

Review Article

THE FAILURE OF SUCCESS

"I want you to be a success. You have qualities that can take you anywhere you choose to go."

It is Lady Boscastle who is saying this to the young Lewis Eliot in C. P. Snow's *The Light and the Dark* (1947). In *Corridors of Power* (1964),* he is now firmly established at the top; and he conducts us, with all the uncomplacent self-esteem of the intelligent wise man who has made it, through the high places of Whitehall and the Commons. Long ago, in *The Light and the Dark*, Eliot is glad when, after painful struggle, Roy Calvert throws in his hand in a manner acceptable to society; renounces the burden of self for the burden of society. Roy surrenders the part of himself that is left, to the body and to society. This is the part he does not value. Eliot values it more. But Eliot retains a saving sense of wonder at the ways of men and affairs. He contends with his own nature, which is too passive, detached; he is a spectator. He tries to become a "brother"—one who gives himself wholly and freely to his fellows—like George Passant, like Roy Calvert. Eliot's private programme is towards "participation". But Roy, who has always thus given himself, who begins as a "brother" in this way, goes beyond a sense of wonder. That in itself for him is not enough. And he struggles to attain something beyond—a transcendent spirituality, it could be called. He fails, and surrenders himself to the world; and one has a sense of the tragedy of his failure.

It was perhaps the sense we were given of Eliot's conflict that made the earlier books of the *Strangers and Brothers* sequence more human and more imaginatively compelling than the later ones. A self-divided Eliot appears in even the "outer" novels: those, that is, not directly about himself, such as *Strangers and Brothers*, *The Conscience of the Rich*, *The Light and the Dark*, *The Masters*. As he moves towards success, he moves away from something else: the sense of affinity with the tormented in their search for some ideal.

Success-failure is a preoccupation of this novelist. It exists overtly in theme and

* *Corridors of Power*. By C. P. Snow. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd. [Toronto: Macmillan of Canada], 1964. Pp. 408. \$4.95.

situation. The image patterns declare it to exist also at deeper, perhaps less conscious levels. Snow's novels are always an expression of conflict. The images reflect this conflict. They fall into groups. Most frequently recurring are images of what may be called violence, tension, strain, or anxiety. He speaks most readily through words connoting violent physical movements, such as breaking, bursting, struggling, straining, throwing, twisting, tearing. Next are images of light and darkness. Significantly pervasive, though occurring less frequently than these two dominant sets, are images of comfort-desolation, confinement-freedom, physical solidity and muscularity, and flux-and-haze. Thus grouped, the images make a statement about the position of the Lewis Eliot self. It is something like this. There is (a) insecurity in the self, or no-position. There is (b) security-comfort in the form of position in the world, success, repute, and reassurance in the presence of men who are muscular, energetic, solid, marked out for the mastery of affairs. The attainment of (b) is threatened by circumstances, forces, or influences which must be resisted or broken; and images of breaking out or confinement-freedom are common. To get from (a) to (b) there must be struggle and conflict. Success depends on this, and on favourable chance. Most of life (when it is really being lived) is such struggle and conflict; and struggle-tension images are most dominant. Also, there is uncertainty about the struggle itself, or about the aims of the struggle; and images of flux-and-haze reflect this uncertainty.

Success therefore has its price. There is a significant preoccupation with the man cut out for success who yet fails: George Passant, Roy Calvert, Charles March, Jago, and now, Roger Quaife. The fascination that the somehow flawed great man has for Eliot, is Eliot's backward look to the failure in himself that he has consciously suppressed by the pursuit and attainment of worldly success: the suppressed spiritual self, it may be. The admiration for the hero-failure who could not compromise is conscience money for the complacency of success: nostalgia for an integrity (even if misguided) which they had, for some measure of ruthlessness they lacked—and may have been the better for lacking.

