

Skios

M.Frayn

March 13-16, 2014

This is a classical comedy of errors based on mistaken identities. A certain wispy character - Oliver Fox, decides on the spur of the moment, to assume another identity, provoked by the welcoming sign held up by an attractive woman at the airport of the small Greek island of Skios. This island is of course fictionary but the name is cleverly chosen to lead the reader to assume that it is one of those innumerable items of archipelagan debris he or she is expected to know, and lest unacceptable embarrassment would ensue, decide to pretend to know. It is tempting to infer that the start of the plot was an obvious idea that had entered into the author's mind at one of the many occasions he had been exposed to the gauntlet after having successfully passed the customs. What character he will have assumed Fox has no idea of, and that is of course the charm of the whole game. For how long will he be able to carry it? How far will he be able to extend his tenure on that tightrope spanning the abyss? It transpires that Norman Wilfred, the assumed identity, is to be the speaker on an annual event arranged by a Humanitarian Foundation devoted to the spread of civilization and civilized ideas. The set-up is ripe for satire on the pompous and empty chatter that comes with such activities. If matters are non-falsifiable, can any nonsense be accepted, provided it is cryptic enough? Is the will to believe and cherish strong enough? Experience seems to bear it out. The subject, though, is hardly new.

We are treated to the one complication added to the other, as well as the one fortuitous incident after the other. The latter is fair enough, the point of fiction is to explore the possible but unlikely. One must admire the skill with which the author builds up suspense, but in the end he lets you down. Instead of having the supreme crescent, he chucks it all out of the window, and simply lets everything end in a shoot-out, thus relieving the author of taking personal responsibility for the plot. The result is that the reader is cheated. The author tries to plaster it over with some pseudo-philosophical comments on the level of the blabbering nonsense he previously have taken pleasure in satirizing.

It is airport literature. Ideal foe whiling away a long flight. Top Ten Bestseller and raised lettering. Frayn wrote a very nice play called Copenhagen, and is obviously cultured, intelligent and knowledgeable. But he is also an author of fiction and has to live by his wits. Thus he has to temper his list of his distinctions with the addition of hack-writer. If you have no independent means, such as Tolstoy, you need to be a hack to make a living, to say nothing of a comfortable one, as a writer. This is not necessarily cause for condemnation nor haughty dismissal, let alone moral censoring. It is a handicraft that takes skill and talent, and few can actually do it successfully, and those who manage are of course the object of envy and the concomitant scorn. Frayn comes across as a faded Lodge. While Lodge as his best can be truly inspired, in this novel inspiration plays less of a role than perspiration. Still it is a good read and a page turner, which means that you should spur the reader on without engaging him, which may be a trivial skill, but nonetheless a difficult

one. And I have to admit that I had to stifle a few involuntary laughs as I read along. And how would it succeed as a movie-script? Beautifully I suspect, giving the spectators good money for their time and tickets. In a movie many of the shortcomings of the novel would become irrelevant. There would be interesting faces on the screen belonging to well-known and beloved actors. There would be scenes of tantalizing undress, not to say nakedness. The sense of location would be conveyed by some stunning scenes from the Greek archipelago. The plot would be irresistible, and the final shoot-out would be just the kind of thing movies are made for.

One final word? Why does Oliver Fox do it? Because he is simply a psychopath, to whom life is not anything serious but just something that can offer distractions and even surprises. Or because he is unable to let anybody down, not to comply to the expectations he meets with. If people mistake him for somebody else, or want to do so, he does not feel entitled not to stymie their expectations. But such speculations are misplaced, the book was clearly never intended to be that serious, the function of the protagonist is just to generate new complications. Then of course one may argue whether the basic set-up is actually believable, in this modern age of google-searchers and its likes.

March 16, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se