The Lasting Worth of ‘Worthless’ Books

by Theodore Dalrymple

Cyril Connolly once wrote: “The more books we read, the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence.” This is tosh, of course, for if every book were a masterpiece, no book would be a masterpiece and we could not know a masterpiece when we read it. They also serve who only sit and write trash.

To know the good, we have to know the bad. The precise quantity and degree of the bad that we have to know in order to appreciate the good is debatable, and certainly there is no great difficulty in finding the bad, whether it be bad food, bad films, bad theatre productions, bad behaviour or bad books. Indeed, the only thing that can be said in favour of the current overwhelming prevalence of the bad is that it adds to the pleasure of finding the good – the piquancy both of discovery and relief.

But quite apart from the valuable function that the bad performs in helping us to appreciate the good, I would amend Connolly's dictum as follows: the more books we read, the clearer it becomes that there is no book, however bad or merely mediocre it may be, that has nothing to say to us, for every book tells us something. Thus reading a book may be a relative waste of time, for we might be doing something better or more useful than reading it, such as reading a better book. But it is never a waste of time in the absolute sense, at least for the inquisitive or reflective mind. For the uninquisitve or unreflective mind, of course, Armageddon itself would be dull and without interest or lessons.

Every contact leaves a trace, said the great French forensic scientist, Edmond Locard; and likewise, every book tells us something (even if, unlike every crime, it appears to leave no trace). This is especially so for those, which is almost all of us, who have access to the internet.

Allow me to conduct a small experiment. I will choose, with my eyes shut and at random, a book from the piles in my study. (If it be objected that the choice will not be random because I know the disposition of books in my study, I can only reply that the objector does not know my study. Ah, if only the hours could be returned to me that I have spent searching in my study on all fours for a particular book, my life expectancy would be considerably extended.)

There, it is done, I have chosen. By happy chance, my hand fell on an ancient book, *Via Rectam ad Vitam Longam, or a Treatise wherein the right way and best manner of living for attaining to a long and healthfull life, is clearly demonstrated and punctually applied to every age and consitution of body*, by Tobias Venner, published in 1650.

No one would go to this book for medical information or advice, but anything of such an age must be of at least of historical interest, and there is something instructive in it

besides. Tobias Venner is by no means a name to conjure with in the history of medicine (like the immense majority of doctors, he discovered nothing), and yet it is not entirely pointless to read him.

We are apt to believe that our own preoccupations are new and unprecedented, but they seldom are. Venner practised in Bath, already a spa town in his day, but "concourse to our Baths was hindered" thanks to "our late unnaturall Civill War, and unparalleld Divisions, [and therefore] I had leasure once againe to take in my hand this Treatise, and to enlarge it with many profitable additions". Are we not back to "unparalleld Divisions" which hinder our concourse? And although I am inclined to believe that our narcissistic age is uniquely preoccupied with health, it is salutary to read that "Verily Health is the Summum Bonum in this life." There was more excuse for this attitude in Venner's day, of course.

In essence medical advice has not changed in the past 369 years as much as one might have supposed. Without benefit of epidemiological studies, Venner tells us that

> *. . . a fat and grosse habit of body is worse than a leane, for besides that it is more subject to sicknesse, it is for all corporall actions far more inapt . . . And because they are repleated with grosse humors . . . they easily incurre the Apoplexie, shortnesse and heavinesse of breath . . . and sudden death.*

Good sleep is necessary also:

> *I advise all men . . . that they carefully go to their bed with a quiet and free mind . . . if therefore ye desire peacable and comfortable rest, live soberly, eschew crudity, and embrace tranquillity of mind.*

On the last page, he says:

> *It is not sufficient for any that desire to live long and healthily to observe moderation concerning passions and affections of the mind, and to be immoderate and irregular in matter of diet; neither is it sufficient to be moderate and discreet in matter of diet, and to be immoderate and irregular concerning sleep . . . if there be excesse or defect in any one of them, especially often, the state and constitution of the body, though firme and good, is soon vitiated and corrupted, sicknesse occasioned, and life abbreviated, which daily experience doth confirme. To conclude, a discreet and moderate course of life retardeth the coming of an old Age, and when it come maketh it the longer lasting.*

