

Last Things

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We are getting to the end. The end game of life at which Lewis Eliot enters already at the age of sixty. There are some health problems. A detached retina, an operation, some trauma, and the operation fails, yet miraculously the retina attaches itself without further intervention by the ophthalmologist. But that happened already in the previous installment, and now it happens again, and a new operation, which leads to a catastrophe, namely a cardiac arrest. The eye-surgeon has the presence of mind to get it going again, and Eliot recovers, but seized with a terrible fright. It is one thing to think of death as a more or less distant possibility (never mind that it is inevitable), quite another thing to be faced with extinction here and now. So why did the heart stop? No one knows. Doctors do not usually know at all. No advance warning, maybe just a fluke. It does put a damp on his life.

His son and stepson are growing up. His stepson is not an academic character does badly at Cambridge and has to drop out and becomes a kind of nurse in a mental hospital in Birmingham. He meets a young woman, somewhat defective, shy, limping and rather deaf, and eventually they get married and recreate. Charles, his own son, who was almost taken by meningitis when very young, takes up with Muriel, the daughter of Roy Calvert, a hero of a previous book, who has had a child and subsequently divorced its wayward father - Pat -, who is actually Lewis Eliot's good-for-nothing nephew. It is all very convoluted, and to be honest, a bit 'soapy', but it makes for good reading. Concomitant with that attachment there is a commitment to radical student activities bordering on, and actually transgressing, on the legal. In fact involving a break-in and the theft of some sensitive documents revealing the Cambridge involvement with biological warfare. Somebody takes the rap and Charles evades eventual conviction, thus having his future career unimpeded. But what about it? To the consternation of his parents he chooses an unconventional if romantic, route to achieve distinction. Rather than to follow the expected academic alternative at Cambridge, where he has done well, he wants to come into the public eye as a foreign correspondent. No one will hire him as such, unless he makes his mark by freelance work in dangerous situations. Do not worry about me, he tries to reassure his parents, I am careful and naturally timid, but that hardly sounds reassuring.

This is the last volume but it does not end with the death of the narrator, for obvious reasons (but in classical fiction that is easily solved by introducing the meta-narrator), but I guess it is implied. But his contemporaries start to drop off. His old mentor George Passant, to whom a whole book was devoted earlier on, leaves England, after the murder case in which his niece was involved, for Scandinavia, dying in obscurity in a Danish town at the age of 65. Francis Getliffe, the old friend, is stricken by lung cancer, just after having bought a property in the south of France. At first the prognosis seems good, and his family is very hopeful, exaggerated so, according to the narrator, who is proved right. The cancer operated on first on one lung, has spread to the other with renewed vigor, and

after a few weeks he is dead at 64. The 60's provides the ante-chamber to old age, and a few, but not that few, are stricken down. We all know of that as we enter that decade. Death strikes closer and closer, and it will not get any better, death does not come as a storm that may subside.

So what to make of the whole suite of eleven books? It was written during a period of some twenty years, and ends when time has caught up with the time of the narrative. It parallels uncannily the life of the author. Both were born in 1905, both with fathers involved in choir work incidentally, but while Snow pursued a scientific career, Lewis Eliot on the other hand follows a legal course, but both have experience in government work. Eliot had an unhappy first marriage, mercifully ended by the suicide of his spouse, just before the war. Maybe Snow had a similar experience as well? Then a happy, almost unrealistically so, second marriage with issue follows in more mature years, for them both. Snow cut loose from his career to pursue writing, this is also the case of his protagonist, but unfortunately we are not to follow him as such, there is a large hiatus in the narrative to which references of a public writer career are made and some unfortunate accusation of plagiarism, as already noted, (did something similar happen in the case of Snow as well?). All in all we have become privy to a life, and unlike in a straight biography, where everything is laid out and you feel at the conclusion, regardless of its length and detail, that is there really not more to a life? You do not have the same feeling in this case. The suite has been read during a period of about twenty months, and irregularly as such, the last six during a Kindle month, the first five during a period of a year, and then a forced hiatus between March 2019 and December the same year; the effect has been that the events of the first loom vague and distant, attributing to the illusion of a long period lived through.

Now a natural comparison would be made with Proust's suite, which I read much more concentrated in the spring and summer of 2000. As a factual narrative, Snow is more engaging, but as a literary Proust is unsurpassed, even in a Swedish translation. This does not mean that Snow's is badly written, on the contrary, it is in fact more engagingly written than I had been led to expect. Snow's stock on the literary market may have been respected in the 50's and 60's but, I fear, taken a downward turn in the last half-century. This is unfair, I think, he takes his place among other realistic writers of English literature following in the tradition of Trollope (whom I must admit I have not yet read) contributing a chronicle of an epoch, and thus providing the reader with a kindred fascination that photographs supply viewers with. However, one must admit that the scenes from the 20's do not really differ from the scenes of the 60's in spite of references to the assassination of Kennedy and the like. Quotidian life does change, and being of rather trivial nature, they do not enter the minds of an author, who take them for granted; but when it comes to the minds of people one may detect subtle shifts, of great value. This applies in particular to the settings of Cambridge, and the leisurely lives of Dons, especially those active in the humanities, while the physics fellows are accorded some respect. What is masterly done in the sequence of novels, especially in the *Masters*, is the psychology and sociology of an academic fight, the forming of alliances, the demonetization of opponents, yet with the understanding that at the end of the day we will all have to live together. The academic fights are contrasted in later novels, by the political ones, and here the

stakes are so much harder, but the executions much cruder. In the rather inconsequential fights of the academics, a huge amount of ingenuity and subtlety is committed to issues of little importance, while in real politics, existential problems are treated in a rather cursory manner.

Yet for all his subtle evocation of human interactions on the level of extra-personal conflicts, and where he may very well be without peers in modern English literature, the personal conflicts, the classical themes of novels, are in fact more engaging still, even if he here cannot claim any distinction among fellow writers on that theme. Subject matter does in the end matter, trumping presentation.

After this final binge of Snow I am nevertheless sad that there are no more volumes of the series. You want a series to come to an end, just as you want a classification in mathematics to have a closure; yet as with mathematics, you would not mind one more exception (such as an overlooked simple group¹). Even after a long and satisfying life you would not mind yet another year, but never an unending sequence of them.

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¹ For the mathematically illiterate: Finite groups make up a very interesting and important aspect of mathematics. It is known that they can all be built up from simpler components, so to speak simple groups, playing the role of atoms. There are a few infinite series of simple groups known since a long time, but also some so called sporadic ones, the first of which were discovered in the 19th century. Later on there grew a list of 26 of those, each very intricate and individualistic and not reducible to some common theme. It was conjectured that those were the only ones, and that one would know in principle all the simple groups. This was proved by a huge collective effort documented in tens of thousands of journal pages. This is a very satisfying result of having collected a piece of the universe, yet if there would be something that have slipped the mind of the mathematicians, this would be very interesting. If on the other hand the process would never end, it would be uninteresting. If there would be a largest prime, this prime by virtue of being the largest would be of pivotal interest, as there is no largest prime, we lose this particular object in the universe, and the appearance of an infinitude of primes, can somehow not compensate for it.