

The Ecstasy Of Impossibility: A Provocation

When I look back on the intensity of my early reading experience, I envy myself. It seems incredible to me now that I wantonly took down *Dubliners*, 1984, *Catcher In The Rye* and *The Great Gatsby* in one week of illness when I was fourteen, or that there was a single holiday the following year when one after the other I dropped *Crime & Punishment*, *The Picture Of Dorian Grey*, *The Master And Margarita* and *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*. I have perhaps allowed myself to forget the extent to which these experiences were greased with liberal applications of Stephen King and Jilly Cooper, but never mind that. The profligacy of it! The abandon with which I unleashed so much so quickly on my unformed mind. That I should self-administer doses as powerful as these in such quick succession seems unimaginable now, which is probably at least in part due to the fact that these days I would feel it necessary to *ponder* so

much more about what was going on as I read.

I was moved around a lot as a kid, and constantly being told that what I had thought was home was home no longer. I spent a lot of time finding my surroundings strange, and pining for the familiar. So it made complete sense for me to find a home in books. They're portable, so you can take home with you. It's not exactly an unusual story. And it is perhaps a direct result of this nomadic upbringing that many of the novels I ended up loving the most were the ones featuring characters like me, who had made a home in literature. Characters who devoured stories and - for better or worse - sought to match what they had read with what they found in the real world. Characters whose nostalgia was not only incurable but also essential to their being. Characters whose pride and happiness - whose *very existence* - was indexed to their readiness to capitulate when the real world disputed their imagined version of it.

The first of these books to grab me was *Le Grand Meaulnes*, by the French author Alain-Fournier. It's one of a clutch of early twentieth century novels that feature what James Wood has called the "enchanted narrator" - novels in which the test of a narrator or protagonist is the extent to which their enchantment can withstand confrontation with reality. *The Great Gatsby*, *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Go-Between* could all be said to belong to the same Doomed Fantasist's Club - novels in which the author places himself inside the onlooker admiring the fantasist who is his bolder analogue. But *Meaulnes* stands out because of the sheer literary nature of his expectations.

Seventeen-year-old Augustin Meaulnes, reckless and romantic, becomes haunted by the memory of his chance encounter with a girl called Yvonne, whom he meets when he has absconded from school and stumbled on a costume party at a magical

country estate, which becomes known in the novel as the "lost domain". His fascination with the place derives from how it reminds him of the midsummer fêtes of his own childhood - a prelapsarian time before the death of his younger brother, who drowned when the two of them had bathed together in a "polluted pool". The sight of the preparations for the wedding and the costumed guests give him the notion that he is witnessing a better - which is to say more *literary* - version of himself: "In the figure dressed in the clothes of a romantic student he saw another Meaulnes: not the schoolboy who had made off in a farmer's carriage, but a charming and fabulous creature out of a book, a book one might receive as a prize..."

I recognised Meaulnes. I admired him, and shared his longing. It was the first time I had seen depicted in a novel the effect which all that miraculous early reading had had on me. The first time I had seen a character realise what I already knew

myself: that through literature we can remember experiences we have never had. Inhabit the consciousness of another. Feel nostalgic for places we have never been - for places that might never even have *existed*. And that the power of our longing for such places is contingent on the fact that they are unattainable.

This, of course, was only the beginning. In time, my reading would bring me to greater works in which deluded characters naively attempt to apply in the world *as it is* the dreams that they have inherited from fiction. And the source code of this tendency in the novel is to be found in Don Quixote.

Before the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha, books were either true or not true. Fiction was indistinguishable from lying. The chivalric romances that so intoxicate our hero - and make him want to live life in their image - were not only widely attacked for their fantastical and escapist nature - they were

feared. That stories featuring giants and sorcerers should not only claim to be "true", but use every stylistic device available to them to back up this assertion, was considered to be both perverse and dangerous. The rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the mid 16th century had gone some way to dispelling this notion, but Cervantes didn't just dream up the idea of a man driven mad by books: it was widely believed that reading too much of this stuff could unhinge you permanently.

Throughout the novel, reality rejects Don Quixote's conviction that he is a knight-errant, often comically, often brutally.

Throughout, he refuses to back down, even in the face of the most irrefutable evidence. Even when confronted directly with his real name, and challenged to deny it, he responds only by saying, "I know who I am". Every new element of "reality" is absorbed and incorporated by him into his version of the world. He does not fracture. He bends. And that makes him

indestructible. In Part 2, when he and Sancho see the first volume of their adventures rolling off the printing press, it is on one level the ultimate proof of their status as made-up characters, and on another the ultimate confirmation that their adventures are real. Real, because they are in a *book*. The novel ends up doing far more than simply parodying or celebrating chivalric romance - it becomes the first fiction that is self-analytical and persuasive at the same time, that dramatises that state of unslakable thirst for the fictionalised version of events. It invents the modern notion of imaginative truth.

