

Other ways in other worlds

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In my next incarnation I hope to return as an Arcadian shepherd and lead an idyllic life tending my herd and reading beautiful books, interrupted only by the bleating of the sheep and the clanging of their bells. I shall eschew all technical monographs on animal husbandry, sheep dip, and modern shearing techniques; and I shall not subscribe to the *Arcadian Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, even if their references were to be arranged according to the principles of the Vancouver declaration. I may find, however, that I sadly lack the inner resources and peace of mind to live happily ever after with my sheep and books, and I shall look then into the possibility of participating in some local internecine tribal warfare, thus limiting my literary pursuits to the cool evenings when the daily massacre is done and the trophies have been erected. If I should again long for the unalloyed pleasures of a pure contemplative or literary life, I will probably conclude that there is no way of appeasing my restless and tormented soul. Meanwhile, I do the best I can, reading non-medical books whenever I can escape from the onerous task of keeping up to date with my house staff.

This year I read *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy's story of a simple man's tragic love for the "pretty, liquid-eyed, light footed woman" whom one modern critic has termed "the nastiest little bitch in English literature." Jude is also possessed by an intense desire to become a scholar; and, though later advised by one of the college masters that he will better succeed in life by remaining in his own sphere and sticking to stone cutting, we find him wanting to learn Greek and Latin even as a little boy—as disclosed in the interview with the famous itinerant physician who sells love potions, celebrated pills that infallibly cure all disorders of the alimentary tract as well as asthma and shortness of breath, and also a precious salve derived at great danger from an animal that grazes on Mount Sinai. Less successful in clinical medicine, for his practice is pitifully small, is Dr Fitzpiers, the country doctor in the *Woodlanders* (my second Thomas Hardy novel of the year) who busies himself with chemical experiments and metaphysical speculations—and already several old ladies in the village have committed their skeletons to his anatomical studies. Medical practice, however, he admits, is very much a matter of rule of thumb, bitter stuff for the old ladies, the bitterer the better, an occasional superfluous presence at a birth, and now and then a lance for an abscess.

After Thomas Hardy's sombre and slow-moving Wessex novels, I enjoyed a more strenuous adventure, starting roughly in the same geographical location, namely John Hillaby's *Journey through Britain*, an account of a walking tour from Land's End to John O'Groats, very therapeutic during those slow months when the Arcadian nation is at peace. Equally effective, for those who prefer the excitement of institutional

politics and office intrigue but wish to look at professions other than medicine, is Louis Auchincloss's *The Partners*. They will find that life in a legal firm is at least as competitive and uncertain as in other endeavours, the ascent as difficult, and the summit as slippery.

From galaxies to planets

For those who prefer excitement out of this world, I recommend a visit to Trantor, the sprawling underground capital of Isaac Asimov's *Galactic Empire*, preferably in its glorious days before the assassination of Cleon I, last of the Entuns, and before the rise of the *Foundation* on the remote planet of Terminus. They may spend the next 1000 years following the decline of the empire, a process chronicled in the *Encyclopedia Galactica* and accurately predicted by Dr Hari Seldon, the founder of the science of psychohistory—a branch of mathematics dealing with reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli.

But those who have no interest in the struggle between the Anacreon, which had no atomic power, and the planet of Terminus, which with psychohistoric inevitability became in ascendance as its economic power grew, may prefer Ken Follett's *Eye of the Needle*, a story about the days of the second world war in Luftwaffe-battered Britain, when people miraculously came out of their cocoons, singing songs, cracking jokes, and passing around egg sandwiches on the trains and in the underground. Hitler's number one spy, Die Nadel, has already murderously worked his way up from London to the east of Scotland, ready to deliver the most important military secret of the war to his German masters. He finds himself shipwrecked on desolate Storm Island, face to face with the beautiful Lucy, whose husband, having lost his legs—not honourably in the RAF, but accidentally in a car crash—grimly spends his time in a jeep tending his sheep and ignoring his wife. And yet it should not be so, for, wrote Marguerite Moreno from her hospital for the wounded (Colette, *The Blue Lantern*), the legless ones soon become happy again, drawing, writing, making small toys, propelling themselves in their wheelchairs, and getting into all kinds of mischief. But the armless ones, she thought, only grow sadder and more melancholy, "Because for a man it must be the greatest humiliation, perhaps the worst of all, never again to be able to undo his own trouser buttons without a helping hand."

Now we turn back to Wimpole Street, some 140 years ago, to Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, spending his days on the sofa in the back bedroom lying at Miss Elizabeth Barrett's feet, until that horrible day, while straying off the main road, he fell into the hands of ruffians and was held for ransom in a horrible dark room in Whitechapel in the company of hungry children, fallen women, and dogs of uncertain pedigree. And how closely did he escape the fate of having his head and paws delivered to Wimpole Street in a brown paper bag, had not Miss Barrett

herself resolutely hailed a cab and ventured into dangerous Shoreditch to pay the ransom and recover her dog. But later in sunny Italy, where dogs are not class conscious and do not have to be kept on a leash, Flush enjoyed all the wonderful things that Tuscany had to offer to a dog—sun, and smells, and romance in the narrow streets of Florence.

