

GEORGE JONAS

Interviewed by Linda Sandler

SANDLER: It occurs to me that you're a distant cousin of someone like Sir Walter Raleigh — an adventurer and a man of the world who sometimes brought his intelligence and passion to the writing of poetry.

JONAS: I'm not acquainted with Raleigh, but it's true that my life is apart from poetry. Poetry is not my whole existence.

SANDLER: Is that Byron?

JONAS: Yes. *Love is a thing from man's life apart, it is woman's whole existence.* And insofar as Byron is right, and certainly in his period he was right, I am a poet in the way of a man, not in the way of a woman. You see, it's very curious. Poets bore me. I have no idea what moves them, or what their problems are. I like poetry, obviously, but I find that the preoccupations of most living poets are very alien to me.

I don't think that you could know your average poet for ten minutes without learning the fact that he is a poet. I don't care how superficial an acquaintance you are; you might be his greengrocer, and you would know he was a poet. There's no point in mentioning names, because this embraces nine tenths of the poetic community.

I belong to that other one tenth. A lot of people have known me for ten years; they have been in daily contact with me, and they have no idea that I write and publish poetry. And I could easily envisage spending a whole evening in conversation with you without necessarily raising the subject of poetry. But I would be distressed if somebody said to me, You're not a professional poet, *and that is the problem with your writing.*

SANDLER: People want their poets to be dedicated. Is that it?

JONAS: Do you know George Faludy? If you knew George Faludy you'd discover a person for whom very little matters in life besides art and history and philosophy. He is genuinely uninterested in the politics of literature — who publishes what and how to get readings. He couldn't care less about those things. He's very happy whenever he's invited to read, of course. You pay him two hun-

dred dollars and he's thrilled, he won't believe it. You're paying him for what he'd be doing anyway, reading and writing poems! And he writes poems of immense beauty and skill in Hungarian. I only wish one could do justice to him in English. Faludy's attitude and aptitude coincide absolutely, but I firmly believe that his greatness lies in the immensity of his *aptitude*. The intensity of his love for poetry is a mere coincidence.

The attitude of a man like Tolstoy, on the other hand, was decidedly anti-art. Tolstoy would never have regarded himself as an *artist*. He would have regarded himself as an *aristocrat* and a *moralist*. Count Leo Tolstoy had an obligation. He would spit on a writer. Writer! What is that? A clown? He had zilch respect for art, but of course an immense, divine aptitude. And this is why I think that the quality of a writer has very little to do with his reverence for art.

SANDLER: I remember that when Pat Annesley interviewed you for *The Telegram* in 1970, she was surprised by your aristocratic coolness. She said something about your being the most urbane and controlled adult Canadian male since Pierre Trudeau.

JONAS: That may have been a compliment. At that time Trudeau was well liked. But you see, there are all sorts of mystiques that people associate with me. There is the mystique of aristocracy, whereas in fact I'm middle class; there is the mystique of coolness, whereas in fact I'm passionate; there is the mystique of cynicism, whereas in fact I'm soft-hearted.

If anybody misleads people, it's me, so this is not a complaint. If I projected the image that Susan Musgrave projects, they'd probably accept that. I could walk around in the most languid fashion and be dreamy and vague and helpless. Chances are, people would accept that.

SANDLER: There's another mystique deriving from your early poems. In *The Absolute Smile* the poet comes across as being terribly bored by his sexual conquests.

JONAS: It is perfectly true that in my routine European way, I will verbally make a pass at absolutely every woman who moves, regardless of looks, age, and my intentions. I was raised in a culture where it would have been a positive offence not to do so. In Hungary you kiss a woman's hand; you indicate, by a combination of verbal and physical means, that unless you immediately have sexual relations with that woman, your life will be ruined. And you do that to your grandmother. It's meaningless. In Canada, since it is not routinely done, I have received a wide variety of responses ranging from astonishment to immediate acceptance.

SANDLER: Let's deal with the vexing question of your origins. It seems you're bored with being labelled "Hungarian," having lived in Canada for twenty years.

JONAS: I find it such a stumbling block when people try to approach my poetry in this way. It's worth noting that I was born in Hungary, but it's not worth

getting hung up on. Certainly, there are more important things to say about Joseph Conrad than that he was a Pole who wrote in English.

SANDLER: Hugh Hood once characterized Hungarian emigrés as “swashbuckling rogues who haunted grand hotels.”