In 19th century illustrations of Don Quixote the knight is presented as melancholic figure. No longer triumphant, suddenly he's slouching in his saddle, looking broken and sorrowful rather than zesty and ridiculous. The slapstick nature of the story is forgotten, because it's being viewed through the doomed prism of Romanticism. It is perhaps because of this

prevailing change of mood that the knight's most original and resonant 19th century descendent is so inevitably destined for destruction. In Don Quixote there is simple joy to be had in the discovery that we can believe something that we know not to be true. When Romanticism collides with Realism centuries later in Madame Bovary, this is no longer a simple matter. Don Quixote bends and remains indestructible. Emma Bovary is brittle and so she breaks. Reality beats her. Her debts must be honoured - quite literally, given that it's money that finally drives her to the arsenic.

Flaubert was fascinated by Don Quixote, and knew long passages of the novel by heart. It's said that it was his reading of Cervantes that convinced him to become a novelist rather than a dramatist. I was not a provincial housewife when I read Madame Bovary, but I knew immediately that I was reading something different because of the sheer intensity of the

recognition. The absolute transportation into Emma Bovary's psyche, realised through the perfection of Flaubert's prose and the way it was so saturated with his empathy for Emma, so shot through with her perceptions. Like Don Quixote, Emma's expectations are formed entirely by books. The home she longs for is nowhere near Yonville L'Abbaye. Familiarity breeds corrosive contempt. The pastoral idyll, so celebrated in the time of Cervantes, is here a prison, because Emma's imagination is steeped in a different rhetoric - that of Walter Scott, of the Romantics. She hates being surrounded by "the lowing of cattle, the milking, the ploughing. Familiar with the tranquil, she inclined, instead, towards the tumultuous. She loved the sea only for the sake of tempests, the meadow only as the background for some ruined pile."

When I wrote my first novel - itself in part generated by longing for places I had been but could not return to - I alighted

on the idea of a pair of fifteen-year-olds who are obsessed with storytelling, and run away from school in search of something each secretly knows they have made up - an "Amnesia Clinic" where they have decided that the older boy's lost mother must be residing. The boy's mother is dead. They know this, but they want to find her anyway. The fact that it is impossible is what makes the allure of their intended destination so powerful. The colourful Ecuadorian setting of the novel was based on my experience, and informed by my reading of Marquez, Borges and Fuentes. But the longing of my characters for story - for life to be more like it is in books - was lit up the spirit of Augustin Meaulnes, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary.

It would have done Emma good to get out more. Had she been transplanted to an absolutely foreign place, her distance from home might have leavened her contempt for it. We don't feel driven to define ourselves so forcefully when we are at home.

Our sense of citizenship breeds complacency. The alien brings us closer to the familiar, because we long for it, and its unattainability allows it to become perfect in our mind. It's like addiction, in a sense: because the yearning can never be satisfied, the energy it generates can never be exhausted. To quote Philip Larkin in his poem *The Importance Of Elsewhere*, home is unsatisfactory because "here no elsewhere underwrites my existence".

As a boy of eight arriving at the British school in São Paulo I was puzzled by the rhapsodies of my lifelong-expatriate teachers when I casually mentioned day-to-day things from home, such as Polo mints, or used expressions that were particularly local and therefore resonant to them. I dropped the phrase "skew-whiff" into conversation once in a lesson and was fallen upon. There was a glee - almost a lustfulness - to their enthusiasm that I found unsettling. When I was back

permanently in the UK four years later this became entirely comprehensible to me, as I yearned for the Brazil I had left behind. Like Gatsby, I "threw [myself] into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted [my] way." This is how we miss things. We invent them. As Salman Rushdie has written of the lost Bombay of his childhood: "If we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."

Edward Said accounts for the fact that many exiles become novelists by pointing out that "The exile's new world, logically enough, is unnatural, and its unreality resembles fiction." It's

worth remembering that Augustin Meaulnes is an exile too. For all his confidence, the boy is a stranger in a new town, and the tragedy that has brought him here is one for which he is in part to blame. His past can never be recaptured. When Meaulnes meets his love for the first time, he is captivated by a look she gives him: *“a look which seemed to say, Who are you? How do you happen to be here? I don't know you.. And yet I do seem to know you.”* This rapture of recognition within the strange is a feeling which he will spend the rest of the novel trying to recapture. Even when he does rediscover the lost domain and the girl, it can never be the same, because what he has been looking for was invented to begin with. It was a product of his yearning.

A writer is a compound of experience and imagination, and a novel is a unique alloy of perception and philosophy, presented in the digestible form of a story. When I wrote my second novel, which was set in a version of São Paulo that many

readers assumed to be from the near-future, it was the very fact that the version of São Paulo I remembered was no longer available in reality that made it possible for me to write about it as I did. When we have become estranged from a place, the only real version we have of it is the impossible one. If what we seek can never be achieved, then it can never let us down. We are in the territory of the Epiphany. The version of events that departs from mere memory and becomes Art. It's a little like what happens when someone dies, and we can stop having to remember them as they are and get on with remembering them how we would like to.

