Reflections of an Idler

by Matthew Wardour (August 2020)

The Smoker, Hermann Max Pechstein,1919

Snail reproduction is rather peculiar. First they stab each other with “love darts,” then there is a competition to see who will be the male. Indeed, one tends to find that among hermaphroditic species the competition is always to be the male not the female. It is a brutal competition: “love dart” is not a euphemism for some kind of mollusk phallus, but refers to a sharp object which, relative to the snail’s size, is more like a knife than a dart. The snail that is “darted” apparently faces a shorter and more difficult life.

This is one of the things I learnt about at university. And like most of the things I learnt while at university, I did not learn it as part of my degree in Laputan Studies. Rather, the discovery was made during an eccentric period in which I harvested and then ate garden snails. This was not done out of economic necessity—the cliche of the impoverished student is, for the most part, no longer true. If he is impoverished, it is because he spends all his money on the cultivation and celebration of vice, his chief pursuit. Alas, my experience of studying at a second-rate university led me to conclude that such places are bars and brothels thinly disguised as scholarly enterprises (with a touch of vainglorious activism whenever there was an election or political controversy).

No, I grew snails out of mere perversity, because I am an idler and that’s what idle people do. In fact, “perversity” is a word that I readily associate with university—sexual perversity, most of all, which was so extraordinary that it makes snail reproduction seem mundane. I remember the shock of seeing a “fetish club” stall at the freshers’ fair, with a pathetic figure (not identifiably male or female) covered entirely in tight leather and kept on a leash. And I recall the horror of my first nightclub experience: the deafening noise, the drunken strumpet who tried to copulate with me on the dance floor, the unbelievable depravity of the lavatories. “Mild” sexual harassment, mostly by men towards women, seemed

depressingly frequent. I often wondered why women, wearing next to nothing, would keep returning to these squalid nightclubs and thereby subject themselves to such horrors. I came to the conclusion, contrary to many modern critics of university censoriousness, that students are not coddled anywhere near enough with regards to the things that matter.

While I may have learnt much about “the way of the world” from university life, I can’t say I learnt much from my degree except how to be guiltlessly idle. By virtue of a moderate intelligence (a virtue which can easily become a vice), it never took me longer than a few days to research and write a decent essay. The remaining weeks were then holidays, though distinctly lacking in luxury. I once had a conversation with one of my tutors regarding the difficulty of a degree, and we both concluded that a diligent student could do all three years work in three months and still expect a good grade. I may well have done even less than that. In my self-destructive final year I decided I wanted to fail and so neglected to write my dissertation. I should have failed my degree because of this, but instead the university offered me a “compensatory pass.” I had not written one of the 10,000 words required and yet I still passed. In the modern marketised university, no one is allowed to fail—though most students at my university evidently should have. Eventually I wrote the wretched thing anyway, mostly to improve my grade, but also to prove a point. I was angry that I was not even allowed to fail. The idler is quite a selfish creature who likes to be able to do whatever he wants, and that includes failing.

As you can doubtless tell I am prone to indolence, a problem which may well have been fixed sooner had I gone straight into work. I recall a perceptive teacher at school who would frequently criticise me for being a “minimalist” —that is, I did just enough to avoid detention and nothing more. I could usually be found, along with a few fellow

idlers, completing my homework in the corridor before a lesson. And when I got to university I was overjoyed that I could not only neglect preparation for seminars, but even avoid seminars themselves without facing any disciplinary action. It was an idler's paradise: economic security, almost no labour, and seemingly boundless freedom. Of course, this apparent paradise was rather lacking in happiness or fulfilment.

In recent years my guide for idleness has been Samuel Johnson, who penned a series of essays titled "The Idler" ("written as hastily as an ordinary letter," according to Boswell—which is to be expected for an idler). In many ways he is the de facto patron saint of the idle and the melancholy (for the two tend to overlap). His first Idler essay reads like a tongue-in-cheek manifesto:

> Every man is, or hopes to be, an Idler . . . as peace is the end of war, so to be idle is the ultimate purpose of the busy . . . idleness must be not only the general, but the peculiar characteristick of man; and perhaps man is the only being that can properly be called idle, that does by others what he might do himself, or sacrifices duty or pleasure to the love of ease.