JONAS: Well, there’s no reason why Hugh Hood should know anything about Hungarians. I know very little about Indonesians.

But if Hugh Hood is referring to the type of Hungarian *he* would be likely to meet in Canada, he’s not altogether inaccurate. In this century a Hungarian might go to North America if he was part of a persecuted minority, or if he was a penniless peasant. If he was middle class, he was probably fleeing from the law. There was a standing joke about this. “He went to America” was the equivalent of saying, “He embezzled funds.” At the time there was no extradition treaty between the two countries, so if you were in trouble you went to America or you went to jail. These were your choices. Some preferred jail, but some chose America. So you could conclude that middle class Hungarian emigrés are swashbuckling adventurers.

And then there are the political refugees, and they are often adventurers, inspired by the same love of excitement as the criminal. You have to have a certain temperament to enter the political or criminal world.

SANDLER: Would your poetry have been different if you’d never left Hungary?

JONAS: I have a feeling that poetry comes more from the inside than from the outside. I’m not a great believer in environmental determinism, beyond the obvious effects. I doubt if I would have been very different in the Middle Ages. Obviously, my idiom would have been different.

SANDLER: The idiom of your first book is the idiom of an exile, something like T. S. Eliot’s.

JONAS: I think I would probably have expressed myself in that idiom even if I had not been geographically uprooted. Franz Kafka is an obvious example. This is a century of great migrations, not only of the body but also of the soul, and displacement is the common theme of many poets.

SANDLER: Can I retract that question and ask you this: what kind of audience would you have had in Hungary?

JONAS: That is altogether a different question. If I had remained in Hungary and sold out to the party, my audience would consist of party poets and bureaucrats. If I had remained in Hungary and not sold out to the party, I would have the whole country for my audience. My poems would be circulated in manuscript form, perhaps, but my audience would be far larger than the audience for Rod McKuen, say. I would be known to as many people as used to watch the CBC programme, “This Hour Has Seven Days.”

The poet has a political role in a communist country. In Canada, poetry does

not substitute for political editorials or for underground newspapers, so that his audience consists mainly of poetry enthusiasts and apprentice poets.

SANDLER: Your Canadian audience has been quite wary of you. One *Telegram* reviewer was quite turned off by what he called your detachment from the vicissitudes of ordinary life.

JONAS: Yes. *The Telegram* had one half-wit reviewing my first book and another reviewing my second book. By the time my third book appeared, *The Telegram* was no longer in business. There is a current trend in literature that seems to regard stridency, indeed *sweatiness*, as evidence of good faith. Anything that is not wearing its heart on its sleeve, or that isn't earnestly obvious, is regarded as being too detached from suffering human existence. There's a reason for this cult of earnestness. Right now, people are disenchanted with the intellect. They feel that raw emotions might save us. And we have, in positions of literary power, people whose tastes are about as refined as an elephant's hide.

SANDLER: You once wrote to Michael Yates on the subject of your apparent cynicism, didn't you?

JONAS: Yes. You see, many people have the ability to equate their own desires with absolute morality. Everybody is acquainted with the type of person who will say that homosexuality is obviously wrong because it's disrupting the family or something like that. But can you imagine someone saying, *I want homosexuality to be outlawed because it makes me uncomfortable*? Nobody will say that. People want a moral backing for their opinions. And they are very comfortable with hypocrisy, but they are most uncomfortable when they encounter a lack of hypocrisy.

If I want something very badly, I'm capable of saying, simply, *I want it*. And if you say in print, as I have said, *I want such and such, but I've no idea whether it's good for mankind or not*, then people will say that you have a cynical bent of mind.

The syntax of "I want" — the statement without the justification — perhaps belonged to a more aristocratic mode of life. People can no longer make that grand demand. A relatively short time ago, the idea of going out and conquering was noble and good. People could say quite openly, *Let's go and conquer Madagascar*. It was just fine. People have not stopped conquering by a long chalk, they conquer left, right and centre. But now they call it "liberation". I have no patience with this. I don't endorse conquest, but I believe that conquest should be called by its right name. This is not cynicism, but realism.

SANDLER: Do you think that the current of opinion is changing? *Cities* is a realist's view of civilization and it was well received in 1973.

JONAS: In the late sixties, I was intensely unfashionable. It's not that I was swimming against the current, because I was swimming in an entirely different river . . . God knows I was not alone. Robertson Davies, who is probably the most

intelligent writer in Canada, was equally unfashionable. I'm not suggesting that my achievements are anything like his, but my approach to life is somewhat similar — in spite of the fact that he is old Ontario and Celtic Wasp.

