

The Masters

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This is the most focused of the Strangers and Brother suite, concentrating on just one thing, namely the tortuous election among themselves of a master out of the rank of Fellows of a college. Everything is minutely observed from the beginning as it edges slowly towards a climax. In short we have Jago, married to an impossible woman, in a childless marriage, passionately wanted to be elected master of the college. Why? He is not professionally successful, and hardly known outside the charmed circle of his college, but by being elected Master he will be reassured that he means something, that he is respected by his peers, and then of course the power and prestige that comes with the office attracts him. Needless to say his wife is delighted, not to say thrilled, by the prospects of moving into the Lodge, the official residence of the Master. Jago is a very nice guy and quite well liked, and Brown and Chrystal, two other fellows who have a taste for politics and maneuvering decide to push for him as a candidate, they engage support, the young narrator Lewis Eliot and his friend Roy Calvert¹, more people are added to the cause which gains momentum, and rather early on it seems that there will be a comfortable majority for Jago, who is pleased as pie. But, as Brown cautions, one is far from home, comfortable majorities have a way of unravel and being dismantled, and the dying Master - Royce - is slow in dying² and in fact initially he is being shielded from the knowledge of the gravity of his position. This involves a long waiting period which grates on everybody's nerves. The candidate of the opposition is a certain Dr Crawford. Not as nice, as a human being, but with a scientific reputation, something other fellows put much more weight to than to that of merely being socially adept and pleasant. Should the office of the Master be something that also adds prestige to the college? In fact, Snow being famous for his two cultures contrasts in his suite the scientists with the humanists, often to the detriment of the latter. Among the hard-nosed scientists we find real competence, while the humanists may be much more charming but with much less solidity. The narrator Eliot is an academic lawyer, Calvert a combination of a linguist and a theologian at least in the sense of a religious historian or sociologist, at least his work touches on that of the dying Master, while it is harder to pinpoint the intellectual locations of the other humanistic fellows. One, the deputy Master is an ordained theologian, and the grand old man Gay, is a specialist on Icelandic Sagas, intellectually the most lightweight of them all, but maybe the one who has pursued his vocation with the greatest joy and zest³. Among the scientists we have Getliffe, a

¹ One of the fascinating aspects is that many of those events take place in tandem with those devoted to Calvert and there are overlaps of episodes, which hence, are being illuminated from two sides. This is to some extent a technical *tour de force* by the author to keep track of during installments written at very different times, which are intrinsically independent, yet constrained.

² his lingering is discussed in detail in the parallel installment on Calvert

³ in his garden he has a huge model of Iceland with all the farms and other locations named in the

dear friend of Eliot and the one who was instrumental in bringing him to the college, Nightingale and the most junior fellow of them all - Luke. With Getliffe there is tension for the narrator Eliot, as they find themselves in different camps, Luke however is firmly for Jago, and the most active of them all in doing what he is supposed to do, involved day and night with his crucial experiments which threatens not to pan out; while Nightingale is a bitter fellow who never lived up to the promises he generated as a youth, and who still nourishes a totally unrealistic hope of being elected to the Royal Society. Nightingale has initially decided to support Jago as he is resentful of Crawford, but when he fails to get a promise of an office from Jago (who cannot stand him), his support waivers and eventually he non-surprisingly defects to the other side, his initial resentment of Crawford having been turned into admiration. This, however, does not so far erode the achieved majority for Jago.

As a sideline, and a very amusing one at that (reminding you of Waugh), is the wooing of Brown and Chrystal of a rich business man sir Horace Timberlake, one of whose relatives has been brought by Brown's devoted and skillful tutoring to a degree, be it of the lowest kind. There are hints dropped that sir Horace will gift the college with an unprecedented sum of money as a benefaction. He is invited to the college, wined and dined, but refuses to commit himself for months, until he at the end sets up a gift of 120'000 pounds to be used for scholarships, four in engineering and science, one at the discretion of the college, and one to pursue the studies of Calvert, with whom he had become very impressed during one of his visits. This is a very big triumph for Chrystal at a crucial stage at the election process. Now there is common ground for the two sides as neither side wants an outside candidate imposed on them, which most likely would be the case would they not come to a majority decision. Thus there is room for various maneuvers masterminded by Chrystal who savors the role he comes to play. This is politics with its subtle play of relations between people, personal as well as instrumental. And this fascination with the other side and unexpected sympathies is something the author dwells on lovingly. The conclusion is unexpected, at the last moment Chrystal himself, one of the prime movers for Jago, defects, as he sees it he can no longer with a good conscience vote for Jago, Crawford would after all be the better Master. After that Jago is done for, what does it matter that Eliot and Calvert managed to get old, mildly demented Gay on their side. There is a meeting in the chapel, witnessed by a large number of people, during which Gay, to his great pleasure presides by virtue of being the oldest fellow. And the mastership of Crawford becomes a fact.

