

The Light and The Dark

C.P.Snow

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So far the most engaging work in this series. Now again the main protagonist is reduced to a passive observer, but perhaps not quite as passive as in the previous book. The main center of attention is his Cambridge friend Roy, Roy Calvert to be formal. The light and the dark refer to the bi-polar nature of the man. At times paralyzed by a depression so deep and encompassing that no one close to him can fathom it; otherwise in a light mode prone to pranks and general frivolity, provoking among his friends and supporters alarm that he may be on the verge of getting off the deep end. He has a weakness for women, with whom he has light affairs, because he cannot help himself. Some of them fall in love with him deeply, and he cannot avoid hurting them, as he eventually inevitably extricates himself. That provides much of the narrative plot of the story. But through all this he pursues a brilliant career as an Orientalist, eschewing the easy temptations of the broad brush of a flashy historian, he settles, true to his temperament of a gifted linguist, on the hard technical and forbiddingly narrow subject of an obscure language. He does win international recognition among a select few, many of them in Nazi-Germany, and is through skillful and savvy machinations of devoted supporters elected as a fellow to the college.

Snow is, if anything, obsessed by psychology. Not only the psychology of love, although this gets its fair if somewhat distracted attention, but above all, the psychology of power, the details of which he lavishes his gifts and imagination. The portrait of Roy, however, does not really adhere to this ambition, but is instead an exercise in displaying the inexplicable and confusing. Can we really understand the soul of a man? Are we not all terribly lonely, isolated from each other, unable to go from the outward manifestation to the core? To depict in painstaking details the machinations of power seeking and power gaining, is different. Then the manifestations have an interest by themselves, and can be instructive not to say illuminating, but divorced from any ambition of reaching down to the soul, which anyway would only turn out to be aloof. When Snow writes about general human psychology, one cannot avoid suspecting that it is all 'made up', that the subtlety is but a rhetorical ruse; while when writing about power play, only fragments of which appears in this sequel, he is on firmer grounds and shares with you the scrutinized fruits of close and sustained observation.

There is a limited set of characters to keep track of. First we have the people at College. There is the master -Vernon Royce - married to Lady Muriel, the sister of a lord. This gives a connection to aristocracy. Lady Muriel and her brother Hugh Boscastle and her sister-in-law Lady Boscastle. This gives occasion for almost Waughian satire which is a little bit too hilarious for Snow's register, but is good fun nevertheless, providing tidbits such as the bathrooms being of preposterous size, cold as vaults, or the amounts of long corridors connecting the kitchen with the dining area, and as a consequence no dish arriving quite warm. Or when at the end of a pic-nic Lady Muriel calls for archery, and indeed

the servants oblige setting it up and a friendly competition ensues. As to be expected the aristocrats are being described as incredible snobs, but in the case of Lady Boscastle, there is also an element of ironic detachment, after all she herself is not of aristocratic stock, only married into it after having been relentlessly pursued by the Lord as a young man. The Master and his wife have a daughter, Joan, later to play an important rôle. In addition there is a crew of more peripheral characters, although some of crucial importance, such as Arthur Brown, the masterly academic politician, Francis Getliffe, the scientist, whom we have met in earlier installments, Winslow and above all the old stodge Despard-Smith the theologian. On the wings there is the struggling diplomat Houston Eggar still not advanced enough in view of his age. Further afield are unlikely scholars such as the army man Foulkes who thinks the world of Roy Calvert as an Orientalist, the German minister Schder back in Berlin, the German dancer, the young sponging street-boy Walter, the Vicar Udal, an unlikely friend of Roy. And of course not to forget Rosalind who will in tandem with Joan pursue Roy. It is all set for a delightful soap. The action unfolds slowly and deliberate, Snow is a meticulous writer and proceeds in a systematic way.

As to plots there are certain strands. One of course centers around the love affairs of Roy. Most of those women are never named, and in fact Roy is a gallant man, only disclosing when his pursuits go awry, never when they succeed and he can savor a woman's favors. But two of those are noteworthy for the Novel. First Rosalind, who is a beautiful and sexy woman, who is intent upon netting him as a husband. Would she not make him a good wife? Maybe even an excellent? Then there is the aforementioned Joan, who already as a teenager developed an immature crush on him, a crush which matures as she grows older. So Roy does a double-f, he flirts brazenly with the mother, who thoroughly enjoys his attentions, and he fucks the daughter. Both love relations, meaning those of Rosalind and Joan, are aborted, as Roy cannot stand the thought of settling down. While the love of Rosalind is healthy and straightforward, seeing in him an ordinary healthy male, that of Joan penetrates deeper, appreciating the darkness of his moods, and takes measure of his whole complicated personality, of which Rosalind is unaware of. In the end, after the latter had more or less given up hope and as a kind of revenge gotten engaged to Udal, he decides to make a complete round-about and decides to marry her, so confident is he of his success that he discloses the fact to the narrator before he has even proposed to her. Her simplicity decides the matter, he wants in the end to be married and to have a child, which he promptly gets.

