The dust jacket was green and grey, divided diagonally, I think. There was nothing to attract my attention about the book’s exterior – chaste, not to say pallid, no picture on it – nothing except the title, which suggested that it might have strayed from the children’s shelf upstairs. I read it through almost without stopping, alternately enthralled by the heroism and disgusted by the treachery of the characters. I taught my sister the verses of the song, because she was still too young to read (I was six and she must then have been four). Neither of us could sing in tune, then, or now, but we belted out the words remorselessly, day after day, to what we imagined to be the tune of Clementine, just as the book prescribed:

Beasts of England, beasts of Ireland,
Beasts of every land and clime,
Harken to my joyful tidings
Of the golden future time.

I was amazed, and a little aggrieved, later on to be told that the book was an allegory of some sort, too complicated to be explained to me in one go. It was perfect just as it was, with no subtext. My aunt and uncle, Violet and Tony Powell, were close friends of George Orwell, and she reported to him how I had read *Animal Farm* with such delight. Orwell was delighted too. I was the best of all possible evidence that he had succeeded in writing clear prose which spoke straight to the reader.

As the years passed, however, after this precocious start, I turned out to be one of those extreme cases Orwell might not have
approved of so much: someone who tended to regard books as more real than life, more reliable, more concrete even. As so often, precocity had grown into something even more repulsive: the bibliomaniac’s cold carapace that repels ordinary experience. And by books I mean books, not words. *Les Mots* – so talismanic for chatterboxes like Sartre – seemed to me shadowy, fleeting things, until after they were safely sunk into the page, their books and uprights and downstrokes absorbed in that thick, breadlike paper that pre-war novels were printed on.

Speech, conversation, verbal instruction – all these seemed to me then, and sometimes still seem, imperfect, transitional substitutes for the real thing, that higher mode of communication which was so neatly sandwiched between cloth boards and which did indeed, when assembled in sufficient numbers, furnish a room with their agreeable miscellany of size, colour and pattern. This is a discreditable kind of deviance, I am aware of that: Casaubon’s Syndrome. It is a thinblooded, less than fully human lifestyle – a denial of Life, in the sense so obscurely bruited by that obsessive bookman, F. R. Leavis. If exposed too rawly, it can offend, even shock. I once declared that I had read so much about Elizabeth Taylor that actually having an affair with her wouldn’t add much. This bewildered the old friends whom I was talking to (quite bookish people themselves); for years afterwards, they referred to my declaration with a mixture of derision and disbelief. It is, I suppose the bookman’s version of Plato’s cave, lived experience a mere shadow-show against the eternal reality of books. I can still remember, at roughly the age I read *Animal Farm*, the first thrill of the thought that books lived longer than the people who had written them.

To describe all this as ‘a passion for reading’ is an understatement; it doesn’t begin to do justice to the indifference to the outside world which keeps the bookman’s head still buried in the guide book while he is standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon or the steps of Salisbury Cathedral. Nor is it to be confused with a passion for books as objects. I certainly grow fond of books I have known all my life. To come upon a book in my own shelves that was on my parents’ shelves forty years ago sometimes makes the heart stop: the dove-grey binding of David Cecil’s *Stricken Deer* (his life of Cowper, in which, for once, all Cecil’s sensibility and charm reach the page); the brown-and-red-speckled Chapman & Hall editions of Evelyn Waugh, with lurking among them the smaller dirty-pink copy of *Brideshead Revisited*, inscribed to my