

Time of Hope

C.P. Snow

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This is the chronologically first volume in the series of eleven books which make up Snow's epic 'Strangers and Brothers', but it was not the first published, that distinction belongs to what afterwards would be titled 'George Passant' appearing many years before as 'Strangers and Brothers'. Clearly to make a cycle out of it must have been an afterthought, the second published volume only appearing seven years later.

It presents the narrator Lewis Eliot at the eve of the First World War at the age of nine, at the time of the bankruptcy of his father through his youth and early manhood up to the year of 1933, when he is 28, although he appears much older. His early years are marked by two obsessions. One to transcend his humble beginnings, with a weak ineffectual father and a mother hungry for advancement and social recognition, the other to find love. Those two ambitions are almost nullified by a mysterious ailment including a low and descending blood count which potentially could be life-threatening but eventually turns out to be something of a red herring.

It starts out inauspiciously with a dismal job as a clerk during which he befriends a slightly older young man by name of George Passant, who will play an important part in his life as an erstwhile mentor and discussion partner as well as introducing him to a larger circle of friends. Passant works as a junior clerk in a lawyer's firm and the idea is that Lewis will join it, but he decides to have higher ambitions and try for the bar, meaning to become a barrister. This initially hurts his friend, who out of loyalty eventually comes around and supports him. It is a gamble, and he needs money. Luckily he gets a small inheritance from his mother's family and a small loan from his aunt (the childless sister of his father and a neighbor) to see him through his studies. Through the lawyer of his friend's firm he get apprenticed to a barrister in London and while working his way up paying his due he studies and crams for the bar exam. He is good at taking exams and is pretty sure that he will succeed, the basis for the whole gamble. Eventually he does splendidly on the exam, although the first signs of his illness present themselves just on its eve. He works himself up in the hierarchy, gets some cases through the connections of a friend of his, another student of the bar, who eventually will change profession and become a doctor. His success is modest but solid and he gradually earns more and more money, success involving some lucky breaks begets new successes. This is the part of his ambition over which he has some semblance of control. Hard work, talent, and not to forget the luck which usually comes to those who are prepared for it, will eventually carry the day.

It is different with women and love. One of his friends, referred to as Jack, is an accomplished womanizer urging on the narrator to join in the sensual game. Of that we learn almost nothing, but it is safe to assume that our Lewis has had some share of carnal taste, but there being little point in elaborating on the customary rites of initiation. At twenty he meets Sheila King of the same very age. She is beautiful but difficult, just how difficult he is to learn at his peril when the first phase of blissful infatuation has passed.

What strikes him is that her attraction transcends that of the flesh, to bed her is not his primary intention, it goes deeper. She is his fate, so to speak, and as it later will emerge, not only 'so to speak'. They share many things, like a sarcastic view of life reflected in their mutual banter. The first signs of her problems is that she is socially withdrawn, especially in more conventional settings, having a predilection for the outcasts. Things are nevertheless going smoothly until she invites him to a pre-Christmas punch party actually at Eden's the junior (soon to be senior) partner of the aforementioned law-firm. She shows up very late and then with another man in tow. After that there is no communication between them for several weeks until she shows up at his room and explains that she wanted to punish him for his possessiveness. They are back together, but the pattern will repeat itself, as all patterns do by definition. She will go out with other men in her futile quest to find real love, but always return to him, because after all he is the one whom she trusts. And he, of course, is always willing to take her back, although he knows well that he would be much better off giving her up, something reinforced by the well-meaning advice of his womanizing friend Jack, to whom the whole pursuit is pure madness. He makes a few valiant attempts to shake himself loose but of no avail. There is another woman Marion, whom he had earlier befriended as a confidante, and who, according to the 'all-knowing' Jack has a crush on him. He actually makes an attempt, and she is not adverse, far from it, but sets as a condition that he forgets and gets over Sheila. There is nothing really special about Sheila, she explains to him, she is just unstable and neurotic, there is nothing more to it. He tries to forget her, but predictably fails, and they lose contact. Eventually he learns that she has become a successful amateur actor and though her theatrical sidelines met the love of her life, bloomed, married, settled down, getting children. A golden opportunity lost?