Another plot, to which have already alluded, is of course to give Roy the acknowledgment which is his due, by electing him as a fellow of the college. An ambition, for which he has no particular interest, he is after all a wealthy man. He has many enemies, as well as staunch friends, and in the end the master politician Brown manages to pull it off. But there is always the worry that Roy in his lighter moments will do something totally irresponsible bringing down embarrassment on the College. Roy seems more appreciated abroad than at home, only two British Orientalists can be brought to speak in his favor. The simple-minded colonel Foulkes, and the stuffed doyen of the subject, a certain sir Oulstone whom Roy cannot resist publicly humiliating at a conference later on.

His academic pursuits gets him invited to Berlin where he resides at repeated visits a few months at the time. Of course he has a perfect command of German, being the linguist

he is, and he seems also, to the alarm of the narrator, rather sympathetic to the Nazis (which his academic supporter Foulkes makes light of, after all one ought to be receptive to new ideas, the only way to keep young), and befriends a young powerful minister Schder. Roy himself adds cynically, that if they will succeed, everyone will forget their black spots, as in history, the only virtue is success. But then when war looms he returns to England, and gets involved, as does the narrator, in government work, which gives the latter an excellent opportunity to compare the academic world with that of the governing, seeing many similarities, after all the two worlds are intertwined, but also significant differences, the latter being by necessity more responsible and efficient¹. But Roy tires of it, and decides to become a pilot getting involved, as the overage boy he is, in basic training. To be in the air-force is statistically the most dangerous in the armed forces, and Rosalind and the narrator are aghast at this suicidal ambition. Roy is depressed, and as far as the war is concerned it supplies but a convenient excuse for his dark mood. For depressions are endemic and thus in the nature of vacuums, which eagerly fills themselves up with whatever substance happens to come in handy. It is of course suicidal, and it turns out that Roy, who in the past has shown such physical courage, now fears for his life, always dreading that every mission will turn out to be his last². And eventually it will. Rosalind mourns the deepest, because her sorrow is one of the flesh, and the flesh cannot take in abstract entities such as annihilation, but yearns for its recreation. The book ends with the Memorial Service, could it have ended in any other way? It is presided on by the old stodge, despite desperate entreaties that he for once should step down from his traditional duty. He refuses to do so, filled with his own self-importance only submitting to a slight compromise. He does it formally and indifferently, yet he is rejuvenated and buoyed up by the fact that someone younger than himself has died, what he, like all old men, savors as a triumph of survival.

But long before that the Master is dying, he who in spite of his age, has shown such ruddy health. He gets a diagnosis of an inoperable cancer, declines quickly at first, then slower, and the agonizing process drags on for almost a year. Initially the harsh condition is hidden from him, which was, I guess, traditional practice until recently, because it is felt that he should not be deprived of hope. When his conditions degenerates to a state which also should be obvious to him, his wife decides it is time to finally tell him. He is devastated by the realization that his future, of which he had been so certain, is no longer there, that his days are counted and that he will soon disappear. But he puts up a stoic face on it, always making an effort to engage with his visitors and their lives, rather than with his own, which is finished anyway. He becomes so mellow and understanding that he humbles and hence embarrasses his visitors (is that a subtle revenge one wonders) and they speak of him with wonder and *magnified* affection. My emphasis, in order to point out Snow's care of observation. Magnified, meaning of course, an exaggerated affection,

¹ The non-scientific academicians at Cambridge and Oxford had indeed a cushy times, once appointed they did not need to publish, enough to lecture, tutor and provide brilliant conversation at high table. And indeed in the book most of them are portrayed as scholarly no-bodies.

² The terror of death, must also have been enhanced by the fact that missions were intertwined with leaves at the security of the homes with clean sheets loving wives and dear friends, high-lightening the contrast between total security and utmost danger, ultimately between life and death.

which was not naturally felt, but intentionally willed out of a bad conscience.