I'm virtually certain that any critical acceptance of my work will be due, not to a cognition of its intrinsic merit, but to a change in fashion. This doesn't please me, but who am I to quarrel with fashion if it goes in my favour?

SANDLER: Critics have said that you brought an urban awareness to Canadian poetry. Do you have any idea why there's so little civil poetry here?

JONAS: I've often wondered about this — especially since the population of Canada, in common with the population of most Western countries, lives mainly in cities. It's very mysterious.

Look at young poets. They instinctively turn to the heavenly bodies for inspiration. When they are slightly more sophisticated, they will turn to nature; they get all rural, when in fact their experience is no more rural than mine. Even if they have never been north of Bloor Street, they will lapse into nature talk. Why? The only explanation that occurs to me is that the traditional imagery of poetry is rural, because social life has been rural for the most part of recorded history. And since most poets are not terribly original, they are quite content to work within a traditional poetic mode.

SANDLER: Someone compiled a recipe for Canadianism: mountains, three trees and a cow. Do you think city poetry is generally considered unCanadian?

JONAS: People argue that although Canada is now largely urban, nature looms large in the national psyche, and the city does not. Now I like nature as much as the next person. I can even imagine being inspired by a tree. A perfectly genuine inspiration can come from the heavenly bodies, even. But I personally believe that the exclusive concentration on nature is attributable to poverty of the imagination.

I think it's unfortunate that so many Canadian writers are preoccupied with discovering their identity, and with proving themselves. The mainstream is wherever you happen to be; your achievements are whatever you happen to achieve, and opening up the Canadian wilderness, I believe, equals all the glory of conquering and losing and reconquering Italy. So many Canadians waste time defending themselves against the snidest and most superficial and unworthy opinions of Europeans and of Americans. They produce "cause literature," which is really a waste product. Do you remember the famous persiflage in Richler's *Duddy Kravitz*, where the guy establishes a newspaper for epileptics? *Did you know that Julius Caesar was an epileptic?* CanLit has a tendency to descend to that level. *Did you know that Percy Faith was Canadian?* One can understand this obsession, but one can only call it a pathological condition. Who has time for things like that?

SANDLER: What are the questions that interest you as a poet? You often use religious terms to talk about civilization or even love.

JONAS: The poet's concern is often the same as the religious philosopher's concern. The poet attempts to ask what seems an essential question — one concerned with being and existence and all the rest. And it so happens that religion is the single human pre-occupation that concerns itself with essential questions.

SANDLER: You're not a poet who makes much use of your daily life, are you?

JONAS: No. And without belittling the poet who finds grist for his poetic mill in his daily life — God knows it's a free country — I can't see myself writing a poem about something I did yesterday. I've never felt that anything I've done was necessarily of poetic interest. Mind you, even if I did feel that, I couldn't make a poem out of it. Most of the things I've done, most of the places I've been, most of the things I've seen, would not inspire me. I don't sit down at my desk because it's Wednesday and it's eight o'clock and I still haven't written a poem. I write a poem when a poem demands to be written. And it's fairly rare.

SANDLER: What's involved in the process of writing?

JONAS: To some extent a poem writes itself. I feel almost as though I were the recorder of someone else's thoughts. I don't actually hallucinate, I don't hear a voice — nevertheless, somebody else is dictating the lines. Then it is done, and sometimes the whole thing dissipates; I can't do anything with it, and I tear it up. At other times the poem is there in rough form, and I rely on whatever inspiration I might have and whatever craft I might know to give it a more accurate form. Primarily, I'm after clarity. Obscurity is anathema to me. If you read my poem and you say, *That's kind of obscure* — then I have failed. What's the point of an obscure poem? My whole life is obscure. Everything is obscure. When I write a poem I want to make sense, to achieve some clarity; to capture a thought, a feeling, an impression, an indefinable sensation. Fishing in eternity and coming up with a fish — that's the whole point.

SANDLER: You have a series of poems set in taverns and cafés —

JONAS: That's very European. Poets usually wrote in cafés in Hungary — bars were almost unknown. You went to a nightclub for entertainment and you went to a café to write. I didn't frequent cocktail lounges until I came to Canada, actually.

SANDLER: Tell me about the cocktail waitress in "Te Deum on Yonge Street." Why did that poem demand to be written?