Corridors of Power gives us a big issue. Can a rising Tory minister, and potential Prime Minister, Roger Quaife, successfully carry through a policy in the period 1955-58 to abandon an independent nuclear deterrent for Britain? He fails. The policy may be right, but motives may be misunderstood, since the time is wrong. So, apart from doing what it does, showing the power struggle over Government policy, this novel gives us one more of the author's studies of the interesting and near-great man who still fails.

Yet, the hero-failure is not here as powerful and compelling a character as some of his earlier counterparts. *Corridors of Power* reflects what has always been a danger for C. P. Snow's procedure and the first-person method that he uses. The danger is inherent in his "game" technique, and in the use of the narrator. In the "issue" novels especially, the crucial decision, vote, election, is approached through a series of preliminary moves, manoeuvres, deployments, as the methods of the game or fight are put into effect.

The issue, in fact, becomes a game or battle to be won. The game's the thing. The moves are made by human beings. Therefore human beings are significant or interesting for what they are largely because of what they will do, and how they will contribute to the moves of the play, rather than as people in their own right. The danger of the first-person narration is that it tends to impose a veil of the Eliot consciousness and attitudes between us and the other characters.

In this novel, the game is played on a big scene: the packed field of high political and social life. Many characters, many incidents contribute to its progress. Committee meetings here, dinner parties there, and weekends somewhere else; pressure groups, reputations, public and private morals, stands taken for this reason or that, or out of some quirk of temperament, are all shown to have their influences and effects. The book, successfully, masterfully even, gives a sense of the whirligig of political life outside the Commons as well as inside. Where there is much diverse eventfulness, less can be realized, dramatized, than in predecessors like *The Masters* and *The Affair*, where the issue is fought out on smaller fields. Instead, more must be left to the narrator's reporting and summarizing. More incidents happen "off", as it were, and are conveyed to us, packaged and compressed in Eliot's references. That such references have a summary, gossipy, dismissive, "throw-away" tone contributes to a sense of the incident's remoteness, and only part-reality for us.

Before long, the gossips began to hedge. Monty Cave was brought back into the Government, and promoted to full Ministerial rank. The commentators got busy once more. Was this a gesture towards Roger? Or was the P. M. playing both ends against the middle? Or, a more ingenious gloss, was he showing the left wing of the party that he had nothing against them, before he eased Roger out?

A few days after Cave's appointment, I was sitting in the barber's in Curzon Street when I heard a breathy whisper near my ear. "Well, what's going to happen tomorrow night?"

As soon as I got out of the chair, I heard some more. Apparently Roger had been summoned to one of those private dinners which busybodies like my informant were beginning to know about: dinners with the Prime Minister and Collingwood and a single guest, which took place, because Collingwood didn't like the Tory clubs, in his own suite at an old-fashioned hotel (Ch.xviii, ed. cit., pp 151-2).

Even when characters are allowed to appear and talk, they often tend to be seen through the Eliot filter: the filter of his analysing, rationalizing mind. Characters are presented, and described with the intellectualized analysis of an essayist. Identity is put into them, only to be analysed and rationalized out of them.

Roger stood up, looming against the window. For the first time since we had been introduced, years before, he gripped my hand.

"Well?" he said.

I was taken aback by his vigorous, active manner. This was like a conversation which one had rehearsed in one's head and which was going wrong. I muttered something lame, about it being a pity.

"Never mind about that," he said. He gazed at me with sharp, unrelenting eyes.

"Well?" he said again. He snapped his fingers.

For an instant I thought he wanted me to take the initiative. It might have been the beginning of a business deal. But I was mishearing him. He went on:

"It's time I thought it out from the beginning, isn't it?" He gave out a special kind of exhilaration. The exhilaration of failure: the freedom of being bare to the world.

He was certain where he was, because there was nothing else to be certain of. I thought I knew him. Ellen knew him better. But the way we had seen him that day was not the way he saw himself. The hedges, the duplicities of his nature—either they did not exist for him that day, or he saw through them. This was nothing like the night when David Rubin had begged him to back down, and Roger had played with him.