As to love, Joan pursues him, meaning Ry, relentlessly, not understanding the claustrophobia of being loved. And as to cynical comments, always so refreshing in an atmosphere of righteousness, and never more apposite than in the context of love, lady Boscastle is the font. While Lady Muriel has a fondness for Roy, her sister-in-law prefers the narrator, what the later must find very gratifying (as does the reader, when invariably identifying with the former). As to the pursuit of Joan, she dismisses it as the pleasure of brandishing a lover, a pleasure so much keener when one is uncompeted for. She shakes her head over her, she ought to understand that a love affair is fatal, when one feels the need to straighten it out, it is time to think of the next. (Which might not be so obvious, one is tempted to add, when one is indeed uncompeted for.). When much later in the novel, when Roy has decided to impregnate and marry Rosalind, Lady Muriel overwhelmed as she is for her fondness of Roy decides that his child, no matter how repulsive the mother, must be born and brought up during the best of circumstances, which she identifies as the castle at Boscastle. Lady Boscastle is indifferent at first to the suggestion and hence eventually allows herself to be overcome by the sustained insistence on the part of her sister-in-law. She writes a friendly letter to Rosalind, yet cannot resist the temptation to include some cynical comment, but made so subtly so as not to be conveyed; only the narrator, knowing her well, believes to spot one malicious flick, obviously put in only for the benefit of the writer herself.

To proceed a bit more peripherally. The narrator cannot take to Udal, although he does not dislike him, on the contrary finds him warm and friendly and not uninteresting, his presence is felt as a strain, and he was surprised to find out that this vague discomfort was not symmetrical. But the last straw comes when Udal presents his schedule. Sunday and one day of the week devoted to his parish, this was his job, and this was what gave him a comfortable income. Three days of the week to his own intellectual interests, biographical scholarship be exact, then a day devoted to physical relaxation, and the remaining day for serious purposes, which when pressed meant preparing himself for mystical preparations. When Roy learns about this neat schedule he loses all his interest in Udal, deciding that he will be of no use to him in his own, as it turns out, futile quest to find God. One wonders always when it comes to a novel, how much is pure fabrication and how much is 'taken from life'. Most is indeed 'taken from life', because otherwise the novel would be of no interest, and this also applies to the most outrageous. All what the novelist does is some fine editing and some modest embellishments. It may not sound much, at least not compared to life itself, but in practice it would tax most people beyond their powers. One may be forgiven if one suspects that this schedule, if not in its details, is likewise stolen from personal experience. Speaking about borrowing from real life, characters in fictions usually have models, or so it is believed. Sometimes involving a mixture of many. This often turns out to be a source of bitterness among those, who rightly or wrongly see themselves portrayed and distorted. But distortion, in the sense of editing and embellishment, is surely the prerogative of a novelist, and one should never forget that characters in fiction are foremost just that, characters in fiction. Incidentally the character of Roy Calvert is supposed to be modeled on his friend and Egyptologist Charles Allberry, born in 1911 and died in 1943 on a bombing mission to Holland, and thus sharing at least the outlines of

the character of Roy.

As to Udal and his intermittent appearances, it gives rise to further occasions to produce some 'obiter dicta'. When Udal is interviewed for a possible college position, he is given time to think things over by Brown, the college politician, although the latter is well aware that most decisions are made on the spot, with little if any thought. Then of course, one would like to add, that what is really required as to extra pondering time, is to properly formulate the reasons for the decision after the fact in order to justify it. As one character in a Swedish soap expressed it: I have made up my mind, but I have not formulated my decision yet. This also applies to collective decisions, although the process here is a bit different. Policies do not form in the minds of great men, but rather result from a Brownian motion of many men (and here the metaphor reveals the author's status as a natural scientist); in particular when it comes to military campaigns when a whole slew of generals, colonels, majors and captains get haplessly involved. In the end all one can do is to fashion some rationalization. As to momentous decisions one needs to consider the bombing campaign, to which the author devotes a fair amount of space. The book was written just after the war, being published in 1947, and one surmises that he merely does a straightforward reporting as to the controversy of the issue. If so it is interesting to realize the solid opposition it was met with at the time, according to Snow most people were dead set against it, at least those he was (as is the narrator) close to. The arguments proposed were not so much based on moral considerations as tactical. It was seen as a waste of resources putting air crews at unnecessary risk (of course Roy himself will expire doing one of those missions as already noted) and having little military benefit. This also seem to be the verdict of posterity, seventy years later. Sebald quotes in his 'Luftkrieg und Literatur' that the number of missions flown more or less corresponds to the number of German civilians killed³. Yet, the decision to go through with it prevailed, in spite of the many convincing and well-formulated arguments against it, provided by people who was expected to know. Bombings had simply became the fashion, and hence against any argument, however well-thought and worked out, could be countered by vague references to morals and appeals to wishful thinking. As noted decisions are usually made without thought, whatever thought which is involved comes later.

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³ In the novel there is a reference to that for every member of an aircrew killed, one might hope for three or four civilians killed. This was fifty years before the book by Sebald