

REFLECTIONS ON TWO DECADES

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IF SYSPHUS WERE A SAINT he could serve for my patron, and perhaps for a good many others of my generation whose oldest members passed the barrier of childhood amnesia during World War I and whose youngest joined the ranks immediately after the Hitler War. We now find ourselves assaulted and blackmailed by the Youth with unprecedented contempt as The Establishment — a word, incidentally, coined by one of our own members to describe a still older generation, the one on which we threw all the blame for World War I and the Depression.

We seniors, more naive and idealistic in our youth than our later adherents, are the ones who have made the whole trip. To mingle our mythologies, we embarked on a lifelong Odyssey that took us through more than one cave of the winds, under the legs of more than one man-eating Cyclops, but we never deviated in our unconscious aim, which was to recreate the old Victorian patrist world in the image of an indulgent mother wearing pants. Now we find ourselves cursed by the young for all the things we were proud of, for our voyage did not end in the Ithaca we had deserted, but in the land of the Lotus Eaters. Out of nowhere came a combined earthquake and hurricane and we had to take once again to our ships. And only now does it become apparent that our captains were not like Ulysses after all. Those in politics turned out to be Macwhirrs, those in command of universities Chamberlains and Mackenzie Kings.

As this piece is mainly about my own reflections as a writer over the past two decades, it is only fair to admit what has been for some time an heretical attitude toward my trade. A true child of my epoch, I believed that a writer should also be a citizen. I am disturbed by the kind of detachment that enables some writers to rub their hands over the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind because they

furnish such exciting materials for literature. This attitude seems pretty poor at any time, but now it is just plain stupid. In this field no writer has a chance against television, not even with the professionally angry men who have established themselves in the medium as professional lovers of The People.

What most worries me now is what has always worried me: the disastrous rise in the price of personal freedom which has become almost prohibitive in the Affluent Society produced by the unions, the corporations and the Welfare State, the latter being the biggest corporation of them all.

To be free is surely to be able to do what you like doing and do best; to be able to tell the truth to somebody even if that somebody is only yourself; to do this and stay sane. I have craved this state of being as a claustrophobe craves fresh air. With me it may even be an addiction interesting to a psychiatrist, for I slept summer and winter in a tent in the family back yard from the age of eleven to twenty-one. This kind of freedom has always been costly, and the collateral of it is security. By the time I reached my fiftieth birthday I was less secure than I had been in 1932, for my youth was over and I had less than a thousand dollars to show for thirty-five years of hard work, no steady job and no pension. But I was still free in the sense that I was doing what I liked and owed no man a penny.

Free, but edgy and worried deep, for I knew this couldn't last much longer. I had the guilty anxiety of a gambler, my own bet being that at some time one of my books would make a financial breakthrough big enough to keep me and those dependent upon me off relief when such talent and energy as I possessed ran out. My novels had earned me a certain reputation, but the most successful ones had been published in the days when the Canadian book trade was almost entirely controlled in England and the Canadian mentality was so colonial that if a book were published only in Canada it was automatically regarded by our own reading public as insignificant.

For the writer in those days such a state of affairs was almost fatal. If you signed with a Canadian publisher, you lost your essential rights abroad. If you signed with an American or English publisher, and your work was successful in the home market, the kind of contract you drew meant that your royalties on Canadian sales were minuscule.

Any Canadian writer of my age knows all this by heart, and I believe Morley Callaghan has told the story more than once. I'll make my story as succinct as possible. My *Barometer Rising* sold 110,000 copies in all editions in the first two years in Canada and earned me barely \$600. My *Two Solitudes* sold 68,000 in hard covers in Canada in approximately the same time and this Canadian sale

netted me slightly less than \$5,000. This was ruinous economics in a time when there was no Canada Council, when even the Governor General's Award was only a medal with no cheque attached. So I lived without vacations, without even resting on weekends, and supported myself by writing sometimes thirty essays or articles a year for very small prices, because even in this area I was too self-protective to write to order. But by the time I reached my fiftieth birthday I don't mind admitting that I was groggy.

