashes. And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep".

A nostalgia of the heights

Elmore Leonard, the writer of the crime world, is my last discovery. His disillusioned approach to the characters of people outside the law is made interesting by an appealing degree of humanity. He occasionally uses the same character in more than one novel, and admitted that his main character was often "the same guy with a different name".

That guy was a tarnished hero, usually but not invariably male, unafraid to break the law but with a fundamental sense of decency, if not of legality. Against him range the forces, not of law and order, but of chaos and violence. They are invariably embodied in one wrongdoer whose skills in murder, mutilation and mayhem are chillingly refined. Each of these villains' unpredictable behavior permits the action to unfold with maximum risk to everyone they encounter.

The stringent style, the perfect dialogue, the contemporary idiosyncratic settings: all contribute to the popularity of Elmore Leonard's stories many of which have been made into successful movies. He was educated by the Jesuits and in quite a few novels he mentions Catholic practices often in an atmosphere of light irony. This makes the characters more realistic and interesting. His protagonists without any religious depths are very dull to me. Crime can be very boring.

“Bandits” (1987) is possibly the most fascinating crime story he has written. Set in New Orleans it is pulsating with the beat, sights, smells of that easy-going city. What makes it special is the first fully realized and most endearing heroine, the lovely, dark-haired, five-foot-three Lucy Nichols, the slender ex-nun in pressed Calvins, and Jack, the ex-con who thinks he has gone straight, and Roy, the ex-cop whose career was cut short by a prison term. Here, in New Orleans they have stumbled onto a cache of several million dollars on its way to the Nicaraguans Contras.- and they have a plan. Together they are going to make out like...bandits! Sister Lucy wants to rebuild the lepers’ hospital which the contras have destroyed.

She is leaving the order : the Sisters of Saint Francis of the Stigmata, but she re-creates reminiscing the fascination of Francis of Assisi’s love story: the unusual setting made of ex-cons gives a special flavor to the whole novel and somehow gives a taste of a humanity with a certain spiritual depth, here only caught as a glimpse of higher realities.

“Greenland”

But I am indebted to the three great writers Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Shusaku Endo for the experience of catharsis as religious ecstasy. These writers have accompanied me for many years, for the best part of my life. All their production has been object of my long love, visitation, re-visitation at distance of time, reflection, enchantment. The fact that they are all converts to Catholicism certainly resonated in my mind and aroused my interest as believer and I could identify with their characters and their drama.

Graham Greene's novels often have religious themes at their centre. In his literary criticism, he attacked the modernists for having lost the religious sense which, he argued, resulted in dull, superficial characters, who "wandered about like cardboard symbols through a world that is paper-thin." Only in recovering the religious element, the awareness of the drama in the soul that carries the permanent consequence of salvation or damnation, and of the ultimate metaphysical realities of good and evil, sin and divine grace, could the novel recover its dramatic power.

Suffering and unhappiness are omnipresent in the world Greene depicts; and Catholicism is presented against a background of unvarying human evil, sin, and doubt. Critics praised Greene as the first English novelist since Henry James to present, and grapple with, the reality of evil.

Greene concentrated on portraying the characters' internal lives – their mental, emotional, and spiritual depths. His stories are often set in poor, hot and dusty tropical places such as Mexico, West Africa, Vietnam, Cuba, Haiti, and Argentina, which led to

the coining of the expression "Greenland" to describe such settings and the spiritual landscapes of the characters who inhabits them.

"The Power and the Glory" (1940) takes place in revolutionary Mexico, where the church is banned and priests are outlawed. A bad priest, guilty of drunkenness and lechery, is sustained by his original commitment when confronted by the ultimate challenge. The police lieutenant, his opponent, represents the non religious humanist view and is a good and honorable man, as the priest acknowledges at the end. The two characters are finely realized as are the atmosphere of the revolution and the simple faith of the very poor who have only a bad priest to turn to in their extremity. The bad priest emerges almost as a saint at the conclusion. The book established Greene as a novelist, but did not prove at satisfaction that the Catholic religion was really important for him.

With "The Heart of the Matter" (1948) the Catholic aspect has become an unbelievable complication of conscience that does not convince. It is a false depth that makes the saintly protagonist unsatisfactory. But the author's command of narrative and his finely planed style reach a pitch of excellence that makes his work compulsively readable.

