

## Book

### A tale of radium, love, and death

The Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris was the largest asylum in 18th-century Europe, with an astonishing 8000 inmates in a city with a population of only half a million. The lowest of its occupants, however, was the “abdominal cavity” in the belly of the building that was reserved for supposedly demented women. In this stinking hole, hysterics, obsessives, and so-called nymphomaniacs fought a losing battle against being killed off by countless swarms of rats. They were, Per Olov Enquist observes, for the most part “women who were confused by love...they were the envied upper class in this tragic and comic collection of six thousand grey shadows who, muttering, shrieking or sobbing, moved like slow-moving toads through the filthy passageways”.

Among them was the entirely sane Blanche Wittman, who had been committed to this inferno for 16 years, and who as “queen of the hysterics” was to become the lover of its senior physician, the renowned Jean-Martin Charcot. He was, as Enquist wryly puts it, “a man with a strong, rational belief in the inadequacy of reason”. One might say the same for his apprentice, the young Sigmund Freud, who puts in an oblique appearance here. It is worth noting that hysteria was a common ailment among these women while Charcot was alive, but ceased to be common once he died. The hysterics, so to speak, now had nobody to perform for. It is, of course, inconceivable that our own medical knowledge might turn out in the future to be so dodgy.

All this is plain historical fact. From these facts, however, Enquist has spun a haunting fiction of love and death, healing and destruction. “Love can arise when a person shares his darkness with his beloved”, Enquist comments. “Does hatred also arise then?” The novel broods upon phenomena that are both life-giving

and death-dealing; and if one of these is love, another is radium.

On leaving Salpêtrière, Blanche Wittman was hired by Marie Curie to assist her in her work on radium; and as a result of this deadly labour she ended up as little more than a human torso, with three of her limbs amputated. Yet the image of radium, as a mysterious energy for healing, also blends in the

**“Only a writer of Enquist’s power could convert Curie’s work with radium into a richly suggestive metaphor of human life.”**

book with the idea of love. Both love and radium can cure, but both can make you ill as well; and the kind of illness that arises from repressed desire would eventually be given the name of neurosis by Charcot’s Viennese assistant. Love has traditionally been seen as an art, not least by the French, but Freud would invent that improbable discipline, a science of desire. Late in life, he would investigate the dramatic conflict in human beings between *Eros* and *Thanatos* just as Enquist does here.

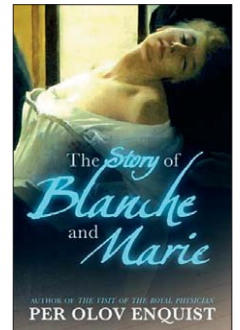
As one whose response to radium is both scientific and aesthetic, Curie is an artist as well as a scientist. Later in the novel she will encounter her own lethal forms of love: first with her husband Paul, who “is struck by an incurable illness by the name of Marie Curie” and later, weakened by their radium experiments, is killed in a road accident. In this sense, perhaps, Curie’s love of Paul, which lies “like a cancerous tumour” inside her, has indirectly led to his destruction. After his death, she plunges into a scandalous affair that almost ruins her professional reputation. Relationships in this novel are highly dangerous affairs.

Curie’s hunt for the origin of the elusive power of radium is a metaphor for her attempt to grasp the ultimately unfathomable nature of human loving.

Both are an “inexplicable miracle”. Charcot reminds Blanche that the word “medicine” derives from the ancient Greek heroine Medea, the mother of witchcraft. Surgery and sorcery have a common root. His own renowned use of hypnotism is another ambiguous combination of science and magic—although Enquist also records that by studying a cleaning woman of his who had a strange form of shaking, he set off on the path that would later lead to the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

The most elusive power of all in the book is that of women—the “dark continent”, in the words of Freud, which Charcot is determined to illuminate with the rays of clinical reason. The contortions of the Salpêtrière hysterics, who are put like animals on public show, are “supposed to demonstrate the previously hidden pathway into the terrifying and repellent world of womanhood and love”. Yet it is precisely in this scientific cocksureness that the physicians are most deeply deluded themselves. The enigma in question is a reflection of their own horrified faces in the glass of the other sex.

