

THE MODERN FLÂNEUR

How to stave off boredom and lead a literary life

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This is the age of hectic anxiety. For those who live in the global bazaar of capitalism, where products are instantly available and individual data is a commodity to be traded, the commercial assault on our senses is so relentless that it has become boring.

Everything no matter how private or personal, has a price. Most things, whether we know it or not, are up for sale.

For the 20th century German critic, Walter Benjamin, the origin of capitalist modernity lies in the shopping Arcades that arose in Paris in the 1820's and 1830's. These were glass-roofed, marble painted corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings and lined with elegant shops - forerunners of the modern department store.

“The Arcade is a city,” he wrote: “a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.” It is an unscripted phantasmagoria: “a universe of commodities.”

To wander through an Arcade was to be a *flâneur*: a solitary bohemian wanderer, abandoned in a landscape of living people, travelling without destination, guided by caprice and curiosity.

The *flâneur*, collects and fixes images as he, or she, strolls through mercantile Paris; a symbolic “rag-picker” who gathers up urban detritus from “a landscape built of sheer life.”

The first literary *flâneur* –cum–poet was Baudelaire. He described the act of walking through crowds of passers-by, sometimes not entirely knowing whether the people were living or dead :

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine des rêves....

O swarming city, city full of dreams
Where ghosts accost the passers-by in broad daylight!
Mysteries flow everywhere like sap
In the narrow veins of the mighty giant

Les Sept Vieillards

The *flâneur* is an urban naturalist: a man who walks through the streets “botanizing on the asphalt.” The arcade provides him with “an unfailing remedy for the kind of boredom that easily arises under the baleful eye of a sated reactionary regime....”

The city of Paris, and the Arcades in particular, offered constant variety and what Benjamin called “double ground” since the streets contain both the immediate present and the vanished past.

The present offers serendipity: history provides depth and equivocation.

Movement through the gathering throng of people ensures there is a continual dialogue between past and present. The *flâneur*'s travels blend novelty with memory.

The cast on the city stage-set is ever-changing. Baudelaire quotes his fellow writer Constantin Guys, “Anyone who is capable of being bored in a crowd is a blockhead. I repeat: a blockhead, and a contemptible one.”

Flânerie, the act of being a flâneur, of undistracted solitary walking, marks the beginnings of “going with the flow”: of urban geography.

Dans les plis sinueux des vieilles capitales...

In the twisting folds of old capital cities
Where everything, even horror, turns to magic,
Obeying my irresistible impulses I spy
On odd decrepit charming creatures

Les Petites Vieilles p 180

The idea of the flâneur inspired Alexandre Dumas’s novel *The Mohicans of Paris*, where the hero, Salvatore, decides to go in search of adventure by following a scrap of paper which he has given to the wind as a plaything. The scrap is like “one of those beautiful white-winged moths” that takes a group of friends from the Place Saint-Andre-des-Arts towards the Rue Saint-Jacques.

What these characters are in search of is, of course, *a story*, believing, in Benjamin’s words that “No matter what traces the flâneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to an adventure or even a crime.”

He compares the flâneur to the central character in Edgar Allen Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd*. In it, the narrator notices a man of “some sixty-five or seventy years of age” whose countenance suggested “ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice of coolness, of malice of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense – of supreme - despair.”

The narrator is intrigued and spots, under the man’s jacket, “a glimpse both of a diamond and a dagger.’ He decides to follow the man through the night as he wanders through the streets, doubling back on himself, altering his speed, retracing his steps, entering gin palaces and disappearing down dark alleys. But no matter how much the man is followed, his purposes cannot be detected.

The narrator concludes:

“This old man,’ I said at length, “is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.’

A Paris policeman wrote, in 1798, “It is almost impossible to summon and maintain good moral character in a thickly massed population where each individual, unbeknownst to all the others, hides in the crowd, so to speak, and blushes before the eyes of no one. “

Arcades p 417

Baudelaire read the darker fictions of Edgar Allen Poe when his stories were first translated into French: *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Purloined Letter*, and there is an inspirational link between the flâneur and the detective.

Benjamin adds: "If the flâneur is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially for it legitimises his idleness. His indolence is only apparent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant."

An added frisson to the fictions is provided by the opportunity to conduct these perambulations at night. In the heyday of the second Empire, the shops in the main streets of Paris did not close before ten o'clock at night; gas lighting enabled night wandering or *noctambulisme*.

Public lighting had come to Paris in 1667 in the form of oil lamps and lanterns lit by candles.