More convincing the stories that followed: "The Quiet American" (1955) set in Vietnam, "The Comedians"(1966) set in the Haiti of Duvalier and the Tontons Macoute, "The Honorary Consul" (1973) set in Argentina and "The Human Factor" (1978) set in London and Moscow. These four novels deal with the committed and the un-committed caught up in places and events in which the "comedians" are those who will never feel the need for any kind of committal.

Fully committed and with a touching, tragic human depth, though more of an agnostic, is the protagonist of "The Human Factor", Maurice Castle. The last page is heart-rending with the phone that goes dead on the much loved African wife and the protagonist swallowed up by the immense silence of communist Russia.

God's works of grace

"Brideshead Revisited: the Sacred and Profane memories of Captain Charles Rider" (1945) by Evelyn Waugh is a complex work about an old Catholic family and it is considered his best novel. Its popularity is justified by the ten hours TV-series by the same title, starring Jeremy Irons in the part of Charles Ryder.

The story is an attempt to trace the workings of the divine purpose in a pagan world. Ryder is an innocent pagan who enters the world of the great Catholic family and his behavior is conditioned by his response to them. The members of the family are all flowed in different ways and yet the mysterious work of God's grace passes through

their weaknesses and makes them in unexpected ways people whose lives become meaningful, if not beautiful.

In the end Charles is attracted by the faith which works in such a manner in the life circumstances of the beloved members of this unusual family. Charles continues to visit Brideshead where his feelings are centered on his friend Sebastian's sister, Julia. But she marries a non-Catholic, a vulgar politician who fails to qualify as a Catholic convert. The self-righteous marchioness dies and the marquis, who was living in Venice with his mistress, returns home, and on his death-bed is restored to the faith.

Julia who may have married Ryder after her divorce from the politician (their tumultuous love story is the climax of the novel), witnesses her father's reconciliation and she too returns to the faith. Charles' doubts about his own faith are resolved by Julia's renunciation of him and eventually, he enters into the chapel of Brideshead, now invaded by soldiers and refugees, and kneels in front of the tabernacle where the lamp is still burning as a sign of hope in the future, in the midst of the multi-dimensioned mess of the war.

Brideshead, which questions the meaning of human existence without God, is the first novel in which Evelyn Waugh clearly presents his Catholic religious views. Waugh wrote: "You can only leave God out of fiction by making your characters pure abstractions. My future novels shall be an attempt to represent man more fully which, to me means only one thing, man in his relation to God."

In the immense chaos of WW II

The trilogy "Sword of Honor" (1952-1961) presents Guy Crouchback, an honorable man with no place in the modern world. He receives no consolation from personal relationships or from his religion but World War II gives him opportunities to establish some sort of identity. The settings is, of course, upper class: Waugh was writing about the world he knew and he could be vicious about it.

By the end of the second volume Crouchback has been stripped of his illusions about the army. He has also re-married his shallow, bird-brained ex-wife Virginia, who is pregnant by another man. His charity to her is the only sort of disinterested action possible in a corrupted world.

In the last volume, Crouchback volunteers for service in Italy with the military government and eventually goes to Yugoslavia as a liaison officer with the Partisans. By the end of the book he has again asserted himself, in the rescue of a group of Jewish refugees.

The words of one of them, a woman, bring him to a devastating realization of the kind of man he used to be: “It is too simple to say that only the Nazis wanted the war. The communists wanted it too. It was the only way they could come to power. Many of my people wanted it, to be revenged on the Germans, to hasten the creation of the national state... Even good men thought their private honor would be satisfied by war. They could assert their manhood by killing and being killed. They would accept hardships in recompense by having been selfish and lazy. Danger justified privilege. I knew Italians- not very many perhaps- who felt this. Were none in England?” “God forgive me,” said Guy, “I was one of them.”

Evelyn Waugh was troubled in the last part of his life by the apparent incapacity of accepting the changes in the Catholic Church brought by the Second Vatican Council, especially in the worship in vernacular. He died on Easter Day 1966, happy after attending a Latin mass by a friend priest, together with his family. He had a fatal stroke in the toilet.