Only a writer of Enquist’s power could convert Curie’s work with radium into a richly suggestive metaphor of human life. Amputation, too, is transformed into a metaphor for cut-off memories and broken-off relationships. In these pages, art and science come to form curious unities. The novel records “how difficult [it is] to distinguish the artistry of solace and healing from that of seduction!” Both activities require a degree of psychological finesse. With deft ambiguity, Enquist exploits the fact that sexuality is physical and spiritual at the same time, a matter for both the medic and the artist. *The Story of Blanche and Marie* is more than the title announces. Within this spare, elegant text, with its delicate web of symbolic resonances, lurks a more ambitious novel about the birth of



**The Story of Blanche and Marie**  
Per Olov Enquist. Harvill Secker,  
2006. Pp 224. £16.99.  
ISBN 1-84343-233-1.

the modern age itself. Those grands maîtres of modernity, Freud, Albert Einstein, and Emmeline Pankhurst, all have walk-on parts. We are present at a time when “with blood, with confusion, with reason, and in an attempt to step into the dark future of humanity, the twentieth century began”. The novel’s crossing of wires between the powers of death and the forces of life speaks

not just of a Parisian asylum or the invention of radium, but of the modern era itself, in all its arresting mixture of science and superstition, reason and madness, compassion and destruction.

Appropriately, then, this is a modernist novel rather than an entirely realist one. It is composed of fragments and fleeting memories, disjointed in its narrative, reliant more on imagery

and subtle allusiveness rather than on plot. Beautifully translated by Tiina Nunnally, it is a story of love and death; and since that seems just about to exhaust the business of human life, there would seem no reason not to buy it and read it instantly.

*Terry Eagleton*  
c/o *The Lancet*, London, UK

## Portrait

### Benjamin Jesty: the first vaccinator revealed

*Benjamin Jesty* by Michael W Sharp (1805)  
A portrait acquired by the Wellcome Trust for the Iconographic Collection of the Wellcome Library, Euston Road, London, UK.

Patrick Pead’s book *Vaccination Rediscovered: New light in the Dawn of Man’s Quest for Immunity* was published in 2006 by Timefile Books. Pp 128. £7.99. ISBN 0-9551561-0-6.

This year the UK’s Wellcome Trust bought the only oil painting of the first vaccinator, Benjamin Jesty. This was noteworthy because the portrait was thought to be lost and only a few relations of the previous owner knew of its existence until 2004. Jesty was a farmer who lived in the village of Yetminster in North Dorset, UK. He was convinced of the folk tale that milkmaids who contracted cowpox during their work somehow became protected against smallpox. During

1774, in the face of a smallpox epidemic, he vaccinated his wife and two sons with cowpox lymph taken from lesions on the udder of an infected cow. Jesty devised and undertook his vaccination method 22 years before Edward Jenner, who is usually credited as the originator of the same practice.

In 1805 Jesty received an invitation to visit the offices of the Original Vaccine Pock Institution in London. He accepted, and was accompanied to the capital by his eldest son Robert. The physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries of the Institution asked Jesty about his vaccination “experiment” and received Robert’s permission for him to be publicly inoculated again with live smallpox to prove he was still protected against the disease. 12 of the Institute’s examining officers were signatories to a statement of the “antivariolous efficacy” of Jesty’s vaccinations. This was issued on Sept 6, 1805, and published in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* soon after. The statement ends, “to commemorate so extraordinary a fact as that of preventing the smallpox by inoculating for the cow-pock 31 years ago, at our request, a three quarter length picture of Mr Jesty is painted by that excellent artist Mr Sharp”.

Michael W Sharp’s canvas was last seen in the UK by Edgar M Crookshank at Chilfrome in 1888. He used an engraving as the frontispiece in his *History and Pathology of Vaccination*, published in 1889. After a long search

I located the painting in 2004. Then owned by one Charles Pope, it was at Marsh Moor Farm near Molteno, South Africa. Last summer, he informed me that he had sold the portrait and that the purchaser was the Wellcome Trust.

Soon after its arrival in London, I was invited to see the likeness of the man whose life I had researched so thoroughly over the previous 25 years. Viewing the near life-size image for the first time I was reminded of the words written by surgeon Alfred Haviland, on seeing an engraving of Jesty during 1862. He described the subject as “a good specimen of the fine old English yeoman, dressed in knee breeches, extensive double-breasted waistcoat, and no small amount of broadcloth. He was represented sitting in an easy chair, under the shelter of some wide-spreading tree, with his stick and broad-brimmed hat in his left hand (sic); his ample frame surmounted by a remarkably good head, with a countenance which at once be-tokens firmness and superior intelligence.” Sharp has captured a dignified pose—the portly farmer exudes an air of sturdiness and reliability. The repatriation and rescue of Jesty’s portrait brings him recognition that is long overdue. We should all draw inspiration from the ingenuity and courage of this humble Dorset farmer.

*Patrick J Pead*  
pjpead@yahoo.co.uk



Wellcome Library, London

Copyright of Lancet is the property of Lancet and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.