The Arcades were brightly lit and, Benjamin writes, "For someone entering the Passage des Panoramas of 1817, the sirens of gas-light would be singing to him on one side, while oil-lamp odalisques offered enticements from the other."

Arcades 874

This is not simply a French phenomenon. Charles Dickens was a great believer in noctambulism, and used the energy and populace of the city as inspiration. In 1860, the year he began work on *Great Expectations*, he wrote an essay called "Night Walks", based on his moonlit rambles through the capital's streets.

"The wild moon and clouds were as restless as an evil conscience in a tumbled bed," he wrote, "and the very shadow of the immensity of London seemed to lie oppressively upon the river."

According to his friend and biographer John Forster, it was not unusual for Dickens to walk seven or eight miles, sometimes as many as 12, before dawn.

He describes the city's changing states of sleeplessness. First, there is the "tumbling and tossing" as it settles to sleep: the public houses turn their lamps out and the potmen thrust brawling drunkards into the street. After that, the last stray walkers, carters and cabmen expire in fits and starts and the late pieman and hot-potato man pack up their braziers. Anyone awake after the last pieman has gone home begins to yearn for company, a lighted place, the comfort of finding that anyone else is still up. The homeless men and ragged spectral youths left out after this hour suffer a condition Dickens calls Dry Rot: "a certain slovenliness and deterioration, which is not poverty, not dirt, nor intoxication, nor ill-health, but simply Dry Rot . . . a trembling of the limbs, somnolency, misery, and crumbling to pieces." It is a relief when Covent Garden begins to stir. Hot early coffee can be got — and toast. At the railway stations, the morning mails come in and the gas lamps grow pale. "

For Dickens, the city of *Oliver Twist*, Bill Sykes, and The Artful Dodger was a magic lantern. The fog of London begins *Bleak House*. A dead body floating in the Thames is searched for money at the start of *Our Mutual Friend*. Young Pip hopes the teeming city meets his great expectations. A blind beggar shows David Copperfield that he too has been blind.

In his biography of Dickens, G.K. Chesterton observed “Dickens himself had, in the most sacred and serious sense of the term, the key to the street....His earth was the stones of the street; his stars were the lamps of the street; his hero was the man in the street. He could open the inmost door of his house- the door that leads into that secret passage which is lined with houses and roofed with stars.”

He is the writer as flâneur – part of the crowd yet divorced from it, observant and yet anonymous.

The clearest contemporary exponent is, perhaps, the French artist Sophie Calle.

In January 1981 she started watching a man on the streets of Paris, but lost sight of him. That very evening he was introduced to her at an art gallery opening. During the conversation, he told her that he was planning an imminent trip to Venice, and so, almost on a whim, she decided to follow him.

Her father dropped her off at the Gare de Lyon. In her suitcase was a make-up kit so she could disguise herself; a blonde bobbed wig, hats, veils, gloves, and a Leica camera with a Squintar lens attachment equipped with mirrors so that she could take photographs without aiming at the subject. Her purpose in following the man she referred to as Henri B was not amatory - it was mere *flânerie*.

She did not know where Henri B was staying in Venice and it took her almost a week to find him. Bizarrely, on her second day and wearing her blonde wig she was herself followed by a man for ten minutes, but he didn't dare speak to her.

Finally she spotted Henri B, followed him through the streets of Venice, and even photographed him taking photographs; which she then replicated.

After two days she was discovered. Henri B noticed her following him. She retreated, hired a room opposite his pensione, and continued to observe. She discovered when he was returning to Paris, got the train before his, and waited back at the Gare de Lyon for his return. At 10.08 a.m on Sunday February 24th, Henri B stepped off the train. Sophie Calle photographed him for one last time as he left the station, and at 10.10 a.m, the thirteen day project ended.

This act of *flânerie* is an act of stalking, and therefore close to criminality; and so two months later, in April 1981, Sophie Calle asked her mother to hire a detective to follow her round, report on her daily activities, and take photographic evidence of her existence.

The detective obeyed. He observed and took notes and photographs, as Sophie Calle bought marigolds, visited a cemetery, met a friend for a café crème, and had her hair done.

She then showed the unknowing detective the streets of Paris, visiting the Louvre, having a drink in the Tuileries gardens, crossing the Place de la Concorde, entering the Palais de la Découverte – in other words, she turned the detective **back** into a flâneur.

And then, if that wasn't enough, she asked a friend to follow and photograph the detective that was following her.