It was shortly after this that the breakthrough came, though it was not a very large one and far from sufficient to protect a pension-less man in an Affluent Society of rising costs. So here begins the next chapter of my little tale. The fashion of its coming, no less than its aftermath, is ironic. It may also be instructive of the mentality of publishers and critics in the psychic earthquake which began rocking civilization shortly afterwards.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY 1957, at 6:42 in the evening, I typed "The End" on the final page of the novel which was offered to the public a year and a quarter later under the title *The Watch That Ends The Night*. It had taken me five years to reach those two little final words. After a few weeks of revision I mailed one copy to Toronto (by that time I had separate contracts) and another to Boston. Weeks passed before I had any news of it and my experienced nose smelled that something was going wrong. It was past mid-March before one of the Boston firm's senior editors came to Montreal on what for both of us was a painful mission.

This very kindly man had to tell me that his firm believed my book was such a total failure that no amount of rewriting could salvage it. He knew I had been under a long period of personal strain and supposed that this had affected my judgment. We parted friends and I wondered what the matter was, because the book he had been describing to me was so unlike the one I thought I had written that we both seemed to be talking of different things. I guessed there was something wrong technically, and there was, but it was so slight that a few days' work cleared it up. Another American publisher not only rejected it, but rejected it flatly. It was not until mid-summer of 1958 that Scribner's accepted it with enthusiasm and my worries with that particular novel were over. But I still wondered, and wondered for some time, why it had run into so much trouble at its birth.

Now that this book has been with the public for ten years, has sold more than half a million copies in English and is again being reprinted; has sold a quarter of a million in German, has done well in Sweden, has been translated into French, Spanish, Estonian¹ and Norwegian, I think I can account for that initial resistance. There was something in the book's atmosphere which evoked it at that particular time at the end of the 1950's.

If a serious novel lasts even as long as five years in the mid-twentieth century, its author must have been in some kind of extrasensory relationship with a few important feelings in the world around him. Feelings, not ideas; as D. H. Lawrence put it, ideas never bother anyone, but what he called "art speech" usually does if it is in any way off the norm. I have never been particularly intelligent, and abstract ideas are usually incomprehensible to me. My brain is far slower than my intuitions and in every novel I have written my brain has hung me up because it keeps refusing to accept what my intuitions shout at it. That is why I have taken so long to write my novels, especially the last two.

When I was writing *The Watch That Ends The Night* I did not understand until the last few months that I was like a snake shedding its old skin. If it is not stretching the simile, the skin I was shedding was 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. I had believed the barometer was really rising; I had believed (and in this I may have been partially right) that the two solitudes were bound to come together in Canada. But my last two novels have been tragic. My original title for *The Watch* was a dead give-away: it was *Requiem*. Requiem for one I had loved who had died, but also for more: requiem for the idealists of the Thirties who had meant so well, tried so hard and gone so wrong. Requiem also for their courage and a lament for their failure on a world-wide scale. My intuitions knew this before I began writing the novel in 1952, but my intellect did not know it until 1957.

What *The Watch* was trying to say in the atmosphere of its story was that the decade of the 1950's was the visible proof of my generation's moral and intellectual bankruptcy. For the 1950's was the decade — remember? — when the students, our own children, were known as "The Silent Generation." Many of them married the moment they graduated, had their first child ten months later and their fourth within five years, and the beginnings of most of these marriages were subsidized by fond parents who were determined that their children should not suffer the privations and inhibitions which had afflicted themselves. It never occurred to them, and it still doesn't, that they had encouraged their children to

give hostages to something far more implacable than fortune. In a word, their hostages were given to The System and in the 1950's The System was an international version of Henry Luce's American Way of Life. In that strange interlude it was virtually unchallenged. Communism had been discredited by Stalin, who himself was discredited in Russia after his death. Technological democracy had destroyed Hitler, had stopped communism in Berlin and Korea, had recovered a devastated Europe and after a time had even rid itself of Joe McCarthy. What else was there, what else could there be in the 1950's, but The System?