But Johnson was hardly indulgent of his idleness. He despaired of his many failures. He had always failed in his life-long ambition to get out of bed at a reasonable time. He shared an idle habit of mine: spending evenings writing lists about what he must and must not do tomorrow, and then entirely failing to observe these the next day. He was always haunted by a sense that he had accomplished little, if not nothing significant. At fifty-five he wrote in one of his prayers that, "I have now spent fifty-five years in resolving; having from the earliest time almost that I can remember, been forming schemes of a better life. I have done nothing; the need of doing therefore is pressing, since the time of doing is short."

Yet by fifty-five Samuel Johnson had already his greatest poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, and his sole novel, *Rasselas* – both extraordinary works about the restlessness of human desire and the futility of human endeavour. He had also completed his landmark *Dictionary*. And in the remaining decades of his life he wrote his monumental *Lives of the Poets*, his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland,* many more great essays, prayers and sermons, and lived a life which would be recorded by James Boswell and remembered with avidity for centuries to come as a life well lived, honestly and indeed fruitfully. There is hope for the idler, then: so long as he is aware of his particular disposition and is constantly fighting it, he may yet achieve something great. But even Johnson, once he had reached old age and attained economic security, settled into a more contentedly idle life. He justified his unproductivity to Boswell, saying, "No, sir, I am not obliged to do any more. No man is obliged to do as much as he can do. A man is to have part of his life for himself."

Yet the idler is not always held back by his temperament; he also possesses some advantages. Most of all, he is not easily bored. Indeed there are few things more agreeable to him than the prospect of doing nothing, which is why the coronavirus shut-down, and the quieter, slower way of life it necessitates, may be quite agreeable to him (if he is fortunate enough to have the means to enjoy it). He tends to have an unusual tolerance for things others find boring. I, for one, enjoy reading long books, especially those which care less about plot and instead pursue a longer, windier road. My most cherished literary comfort food is the novels of Sir Walter Scott, whose gentle meandering prose and glorious escapism provide the perfect diversion for an idler. The modern world, incapable of sitting still, seems to have become insensitive to the merits of this great novelist.

Scott himself, though a sense of duty compelled to be a prodigious writer, was an idler at heart. He wrote fast and

with far less planning and revising than most. And besides, only a true idler could begin a chapter thus:

> SHALL THIS be a long or a short chapter? This is a question in which you, gentle reader, have no vote, however much you may be interested in the consequences; just as you may (like myself) probably have nothing to do with the imposing a new tax, excepting the trifling circumstance of being obliged to pay it. More happy surely in the present case, since, though it lies within my arbitrary power to extend my materials as I think proper, I cannot call you into Exchequer if you do not think proper to read my narrative.

Scott's *Journal* makes frequent reference to his love of solitude—the idler's chief pleasure. He wrote that if given the choice between "eternal company, without the power of retiring within yourself, or solitary confinement for life, I should say, 'Turnkey, lock the cell!'" And having once found himself in solitude for period of time, he asked himself:

> Do you love this extreme loneliness? I can answer conscientiously, I do. The love of solitude was with me a passion of early youth; when in my teens, I used to fly from company to indulge in visions and airy castles of my own, the disposal of ideal wealth, and the exercise of imaginary power. This feeling prevailed even till I was eighteen, when love and ambition awakening with other passions threw me more into society, from which I have, however, at times withdrawn myself, and have been always even glad to do so. I have risen from a feast satiated; and unless it be one or two persons of very strong intellect, or whose spirits and good-humour amuse me, I wish neither to see the high, the low, nor the middling class of society. This is a feeling without the least tinge of misanthropy, which I always consider as a kind of blasphemy of a shocking description. If God bears with the very worst of us, we may surely endure each other. If thrown into society, I always have, and always will endeavour to bring

pleasure with me, at least to show willingness to please. But for all this “I had rather live alone[.]”