Across the pool of light, he began to talk. To begin with, as though it were obvious and had to be put out of the way, he said that he would have to go. There was no argument. He was out: so was what he had tried to do.

Then he broke out: "But not for good. Not for long. Someone's going to do it. Maybe I still can."

It was the last thing I expected. He was talking with a curious impersonality about the future . . . (Ch. xlv, pp. 394-5).

Though characters may be given more sustained dialogue, the talk of one, in its rhythms and idioms and imagery, is not sufficiently different from that of another, or from Eliot's own. In fact, the more sustained the speech is, the more obvious are the similarities: the more the different voices are the same voice.

Roger swept on. "No, I'm not forgetting judgment. But we're too inclined to talk about judgment when we mean the ability to agree with everyone. That's death. Let's have a look at what this man has really done. He's stated a case—pretty roughly, that I'll grant you: he hasn't taken the meaning out of everything he said, which is another gift we tend to over-value. In one or two places he's overstated his case. That I accept, and it's a fault you're always going to find in sincere and passionate men . . ." (Ch. vi, p. 57).

"Look, there are some peculiar features about the situation," Douglas [Osbaldiston] pressed on. "It isn't only Brodzinski and the wild men who are clamouring for Quaife, you know. There's your old chum, Francis Getliffe, and his friends. Now whatever sleight of hand Quaife goes in for, and I fancy he's pretty good at that, he's not going to please both gangs. Tell me, do you know what he's really going to do?" (Ch. vii p. 63).

[Eliot—narrating] I nearly came out into the open. I had one clear and conscious reason for not doing so. I knew that Douglas, like nearly all his colleagues, was deeply conservative. He was too clever not to see the arguments for Roger's policy, but he would not like them. Yet that was not the reason which kept me quiet. There was another, so worn into me that I did not notice it was there. I had lived too long in affairs; I had been in too many situations like this, where discretion was probably the right, and certainly the easiest course . . . (Ch. vii, pp. 63-4).

[Eliot—speaking] "You want to know my political views, don't you? . . . First of all, I haven't altered much as I've got older. I've learned a bit more, that's all. . . As I told you, I've never been dedicated to politics as a real politician is. But I've always been interested. I think I know something about power. I've watched it in various manifestations, almost all my working life. . . ." (Ch. xxxiii, p. 286).

[Hector Rose] "I confess, I should rather like to know exactly what our friend Douglas Osbaldiston expects to happen. He has always had a remarkably shrewd nose for the way the wind is blowing. It's a valuable gift. Of course, he's a great friend of both of us, but I think it's fair comment to say that this particular gift hasn't exactly been a handicap to him in his career." (Ch. xxii, p. 177).

Rubin [the American scientist] went on: "They're not fools, if you don't mind me saying so. They've been watching you having to struggle for every inch you've made. Everything's turned out ten per cent, twenty per cent, sometimes fifty per cent, more difficult than you figured on. You know that better than any of us. Lewis knows." (Ch. xxxv, p. 308).

[Ellen Smith] "I'm not fooling you, am I? I'm not the sort of person to make gestures. Naturally I couldn't do him harm. I couldn't bear to damage his career, just because it's him. But I couldn't bear to damage him—because I'm pretty selfish. If he suffered any sort of public harm because of him and me, he'd never really forgive me. Do you think he would?" (Ch. xxiii, p. 187).

"That is why you are dangerous," said Brodzinski. "That is why I have to expose myself. You think you are people of good will. You are doing great harm, in everything you do. You are even doing great harm, in little meetings like this. That is why I have come where I am not welcome. You think you can come to terms with the Russians. You never will. The only realistic thing for all of us is to make the weapons as fast as we know how." (Ch. xxxiv, p. 303).

