

Three Men in a Boat

Jerome K. Jerome

March 8–9, 2014

For some reason I heard about this book early in life. Maybe for the first time when seeing a snippet from one of the very many movies which has been based on it. From the start you got the impression that the book was both very funny, and also somewhat idyllic, hankering back to a time before cars and airplanes, when people took simple pleasures and were satisfied with that. In fact when I was a child there were many people who still remembered that time as children or even youth. The book was published in 1889. When I was fourteen I was given as a choice that book or some book on science for a birthday present. With a somewhat heavy heart I chose the latter although I was dying for the former. The book I chose I never read. When I was sixteen I bought a thin Penguin edition of it in England and started reading it while on a visit up north to my grandmother and uncle. A neighbour was very impressed that I read it in English. Later that fall our English teacher recommended that we read it in Swedish because otherwise much of the humor would supposedly get lost on us. It was also available as a so called 'Easy Reader' but that one was dismissed. I do not remember too much of it, perhaps because I did not finish it? Still I do recall vividly upon my rereading, Jeromes sarcastic remarks about the value of old things, which I took to my heart. As we know any rubbish we happen to preserve by accident takes on a special meaning after a few decades, because after all it serves as a token of the past, not unlike a Proustian olfactory memory, and its very banality is seen as proof of its authenticity.

Now the book is charming and funny. Much of the charm is due to the endless digressions, which are kept at a simple level, as far as I can tell there are no digressions inside digressions, the reader is not threatened by confusion. Some of the fun is pure slapstick, and as such a bit trying. The humour, at its best, is of the dry English understatement variety, in which a lot is packed into very few words, as when we are alerted to the remarks of a man just presented with the bill of the funeral of his mother-in-law to the effect that there is no thing that does not have some disadvantage. Or when the narrator on a digression on the maze at Hampton Court by accident comes to the center of the maze with a long line of lost people trailing him trusting him to lead them out. He momentarily decides to pretend that it was intentional, but when seeing the mean looks of those faces, decides better not.

The scenery is idyllic, a river entirely given up to pleasure seekers, rowing, punting, towing boats up-river in order to go down on the return. The river is bordered by small towns with cosy pubs, or sights stemming from English history from the Tudors, down through the Middle-Ages, all the way to the distant misty past of Anglo-Saxon kings. Interspersed with those there are word-paintings of river scenes set during auspicious circumstances of time of day and meteorological curiosity. Those word-paintings are presented as parodies, but it seems rather clear that the author actually takes more pleasure out of them as pastiches, and that he would indeed not be adverse to pursue such purple writing

more seriously. Much of the original material for the book were probably cut out to make it briefer in execution and more accessible and appealing to the mass-reader. It is a book that is written by and written for the formally un-educated, the new class of office-workers who were coming into their own through in a modest way allowing leisure and pleasure to mix. That very class would less than a hundred years later fly down to Mallorca or the Canary islands and sweat it out in the sun.

Maybe the book ends too quickly. Once they have reached Oxford (an accompanying map in the recent Penguin edition would not have been amiss) and turned around, the rest goes at high-speed and with a premature abortion of the trip in the bargain.

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