Thus, a new flâneur followed the detective following the first flâneur.

This adventure then made its way into fiction. Sophie Calle was the inspiration for the character of Maria Turner in Paul Auster's book *Leviathan*.

After the novel was published, Calle responded by living as Maria the character rather than herself, modelling her behaviour on the extra elements that Auster had made up, reconstructing, for example, the colour-coded meals set out in the book; orange on a Monday, red on a Tuesday, white on a Wednesday, green on a Thursday, yellow on a Friday, pink on a Saturday.

And so the chromatic diet of the fictitious flâneur influenced the real life character that inspired her.

Auster who, by the way, has also translated Baudelaire, became, in part, what Calle called "the author of my actions."

A more recent project is *Où et Quand?* [*Where and When?* 2008] involving a clairvoyant. "I would ask the clairvoyant where she saw me in a week or a month's time," Calle explained. "And then I would go there. In a way it was like catching up with my own future."

This is advanced, projected flânerie, playing with notions of time, observation, presence and absence; a meditation on chance, fate and the almost random nature of decision-making.

The Internet

Today we can be both literal and digital flâneurs; surfing new phantasmagoria on the internet. As the flâneur wanders through the crowd, *in it but not of it*, so we have to behave online, never becoming a creature of the internet, or possessed by it, but detached from it, watchful, suspicious, ever the detective.

The digital flâneur is not seduced by the temptations of abbreviated attention and relentless superficiality: cats playing Rachmaninov, pop stars brushing their teeth with Jack Daniels, naked celebrities, monkey tennis or what Walter Benjamin called "the replacement of permanence and solidity with transience and fragmentation."

One has to find one's own way past the chasm of solipsism where validation consists simply of authenticity.

You cannot equate significance with intensity – the disappointing promiscuity of the internet is necessarily unfulfilling. The acquisition and mastery of its total information is beyond reach. We are no longer in the Renaissance, where scholars such as Erasmus, Castiglioni and Pico della Mirandola could espouse the virtues of the *uomo universale*; a person who could master all available knowledge, whether artistic, scientific, physical or spiritual, and put it to good social use.

Instead, we live between the extremes of specialism and self-promotion, muddling through the chaos of knowledge and cloud of digital unknowing.

So how are we to cope with our own inevitable failure to know all that we feel we want to know? How can we prevent lassitude and despair? What is to stop us collapsing on the ground and thinking: “I give up. It’s too much.”

The first step is to know that the gap - between what is possible and what can be achieved - has been studied before.

There is a history of restlessness and surfeit together with their necessary corollaries: lassitude and boredom.

And fortunately, that history is not boring at all – or, at least, I hope it’s not.

Dr Johnson

For Dr Johnson, only a life of focussed action can bring satisfaction. As another sometime noctambulist, he too was an early flâneur, and once walked with the poet Richard Savage round the squares of London all one night, being too poor to afford either food or lodging, sustained only by the passionate intimacy of their conversation.

He was also aware of the criminal dangers of nightly flânerie, warning in the poem *London*:

Prepare for death, if here at night you roam,
And sign your will before you leave your home.
Some fiery fop, with new commission vain,
Who sleeps on brambles till he kills his man;
Some frolic drunkard, reeling from a feast,
Provokes a broil, and stabs you for a jest.

The city is a human market-place

Where all are Slaves to Gold,
Where Looks are merchandise and Smiles are sold

London offers so many dangers and divertissements that it’s hard to concentrate on any one thing.

In an essay for the flaneristically named magazine *The Idler*, Johnson describes those who “lie down to sleep and rise up to trifle, are employed every morning in finding expedients to rid themselves of the day, chase pleasure through all the places of public resort, fly from London to Bath and from Bath to London, without any other reason for changing place, but that they go in quest of company as idle and as vagrant as themselves, always endeavouring to raise some new desire that they may have something to pursue, to rekindle some hope which they know will be disappointed, changing one amusement for another, which a few months will make equally insipid, or sinking into languor and disease, for want of something to actuate their bodies or exhilarate their minds.” (454)

Johnson therefore suggests confronting boredom with concentrated action, upbraiding his companion Boswell for trying to “think down” or repress distressing thoughts.

‘While we were in the chaise driving to Birmingham to breakfast, he said, “When you have a place in the country, lay out twenty pounds a year upon a laboratory. It will be an amusement to you.’

