HUGH MACLENNAN'S TWO WORLDS

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THE SIX NOVELS THAT FORM the MacLennan canon explore for us, in specifically Canadian terms, a familiar pattern of the humanist's quest for an ideal society, consequent disillusionment and despair, and finally spiritual transcendence. There are striking parallels between the narrator's sense, by the end of *Barometer Rising*, that he is witnessing "a great country move into its destiny" and the Renaissance humanist's feeling of historic participation in rebirth from Gothic darkness. In their desire to provide an ideal literary model for Canada's development, MacLennan's early novels resemble the numerous mirrors for Christian Princes and the literary models for ideal societies written during the Renaissance. The increasingly sombre tone of the later novels is an acknowledgement that the gap between the ideal model and the actual Canada is as unbridgeable as the gap between Erasmus' "Philosophy of Christ" and the statecraft of Henry VIII.

The ideal prince, according to *The Praise of Folly*, "should manage the Publick, not his Private Interest; study nothing but the common good." The ideal role for Canada in *Barometer Rising* is to be the "central arch which unite[s] the new order." In contrast with the ideal model, however, actual experience is of religious and civil wars, the Protestant Reformation and Quebec Separatism, the sixteenth-century break-up of Christendom and the twentieth-century collapse referred to variously by MacLennan as standing on "yawning edge of the precipice" (*The Precipice*), "the disintegration of the world itself" (*The Watch That Ends the Night*), and the sense of living in the eye of an apocalyptic hurricane (*Return of the Sphinx*). MacLennan, in *The Watch That Ends The Night*, refers to this gap between the ideal and the actual as the "conflict . . . between spirit and the human condition." In *Return of the Sphinx*, it is the conflict between human ideals and human nature: "All the ideas that had guided and inspired Ainslie's life — socialism, education, the faith that science and prosperity would improve man's life . . . — the best he could say now of any of these hopes was that they had foundered in the ancient ocean of human nature." When the tension between the ideal and the actual finally becomes intolerable, a possible response to the resulting despair

is repudiation of this foundering world in favour of some transcendental reality: the quest for the ideal, frustrated in this world by sin and the perversity of human nature, is transferred to the spiritual world.

MacLennan's six novels, from *Barometer Rising* to *Return of the Sphinx*, develop according to this pattern. The national odyssey of the early novels to find an ideal Canada becomes a quest for the otherworldly Celestial City. The change occurs midway in *The Watch That Ends the Night* and accounts for that novel's noticeable shift in tone from the detailed, realistic account of the Thirties experience at the beginning to the spiritualized conclusion in which the everyday world of Canadian life is "becoming a shadow" and politics "seemed the most unreal of all." Erasmus' comment on the need to move "through the labyrinth of this world into the pure light of the spiritual life" (*Enchiridion*, ii) forms an apt summary of the thematic movement of *The Watch That Ends the Night* and explains the abstractness, the detachment from action in this world, and the apocalyptic intimations that characterize *Return of the Sphinx*.

MacLennan's own re-enactment of the failure of the humanist synthesis is consistent with his perception of recurring patterns in human history. The humanist tradition records an awesome history of losses that include the collapse of the classical Greek cities, St. Augustine at the fall of Rome, Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin at the break-up of Christendom, and onward to the Victorian sense of collapse. MacLennan witnesses yet another disintegration, this time specifically in terms of the Canadian experience. He seems to be speaking through his own fictional character, Alan Ainslie, who says in *Return of the Sphinx*:

> I've talked history to Daniel by the hour. . . . I don't know why it is, but all these things keep happening again and again. Mice and men. Men and mice. Can't anyone ever learn from anything?

Significantly, Ainslie has written a book called *Death of a Victorian* and, like MacLennan himself, is painfully conscious of being one of the last upholders of a humanist code of values that the rest of the world considers obsolete. MacLennan's essay in *Scotchman's Return*, "The Classical Tradition and Education," discusses elegiacally the break-up of humanism and contrasts the older humanist education with the present system that is bound to the "producer-consumer cycle." But, he goes on to say, "even when I was a boy there were vestiges of the [classical humanist] tradition left in daily life. My father was one of them." MacLennan's father "read Latin and Greek for pleasure" and was consequently "one of the least provincially minded men I ever knew, even though he was full of Scotch and Calvinist quirks." It is specifically Calvin's brand of humanism, inherited from MacLennan's father, that provides a broad context for MacLennan's novels.