JONAS: I recall the making of that poem more than I recall the making of any other poem because the process was more conscious than usual. I was listening to Verdi's *Te Deum*, I think it was, and reading the words of the text. I was wondering if I could write a modern *Te Deum*, using the Latin text as the skeleton of

the poem. I recalled a cocktail waitress who had executed her job with special grace, in a way that seemed a hymn of praise, and it occurred to me that any living creature is capable of praising God in her own way, and I wrote this Toronto *Te Deum*.

Had I been a frequenter, not of cocktail lounges, but of Chinese laundries, it's quite possible that a Chinese laundress would have brought on this impulse to write a poem. And it's also possible that had I been a fan of Mick Jagger, instead of using the words of the *Te Deum* I would have used the words of "Sticky Fingers." Being the kind of person I am, I happened to hit on these two devices.

SANDLER: You've mentioned that you're also capable of writing a poem on command, so presumably craft is as important to you as inspiration.

JONAS: You can't call yourself a poet unless you can write a Petrarchan sonnet on the glories of the cow, if necessary. But that's an exercise, and it shouldn't be confused with poetry.

One of my quarrels with contemporary literature is that so many writers are obsessed with their tools. You have to master your tools, there's no question about it — but that is Step One. Once you learn how to play the piano you don't look at your fingers.

The European modernism of the twenties didn't hit North America until after the war and its reverberations (especially in Canada, where things reverberate for a hell of a long time) are still being felt. In Canada we have little secondary and tertiary waves emanating from the great Berlin storm, and we have Black Mountains and Yellow Mountains, and there is a whole generation of youthful innocents who are terribly preoccupied with technique. They are all looking at their fingers instead of playing the piano. And the audience quite wisely pays little attention to them, because the audience wants to hear music.

SANDLER: It's boring for you, having to talk about poetry, isn't it?

JONAS: It's very curious. I don't know how to put it. I can be bored by poetry in exactly the same way as a cartoon husband in *The New Yorker*, whose wife is dragging him to the opera, and the poor guy is out of his mind with tedium, the prospect of tedium is distending his pores . . . That is the extent to which I can be bored with poetry. On the other hand, nothing can give me the ecstasy that poetry can. I'm not a religious person, and not given to mysticism of any but a cerebral kind. For me, poetry comes closest to providing a transcendental experience.

SANDLER: Can we talk about politics? There's a poem in *The Absolute Smile* where you ask, *What do men die for?* It's about Christian Montpelier, Captain of the Guard.

JONAS: I'm trying to remember the impulses behind the poem . . . I was looking at a footnote in a book about the Napoleonic War, about a man of the people

who fought for Napoleon, and I was wondering whether the ostensible cause for which Montpelier died at Waterloo — the glory of Napoleon or of the French Empire — really had much to do with it. What was his real motive for fighting? And why did my contemporaries in Hungary surrender their lives? That is the question I was trying to answer — and indeed, I am still trying to answer it.

SANDLER: How did you get involved with the Young Communists?

JONAS: I guess I felt that the world was an imperfect place. As I understood it at the age of thirteen, the Marxist system was the perfect solution for an imperfect world. And since I wanted the world to be perfect, it seemed logical for me to join the Young Communists. It took me two or three years to realize that communism was not making the world better, it was making it worse.

SANDLER: What did Young Communists do?

JONAS: We did most of the things that the Hitler Jugend did. We had an endless series of parades and meetings, painting cultural halls and politicizing peasants — that was ninety per cent of it. But there were worse things. The slogan at that time was FIGHT CLERICAL REACTION, and as a child of fourteen I took part in the forcible evacuation of a nunnery. We descended on the nuns like a gaggle of geese, and we ranted and raved and cajoled — danced madly around a few Catholic nuns while they gathered up their possessions and left the building. It was a Red Guard type of activity — a mobbing action.

And there were related activities: I volunteered to assist in the deportation of persons, many of them elderly, who, I was told, were enemies of the people. I loaded trucks with their belongings and drove them to resettlement areas in the countryside. These things are horrible in retrospect, but I can't honestly say that they awakened me to the evils of communism. I was convinced that what I was doing was absolutely right. God knows, I was a mindless and disruptive barbarian, and my only excuse was my extreme youth.

SANDLER: And in 1956? What did you do in the Hungarian Revolution?