One of the idler’s most common pleasures is music, for music is the art form with the least obvious purpose. You might, like me, believe that beauty is connected to goodness, and that music therefore serves a greater purpose. But this is only a belief, and one often contradicted by accounts of evil men who nonetheless appreciate beauty. Music is the most idle of the arts to enjoy, though among the most strenuous to participate in, especially in our astonishingly virtuosic age. Yet for those content to spend lonely evenings playing their instrument, it is not a struggle but a joy, an outward expression of an otherwise inexpressible medley of thoughts. The idler suffers from sundry preoccupying thoughts, and music, by virtue of its apparent meaninglessness, seems to keep them at bay – for the only response to good music is to involve oneself deeper in it. There is no need to speak, to rebut, to question.

My preference is for slow music. At the moment I am going through a Toru Takemitsu phase. His music is perfect for our shut-down, newly-stilled world where nature is once again seen and heard: impressionistic, with judicious use of silence and rich harmonic textures—not unlike Messiaen, but more intimate. I have never had much of a taste for dramatic music. The Romantic style, with its endless groaning towards somes short-lived climax is usually far too much for me. (Hell surely has a Mahlerian soundtrack.) But lest you think I do not enjoy lively music, I am listening with renewed enthusiasm to Classical works—Haydn, Reicha and C.P.E. Bach most of all. They are not burdened with the “narratives” and “meanings” so often implicit in later music; rather, they represent the joyous and social aspect of life which, in some part, I now miss.

And of course I am returning to old favourites—in all things, not just music. Idlers like myself usually prefer old

thrills to new ones. We like what we know. There is some overlap between idlerism and temperamental conservatism, exemplified by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott's essay "On Being Conservative", which might as well be titled "On Being Idle." The idler is not seduced by the grim, glib cult of productivity and innovation. He knows that, perversely, it is often much more productive to go for a long idle walk than to spend hours on a work project. In that great Italian historical novel, *The Leopard,* Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, tries "to count how much time he had really lived." He concludes that, of his seventy-three years, for only two or three had he actually lived. The endless tedium of petty politics and the needless miseries and complications of his social and familial life vastly overwhelmed the few happy hours spent in his observatory or in the company of his dog Bendicò. Don Fabrizio says that he saw glimpses of heaven when enjoying these idle pursuits.

The national shut-down, for all its madness and misery, has shown us some of the neglected joys of idleness. "There are activities," wrote Oakeshott, "not involving human relationships, that may be engaged in, not for a prize, but for the enjoyment they generate, and for which the only appropriate disposition is the disposition to be conservative." He uses the "ritual" of amateur fishing as an example. I prefer other examples: playing an instrument for one's own enjoyment, writing a journal, watching squirrels scuttle up trees, taking pleasure in identifying cloud types, listening to the glory of bird song.

One should not therefore assume that to be idle is to do nothing. When I refer to idlers I am not referring to those lumbering sacks of inertia whom Marxists amusingly refer to as *lumpenproletariat*. The idler's life can be an especially busy one. He starts a thousand projects and finishes none. He is always convinced he will write the next great picaresque novel, political treatise or grand opera, but that he need not

embark on it today—there is always tomorrow. He is often found lying in bed, which he does for far longer than the eight prescribed hours, but while doing so he is planning and plotting the next day's Great Projects. He then gets up in time for lunch, and not merely fails to act on any of the schemes he had so keenly designed the night before, but forgets he ever made them. The idler is of course a dilettante, a chronic amateur, a generalist—the sort of creature for whom the modern specialist world has little use.

Yet this wildness has its advantages, as Johnson explains:

> The Idler, though sluggish, is yet alive, and may sometimes be stimulated to vigour and activity. He may descend into profoundness, or tower into sublimity; for the diligence of an Idler is rapid and impetuous, as ponderous bodies forced into velocity move with violence proportionate to their weight.