The basic similarity, the absence of a really individual voice in each character (though concession is of course made to characteristics: Rose's effusive politeness, Brodzinski's foreign-ness, Rubin's Americanisms) contribute also to the effect of an invisible barrier between us and the possible individuality of the characters—the individuality which we guess is there, but which is not permitted to come across fully to us. All this tends to make the novel more like the scientific or government paper, or personnel report, or published account of some public issue involving "personalities". Situations, human relations, characters, even dialogue, seem used as so much documentation of the central thesis, or report.

The very size and the public nature of the issue here make it more remote, in one sense, from the reader. It is so big and so familiar to us from other sources, that, in a novel, it would need to have, paradoxically, something other than itself to make it sufficiently compelling—some human interest, some character interest greater than that which we are given largely at levels of superficial, if serious, social and political intercourse. For the individual hardly accepts the probability of his own annihilation by the Bomb; just as, against reason, he preserves the illusion of personal immunity from his own eventual death.

For these reasons, *Corridors of Power* does not shake or move us. It is full of insights, political and human. It is an important document of a phase of our political thinking in the middle of the twentieth century. As such it is a significant addition to C. P. Snow's fictional factual record of his times. And yet, one misses something more. We do not feel ourselves borne up on the artist's vision, as in Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, or Proust. Snow does not leave the ground, though he covers that ground both extensively and deeply. His rational eye is always too closely scrutinizing and rationalizing experience: he seldom stands outside himself and lets the imagination take over. He does not give a sense of a unique vision of experience as do all the greatest artists, so that the work stands apart, single and whole, even from the kind of experience it treats of as, say, *War and Peace*. On the contrary, with Snow, the break between the sociological document and the artistic statement is never wholly made, even in the best of the novels. He treads the dangerous no-man's-land where fact and fiction merge. The raw material, superbly and often profoundly observed as it is, is not sufficiently transmuted. The scientific, documenting mind, which has assembled and presented such a wealth of observation and commentary, needs something more, for art of the highest quality.

There is success and failure: failure in success, artistically as well as thematically. The novels of the *Strangers and Brothers* sequence trace a search for security and fulfilment through success, by a gaining of the world's fruits. But in the absence of a spiritual stay, the victories are barren. To show awareness of this barrenness is part of the novelist's successfully achieved aim. But the work produces an effect of barrenness at which, presumably, he does not aim. Compromise, an essence of Lewis Eliot's character, is seen as an answer, from the standpoint of some unifying belief, to the failure of spirituality. A making the best of things as they are is put up as something in itself positive. A keeping the eye on the ball: an analytical awareness of self, of others, and of self in relation to others: an unremitting attentiveness which brings the anodyne of success, and the accompanying sense of fulfilment which is a substitute for the spiritual stay. This, the novelist suggests, may have to be enough. But in the long run, it is not enough for the reader. It is not enough for the reader because, at deep, and not necessarily conscious levels, it has not been enough for the writer. His personality as a novelist is split between the lost individual crying in the dark, and the practical man who would escape from lostness and chaos by the mastery of the world around him. But the world is finite; and society to

some extent is an abstraction. And a compensatory dedication to the finite and the abstract brings its own special kind of emptiness and frustration. Closing the gap between the life of self and life in the world, is a fulfilment of self which is at the same time a denial of self.

Memorial University of Newfoundland

ALASTAIR MACDONALD

AFTERTHOUGHTS: PARIS ON HELEN

Douglas Barbour

She was the shadow of perfection's shadow cast
along the wall of rare dull massed humanity's rough face—
this was her charm.

Her mind
the bough of some exotic tree although
the sparrows fed there
nor nightingale nor simple dove
and I, an eagle as I thought
brooding for a quiet night
while passing through
upon this green-gift perch,
but Ah! she held me
caught me in a net of ambiguities
too intricately woven and vast
for any mortal bird to fly
And so I made her home.
You'll tell me she's inconstant, Hector,
and I vow you're right
but deception is a gift from her
and to be rarely praised.

Menelaus received it not
and he suffers now.

I'll die soaring
through the clouds of my sad sophistication—
but to try to touch her soul
is worth a thousand scattered Troys
and all the blood of Greece.