The persistence of the Calvinist mentality, even among those who consciously try to resist it, is the theme of both *The Precipice* and *Each Man's Son*. Mac-

Lennan's preface to *Each Man's Son* explains the negative aspects of the Calvinist inheritance:

> To Cape Breton the Highlanders brought . . . with them an ancient curse, intensified by John Calvin and branded upon their souls by John Knox and his successors — the belief that man has inherited from Adam a nature so sinful there is no hope for him and that, furthermore, he lives and dies under the wrath of an arbitrary God who will forgive only a handful of His elect on the Day of Judgment.

In the course of *Each Man's Son*, MacKenzie confronts Daniel Ainslie with an ironic echo of Calvin:

> Man, having through Adam's fall lost communion with God, abideth evermore under His wrath and curse except such as He hath, out of His infinite loving-kindness and tender mercy, elected to eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Calvin's dualist assumptions about the nature of man are evident enough in these two quotations. According to Calvin, "there be in man as it were two worlds."[1] The natural world fell with Adam and is now dominated by sin; therefore one should focus on the spiritual world and the Day of Judgment.

Calvin's two worlds can betraced to the more familiar Augustinian account of the "two kinds of human society which we may call two cities. . . . The one consists of those who wish to live after the flesh, the other of those who wish to live after the spirit" (*City of God*, XIV, i). Erasmus reproduces this conflict in the *Enchiridion*:

> Let us suppose that there are two worlds, . . . the one intelligible, the other visible. . . . In the visible world . . . we are, as it were, mere sojourners. . . . I feel that the entire spiritual life consists in this: That we gradually turn from those things whose appearance is deceptive to those things that are real . . . from the pleasures of the flesh, the honors of the world that are so transitory, to those things that are immutable and everlasting." (III, 5)

NOT SURPRISINGLY, IN VIEW of MacLennan's own Calvinist inheritance and his consequent familiarity with the doctrine of the two worlds, guilt and transcendence are the twin dynamic forces of a MacLennan novel. Awareness of guilt — what MacLennan calls in *The Watch* "the Great Fear" that eddies up from the subconscious and in *Return* the "beasts [that] were kept hidden in the darkness" behind the unlocked door — this awareness becomes intolerable and drives its possessor forth on a quest for transcendence. As MacLennan puts it in his preface to *Each Man's Son*:

> no normal human being can exist in constant awareness that he is sinful and doomed through no fault of his own. . . . the curse remained alive . . . like a sombre

> beast growling behind an unlocked door. It was felt even when they were least conscious of it. To escape its cold breath some turned to drink and others to the pursuit of knowledge.

The novelist, needless to say, must cope somehow with the dark domain that belongs to the beasts of experience. MacLennan tends to cope in two ways with the necessity of finding his materials in the fallen world. He writes satire and, secondly, he idealizes, turning the physical world into a symbol of the spiritual world. The satiric strain, consistently an important element in the novels, expresses MacLennan's sense of the betrayal of humanist values in the world as he finds it. He satirizes the corrupt colonial mentality of Geoffrey Wain in *Barometer Rising*; the ruthless business world of Huntley McQueen in *Two Solitudes*; the New York advertising world that Stephen Lassiter joins in *The Precipice*; the life-destroying influence, even upon those who intellectually deny it, of the "ancient curse" of Calvinism in *Each Man's Son*; the neo-religious fervour of the political movements of the Thirties in *The Watch That Ends the Night*; and finally over-indulged rebellious youth, and the American consumer society that has produced them, in *Return of the Sphinx*. Usually, whenever MacLennan is at his most realistic and convincing in his handling of specific detail, his tone is satiric.