JONAS: Not a helluva lot. It was a general uprising and I did all the normal uprisy things, dashing around and so forth. I was by then no longer a Young Communist, but a young writer among other young writers. We talked a lot, attended meetings and drew up a programme of demands — the famous Eighteen Point Programme which was published in the *Literary Gazette*. We demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops, the abnegation of the Warsaw pact, the destruction of the personal file system, and so on — it's well documented. We demanded things that, in any Western country, would be considered the rock bottom requirements for social existence.

There was a very intense two week period of fullscale war — not nation-wide, but confined mainly to Budapest. The casualties were high — but not nearly as high as they would have been in Toronto in a similar situation, because the Hun-

garians are a war-wise people. There is, for example, an art to crossing a street which is under gunfire and the Hungarians are practiced in this art. It's a very simple art, perhaps, but if you don't have it you are liable to get shot.

And, you know, when you find yourself in that kind of situation, you do whatever seems right at the time. You fight whomever you need to fight, and you take whatever actions are necessary to preserve your life. Do you think that we had any quarrel with those Russian peasants who thought they had been sent to Cairo? We had no quarrel with them. There were people who tried very hard to convince some soldiers from the Second Division of the Ukrainian Army that they were in Budapest fighting Hungarian communists, and that this was the Blue Danube, not the Suez Canal. I didn't want to shoot those poor bastards. But I wanted even less to be shot by them; and when you see a tank coming down the road you have no time to be compassionate.

In 1956 I was not fighting, I was running. If I had thought for one minute that the Russians wanted to annihilate the Hungarian people, I might have felt it was my duty to die with them. But the Russians were not interested in genocide, only in imperialism. And I did not feel it was my duty to live under the system they imposed.

SANDLER: And so you came here. What kind of country were you expecting?

JONAS: I expected very little. You must remember that I came to Canada as a refugee. I did not, as so many European immigrants did, come to Canada expecting to find a perfect society or perfect happiness, or to make my fortune. I was looking for relative freedom, relative happiness, and a relatively civilized life. And I can certainly say that I have found these things.

SANDLER: In "Civil Elegy" you say that no city really exists until it has known war.

JONAS: I believe that completely. A city is forged by the experience of war. Indeed, urban existence originates in the need to create a defensive unit, a fortification. A nation too, arises from a warlike mentality, and I don't think that Canada would have to search for its roots if it had to fight for them. I'm not saying that war is a good thing, I do not endorse war. I simply make these observations.

Medical people have observed that in the concentration camps of Auschwitz there were few psychiatric problems or ulcers or suicides. No one in his right mind will conclude that Auschwitz was therefore of benefit to humanity. But one can nevertheless see that certain problems are caused by peace and prosperity. Strife is part of the human condition and it has certain values. I think that these things have to be faced and accepted. I don't believe that you can possibly improve the human condition if you're not willing to face it. This is the very opposite of cynicism.

SANDLER: I've heard you described as a political liberal and I must say I was surprised.

JONAS: I would describe myself as a liberal in the tradition of the eighteenth century *philosophes*. I'm very much in favour of all kinds of freedoms. I can hardly think of a freedom I might not be in favour of — with the exception of the freedom to disrupt somebody else's life, or the freedom to prescribe for someone else. But I tend to think of our society as something which might be improved, rather than something which ought to be destroyed. My initial bias is in favour of permanence, and I suppose I am conservative in this sense.

I don't believe in closing my mind to the evidence of history. I'm too empirical, too pragmatic, to be able to behave in an entirely ideological fashion; and quite simply, I do not see a better alternative to our present society. I see a large number of *worse* alternatives.

What intrigues me is that we should begin to question the values of our civilization precisely at the moment when it is in a position to do some good to mankind. Western liberalism has taken centuries to reach the point when it can begin to implement certain ideals of justice, certain humane values. But now we say that liberalism has lost its revolutionary fervour, that the mills of justice grind too slowly. We want to destroy the whole structure and go back to zero. Our civilization must always be in its childhood.

I have no doubt that in a few centuries Africa and Soviet Russia will have attained a level of civilization comparable to ours. But what we definitely know is that the first few centuries of every revolution in human history will be years of oppression and of total intellectual darkness.

If I wanted to improve on God's creation I would try to find some method of ensuring the continuity of human knowledge and experience. The wisdom of the first revolutionaries would be reincarnated in these youngsters who claim to care for human values, but who are always ready to plunge us back into darkness.

SANDLER: Does that imply a scepticism about social engineering?

