

## George Passant

*C.P.Snow*

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This was the first book written in the series, and I suspect that at the time, the author had no inkling that he might want to extend it, but I am only speculating. But assuming that the speculation is correct, it poses some interesting problems. First reading it as a sequel to what would later turn out to be the first in the chronological order one rather gets the impression that it is an afterthought rather than a precedent. That having written the first, there was a need to focus on one aspect of it. Now you cannot really change the sequel to fit more smoothly with its ostensible precedent, that would be cheating, and that means that 'George Passant' has, for better or for worse, put constraints on the cycles, to which the author has to comply to, and if it was written without any thoughts of being just one part of a much bigger whole, this is remarkable. Would not the author have wished for having done things a little bit differently back then? On the other hand, as I never tire of pointing out, the imagination is only truly stimulated when constrained by external obstacles.

Now to the book. To be honest it is not as gripping as 'Time of Hope'. The latter tells a story of ambition and obsessive destructive love, what more can you hope for in a novel? While the former concentrates on a passing detail and character, be it a crucial one, in the latter. Why is George Passant interesting? A clever guy obviously but more of a big fish in a small pond. And not that big a fish either, having been stunted being stuck in a dead-end position in a law-firm with no prospects of advancement. What he savors though is to have a small circle of admirers around him, a circle of friends among whom he is important. This is a circle involving both young men and young women, the young women being younger than the men, and many of them quite alluring. In fact the morals, by contemporary standards, are rather unconventional, i.e. low, and there is a lot of drinking and carousing, and as we are to understand, sex with few if any strings attached. The kind of free love which became fashionable in the youth culture of the 60's, but which obviously had deeper roots.

The plot centers around some shady business deals in which Passant had become entangled in together with an enterprising fellow, by name of Jack, of the circle, but really what was threatening to come to trial, was not the business practice per se, but the morals of the group, which if become publicly known, might hurt him significantly. In fact, the head of the firm by name of Eden, rightly points out that Passant, as a teacher of the school, has indeed abused trust in engaging his students on such ventures, all in the name of freedom. Thus we are treated to the trial, the efforts on both sides to twist matter and play up to the emotions and prejudices of the jury. To find out the Truth being subservient to what merely appears as Truth, which is a time-honored tradition in the judicial system, and whose egregious abuses, still inspire a mixture of disgust and admiration. Disgust because of the subversion of truth, and fascination with the skill this subversion can be effected. It is plenty of this here. The book engages because the reader

is made to sympathize with the main character and his plight, so the attempts at necessary duplicity become not only one of fascination but also of gratefulness.

Now to details, most of them in the nature of philosophical and psychological comments by the author. There is the question of natural limits, to which Passant is resistant. Namely that if given the chance one could do almost anything, in particular, as a social being, be able to consort naturally with any set. Thus if there are shortcomings, those are not really intrinsic but due to bad luck. As to indiscretions, they come to you the easier the more astute and subtle you are, and thus while astuteness and subtlety should safeguard you against them causing you to regret your transgression, they also at the same time make the temptation the bigger and easier to roll off the tongue. As to memories, there is an explicit nod to Proust, without mentioning him by name, by referring to involuntary memories, typically recalled by smell. He also refers to the limitidness of facial expressions, that in a photograph we are not able to distinguish between a smile of pleasure and a grimace of pain, it is only the context and the history, not supplied by a still, which can tell. As noted before, astuteness, subtlety and discretion do not go hand in hand, whenever we speak to someone, this person need to become more vivid to us than anyone else in the world, and with this vividness, that gives the illusion of there only being two people in the world, comes an irresistible urge to share, to enter into conspiracy, even if it would be the case of your worst enemy. From the outside, say in a newspaper report, humans are but abstractions cardboard entities without real flesh and blood, and this is necessary in order to protect the readers from the realization that they are not unique in their uniqueness, as that realization would threaten their own sense of identity. Thus you can read news reports of people as if they were but fictional. Or how we sometimes in our lives, not too often obviously, are seized with the impulse of bringing about our own extinctions, because it is so easy, just to turn a wheel. But for most of us we are able to draw back at the very edge. If this fail, what seems to have been an accident was really not, but a provocation of fate which went too far (if I am allowed to continue to elaborate on the musings of the author).

Now a central part of the plot hinges on the perceived necessity of the narrator to step down in heading the case for his friend Passant and concede ultimate authority to his superior the barrister Getliffe, although he does not work as hard, is not as versed with the ins and outs of the case, as the narrator himself, and besides somewhat fuddled and prone to forgetfulness, yet having that undefinable extra, that will tip the balance. Hence the narrator is momentarily torn between the concern for his friend and his own vanity, letting the former win out. And of course Getliffe will in the end win the day, not only for himself (which might have been the major thing in it for him) but by implication, to the relief of the reader, also to Passant himself. But how does he do it? By planning and intention, or as is suspected, by pure invention on the spur of the moment? That is necessary at times, and it takes a lot of aplomb to do that in court, but maybe this is really what is meant by that little extra, of which the narrator for all his planning and clearheadedness, would have been incapable of.

People who have minutely accurate memories, as will be manifested by some witnesses, usually have had outwardly drab and uneventful lives, and thus, one surmises as a reader, need to make the most of what actually happened. The fact that George allowed himself

to be led astray by the more enterprising friend Jack in the various ventures is a mystery, but as the narrator expresses the thoughts of the author, we want someone to destroy our ideals, to reduce us to our lowest denominator, thus we are willing to submit ourselves to the power of a destructive, clear-eyed and degrading friend. In this novel it is Jack of course who is that degrading friend, and that Olive, one of the young woman groupies, as we would say now falls for him as well, must be due to the fact, the narrator explains, that he manages a very rare thing, namely to satisfy two contradictory needs. We all have needs, so many of them in fact that they go counter to each other (as Isaiah Berlin observes about politically liberal impulses) and thus can never be simultaneously gratified, leaving us still in want. How irresistible is not the prospect of comprehensive satisfaction. In this case of Olive, the twinned desire both to submit and to control.

In the end Getliffe gives a spirited defense of Passant, at the price of tearing him down, of exposing him as a wasted man. A man who tried to build a better world, but out of ignorance, an ignorance of what humans being are like and what you are like. This ambition coupled with such specific ignorance is a recipe for disaster ending up building a much worse world. And the narrator takes the words of defense to his heart. George who was more vivid than anyone else he knew, still was capable of such self-deception. Being the most generous and unselfish of men, yet sacrificed everything to his own pleasures. Yet in doing so he was unique, he was George, the narrator thinks, and not as Getliffe tried to make him out as, a child of his time.

April 3, 2018 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se