In the meantime Lewis has, as noted, been provisionally diagnosed with pernicious anemia, and trying to hide his condition, which would be fatal to his career and advancement would it become known, he has taken an extended vacation down by the Riviera. This is the low-point of his life, a life that may very well come to an end. He had received very little sympathy for his plight from Sheila, who, apart from serving him a cup of tea once in a while, has difficulty to give emotional support and care, something which she does not fail to admit with the false pride and cruel satisfaction that comes with perceived honesty ruthlessly expressed, as if thereby justifying itself. And during his lonely sojourn, not a single letter or any other sign from her. After his return he finds out that she is in love, but wants his blessings, and implores him to meet her lover and hope for happiness between four eyes to size him up and then advise her, because she trusts no opinion more than his. At first he naturally refuses, but she perseveres and he predictably gives way, partly out of realization of the power he may wield and bring to the encounter. He has met him briefly at her place, found out that he was fond of her, as she was fond of him, and at light-hearted ease as she had never before been in his company. But of course there is no real love between them, only the promise of mutual convenience. He will play on that when he arranges for a meeting a few days later at his place. The poor young man, by name of Hugh by the way, is made to realize that between the two of them, Lewis and his Sheila, there is an abyss of passion and ties, going well beyond the mere pleasantries he is expected to reap from an union with her. That life with her will be a hell, and he

better thinks twice about it before taking that plunge into what he will never know will be there. He may have known her for six months, while Lewis has known her for six years. It does not take much to scare away that simpleton of a lover, but nevertheless Lewis derives great satisfaction from it.

To Sheila he has proposed in the past and he will repeat it, and she will eventually go along. They will buy a new house after some time, but the marriage is no success, and he resents it bitterly, finding temporary relief from her absences, but always welcoming her back. Socially she is an impediment to his career, and once he decides to throw her out once and for all, to which she complies in resignation ready to embark on a course of plan-less and futile travel. But once she is set to go, having packed and everything, he has a change of mind and takes her back, and she puts on little if any opposition. And the book ends in resignation and despair. She is, come what may come, his Fate, to which one has to bow.

The book is quite interesting. It does of course not have the same poetic elegance as the cycle of Proust, although there are patches of what Orwell used to refer to as purple writing, but in a very constrained way, because Snow is well aware of his limitations and the area of his true competence, in order to stray away into territory where he would be lost. The forte of Snow is to address issues and themes not ordinarily addressed in novels, except possibly in commercial pulp. In this book he is out to explore the motivation and drives behind ambition along the professional route, in this case the legal one, which, except in spectacular cases brought to the criminal court, is rather mundane, not to say cut and dry. Although one may be pardoned for suspecting that Lewis Eliot is his alter-ego in a thinly disguised autobiographical vein, the background of the author was rather different, and did not involve a legal stint, but chemical research, although his ultimate ambition seems always to have been a literary one (publishing fiction already in his mid-twenties). Still, at a fateful dinner party, Lewis admits to a secret wish to have tried his hand at being a creative writer. There is after all more than meets the eye.

How much does Snow really know about the life and tribulations of an up-coming barrister? There is one thing to give the illusion of knowledge, which is after all the business of a creative writer, another thing to actually provide real instruction. An added difficulty for a general reader not familiar with the British legal system is that any account tends to be somewhat confusing. The author manages to make it mystifying as well and not devoid of fascination, which is of course his expected duty as a competent novelist. We learn of so called briefs coming the way of the eager apprentices, reluctantly given away by their superiors, which is of course a ruse, no doubt to impart to their eager recipients a feeling of gratitude. A gratitude becoming more material, and hence more tangible, because each brief carries some money, and there is more if court appearances are required, which is another kind of work, more flashy, less predictable than the mere paperwork. But of course the drudgery of paperwork is at the core of the profession. To do the necessary legal research ferreting out obscure references and to present them to their superiors to take the credit for. In the world of mathematics it would be as if the professor gives to the aspiring students the onerous duties of presenting formal and watertight proofs of all the subsidiary but supporting statements of a paper for which they would take all the credit, and only exceptionally, and if so merely in a footnote, supply a niggardly acknowledgment. After