His fellow convert, Graham Greene, in an interview in 1986, said there was something characteristic about his death. It reminded Greene of Apthorpe’s “Thunder-box”, the antiquated field latrine in the shape of a plain square box which had exploded under Waugh’s comic character in the first volume of the trilogy, just as the Catholic Church had detonated beneath Waugh in the form of the Second Vatican Council. In Greene’s opinion, Waugh “needed to cling to something solid and strong and unchanging. Catholicism was that raft, essentially unaltered for 2,000 years. The Vatican’s attempt to modernize Waugh’s creed sank him”.

Greene’s irreverent and ungenerous assertion shows only that he did not care enough for his faith, at least not as much as Waugh. Fifty years later, the anguish and fear of Evelyn Waugh are, in front of the implosion, crisis and disarray of Catholicism, more than justified, almost prophetic.

The full symphony of humanity

Shusaku Endo, the Japanese convert to Catholicism, in his masterpiece “Silence” (1966), focuses on the drama of apostasy caused by the will of avoiding the suffering of the weak, almost the Theology of apostasy: it is the suffering Christ himself who speaks in a dream to the Jesuit missionary: “Tread on me, tread on me! For this I came into the world...”

His other beautiful novels are less paradoxical but as much dramatic like “The Samurai” (1981), “The girl I left behind” (1964), “Wonderful Fool” (1959), “Scandal” (1986) “Deep River” (1994). Amazing how in every novel the center is occupied by the figure

of the suffering Christ! Shusaku Endo is not an easy writer, but the catharsis is so powerful on the reader who persevere to the end! I call it ecstasy.

One aspect that concerned the writer is the realization that to be a Christian in Japan is to lack the support of a Christian culture which is the natural heritage of the people of the West even when they are no longer believers. The West is informed by the Christian faith; the East, on the other hand, is informed by a kind of pantheism ... Pantheism knows no tension of opposites – between good and evil, flesh and spirit, God and the devil – such as is at the heart of the Christian life view.

Endo chose not only to try to portray precisely this form of conflict but to set this conflict against the calm passivity of pantheism that he sees as the dominant Japanese religious mood. He writes: “For a long time I was attracted to a meaningless nihilism and when I finally came to realize the fearfulness of such a void I was struck once again with the grandeur of the Catholic Faith”.

“This problem of reconciliation of my Catholicism with my Japanese blood... has taught me one thing: that is, that the Japanese must absorb Christianity without the support of a Christian tradition or history or legacy or sensibility. Even if this attempt is the occasion of much resistance and anguish and pain, still it is impossible to counter it by closing one’s eyes to the difficulties. No doubt this is the peculiar cross that God has given to the Japanese”.

But what has inspired him most is the depth of humanity that is evoked by the Christian view of human nature and human destiny. Endo compares it to a symphony. In this he reflects the experience of other Catholic writers like those we mentioned above and especially the French ones like Julian Green, Francois Mauriac and George Bernanos he made object of his study, in his university days.

They all express amazement at the depth and breadth that the Christian life view draws from the human person: something very much appreciated by a novelist. Endo writes: “If I have trust in Catholicism, it is because I find in it much more possibilities than in any other religion for presenting the full symphony of humanity. The other religions have almost no fullness; they have but solo parts. Only Catholicism can present the full symphony”.

Reading: an unending adventure of the spirit

Satisfaction, play, esthetics, grim philosophy or spiritual ecstasy: all these spontaneous reaction to the faithful reading of fiction constitute an invaluable therapy which is made more efficacious if the stories are turned into movies as it is the case of almost all the

productions of these writers. The last movie is Martin Scorsese's "Silence" (2016) from the novel of the same title by Shusaku Endo: a movie which stayed in the mind of the director for more than twenty years, yet when at last it appeared it was of a singular beauty, touching object of reflection and contemplation.

There is still no thrill like turning a page of a book that you like. Nowadays, people are still reading but they are reading in a different form, they are gradually changing their habit: online materials are slowly gaining influence among the people. The "physical books" are still preferred by an older reading class and the online publications appeal more to the young. Still I will never be caught dead without a physical book of fiction in my hands, especially during my travel. Fiction! I still bring three books with me, even if they take much baggage space: good company to my maintenance drugs!

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