Boswell replied:

‘I said I had last summer taken a course of chemistry. “Sir, said he, ‘take a course in chemistry or a course of rope-dancing, or a course of anything to which you are inclined at the times. Contrive to have as many retreats for your mind as you can, as many things to which it can fly from itself.’

(Boswell Ominous Years, 287)

Boswell, ever one to put the desires of the body before the needs of the mind, thinks to himself that “a course of concubinage” might be fun.

That is not what Johnson had in mind; although activity, however frenetic, is frequently his answer to the noontday demon of introspective despair.

According to Johnson, the mind must flee from self-pity. Doing something is better than nothing- whether it is conversation, playing draughts, composing dictionaries or treasuring up scraps of orange peel; anything to occupy the brain and see off depression.

Johnson’s short work of fiction, *Rasselas*, addresses the problem: a young prince, given nothing to desire, suffers from life’s tedium, but learns that desires must to some extent remain unsatisfied for the simple reason that to have every desire instantly gratified would make for a life of utter monotony.

This is of course the paradox at the heart of the vanity of human wishes; desire makes us miserable - but the absence of desire results in boredom.

Those who have enjoyed an eventful past and have things to which they can look forward can alleviate the tedium of the present with memory and expectation. For those not so blessed, Johnson recommends the energy of walking; and a passage in *The Idler*, even anticipates the flânerie of Baudelaire:

“But what can retirement confer upon him, who having done nothing can receive no support from his own importance, who having known nothing can find no entertainment in reviewing the past, and who intending nothing can form no hopes from prospects of the future: he can, surely, take no wiser course, than that of *losing himself in the croud*, and filling the vacuities of his mind with the news of the day. “

(Idler 473; no 126, 19 Jan. 1754)

Johnson, too, could be a man of the crowd.

Boredom

What makes people bored?

The development of leisure, the rise of individualism, the decline of religion, the growth of psychoanalysis, therapy and introspection have all widened the gap between the individual’s sense of a confident and engaged sense of self - and the unstable, and frequently transient, attractions of the world.

Today, people may feel they have “ a right to happiness” but such a notion would have felt very alien to anyone living before the eighteenth century.

Incidentally the verb “ to bore” does not appear in English until after 1750, and the first citation of the noun *boredom* in the Oxford English Dictionary is as late as 1864. It’s not in Dr Johnson’s dictionary as Johnson prefers “tired”: as in “ a man who is tired of London is tired of life” and “tiresome”.

The etymology of bore and boredom is unknown; the eighteenth century phrase “French bore” suggests the word might be of French origin, from *bourre* meaning padding, and *bourrer* to stuff or satiate – but even the Oxford English Dictionary suggests “ these words do not yield the required sense”

Now, of course the condition of boredom is familiar to any parent of young children, any adolescent or student, or anyone attending workplace seminars on the benefits of granular work-flow.

(Nothing good ever came from the phrase “this is just to give you the heads-up”)

There is a desperate desire in an atomised world to be connected to meaning, to flee from anything that might be considered boring, but modernity has been so over-engineered (or capitalism so hard wired) that many people feel they can’t possibly keep the pace or stay the distance. They feel they are missing out on something but can’t ever quite define what that is.

One thing most people are missing is, of course, God.

I realise that to bring religion into a contemporary cultural discussion is to be quaintly old fashioned but this idea lies at the heart of Pascal’s *Pensées*.

Pascal

For Pascal, without God, man is nothing, and boredom is the realisation of that nothingness.

Trivial and ephemeral consolations only make matters worse.

“The only thing that consoles us for our miseries,” Pascal writes, “is diversion. And yet it is the greatest of our miseries. For it is that, above all, which prevents us thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to destruction.’

Existence becomes a flight from life; anything to avoid existential despair.

“Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.’

(Pascal is always one to warn his readers what the rejection of Christianity involves)

Since the Enlightenment, one could argue that boredom has become the great modern subject. You could have a veritable football team of writers and philosophers playing for Boredom FC: Albert Camus in goal, a defensive back four of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger; a midfield flânerie of Baudelaire, Flaubert, Chekhov, and Ibsen; with T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett up front. I imagine they are playing 4:4:2 but being flâneurs they are unlikely to stick to the formation.

Their manager would be Alberto Moravia whose novel, called simply “Boredom”, was published in 1960.