JONAS: I am not sceptical about social reform. I am sceptical about total reform. You see, the best you can achieve in this world is fairness. The scales are somehow in balance in the middle and if you're trying to be better than fair, you will be worse. This is why I am not a socialist any longer, quite apart from what we've learned about Marxism in practice.

If you know any history at all, you must see that certain societies were more conducive to the expression of evil than other societies. And therefore it's nonsense to say that social engineering has no significance. But it's also nonsense to say that the minute you have your ideal society, all problems will disappear. How could they possibly disappear? If human nature were inclined towards perfection, the ideal society would have evolved long ago.

I have never believed that you should therefore go along with the worst injustices. You can most certainly feed a hungry child without upsetting the grand design of the universe, or you can strike for fair wages in the textile industry, or you can fight against Hitler. I'm not suggesting that because human attempts to change the world are futile, *Why fight against Hitler?* No. I have no trouble fighting against Hitler. But having done so, I don't try to make a perfect world. Because I will then make a world of Hitlers.

SANDLER: Going back to art: You once said that it has become so peripheral that it doesn't attract bright people any more. Can you still take the value of art for granted?

JONAS: I may have expressed myself inaccurately — I don't think that art is any more peripheral than it has ever been. The arts are simultaneously the most and the least important facets of society. On the one hand, they have always been frills because what matters in any given society is how much power you have, how much wealth. And the artist — well, he's just the guy who's going to write about the prince. He eats in the kitchen with the servants.

But when you think of a bygone age, you can only think of it in terms of its art. If you talk about the late eighteenth century, what flits through your mind is a melody by Mozart. The late eighteenth century is gone. Nothing besides art remains.

SANDLER: So what does art lack? Why do intelligent people gravitate away from it and towards law, science, or whatever?

JONAS: The arts are no longer the leading edge of our civilization and so the keenest minds in our society are unlikely to choose art as their discipline. Some time ago, if you were a really smart guy, you would occupy yourself with philosophy and art even if you went into the church. Art was probably the best medium for exercising your mind. You wouldn't go into law, because law was a set of arbitrary regulations imposed by the prince; science was haphazard, and mixed with superstition.

There's been a radical shift in the last one or two hundred years. Today, if I open *The Ontario Report* and I read a judgment on a constitutional or a criminal case I encounter considerable brilliance — a capacity for logic, a capacity for judgment that I just don't find in the arts. And I would find the same qualities in a biologist's research paper.

I don't regret that I write poetry, but I regret very much that I work in the arts. As an administrator of the arts, I find myself in the company of some of the dumbest people of my civilization.

SANDLER: What's the current value of art?

JONAS: Art is very powerful. What is its power? I can only express it in quasi-mystical terms, as some kind of transcendental experience. The only thing that

actually gives me a *high* is poetry or something akin to poetry — music, ideas, epigrams, a bit of well written history.

One of the problems is that people note the power of art and they assume that it can be used to instil morality in people. Art *does* have some kind of moral influence, but not so crudely and directly as people assume. You know? *If you play your kids Mozart and you talk to them about Dostoevsky, they will vote against the Spadina express way.* You don't ship wheat to India because you are given a steady diet of Thomas Mann, or even Camus. Art will not make people more peaceful, more altruistic, more compassionate. And the funny thing is, the same people who assume that art can work for the moral good would scream and rage at those who say that art can corrupt innocent minds. The very person who reads Tolstoy to his kids at bedtime for their moral edification will rage against the prosecutor who wants to ban pornography.

SANDLER: What about the failures of contemporary art? The experimental novel nobody reads, poems that are of no interest to anyone but the poet and his friends —

JONAS: We've heard about the failure of the novel on and off for many years. I know what people mean when they say that, but never before in the history of mankind has so much money been made by selling so many stories to so many readers.

Universal literacy and leisure have changed the market, that's all. In the not-so-remote past, your illiterate could not read and write. Today, your illiterate can — and very often will — read and write. You have an immense reading public which is not more advanced, emotionally and intellectually, than its great grandfather — except that its great grandfather would never have dreamed of picking up a book. He didn't have the time, he didn't have the money, it just wasn't done. He went to the country fair and gawked at the sword eaters. Nothing has changed since then, except that this man's descendants read books.

Literature gears itself to this market. A publisher is after all in the business of making money. If he knows that one book can sell in millions and another only in hundreds, why should he not concentrate on producing the first kind? For him, basically, a book is just ten thousand dollars worth of paper and ink.

