The Sleep of Reason

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We are approaching the end. Many years have passed since the previous book and we are to understand that Eliot, the narrator, has embarked, like the author, on a writing career. A career which has not been devoid of setbacks, among them an unfounded accusation of plagiarism. This accusation is particularly irksome as there is no foundations for it, otherwise one would believe that accusations with some truth to them would be worse. Maybe in some ways, but not always. An approximation of truth is easier to accept than one that has nothing to do with it.

Most of the book this time takes place in his old hometown a place he has escaped but now for a variety of reasons seem to want to return to and reconnect with his provincial roots. In recent years a university has been founded headed by a charismatic Vice Chancellor, who has managed to attract some very distinguished faculty, among them Leonard Getcliffe, the son of Francis Getcliffe, one of Eliot's oldest friend and one who repeatedly turns up in every book. This son of his is supposed to be even more talented than his father, some even talk in terms of genius. Now there is one issue that has caused our narrator to be invited by the Vice Chancellor to be mediator in a conflict between the Vice Chancellor and four students accused of misconduct. Incidentally the Vice-Chancellor, by name of Shaw whom Eliot seems to know personally and whose daughter Vicky is in love with Pat his nephew and who in her turn is hopelessly loved by Leonard who would make an excellent match, much better than a possible one with the fickle Pat. The misconduct consists in two couple of students being discovered in conjugal situations in a women hostel. This behavior is no longer seen as scandalous by the emerging norms of the early sixties, tidbits of which we are served in terms of brief references to the assassination of Kennedy; but rather sternly viewed form the perspective of an older generation represented by Shaw. He demands expulsion, while the student body campaigns for a more indulgent response. Eventually a compromise is achieved in which the students are placed at other universities, two of them are gifted, while a fourth could as well drop out.

This leads to the climax of the novel, a piece which seems bizarre and out of place in the life of Eliot and his normal concerns. One of the culprits by name of Pateman, a somewhat unsavory and unsympathetic character, lives with his parents in a modest house. Eliot is induced to visit them and is immediately appalled by the strong smell of a disinfectant that permeates it. The mother is a bit subdued, the father comes across as strong and forthright filled with grievances. There is also a daughter Kathy in the family who has a live-in friend Cora, who by a quirk of fate is a niece of George Passant, the friend and mentor of Eliot's youth. Passant, who has made repeated come-on appearances in the books, and also constitutes the strongest link Eliot has to his hometown, stronger than that provided by his father, who is now an old man, living like a tenant in a building bequested to him after his sister died. Passant is the prime example in the book of a highly gifted person who for some reasons never made it but got stuck at a dead-end job in a

third-rate law-firm, while Eliot himself has made a very successful career ending with a knighthood. One wonders about the great disparity of fortunes. One explanation supplied by Eliot himself is that Passant lived according to his nature, meaning he did not prioritize success and the ambition that makes it a possibility. He was not going to sacrifice even parts of his life to getting ahead, but thought of it as a gift not to be squandered for conventional ends. In short making personal happiness take precedent over ambition. It is not clear whether this necessarily makes for a happier life, or even a more contented. In fact at the end of their lives, the difference is striking. Passant is no more than a bum, living on a meager pension, in a small cramped abode, and pursuing younger and younger women, a passion of the senses which makes Eliot more and more uncomfortable.