The narrator is Dino, an artist who is so rich and so bored (is boredom itself decadent? One might ask?) that he sets out to write a history of the subject:

“In the beginning was boredom,” he declares, “commonly called chaos. God, bored with boredom, created the earth, the sky, the waters, the plants, Adam and Eve; and the latter, bored in their turn in paradise, ate the forbidden fruit. God became bored with them and drove them out of Eden; Cain, bored with Abel, killed him; Noah, bored to tears, invented wine; God, once again, bored with mankind, destroyed the world by means of the Flood; but this in turn bored him so much he brought back the fine weather again. And so on. The great Empires- Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman- rose out of boredom and fell again in boredom; the boredom of paganism gave rise to Christianity; that of Catholicism, to Protestantism; the boredom of Europe caused the discovery of America; the boredom of feudalism kindled the French revolution; and that of capitalism, the revolution in Russia. All these fine discoveries were noted down by me in a kind of summary, then I began with great enthusiasm to write the true and proper history.....then I grew bored with the whole project and abandoned it.”

Boredom is perhaps the privilege of modernity.

Milan Kundera has suggested that it has developed in line with “progress” and in the novel, “Identity”, he makes claim that people in the past, particularly manual labourers were relatively free of lassitude:

“I’d say that the quantity of boredom, if boredom is measured, is much greater today than it was. Because the old occupations, at least most of them, were unthinkable without a passionate involvement: the peasants in love with their land; my grandfather, the magician of beautiful tables; shoemakers who knew every villager’s feet by heart; the woodsmen; the gardeners; probably even the soldiers killed with passion back then. The meaning of life wasn’t an issue; it was there with them, quite naturally, in their workshops, in their fields. Each occupation had created its own mentality, it’s own way of being. A doctor would think differently from a peasant, a soldier would behave in a different way from a teacher. Today we’re all alike, all of us bound together by our shared apathy towards our work. That very apathy has become a passion. The one great collective passion of our time.’

Identity p 75

We are not a million miles away from the hymn *All things bright and beautiful* in this view of the past. “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate” – and not everyone who works in the contemporary world is apathetic.

But Kundera has a point about both a post-agricultural and now a post industrial society - what one might call a globalised call centre - in which labour and meaning have been separated.

Chekhov

The bard of boredom, is surely Anton Chekhov. So many of his characters are perpetually stuck, unable to flâneur their way to Moscow – or anywhere else for that matter.

Chekhov described his native town as consisting of “60,000 inhabitants busy only with eating, drinking, and reproducing.... How dirty, empty, idle, illiterate and boring is Taganrog.”

His play Uncle Vanya is a secular hymn to the despair of a wasted life

VANYA: Oh my God, I’m forty-seven. Suppose I live to be sixty, that means I still have thirteen years to go. It’s too long. How am I to get through those thirteen years? What am I to do? How do I fill the time?

And this is how Masha responds to her husband’s declaration of love in Three Sisters:

KULYGIN: We got married seven years ago, and it seems like only yesterday. That's the truth, I say again, you're an amazing woman. And I'm so very, very happy!

MASHA: And I'm so very, very bored.

Chekhov's own boredom was practical rather than philosophical:

I am bored not in the sense of *weltschmerz*, not in the sense of being weary of existence, but simply bored from want of people, from want of music which I love, and from want of women, of whom there are none in Yalta. I am bored without caviar and pickled cabbage.

Yalta, February 15 1900

Paradoxically, the piece of writing that changed, enhanced and developed his reputation was called *A Boring Story*. It was written two months after the death of his brother in 1889, the first-person account of a sixty-two year professor of medicine, Nikolai Stepanovich, who has only months to live. In the course of the story he comes to question all that he has previously striven for, not least academic reputation, respect and fame.

He cannot believe that the ending of his life will take place, in all likelihood, in a banal bedroom. He wants to break off his academic lecture and scream:

"I feel a passionate hysterical desire to stretch out my hands before me and break into loud lamentation. I want to cry out that I, a famous man, have been sentenced by fate to the death penalty...and at that moment my position seems to be so awful that I want all my listeners to be horrified, to leap up from their seats and to rush in panic terror, with desperate screams, to the exit."

He adds:

"It is not easy to get through such moments."

Stepanovich recognises that the common round of human behaviour is a mask for despair. But he warns people who work in universities - pay attention here ladies and gentleman - that bitching about a university colleague, is one of the first signs that you are not up to the job:

"If a young scientific or literary man begins his career with bitter complaints of scientific and literary men, it is a sure sign that he is worn out and not fit for his work."

At the same time, scholarly detachment is no good either:

"They say philosophers and the truly wise are indifferent. It is false: indifference is the paralysis of the soul; it is premature death."