Further East, in Rhodes, I found myself last winter sitting on a bench outside the tall walls of the fortress of the Knights of St John, reading Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. On the left was Mandraki Harbour, faithfully guarded by two bronze deer; in the distance, the blue mountains of Asia Minor rising out of an even bluer sea; and, right in front, two men languidly playing backgammon on a small Turkish boat. Then came a great down-pouring of immense darkness (in the book); then Mr Carmichael, who was reading his Virgil, blew out the candle at midnight; and Mr Ramsay, stumbling through the dark, stretched out his hands but they remained empty, for Mrs Ramsay had "died rather suddenly the night before." So death comes without explanation, in parenthesis in a four-line paragraph, almost as an afterthought, "rather" suddenly—and then the storm abates, stillness and loneliness reign again, "solitary like a pool at evening, far distant, seen from a train window, vanishing so quickly that the pool, pale in the evening, is scarcely robbed of its solitude, though once seen."

For Mr Arthur Sammler, however, now in his eighth decade and living in a world that he increasingly fails to understand, death had refused to come even when the Gestapo made him strip and dig his own grave and then shot at him with machine guns. Mr Sammler has long given up trying to understand, indeed he thinks that intellectual man has become too much of an explaining creature. He has also long given up playing the European culture game; finds himself perplexed in a world of lunacy and wanton sex where people uselessly display their genitalia; ponders on how heavy human life becomes in forms of bourgeois solidity and how sad is attempted permanence; believes that people exaggerate the tragic accents of their condition; and thinks that an interesting life is the supreme concept of dullards. He sees his daughter, like perhaps all other women, making impossible demands and expecting the immediate gratification of all her numerous instincts. Like others, she has "gone to shrinkers for years," and this had not cured her of anything, for she "needed the warmth and pressure of men, needed a child for sucking and nurture, needed female emancipation, needed the exercise of the mind, needed continuity, needed interest—*interest!*—needed flattery, needed triumph, power, needed rabbis, needed priests, needed fuel for all that was perverse and crazy, needed noble action of the intellect, needed culture, demanded the sublime. No scarcity was acknowledged. If you tried to deal with all these immediate needs you were a lost man."

So the hero of Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* has seen all the ugliness, despair, and suffering that has come with the liberation

of the individual. For the Indian scientist who convinces him of the feasibility of going to the moon, he suddenly experiences a spontaneous feeling of friendship, which fills the old man with utter joy, because it makes him feel as though he had come back from another world, and because it showed that, at his age, he was still capable of feelings usually reserved for the young, "still dreaming of love, of meeting someone of the opposite sex who would cure you of all your troubles, heart and soul, and for whom you would cure and fulfill the same." But Mr Sammler will only go to the moon if it is metaphysically advantageous. Incidentally, he tends to approve of exotic marriages, for if you should happen to marry a bore it will take years longer to discover it in French.

Cosmogonies and caliphs

Among the other books I have read this year is *The Great Gatsby*, the story of another victim of trying to gratify too many instinctive needs; George Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the memoirs of a man of letters who having inherited some money is now able to retire to a cottage by the sea and gratify his need to think, observe, live quietly, and write down his thoughts; and Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express*, an account of a journey by train from Bunker Hill to Patagonia, as good an armchair adventure as his earlier *The Great Railway Bazaar*. I was particularly interested to read his interview with Jorge Luis Borges, the blind South American writer, because last summer I had read his *Universal History of Infamy*, replete with story of murderers, gangsters, and villains of all kinds, as well as with heroic tales from the Orient.

Among these is the story of Hakim, the Prophet of the Veil, whose face was so resplendent that no sinner could look upon it, for the angel Gabriel himself had cut off his head and taken it to the highest heaven, before the Lord, who had endowed it with a radiance that no mortal eyes could bear. The people flocked to his white banner; they believed in his new cosmogony; and in several battles they humbled the black standard of the Abbasid caliphs. But then an adulteress, as she was being strangled by the eunuchs, cried out that one of the Prophet's fingers was missing and that the other fingers had no nails. Then a captain rudely drew aside the Prophet's veil, and there was a shudder, for the face was unbelievably bloated and deformed with the "horrible whiteness peculiar to spotted leprosy. There were no brows; the lower lid of the right eye hung over the shrivelled cheek; a heavy cluster of tubercles ate away the lips; the flattened, inhuman nose was like a lion's." "Your unforgivable sins do not allow you to see my splendour," cried the unfortunate Prophet in a final stratagem, but, unmoved, the captains summarily ran him through with their spears.