Now there is a final twist of the plot. A young boy is abducted and disappeared and eventually, more by chance than anything else, is found dead and buried. The tedious detective work of a team of policemen finally bears fruit, and the two women Cora and Kathy are apprehended. In regular detective stories there are only a couple of leads, all but one of which in the end turns out to be dead-ends. In real life there are hundred leads all of which have to be pursued to the bitter end, because there is usually no way of telling in advance whether a lead is fruitful or not. The implication being that a realistic detective story would be so tedious that most readers would not be able to stomach it. We are blissfully spared all the details and are instead thrown into the trial. By that time the persecution has a more of less water-tight case that binds the two young women to a particularly abhorrent crime involving torture and an eventual brutal killing using blunt instruments against a head. The only thing the defense can do is to claim diminished responsibility, if not outright sanity, at least something that impairs judgment and hence responsibility. This is a fairly new law and it is far from certain how it is going to be applied, the psychiatric establishment not being in a position to reach a consensus and hence the testimonies from the experts from the different camps is bound to be contradictory. Is there anything like a science of criminal psychology? Or is it just a matter of subjective opinion, a dilemma still present in forensic psychiatry I believe. As the persecutor states it: are not the arguments for diminished responsibility circular? A horrendous crime has been committed, and no one of a sane and sound mind could have done it, so by the very virtue of the crime, it automatically implies diminished responsibility and thus merits impunity as regards the crime itself. Yet one should note that anyway it at least incurs confinement inside a mental institution, which could be even worse, as there are no time limits for such confinements and release becomes a matter of psychiatric whim.

By this time Eliot has become something of a celebrity and he is warned by his teenage son that his presence at the trial will inevitably be noticed and potentially cause him much harm. Why subject himself to such risks? But Eliot feels a commitment to his old friend. Also his status allows him privileged access to the judge and the lawyers on both sides and a seat in a box close up. This enables him to savor the back-talk where counsels and persecutors socially mingle in complete comfort, highlighting that much of a trial is actually a game not to be taken personally by those who conduct it. It also allows the narrator to make professional comments on a proceeding most readers would not understand very well, thus in the tradition of the other inside information, or at least that which has the feel of it, supplied by the authors in the books.

In the end there is a jury to be left to deliberate, a deliberation that lasts much longer than Eliot had expected, was it not a clear case of murder? One that elicits little sympathy too boot and not likely to be excused by any means? And by a twist had it been performed with a shotgun instead, something which may have been much more merciful than being bludgeoned to death, than the verdict would have been death by hanging. As it is they will get away with life imprisonment, which everyone knows does not necessarily last a life, maybe as little as ten years. In the end they are found guilty of murder and sent to prison, where they have to be protected from the other inmates, who otherwise most likely would kill them. (Child molesters are on the lowest rug in a prison and liable to be physically harassed, there is no reason that there should be any fellow-feelings among criminals.)

The two girls provide a riddle. They are very dependent upon each other in a relation which is bound to have strong sexual overtures even if nothing explicit may be involved, and this very fact has been the basis of a speculation to explain and thus to support diminished responsibility. The author does not go into any details, the purpose is just to show remote areas of the human mind lying well beyond the experience of the author, as well as his protagonists, so in effect this bizarre episode in the life of Eliot and his friends is literally beyond the pale, pointing out the narrowness of the social scene depicted and its concomitant psychology. In a way one can see it as a literary experiment.

Now after the debacle Passant finds it expedient to move away, far away, not even staying within the British Isles. Although he has traveled very little in his life and his health being poor (we are giving intimations that he is soon to die). Dies does Eliot's father, as noted an old man at the end of his tether, after having been dismissed as the head of the choir he has devoted his recent life to. He died, apparently with his mental faculties intact, requiring the presence of his tenant, who actually with his wife, occupied almost the entire house. Eliot has not had much contact with his father who had been a widower for forty years, but in the book he is able to introduce his son to him. There is a simple funeral at a parish church, and when before that event seeing the open casket he is reminding of seeing his dead grandfather back in 1914 when he was but a child. And through his grandfather he heard about the humble positions of his great and great-great ones, who had led unremarkable lives unable even to read.

The death of the father makes for a fitting ending of the book preparing for the final volume. Reading the series of volumes one sometimes finds oneself a bit lost as faintly familiar names appear which are hard to place, in fact a short synopsis of the books as well as a personal register would have been helpful, on the other hand this vagueness and forgotten and half-forgotten episodes gives to the series a remarkable realism, giving the impression of a full life of which a complete survey is not possible. So much has happened that everything cannot be retained but have to exist at different levels of oblivion.

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