Dramatic events in Chekhov's stories are frequently thrown away, used merely as a one line excuse to explain why people feel the way they do; as when Katya, Nikolai

Stepanovitch's ward, a disappointed and jilted actress in her twenties writes simply: "Excuse the gloominess of this letter; yesterday I buried my child."

Chekhov undercuts boredom with life-changing moments from which there can be no return; the consequences can be either tragic, comic or both. He is interested in human behaviour under fate, how people give themselves away yet still try to hide their disappointment, yearning and despair.

The Russian translator Rosamund Bartlett has pointed out that the English word "boring" does not convey as much as the Russian "skuchno" which also implies "sadness, gloom, despondency, yearning."

(Chekhov Scenes from a Life p 92)

What matters, for Chekhov is the interior life; even if its outward manifestation is tedious:

"All that I now write displeases and bores me, but what sits in my head interests, excites and moves me..."

Moscow October 27 1888

It's like the x-ray analysis of a painting. Chekhov is interested in everything behind the surface.

In the story *Gooseberries* Ivan Ivanych tells the story of his brother Nikolay who was determined to move from the town to country, saving all he had, marrying a rich widow for money, and behaving with utter meanness in order to satisfy a rural vision which would find its fulfilment in eating a plateful of gooseberries that he had grown himself. When, after many years, the moment comes, the gooseberries are sour and unripe, but Nikolay declares 'Ah, how delicious! Do taste them!'

The narrator is amazed at this act of self-deception. He both despises and admires it:

"We see the people going to market for provisions, eating by day, sleeping by night, talking their silly nonsense, getting married, growing old, serenely escorting their dead to the cemetery; but we do not see and we do not hear those who suffer, and what is terrible in life goes on somewhere *behind the scenes*...."

Chekhov's genius is to realise both the front his characters show to the world - the presentation of the self in every day life - and the pain and despair that all too often breaks through that surface. He understands how the boring and the trivial often reveal desperation, the need for security, the fear of hopelessness, the underlying lack of understanding or motivation.

This gap between appearance and reality is an almost Johnsonian device. It was Johnson who suggested, for example, that reticence could be disguised arrogance. The bashful person "considers that what he shall say or do will never be forgotten; that renown or infamy are suspended upon every syllable." But, says Johnson, "He that

considers how little he dwells upon the condition of others, will learn how little the attention of others is attracted by himself.”

Rambler 159

A lesson for those on Twitter perhaps....

The boring, the dull and the tedious however can be surprisingly revealing and it is part of the purpose of art not only to contain high tragedy and bright comedy but to give meaning to the mundane; to make at least *something* out of nothing.

Madame Bovary: Sex, depravity and boredom

The idea of “ nothing” has been a complex concept in the world of modernist literature – from the nihilist philosophy of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* to Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*.

So inspiring is the idea of writing about a world without God that Flaubert suggested: “What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing.”

That book became *Madame Bovary*; a novel which is, of course “ about” many things, not least boredom.

Emma Bovary, and her adulterous companions, are bored out of their minds. Life has not turned out as the books they have been reading have led them to expect.

But one could argue that part of Emma’s banal tragedy is that she has been reading the wrong books in the wrong way: these were the romances given to her by the old maid who came to do the linen in her convent school; “ all love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every stage, horses ridden to death on every page, sombre forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses....”

Flaubert’s contempt for popular fiction really takes off here...”little skiffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, “gentlemen” brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was, always well dressed, and weeping like fountains.”

Madame Bovary longs for a meaningful and beautiful life but is frustrated by the gap between expectation and reality;

“Emma tried to find out what one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion rapture that had seemed to her so beautiful in books.”

Early on in her marriage she abandons reading, foolishly exclaiming “I have read everything” and embarks on her two affairs with Leon and Rodolphe, both of whom are bored. They too yearn for the excitement of adultery promised in romantic fantasy: only to find that, in practice, it too is boring.

Life cannot be as it is in the grand and popular romances- in fact it cannot be very much at all, and the bored lovers then proceed to commit the worst and most tedious sin of all: they become dull themselves.

Dostoevsky: boredom and crime

“Of course boredom may lead you to anything,” Dostoevsky wrote. “It is boredom sets one sticking golden pins into people...What is bad ...is that I dare say people will be thankful for the gold pins...”

(Notes from the Underground, Chapter VII)

Dostoevsky’s fiction intensifies boredom into existential despair. Ivan Karamazov argues that “without God everything is permitted”, and Kirilov in *The Possessed* suggests “If God does not exist then I become God.”