Not contrary but complementary to the satire is MacLennan's idealism. This is expressed in his favouring of heroines of spectacular virtue and purity, in his development of symbolic characters and allegorical central episodes, and in his consistent use of the quest pattern. Since, within the Calvinist scheme of things, the disintegrating physical world is fitter as an object of satire than as a source of values, the characters in MacLennan's novels are constantly in search of something that proves to lie outside the world of experience. The novels are all shaped in the form of a quest, and the characters yearn, like Jerome Martell and George Stewart in *The Watch*, "to belong to something larger than themselves." In the first three novels, the quest is for an ideal national identity for Canada. Canada, having purged herself of her colonial past in *Barometer Rising*, moves to assume her role as "the keystone to hold the world together." She must bridge the two solitudes and manage, at the same time, to avoid falling over the precipice of go-getter American materialism. The pattern is somewhat varied in *Each Man's Son* where Daniel Ainslie's search for a son is really the search for an ideal. As MacKenzie tells Ainslie, "You aren't looking for a son, Dan. You're looking for a God." We find out in *Return of the Sphinx* that the adopted son, Alan, is reproducing Daniel's Calvinist quest for a route out of this world. Chantal says, "That old father of his — he gave Dad the idea that his life ought to be some kind of Pilgrim's Progress to some kind of City of God and what did Dad turn that into? His City of God is this greedy country." *The Watch That Ends the Night* (which MacLennan has described as depending "not . . . on character-in-action, but on spirit-in-action") is also concerned with a pilgrim's progress in search of spiritual

reality, the "something larger than oneself." Consistently in the novels the characters become symbols and the quest ends with some ideal that transcends the literal.

Characteristics of MacLennan's fiction that have troubled readers — the "unnovelistic" endings that jettison characters and transcend the human situation, the didacticism — these are likely products of a two-world theory. The novel's subject is the world of change: "A novel's chief value lies in its capacity to entertain and in its characters," says MacLennan.[2] But MacLennan also desires to instruct, and truth belongs to the spiritual world. In the long run, the characters are expendable vehicles for the message. By the end of *The Watch That Ends the Night*, for example, the characters lose their human identities. George Stewart becomes Everyman and Jerome and Catherine are "half-translated" to the spiritual world:

> Like Jerome's only much more so, [Catherine's face] had become so transparent one almost felt one looked at a spirit. Light was in it. . . . [Catherine] seemed . . . to be somewhere else most of the time, somewhere beyond from which she came back to visit.

It is in *The Watch That Ends the Night* that the various tensions between the visible world and the ideal world, the characters and the spiritual meaning, the actual country of Canada and the ideal model finally become irreconcilable and the two worlds split apart. The early novels support the belief that the barometer is rising. They depict journeys that end in lovers meeting and show a model new society forming itself around the united young couple. The last two novels emphasize the isolation of their now middle-aged protagonists, who end up sojourners and exiles in a disintegrating world. As MacLennan becomes increasingly disillusioned with the effectiveness of action, he turns from romance and comedy to irony and tragedy. We can observe the change occurring in *The Watch That Ends the Night*. In "Reflections on Two Decades," MacLennan himself reports that while writing this novel he was "like a snake shedding its old skin" — "the intellectual skin most men of my generation had been wearing since the beginning of the Thirties": "So long as I wore it myself, my novels had been essentially optimistic."[3]

The narrator, George Stewart, is Everyman whose personal history represents the experience of his generation in trying to cope with the final collapse of humanist values. The first part of the novel examines various inadequate attempts to discover sustaining values in this world: George's search for a father-figure; Jerome's conversion to socialism as a "neo-religious faith"; and George's idea that in Canada he "had found the thing larger than [himself] to which [he] could belong." When socialism and communism and active political resistance against Franco and Hitler all prove incapable of reforming the fallen world, the immediate reaction is despair and cynicism:

> But the trouble is that none of these substitutes abides.... Then, though we may deny it, comes the Great Fear.... There lay ahead only the fearful tunnel with nothing at the end.... My subconscious rose. The subconscious — the greedy lustful infantile subconscious....

George encounters, eddying up from his "underself," repressed sexual desire for his step-daughter Sally as well as jealousy and intense resentment for Jerome and Catherine: "I hated them both — Catherine no less than Jerome. I hated myself and I hated life."

George resolves this intolerable conflict along the dualistic lines already examined. In the novel's climactic scene of the meeting in the hospital room "with Catherine's small silent body between [them]," disciple George achieves mystical unity with his Saint Jerome whom he has for so long both loved and hated. "He was actually myself," George says. George has earlier described his story "not as one conditioned by character as the dramatists understand it, but by the spirit." The conflict is resolved when the characters turn themselves into pure spirit and transcend the human condition. As George describes Catherine, "her character almost disappeared into her spirit"; "her beauty ... was suddenly that of an angel." The characters now prepare to enter into the "city on top of a hill" that Jerome used to dream as a child "was white and ... beautiful, and ... a great privilege to enter." This city is not, as he once thought, the classical city of Athens, but Montreal transformed into the Celestial City of light.