Health advice would not be so very different now. There is value, and even consolation, in realising this. Human nature, both for good and evil, remains much the same as ever it was: and just as Spanish kings were obliged to repeat their instructions to their colonial governors over and over again because they never obeyed them, despite their protestations that they would, so doctors have had for centuries to recall their patients to the value of moderation, advice no sooner uttered than disregarded. That mankind will remain for ever stubbornly imperfectible and prey to its own nature is both dispiriting and reassuring, certainly for a writer for whom writing has become an existential necessity: for there will never be nothing to write about and material, alas and thank goodness, will always abound.

It might be objected that the books to be found in my study, even at random, are unlikely to be utterly valueless to me, for I selected them all myself. To meet this objection to my

thesis that every book has something of worth to the reader, I asked my wife to go to the nearest Oxfam shop – Oxfam shops being to British high streets what rats are to urban dwellings: you are never more than a few yards from one – and buy at random an airport novel of the kind that people donate to Oxfam under the misapprehension that, while disembarrassing themselves of household clutter, they are thereby assisting the people of the Third World. Oddly enough, among the pulp novels, biographies of Beckham and discarded cookbooks is often to be found a work of arcane or specialised academic interest, my latest purchase of that description being a multiauthor book on encephalitis lethargica, the mysterious disease whose cause is even more disputed than that of the First World War, which it followed.

My wife returned with a copy of *Her Frozen Heart* by Lulu Taylor, a best-selling author of whom I had not previously heard. I had asked her to choose at random a well-preserved paperback from among the rows of disposable romantic novels (I have a neurotic distaste for reading paperbacks in bad condition, whatever the merit of the content) to be found on the shelves of all charity shops, with their garish vulgar covers of the kitschiest possible design of a type which presumably appeals to and reflects – oh horrible thought – the taste of the public. It was, unfortunately, 483 pages long, and therefore gave rise to an experiment somewhat longer than I had wanted or anticipated.

Lulu Taylor! Was it a real or an assumed name? If the latter, it was perfectly chosen for a romantic novelist, and if the former it was almost a confirmation of the theory of nominal determinism, namely that a person's name in some way influenced his destiny or choice of profession. For example the two preeminent British neurologists of the first half of the 20th century were Henry Head and Russell Brain. Lulu Taylor! In the absence of silent films, I should have put her down at once as a likely romantic novelist.

Miss Taylor is, by all accounts, quite unashamedly a producer of entertainment without literary pretension. Her aim is to make the reader care what happens to her characters and turn over the page, and in this aim, which is far from easy to fulfil, she undoubtedly succeeds. Her plot is clever and there are many more ambitious writers who could learn a thing or two about style from her, give or take a few lapses – for even Homer nods. Humour is lacking, the characterisation is simple, the story ends in emotional slush (genres imposing their rules as they do), and there is an undertow of modern psychological cliché to it all – wanting closure, ownership of problems, emotional healing, survival, self-esteem, emotional support and so forth. But the novel as a whole is not without potential as far as reflection is concerned, at least for those who do not read purely for distraction.

There are two stories that run parallel in the book, one concerning a generation that lived through the war and the genuine austerity of the post-war years (anyone who believes that we are passing through austerity now would do well to read it), and a generation that grew to adulthood in the 1990s in an environment of assumed plenty. The two stories are united at the end of the book by a Jacobean mansion in the Oxfordshire countryside.

Despite the difference in the circumstances of the two generations, the same or similar characters and characteristics are seen in both. Egotism, selfishness, self-doubt, and self-sacrifice survive in altered conditions: thus human nature does not change very much and we would therefore be wise not to expect it to do so by a mere change of environment (shades of Tobias Venner). This is a lesson both depressing and reassuring; there being no new thing under the sun, we are rarely as favourably or unfavourably situated as we might suppose.