When Lise confronts the sweet novice monk Alyosha Karamazov and tells her how bored she is, he suggests, that like Emma Bovary, it is a sign of decadence. ‘It’s your luxurious life.’

But Lise counters: ‘If I am ever poor, I shall murder somebody and even if I am rich I may murder someone perhaps – why do nothing!.....Real life is a bore.’

Modern Boredom

The search for meaning, or what has been called the plugging of “the God-shaped hole”, in an arguably post-Christian west, has perhaps become *the* major theme of modernity. In an interview in 1995 JG Ballard remarked:

“People believe in nothing. There is nothing to believe in now....There’s this vacuum.... What people have most longed for, which is the consumer society, has come to pass. Like all dreams that come to pass, there is a nagging sense of emptiness. So they look for anything, they believe in any extreme. Any extremist nonsense is better than nothing....Well I think we’re on the track to all kinds of craziness. I think there’s no end to what sort of nonsense will come out of the woodwork, and a lot of very dangerous nonsense. I could sum up the future in one word, and that word is boring. The future is going to be boring.”

Lukas Barr Don’t Crash: the JG Ballard interview, KGB, 7, 1995

It is unavoidable – the Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen in his short study “A Philosophy of Boredom” refers to it as “life’s gravity.”

So how should we respond? How can we, as the title of this lecture suggests, stave off boredom and lead a literary life?

One must get to the point when one is so bored by being bored that one is forced to act –one must travel through it in order to come out the other side. There are no detours.

Joseph Brodsky, in an article “In Praise of Boredom’ from his collection *On Grief and Reason*: When boredom strikes, throw yourself into it. Let it squeeze you, right to the bottom.”

“For boredom is time’s invasion of your world system,“ he continues. “It puts your life in perspective, and the net result is precisely insight and humility. The former gives rise to the latter, *nota bene*. The more you learn about your own format, the humbler and more sympathetic you become to your fellow-beings, to the dust that swirls in the sun’s ray or that already lies motionless on your table top.”

We need boredom as much as we need dreams to condense the psychic life.

In short we need to become flâneurs of the imagination.

Daydreaming and the Creative Imagination: Keats

In his letters, Keats suggests that we, as readers, give ourselves up to what he calls “delicious diligent indolence”; and that we work hard at our daydreaming:

‘I have the idea that a man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner- let him on any certain day read a certain page of full Poesy or distilled prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it – until it becomes stale- but when will it do so?

Never – When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves as a starting point towards all the “two-and thirty Palaces”. How happy is such a “voyage of conception”, what delicious diligent indolence! A doze upon the Sofa does not hinder it, and a nap upon Clover engenders ethereal finger-pointings...’

Letters 1 231-2

The reading of poetry becomes a secular form of prayer, and is approached in the same meditative manner. Whereas Jesus promised that “in my father’s house are many mansions”, Keats offers the reader the chance to take any one of the thirty-two wind compass points that each lead to a palace of the imagination.

Literature should be inexhaustible – one should never, like Madame Bovary, have “nothing to read” and each reading should set off a series of associations and speculations, that keeps growing

A thing of beauty is a joy forever

Its loveliness *increases*

with each reading and every generation; and if this act of reading continues to be one way in which the world’s beauty and truth is allowed to grow then, for Keats,

“Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furse and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees.”

The dreamer becomes the dream.

One of the earliest examples of the redemptive power of literature can be found in Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess* in which the narrator, a poet, begins by telling the reader that he is bored, listless and insomniac. This has been going on for eight years. He is in a funk – probably suffering from that great medieval complaint – unrequited love.

It’s a great wonder, by this light
I’m still alive, for day and night
I hardly sleep a single wink,
So many idle thoughts I think.
Purely for lack of sleep, I find,
I can hold nothing in my mind.
Great things may happen, I don’t care,
How they began or when or where

The solution comes when the poet narrator, let us call him Chaucer, takes down a book, almost certainly Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, and starts to read the tragic love story of drowned King Seys and his Queen Alcyone.

Queen Alcyone finds out her husband has drowned. Morpheus, the God of Sleep, tells her so by occupying the body of King Seys. He then comes to her in a dream, and tells her how he has died.

Chaucer is so impressed by the God of Sleep’s quantum leap that he soon falls asleep himself. He now has his own dream.