SANDLER: Well . . . there are better ways to get rich — especially in Canada.

JONAS: Yes, there are. Although — I'll tell you something. Everybody wails about the economic hardships of the arts, but culture is big business. Very big business. For everybody except the artist who is the primary producer.

You are talking to me now in my role as one of the primary producers of art. As a poet, my income does not represent one tenth of the income I derive from being a secondary or tertiary dispenser of culture. I can make a good living being an administrator of culture, or an interpretive artist if I direct a play.

Let me emphasize that I am not complaining. I'm describing.

There is an immense amount of money available, generally out of the public purse, for so called high art. And of every million dollars which the public spends on high art in this country, nine hundred thousand goes for its administration, its promotion, its cataloguing, its popularization. Maybe one hundred thousand goes for its creation. And these proportions are wrong.

As for the artist: if, for any reason, an artist finds common ground with a large audience and pulls in millions of dollars — that's fair game. If he refuses to do that, he has only himself to blame. Or not to blame. He can proudly say, *I'm starving and I couldn't give my books away, let alone sell them!*

I don't believe that I am the greater poet or person because I have utterly failed to make contact with a wide public. That is a matter of complete indifference, as far as the quality of my work is concerned. Some of the greatest contemporary writers have a wide public and some of them have no public whatsoever. Conversely, some of the most ridiculous hacks have an enormous public and some of them have deservedly no public at all. If I could, without compromising anything, find a wide audience, I think I would deserve every penny and all the acclaim I might enjoy.

SANDLER: What about your poem, "The Television Producer's Vision," about how boring it is to work for a mass audience?

JONAS: I was a bit saddened by this common experience: here you have a young man with a vision, and he ends up painting advertising posters or inventing ads for Toronto Hydro. There is a great chasm between your first vision and your actual achievements within any artistic medium. And the more you get involved in art for mass consumption, the more you are haunted by the purity of your original vision.

I have little faith in television. The electronic media reward mediocrity, not quality and intelligence. If I, as a producer, were looking for a star host, I would cast someone like Patrick Watson before a woman of genius like the late Hannah Arendt, because Watson would look much smarter on the screen. If you put the two of them side by side on a platform in front of television cameras, nine tenths of the audience would conclude that Patrick Watson is the more intelligent of the two.

SANDLER: But she would rip him to shreds in a debate —

JONAS: No. Because the minute Watson felt out of his depth he would ask a very dumb, superficial journalistic question. He would ask, *Is it right for Israelis to bomb Palestinian refugee camps?* He would ask a sharp question which doesn't cut to the depth of a millimetre but leaves an obvious gash in the debate. And Hannah Arendt might throw up her hands in despair — she is talking about the

movement of ideas in Western civilization. What can she say to this question? And the audience would conclude that Watson had defeated Arendt.

SANDLER: Didn't you enjoy writing the TV libretto for "The Glove" — your comic opera — and seeing it performed on television?

JONAS: I enjoyed that a great deal — I like sophisticated light entertainment. What disillusioned me is having to make a crude, stupid, earnest statement, or to oversimplify a complex issue so that it can fit into the television tube — which is a very, very narrow tube indeed.

One of the problems with television is that it specializes in sham magic. Confused thinking is not magic. Confused emotions and moral confusion are not magic. Stridency is not magic. The absence of thought is not magic, but dumbness. I loathe sham magic; I want my magic to be real. "The Glove," you see, is *real* magic. And it's perhaps the most civilized form of art, because it works on several levels; kids can enjoy it, but you have to know something about opera and poetry to appreciate it fully.

"The Glove" is a game — it's high camp. It has no metaphysical significance, perhaps — but God, it's a lovely game! Magic, whether it is complex or simple, is very powerful. That's what poetry is all about. And if you did shows like that all the time you would not be far from your original vision.

LEDA'S VERSION

James Harrison

A furtive blow, more like. There was I
Thinking that all he wanted was to take
Bread at my hand, not play ducks and drakes
With me and the course of history. Though why
He should feel that all that flapping would terrify
Me I can't imagine. Brute strength's one thing, fake
Webbed feet and wet feathers another. It makes
Me mad to think about it — lord of the sky
And in just as clumsy a rush as all the rest!
Sad that I could not, at the time, have known
How he knew all along the far-flung cost
Of his sudden whim. Contempt might then have grown
To pity for so incongruous a lust,
And the whole issue been too much to be borne.