all the vision is theirs the small devilish details being below their notice. Of course such a procedure might be quite useful for the students teaching them skills and perseverance to come them in good stead later on. (And who knows, this is what probably goes on in big science) But it is of course humiliating and frustrating for anyone entrapped in it. But as it comes to real instruction, to dispel confusion and add to the general knowledge of the reader, there is little provided by the author, but of course he addresses a well-educated British audience and can take much for granted. In the English system there is a split between barristers and solicitors. The latter do the ground work, meeting with clients, setting up legal contracts, and assisting barristers in menial clerical work. While solicitors can set up themselves as partners in a law firm, this is forbidden for barristers, who nevertheless tend to congregate into so called 'chambers' sharing clerks, administrators and the inevitable overhead. Barristers are obviously a cut above solicitors, and if you do not know that much of what goes on, when Lewis makes his momentous decision, remains opaque to you. George Passant is associated with solicitors in a firm hence his feeling of betrayal, not to say humiliation, when Lewis decides to set his sights higher. Barristers do not normally come in contact with lay-people, they do not have clients in that sense. In a court case any contact with them needs to go via a solicitor. Barristers show off in English courts (as in Wales but not in Scottish, as Scotland has a slightly different judicial system) with special gowns, and even more comically to an outsider, horsehair wigs. As of recently (2008) solicitors (or more precisely solicitor advocates, i.e. solicitors entitled to appear and present cases in lower courts) have also been entitled to wear wigs, as if that would be something to strive for, as well as gowns, but of a different cut of course. Now as to briefs, so often referred to in the book, they are, as the reader readily guesses, memoranda containing legal arguments for making a petition. Sometimes when the law is too vague to give precise instruction, a brief could contain a discussion of the probable consequences of different actions. The word 'briefing' clearly derives from 'brief' (the etymology must come from 'brev, Brief etc') and refers to giving succinct background information. The word 'briefcase' also refers to briefs, as it became necessary to provide special bags in order to conveniently carry all the briefs involved.

But to be honest, the main interest in the book, and which to a large extent holds your attention, is the love story. Happy love stories may be pleasant to read about, but inevitably somewhat boring, as being invariably rather insipid. Unhappy stories are far more exciting and engaging. The theme of obsessive futile love is of course a very common theme in literature, one of the classical example being 'Of Human Bondage' by Somerset Maugham. We have all of us had a taste of it, otherwise we would be unable to identify with the stories and thus enjoy them, but few of us have truly been swallowed up, thus we view it with pleasant horror. Snow makes a good job of it holding up the suspense and succeeding in surprising the reader. It all sounds rather true and hence one suspects an autobiographical experience. On the other hand a skilled writer of fiction may be able to draw on the fiction he himself has devoured, digested and absorbed, thus fiction being nothing but a gallery of mirrors each reflecting the others.

First love is more than the promise of sensual delight, although it may endow everything with such a delight. It means that you once again tend to see things for the first time, and everything you see is imbued with that love and hence made to glow with a

peculiar freshness. Also, a first love inspires a conviction that it is not only your first love, but the first love in the world whatsoever. No one can have felt so deeply, and been so truly in love before. This is of course absurd yet it has its own incontestable logic. Then things goes beyond that, when love loses its innocence and becomes something deeper, not just a glorious possibility in the future, in which you can bask imaginatively, but as a fact in the past which for better or for worse restricts you and you cannot but ask for release, because the past is what defines you in the end. But love is not always reciprocal, in fact as Thackeray cynically remarked, it never is, there is always one who does the loving and one who allows to be loved. In the case with Sheila, she did not allow herself to be loved, she wanted to experience that passion Lewis had for her, for herself. Thus this constant vacillation, the refusal to be possessed by him, and the futile hope of herself becoming possessed by her emotions, frigid as they may be. Thus into their games enter cruelty, once innocence has been shed.