In an act of medieval imaginative flânerie, the poet finds that he is walking through a wood. There he meets a twenty-four year old “Man in Black” leaning against a tree and in a bereaved state

And sunk so deep in thought and pain
He could not hear me; I spoke in vain
For he had nearly lost his mind

This medieval version of Johnny Cash, then tells the poet of his own lost love.

I have such sorrow and such woe
That joy I never more shall know,
Now that I see my lady bright
Whom I have loved with all my might,
Is gone from me, by death laid low.

His bereavement, his lostness, and his grief is all consuming – described in this utterly brilliant phrase

This is my pain, as I have said
Always dying and never dead

After a long conversation about the perils of romance, in which the man in black conveys both the wonder of love and the disaster of death, Chaucer wakes up, determined to write down all that he has dreamed, revitalised by tale he has been told.

The story itself has alleviated his listlessness; and no cure would have been forthcoming had the poet not read Ovid's *Metamorphosis* in the first place.

Literature transports him to the strange world of a dream within a dream – a conceit also used by Bunyan and Dante – that provides a restorative gloss on reality: one that cures ennui and acts as a spur to the activity that is writing.

Ted Hughes

Both reading and writing require a form of imaginative flânerie. In 1957 the poet Ted Hughes hadn't written anything for a very long time and was becoming worried. Then, one night when he was doing nothing - a fox walked into his imagination.

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

Ted Hughes, 1957, *The Thought-Fox*

This is not, primarily, a poem about a fox, but a poem about writing a poem.

The requirements of poetry are solitude, quiet, and the need to slow down the pace of time – as if poetry were reality in slow motion.

The writer has to decide exactly what to describe, and in sharpest focus. It has to be the kind of image Cartier Bresson referred to as “the decisive moment” as the fox of inspiration enters “the dark hole of the head.”

So fast is the contemporary pace of life that moments of realisation are often missed, lost or ignored.

We are perhaps so preoccupied with looking that we forget to see.

The panic of the zeitgeist makes retention difficult. The only appropriate response, according to Milan Kundera is to slow down. ‘The degree of slowness,’ he writes, ‘is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.’

Wittgenstein makes the same connection with speed: “In the race of philosophy, the one who wins is the one who can run slowest. Or: the one who reaches the finishing line last.’

This is partly nonsense of course – not everyone who finishes last is a philosopher, just as not every bored person will become a poet, or every idle person a genius – but the idea of slowing down time and allowing for concentration is a necessary response to hectic anxiety.

Literature must have the ability to stop time and think in a different way, reformulating understanding.

This is T.S.Eliot’s idea of the still point in the turning world that we find in *The Four Quartets*:

At the still point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is...

Eliot’s poetry frequently references Baudelaire and the movement of the flâneur through the “unreal city” of both reality and imagination.

The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock pays tribute to all the tropes of flânerie:

LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question... 10
 Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
 Let us go and make our visit.

There is no pre-ordained purpose. "Oh, do not ask, "What is it?". Whim and serendipity is all. "Let us go... let us go..." The phrase is repeated three times in twelve lines.

The 'flâneur' wanders "through certain half-deserted streets" like Johnson and Savage in the eighteenth century inhaling the night stench of "one night cheap hotels and sawdust restaurants."

It is almost dark. The journey takes place in murky light: "yellow fog" and "yellow smoke." The lamps are lit and, as if it were an Edgar Allen Poe story, crime is never far away

And indeed there will be time
 For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
 Rubbing its back upon the window panes; 25
 There will be time, there will be time
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
 There will be time to murder and create,

Time is slowed; there is "time yet for a hundred indecisions, And a hundred visions and revisions." The imaginative world is full of possibility, chance and questions:

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me. 125

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown 130
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Eliot confronts an "unreal city", just as Baudelaire did. It's a city populated by the living and the dead. ("I had not thought death had undone so many.") He knows, as Dickens did, that that the present can be haunted by the past and visited by ghosts from the future.

The purpose of the flâneur is to live life to the full, to notice things, to be filled with the curiosity that alleviates and transcends boredom and results in revelation; to spot the things that matter and to spend appreciative time in response; knowing, perhaps, that the less one has lived the more frightening death becomes.

The nineteenth century critic Walter Pater simplified the desire for a fuller life and a concentrated focus that art and literature provide:

“Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.”

The life of the flâneur, the literary life, is rich in dream and reward. It consists of curiosity and keen response, thought and feeling, discovery and surprise. It extends experience beyond all continents; reaches beyond the living and the dead, brings patience, illumination and, at the very least, a little understanding.

It is a life that I commend to you. After all, one wouldn't want to be bored *to death*.