This is one of the reasons why the world needs us idlers. And indeed, as Bernard Russell pointed out in his essay "In Praise of Idleness," the world could do with fewer busy people. Doing nothing can contribute to many ills, but doing something is surely more dangerous. Many great men and women were idlers. As Russell and many others have noted, most cultural achievement is predicated on leisure. I often find the idle more agreeable than busybodies and men of action who never seem to rest—who, having run out of nails to hammer, proceed to hammer everything else in the room because they loathe the thought of stopping. The idler has a different rhythm to his life, one which is less obviously destructive. If he keeps his worst excesses in check, daily incanting the prayers and meditations of Dr Johnson, then he can surely lead a good life. He will not start wars, intrude in other people's private lives, or otherwise cause mischief. At worst he might spend a few too many hours cloud watching, or stomping about the house, perhaps even muttering to himself, or buried in old

manuscripts, or devising his next great idea from the comfort of his armchair. He will act when his conscience presses him to action, or when there is a serious threat to his idlerist way of life, but otherwise he will be content building "castles in the air" and pleasing himself with "phantasms sweet" (to borrow from the poem which opens Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* that magnificent tome which has much to say about idleness).

However, it would be wrong to portray the idler's way of life as harmless. The idler is often a judgemental person—his sedentary position is the most convenient from which to judge others. He abhors public vice while cultivating his own secret vice, which he thinks is less evil for the fact it is secret. He may drink too much, for instance, and is often bitter and highly sensitive, hide it though he might. He masks his contempt with humour. He loathes the ambitious and easily dismisses the achievements of others. He does not like the company of those whose promising lives make him uneasy about his own idleness.

When an idler does go into the world, he does it with quixotic peculiarity. He cannot stand the normal fakery of the world and so does not behave in the normal way. He is forever seeing the noisy ills of the world and is incredulous that he has to suffer them. The idler is, in truth, something of a misanthrope; that is, he dislikes much about mankind generally, while he can be exceptionally genial to individual men and women. His opinions are usually impersonal. He is like the racist who does not think much of black people, and who goes on about what trouble they cause, but has a single black acquaintance who he treats with great affection. Or the man who loathes women, yet loves a woman. The idler thinks very highly of his own opinions, and he believes his idlerist ways make him a more perceptive judge of society.

In this respect, the idler's idler is monumentally lazy and outrageous Ignatius J. Reilly from John Kennedy Toole's

novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Reilly embodies all the idler's vices. His whole life is a series of noble lost causes, as he sees it. This again brings us to Samuel Johnson and Sir Walter Scott, both of whom were sentimental about the past and lost causes (particularly Jacobitism). Reilly is in fact a grotesque version of Samuel Johnson, equally fat and with similar peculiarities of manner and gesture. But Reilly's rudeness is unfiltered, not held back by Johnson's deep Christian faith and eighteenth-century Tory sensibilities. Reilly spends his time trying to get people to read Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and slowly working on his magnum opus ("a lengthy indictment against the century") at a rate of six paragraphs per month. He abhors the "perversion of having to go to work." He spends his time devising ridiculous schemes: first there was the Divine Right Party, then his Campaign for Moorish Dignity, then the attempt to create world peace by encouraging a "sodomite" takeover of the army. He does not expend much energy on these abortive movements, however—they are wild but brief diversions which he later enjoys as noble lost causes.

You might wonder, then, why an idler like I would spend his time writing a rather long essay? Well, because the guilty idler, observant of the writings of Dr Johnson, among other sages, knows that the cure for idleness is busyness. This prescription was perhaps most memorably expressed by Henry VIII in his song "Pastime With Good Company":

> *Company me thynkes then best*
> *all thoughts & fansys to deiest [digest]*
> *ffor Idillnes*
> *is cheff mastres [mistress]*
> *of vices all*
> *then who can say.*
> *but myrth and play*
> *is best of all.*

Montaigne wrote his *Essays* for this reason, explaining

in his short essay on idleness that writing helped tame those thoughts which “rush wildly to and fro in the ill-defined field of the imagination.” He found that idleness in fact exacerbated these thoughts, and that only by busying himself in writing could he “make my mind ashamed of them.”

The trouble is that, while the cure for idleness is busyness, most who are busy yearn to be idle. It is the moral of Samuel Johnson’s beautifully concise novella *Rasselas:* that a new and novel state of being is soon found inadequate, and so we seek to return to the former state which we previously found unsatisfying. We still find it just as unsatisfying, and so we are trapped by the insatiability and futility of our contending passions—the vanity, that is, of human wishes.

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