

M.Frayn

Towards the End of the Morning

June 25-29, 2014

Frayn is a notable dramatist, maybe mostly known for his 'Copenhagen', but he is also a writer of novels not without commercial and critical success. Yet the age of the novel is already past and thus the craft is now executed with a certain detachment and channeled into different categories of which crime fiction constitutes by far the largest part. Another large category is the comic novel, in the tradition of Evelyn Waugh often with touches of Graham Greene, when in British settings. Such novels easily degenerate into mere slapstick, as in the case of Frayn's 'Skios'¹, and as such become rather tedious, intended to be consumed rather than savored. The present one belongs to his early oeuvre, and as such written, one presumes, with a bit more sincerity than what was brought to the later more 'hackish' productions such as the above mentioned 'Skios'. Older novels also have charms not apparent at their time of writing, as they can give interesting clues about times now in the past, and thus open up to the nostalgic as well as the inquisitive eye. In this case we are talking about the mid-sixties, which fifty years later have acquired a certain patina and identity, the last one really, on par with the twenties and the thirties. Ostensibly it is about the newspaper business, but to be honest, there is little about it in the book. True, there are scenes from newspaper offices and common boozy lunches at nearby pubs, the quintessential Fleet street scene, yet one gets precious little idea of what it really involves, what the journalists are working on so consistently. I guess the idea being that it is hopelessly dull and inconsequential. But we do get glimpses of what were on peoples minds in general. For one thing there is a lot of smoking going on. The author dwells almost obsessively on blue smoke whirling up in the air, of cigarettes held in the palm of hands behind ears while cooking, of being stubbed in ash-trays or offered out of deftly produced packages. Clearly it was cool to smoke. The 60's was the last great smoking decade, the habit lost much of its allure in the decade to follow. Then there is the beginning involvement with the real estate market. How to afford housing, whether by renting or buying. You ideally want something central, Georgian or Regency, but as always when it comes to investments people have been there before and you have to be edged out, setting you sights lower, settling for something Victorian or even Edwardian, in what euphemistically is termed the inner suburbs. If you are handy and have contacts, buying something which has renovation potential may enlarge your options. The neighborhoods you can afford are usually already occupied by less savory characters, but you can always hope that other middle class families will move in, edge them out, and in the process enhancing the value of your property. But clearly, such hopes cannot be voiced too openly and too explicitly, the notion of political correctness surely is as old as mankind itself. And when it comes to race no one is a racist of course, definitely not in the upward mobile middle class section of society most articulate people find themselves in. However, it is

¹ Reviewed in March 2014

not always easy to predict the future, especially when it comes to fashion. The option you chose may become a cul-de-sac, shunned by your class. It sure helps if it is reasonably close to a tube station, because for commuting you are absolutely dependent upon them. TV still plays an important role, and to appear on television, is something that more or less automatically infers celebrity status. Or so it is thought. This is surely prime material for satire, and Frayn sucks this particular bone to its very marrow. One of the main protagonists of the story, a certain John Dyson, in his mid-thirties (i.e. of the same age as the author at the time), is given the opportunity to take part in a panel discussing the topical issue of race relations. Needless to say, it goes to his head, he hob-nobs with the famous and titled, engaging with gusto in conversational inanities. The idea of flying is also filled with romanticism of the smart life, and in truly the most comically successful section of the novel, the author traces the gradual wilting of such phantasies, as Dyson is taken on a promotional tour to the Persian Gulf, only to suffer repeated delays, free drinks, constant stop-overs only to be grounded in Beirut, halfway to the eventual destination, subsequently being bailed out to return to Amsterdam, only to suffer an emergency landing in Ljubljana. There are also glimpses of the smart London of that swinging decade. A mysterious Morris, a sophisticated young man straight out Kings College at Cambridge, surfacing as a stand-in for a recently diseased colleague, seems to have high-level contacts, plenty of money and grand ambitions, apparently with a talent to match, allows the other protagonist - Robert Bell, friend and office mate of Dyson, to glimpse smart restaurants and skinny girls with no bottoms, apparently the ideal of the time. Furtively over the head of his plain girlfriend he is able to engage in phantasies.

Much of the story centers on the social relation between Dyson, with wife and two young sons, running wild, and the bachelor Bell, who has been saddled, due to his own ineptitude, with a young naive woman from the provinces, who is overwhelmed by his modest erudition. Despite his learning and the superficial sophistication which comes with it, he appears unable to grasp simple facts of life, such that his naive fiancée instantly and instinctively does. Clearly, she tells him, his friend's wife is in love with him, and her eagerness to set him up with her, is because she does not consider her serious competition. She has arrived on the scene much to his consternation, while he had been considering breaking off with her, getting embarrassed and eventually tired of her long and frequent gushing letters, but of course being far too weak and indecisive to effect a clean break. She does of course sense that the relationship is doomed, that he does not really love her. Her appearance on the scene may disappoint the prurient reader who may be hoping that Bell instead will be seduced by the older woman Mrs Mounce, who is constantly imposing herself on him, her husband (incidentally another colleague at the paper) supposedly impotent. Approaches we know that Bell will be as little able to protect himself from as he is welcoming them.

None of this receives any conclusion in the novel, which ends rather abruptly by the predictable triumph of Morris, usurping the seat in a program due to Dyson, or at least Bell as a stand-in in case the former is unable to make it back from Ljubljana. Needless to say, Morris does it with aplomb, he is plainly cut out for it.

In short a pleasant but inconsequential read with a few period tidbits to savor.

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