The last few pages re-focus a whole configuration of images that have been already used in connection with the Spanish Crusade and the novel's political quest for a reformed society in this world: for example, the long journey of the canoe to reach the ocean; martyrdom; death and rebirth; dark and light; references to *Pilgrim's Progress*, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and the light on the road to Damascus. The political quest, energized by "neo-religious faith," is only a parody of the true quest, which is achieved in an ecstatic *grande finale* of light and music — Bach's music and Catherine's light-filled painting. In this way, MacLennan does not have to abandon any of the imagery he has developed in the course of the novel. He simply transforms it from its secular to its spiritual application. Just as classical Athens becomes the New Jerusalem, Catherine is transformed from a neo-Platonized love goddess into a portion of the Holy Spirit. George has first perceived her in terms of courtly love, Renaissance sonnet sequences, and Arcadian pastoralism:

> with the sunlit green of the garden around her ... green was her color at that supreme moment of my youth;

and

> all these sensual images were so sacred that I blushed lest my knowledge of them would seem a profanity;

and

> So that summer I entered Arcadia and the pipes played and the glory of the Lord shone round about.

By the end, however, he is confident that "the loves she had known and inspired . . . would be translated into the mysterious directions of the spirit which breathed upon the void."

The Watch That Ends the Night is less tragic and more energetic than *Return of the Sphinx*. Although it presents the complete pattern of earthly quest, disillusionment, and transcendence, *The Watch* deals mainly with the optimistic period of belief in political reform and then later with the ecstasy of the spiritual consolation. Moreover, before the novel shifts the sphere of the quest from this world to the spiritual world, there is time for vivid observations of experience in the Dickensian sketches of Bigbee at Waterloo School, the formidable Aunt Agnes, and the loser Harry Blackwell, and for realistic descriptions of the New Brunswick lumber camp and of St. Catherine Street on a Friday night in the Depression. *Return of the Sphinx* begins where *The Watch That Ends the Night* concludes, with an assumption that the world, as George puts it, is "a shadow in which politics . . . [seemed] the most unreal of all." The tone of *Return* is ironic because the only thing at issue is how long it will take Alan Ainslie to realize that he is living in the shadows of Plato's cave. The novel focusses almost exclusively, therefore, upon the process of disillusionment, despair, and repudiation. By the end, "the walls of his life and meaning dissolved around him." Gabriel is left to provide the epitaph: "When a man tries to do something positive in the world, he's safe so long as he can believe the shadows are real. Until this year I always thought that Alan could."

Hugh MacLennan's novels, taken together, form the record of a process which, one suspects, has been completed, with the gap between the two worlds now too wide for a novel to span. In conclusion, we can say that MacLennan's Calvinist brand of humanism has shaped this dualistic pattern and goes far to account for many characterisic features of the novels: their tendency to be didactic and rhetorical rather than representational and mimetic; the use of symbolic characters and incidents; the vividness of the satirical sketches of minor characters in contrast with the often unconvincing and abstract major characters; the use of apocalyptic imagery; the turning away in the later novels from romance and comedy to irony and tragedy; the persistence of the quest motif; and the shifting of the geography of the quest from this fallen world of shadows to the spiritual world. To us MacLennan is important because his national odyssey puts the recurrent humanist dilemma into a Canadian context. In his six published novels, we see the completed process of the political quest for an ideal model of Canada, despair

and the repudiation of the "labyrinth of this world," and finally the movement into "the pure light of the spiritual life."

NOTES

[1] *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III, 19.

[2] "The Future of the Novel as an Art Form," *Scotchman's Return*, p. 145.

[3] In *The Sixties: Canadian Writers and Writing of the Decade*, ed. George Woodcock (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1969), p. 31.

THE FINAL FALL

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

There are things
you could have said
in calmer countries.

Autumn came from the woods,
invaded the garden. Look,
it falls now on the patio
as it did last year
when this wine was grape.

The sun sets clouds on fire,
the wind blows the ashes away
and trees move their tired arms
— old dancers outplayed by the tempo.

That was the fall you knew,
snowless as a dream-world should be;
these lines file it for a while.