In *The South*, which is my favourite Borges story, a man who cannot bear to die in the way that life has ordained for him finds a way to die that is more consistent with the ideals he has learned about from fiction. Juan Dahlmann is - of course - a librarian. Rushing home one day to crack open a newly-

acquired copy of The Arabian Nights, he instead cracks open his head on a beam when racing up the stairs, cutting himself badly. The wound is so bad that he ends up in hospital with septicaemia. His condition deteriorates. In his delirium, he thinks that he is in hell. Then, abruptly, he is told that his condition has abated and he can go home. It's never explicitly stated, but it's clear that at this point, the story has diverged from what is actually happening and gone in the direction that Dahlmann wants it to go. He checks himself out of hospital and gets on a train out of Buenos Aires, intending to visit a ranch in the pampas that he inherited from his grandfather - a place associated with glamorous connotations of gauchos and swordplay such as he has read in epic poetry. The train never reaches its destination, but pulls into another station. In the station cafe Dahlmann gets into a fight with a local. A knife is thrown to him by a gaucho who happens to be sitting there (who calls him by name). Knowing he will die, he picks up the

knife and goes outside to fight, reflecting that it is a more glamorous death than the one he would have had if he had remained in hospital having hit his head. Dahlmann triumphs because he is the embodiment of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's dictum that "What matters in life is not what happens to us but what we remember and how we remember it."

In the hands of Marquez, bookish fantasy empowers itself in an even more spectacular way. There is a synthesis between the lost world of the fantastical childhood stories that were told to the author by his grandmother and his political outrage at the way others have presumed to rewrite the history of his town. One Hundred Years Of Solitude not only recaptures the fantasy of his childhood but also is a triumphant rejoinder to those who would seek to erase the crimes of the past. "If you can tell me that a massacre of banana plantation workers in my home town didn't happen," he says, "I can tell you that carpets can fly, or a

girl can ascend to heaven when hanging out the washing." The fabular stories of his grandmother achieve a transformative potency. Nostalgia is weaponised.

My third novel was written under the spell of repeated visits to derelict psychiatric hospitals. I'm still not entirely sure how that happened. I know that I had always wanted to write a novel where one of the principle characters was a building. Then on a whim, having read about the Care In The Community Act, I decided to visit a derelict psychiatric hospital near Hastings called Hellingly. Over the next couple of years I developed a raging asylum habit. I dreamed about them. I broke into them whenever and wherever I could, often going in before dawn, wandering the corridors and airing courts, trying to hear what they had to say. I left my watch behind so that I could lose my sense of time. I stayed for up to ten hours at a time. And succumbing to the opiate power of the buildings became a

home of its own. Letting the obsession in, and seeing how that process populated my imagination. It was a source of unease to me that I should find myself so powerfully drawn to places where so much pain had been processed and (in some cases) generated, and I found myself worrying about what I might write as a result.

But it is undeniable that one of the emotions I felt while wandering the derelict wards was that of acute nostalgia. A profound sense of loss such as one might feel in any post-human landscape, for the processes that used to hold sway in places like these. For the great worlds and systems that were built, to do good, which expired. The sight of a nurse's handwritten sign asking for litter to be adequately disposed of on a derelict ward; a patient's graffiti near the telephone kiosk, a trolley that once went about its business and now lay covered with moss. All these things made me feel a profound sense of

loss and longing.

Ruin Lust is nostalgia too, be it expressed in 18th century paintings of Tintern Abbey and Pompeii or in the activities of modern urban explorers who crave Chernobyl and Detroit. It's a less predictable iteration of it than, for example, the sentiment that saturates so much literature set in the pre-war Edwardian era, in novels like *The Go-Between* or its more adult counterpart, *The Wind In The Willows*. But it's the same yearning for the unattainable. The same ecstasy of impossibility.

It's perhaps too simplistic to say that rupture begets pain which makes us yearn for what was before. Otherwise we would yearn for the time before the change and not seek constantly to revisit the change itself. Is it too much to argue that Dickens's obsessions with orphans and debtors and poverty, or JG

Ballard's inability to stop revisiting empty swimming pools and crashed planes, stem from a kind of nostalgia? Is it too much to suggest that the horror we feel at the sight of the skewed Statue Of Liberty beached in the surf at the end of *Planet Of The Apes* is a dangerously concentrated dose of nostalgia too?

Life has a way of rejecting the order and wonder we find in fiction, which only makes us desire them more ardently. I have often thought that the greatest luxury of being able to write for a living is that it allows us to believe that life has meaning. For all the time and distance that divides them, the question asked by the authors I have mentioned is the same: can you live in a state of continuous fantasy - of continuous ambiguity? The best of them understand that if we seek reconciliation the snake will eat itself. That by maintaining the tensile energy generated by the opposing forces of what we experience and what we can

imagine, we create something alive, burning with longing.

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