How do the characters react to the news of the Masters impending death, and actual death? When it comes to death, there is healthy selfishness which protects us from applying it to ourselves. Others die, not we. When death eventually becomes a fact, the author observes that the grief for an acquaintance never lasts long, once again the healthy instinct allows a revival much faster than most of us would like to admit. When it comes to intelligence, the author recognizes many facets and aspects and could no doubt elaborate indefinitely. As to Crawford, he did not have the penetrating intelligence of a Calvert, and in a regular intelligence test he would not have scored as high as the Master or even Winslow, and as to human insight he had none, yet his mind was broad, strong and

powerful. One wonders at on what basis the author was able to make such penetrating pronouncements, be it only of his fictional characters. As to the ambition of Jago, it crucially came into conflict with his pride, much to its detriment. He refused to humiliate himself to serve its ends, which eventually became its undoing. In the process of election the author notes, that rivals not seldom become closer than friends. Maybe, I would like to add, because you choose your friends but not necessarily your rivals, thus the former are part of your imagination ad contingent upon your grace, while the later are imposed on you, and hence more real and thus more imperative to come to terms with. One of the more interesting asides is that on the evolution of language. Senior fellows such as Gay came into Cambridge already in the 1870's and preserved a language, including that of slang, appropriate for that time, so the college retains within itself different layers of use. Also at one point, there is a reference to a nice 19th century handwriting. The events are supposed to take place in 1937, at a time when the previous century still had a powerful hold on the new, yet seen as the outmoded past. One fellow refers to the students as 'men' as the habit of the 1890's while modern fellows such as the narrator would say 'young men' or 'undergraduates'. Snow likes to make fine distinctions, or at least allows his characters to do so. 'Gratitude' is not an emotion, one of them says, but the expectation of it is a lively one. Chrystal upon his triumph concerning the gift of sir Horace finds himself a bit dispirited as the triumph did not appear as intoxicating as it had done in anticipation. Pilbrow another defector, more unexpected than Nightingale showed his age (a few years over seventy) by his disregard for human emotions. Temperamentally an affectionate man, he found nevertheless that with advancing age, he lost interest in the petty humdrum concerns of ordinary life, but instead focused on the main themes in life, such as grand political developments. Thus he was unmoved by any appeal to consider Jago's feelings being deprived of the much coveted mastership, dismissing them as soon to be overcome, what moved him was Jago's political indifference to the rise of fascism. In politics, the narrator reflects, will is more effective than anything else. Sheer stubborn will, will carry the day in a way cunning, finesse or subtlety will not. But still will will not by itself overcome resistance unless there is some spot in the opponent ready to change. When the experiments of Luke finally meet with success, a success which can only be properly appreciated by Getliffe, Luke describes his triumph as having put Mother Nature to sit up and beg, and just to show that there is no ill-feeling, you give her an affectionate pinch on the bottom. The unexpected volte-en-face of Chrystal had become about, the narrator speculates, because he had never really been a master of the events around him, one compromise had inexorably led to another one, getting him further and further away from his true center of gravity. And this he could not forgive. He had thought that all his actions had been motivated by realism and taken for practical reasons, thus been made blind to his own vacillations. But then suddenly he would understand everything in a flash. Shames are more acute than sorrows, they smart more, but at the end of the day it is the agonies of the heart which move you, the sorrows they engender are deeper and run where mere vanity does not reach. In politics you may be uncomfortable with your supporters, you may not even like some of them, as Jago did not really like Chrystal; but that makes them more powerful. If such men believe in you, the more the reason to believe in yourself.

The author adds an appendix formulated by the narrator. The inescapable charm of institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge is the solid unbroken ties with the past they seem to exhibit. The stately buildings are there, and have literally been so for centuries, and you easily imagine that you are the whole time stepping into the foot steps of your predecessors. If you want you can peruse the records of every bottle of wine which had been ordered in the combinations rooms, with the dates and the names of every provider. Such steady continuity with the past, such assurance that nothing really has changed, appeal to our most deep-seated instincts for the conservation of time and banishment of change in our desperate need for security. But one should be well advised to realize that those ancient tradition, which hold such a fascination to us, do not go back very deeply. In fact those timeless traditions do not go back further than the 1870's, the time of the undergraduate days of the older fellows of the novel. For most of its history the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were intellectual backwaters and could not hold their candle to German and French institutions. Universities go a long way back, but as beacons of knowledge and discovery as well as first class educational institutes they do not really go further back than the visions of William Humboldt. Cambridge became a first class institution thanks to Natural Science, which did not make an impact until the latter part of the 19th century. And as the narrator notes, it were the scientific institutions and laboratories which made the universities at Oxbridge to revive and rise at the expense of the colleges, which had been mere provincial coteries with no international distinctions as the universities would earn. And still one may remark that Cambridge is dominated by the scientists, while Oxford by the humanists. The two different cultures in the sense of the author.

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