What else can you pick up from the novel? When Lewis is attending the death bed of his mother, succumbing slowly to a heart ailment, it is clear that was is really interesting to her, as with most people, is the future. When the future dwindles, the interest in life dwindles as well. In fact the most commonly expressed regret in view of impending death is that you will never know what will happen. The fact that also the past will be obliterated is not something which is usually dwelt on, perhaps because the past is taken for granted, and you never really believe that you will lose what you so painfully has acquired over a life. Death means not only cessation, which merely frustrates your curiosity, but obliteration as well, which cuts much deeper, provided we care to contemplate it.

To die young before life and its promises have had an opportunity to unfold is clearly bitter. And this is the predicament Lewis has to consider for a few months. But he also realizes that the real terror of death has nothing to do with this bitterness, it will be as terrifying no matter when it will happen, because the dread of death is at its core existential. It is the infinite emptiness ahead that is the real terror, and that is a terror that the wear and tear of advancing years will not be able to touch. But even deeper than the fear of death is the fear of losing your control, the realization that life proceeds independent of your volition, that you cannot will things to come your way. This is a view of the world which is truly childish, but by so being it is deeply ingrained, and remains with you. Dying is not a matter of will, it is something from the outside imposed on you, and only in the confrontation with your own death do you realize that the world you have inhabited was not one of your volition, but something into which you were thrust, in particular it renders apart the comfortable illusion of solipsism. One way of getting out of it is suicide. Then death is not an intrusion but an act of volition. A preventive war is as stupid as committing suicide because you are afraid of death, Bismarck is supposed to have remarked. Yet, it happens. Another fear connected to loss of control is the fear of madness.

Decisions in life provide another existential angst. In fact a life is formed by certain key-decisions. As the narrator points out, when it comes to the most momentous decisions in life they are taken before we realize it, and what we take for making one is only discovering what we have actually decided. In short our conscious life is just one part of our life as a whole.

To help somebody may be consider altruistic, but Snow lets his main protagonist point out that help is seldom given unconditionally but on terms. If those terms are implicitly broken by the recipient it leads to distress and recrimination as to lack of proper gratitude.

Lewis, as far as a worldly career goes, is at a disadvantage, he has no connections and hence no resort to influence, let alone any influence himself. But being at a disadvantage has its own advantages. He has never been subject to an over-critical assessment, nor being compared to those truly successful, thereby not losing his innate self-confidence nor having limits set to his ultimate ambition. Being born into a successful class, the world may seem finished from the start, while those who has not known it, it seems only to begin, fresh with opportunities,

Timidity and arrogance often go together, one being a compensation for the other. The combination is not as rare as one may suspect, in fact it is quite common, and disqualifies you for the ways of the world. Mr Knight, the father of Sheila, and the minister, who is capable of such good sermons, both as to form and delivery, is such a man. In the past there were havens for such individuals, clever and cultured, yet marginalized by their arrogant view of the world and their own importance, still far too diffident to enter the fray. They need ivory towers, and the church, especially when it had ceased to play a political role, became a haven for such people, just as the academic world would constitute until recently.

As already noted, Snow is no Proust, and any suggestion of a comparison, can only bring ridicule on him. But he is serious, maybe actually more serious than Proust in depicting life. But seriousness makes you vulnerable, and the literary reputation of Snow may not be that high, at least not any longer. But I find this unfair, he is very competent at his craft, and writes a no nonsense prose. True, at times he explains more than he shows, especially when it comes to psychological characterization of the characters he has created. This may irritate many readers, even if he does so elegantly. But is this not the case of Proust as well?

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