A book such as this evokes reflection in two ways: first by suggesting analogies with the reader’s own life, which of

course will depend on the particular biography of the individual reader, and second by suggesting more general, even philosophical questions.

Among the former, in my case, was the following description of one of the main characters in the story of the contemporary generation. Patrick is a high-flying lawyer who is killed in a taxi on his way from the airport, leaving his young widow to wonder about the exact nature of their seemingly happy marriage. The truth was that Patrick's whole existence had been dedicated to removing himself from his family and embracing a self he carefully constructed.

This had a powerful resonance in my mind because, while I do not think that I have constructed myself according to some conscious plan or blueprint as cold-bloodedly as Patrick, nevertheless (in retrospect) I can construe the whole of my life as having been a flight from my childhood – on the whole, a successful flight. I surely cannot be the only person of whom this is true, though it will not be true of every reader, who will find other resonances with his or her life.

In the story about the war generation, a young woman known as Tommy (Thomasina) is widowed when her husband, Alec, is killed in France early in the war. Considerably later in the book we learn that she married Alec only because she had been with child by him, and she had been with child by him only because he had raped her. She did not tell her mother, Mrs Whitfield, what had happened, and her mother, being a narrow-minded stickler for propriety and respectability, insisted on marriage. Tommy agreed to this because, at the time (1939 or 1940), it was better for the child-to-be to have a married mother than an unmarried one, the stigma unjustly attaching to the child as well as the parent.

Despite the marriage, which not surprisingly Tommy found repellent to her, Mrs Whitfield did not forgive her daughter, for it was obvious that the child had been conceived out of

wedlock, and this was a taint on the family's respectability. Mrs Whitfield is depicted as a censorious bigot, and there is no doubt that such censorious bigotry as she displays actually existed. I once worked in a mental hospital in which there was a woman who had been a "patient" there solely (at first) because she had had a child out of wedlock in the 1920s, although she had quickly become so institutionalised that it would have been cruel to discharge her. She was by no means the only such "patient".

Clearly, we are intended to dislike Mrs Whitfield and, by extension, all that she stands for. But romantic novels being what they are (I presume, for I cannot claim to have read many), there must be a reconciliation between mother and daughter at the end, otherwise the reader would go away with the unpleasant impression that some conflicts are above or beyond resolution. In the end, Mrs Whitfield recognises that she had misjudged her daughter.

The implicit condemnation of her previous censoriousness remains, however. But this aspect of the story caused me to think of the great French economist, Frédéric Bastiat, with his fundamental distinction between the things seen and the things not seen (some commentators consider that Bastiat was the originator of the concept of opportunity cost).

We see clearly enough the unpleasantness and bad consequences of Mrs Whitfield's attachment of importance to respectability. What we do not see is the consequences of the complete absence of importance attached to respectability. It is only on reflection that we realise that, if Mrs Whitfield's attitude is indeed deeply cruel, a mirror image of this attitude is catastrophic also, perhaps on a larger scale. How to keep the balance between censoriousness and licentiousness has not proved easy; indeed, our current resolution of this tension is to indulge in what might be called censorious licentiousness, according to which anybody who disapproves of any choice of lifestyle or conduct is the subject of disapprobation of the

most censorious kind.

I do not want to endow (or burden) Lulu Taylor’s book with a philosophical depth to which it does not pretend. It is entertainment, after all; there are contradictions in it and sometimes anachronisms. But that is not to say that it is contentless, or cannot provide mental sustenance. I think the same would be true of any other book that my wife had brought home, even if it were true that my time might be more profitably employed reading something better.

Nothing written is utterly without value, without something to teach, whatever its intentions. But I am reminded of what Samuel Johnson said of travelling, for it is true of reading also:

> *He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him. So it is in travelling. A man must carry knowledge with him if he would bring home knowledge.*

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