Perhaps because The System had done nothing for me except increase the cost of my freedom, I was unable to believe in it with my heart and feelings, though I accepted it with my brain as one accepts the inevitable. In the Fifties I worried a lot about the explosion that might come from the sky, but my intellect never grasped that a far more imminent explosion was gathering heat underneath us all, that it was buried in the trauma of little children who had been cheated of a balanced childhood. The incontestible public fact was that the depression generation had come through on all fronts. It had discarded the puritan hairshirt. It fancied that it had emancipated itself sexually from the Victorians. It lavished luxuries on its young including what it believed was the greatest of all luxuries, the freedom to choose as adults before they had reached their 'teens. We softened the discipline of the educational system. We summoned up the new Social Sciences to counteract the authority of the physicists, chemists and engineers who had furnished the armies with weaponry including the H-bomb. So thoroughly did we put our faith in the good old liberal notion that man cannot but choose the better path when it lies open to him that our hubris in its own way was as staggering as Hitler's. We came pretty close to accepting that technology "controlled" by liberal democrats would bring in the millenium.

In *The Watch That Ends The Night* my intuitions were forcing me to utter something socially blasphemous in those years. They were asserting that God had not been outmoded by the Christian Church, Bertrand Russell, the social scientists and modern education. My brain did not grasp this, and that was why I had so many hang-ups. Not even when I finished the novel had I reached the place where I could say, regardless of whether anyone laughed at me or not, "I believe in God — and that is what scares me." In the God manifest in evolution, which I am told some geneticists now question? Yes. In the God of love? The existence of that One surely depends upon the individual. In the God of the Book of Job? Watch out for Him, everybody. But there is no point these days in discussing what cannot be scientifically proved, so let it pass. Speaking personally, I am at least telling the

truth when I say that the *papier-maché* intellectual armour I had picked up in the Thirties contained more built-in obsolescence than any shiny new model you see advertised on the TV screen.

For the chief delusion of the Depression Generation was that it was revolutionary. By now it is obvious that we never were that because our "revolution" was nothing more than the climax of a philosophy which had been consolidating itself for a century and a half. We had swallowed all the way down to the small bowel of our digestive tract the materialistic notion that the *quality* of a civilization depends upon its living standards, together with the concomitant that a man's morality can be satisfactorily judged by his political opinions. To think otherwise was to be reactionary, if not an outright fascist.

Let's look History in the eye and ask ourselves an embarrassing question — what was our famous quarrel with the capitalists based on? Their assumption that man's chief end is the production, consumption and distribution of goods and services? Their faith that if affluence does not necessarily create happiness, happiness cannot exist without it? Surely these questions answer themselves. Our quarrel with them was merely this, that under their *laissez-faire* control the economic system wasn't distributing justly and in the 1930's was hardly distributing at all. Therefore, so we believed, let us change all this. Let us plan and make it a real System. Above all — for we had dragged Freud into it without understanding what Freud had really been telling us — let us change the whole tone of education so that it will not torture children with the repressions that tortured us. I have often thought that the main reason why the post-war capitalists climbed aboard the reformer's bandwaggon was their instinctive understanding that if you remove a child's inhibitions the chances are pretty good that you will turn him into a compulsive consumer.

We can see now — or can we? — that we so-called revolutionaries of the Thirties were no more and no less revolutionary than Henry Ford, Mikoyan and Walter Reuther, the latter of whom in the late 1940's persuaded the Detroit manufacturers that it was in their own interests to accede to the unions' demands. The result of that historic decision is now clearer to Asiatics, Africans and South Americans than to the new bourgeois workers of America. It has produced a unique brand of Imperialism which hunts the globe not only for raw materials, but for hundreds of millions of new consumers who then must be brain-washed — no difficult feat to accomplish on brains filthy with poverty — into keeping the American Way of Life from dying of its own surfeits.

No, this revolution of ours was never for real. A genuine revolution cares noth-

ing for the repair, enlargement or take-over of an existing way of life. It happens by some mysterious alchemy in the soul of millions of people who reject without argument, regret or thought for the future not only the values of centuries, but even the apparatus of living which those centuries have accumulated.

In recorded history there have been few revolutions of this kind, probably because the evolutionary process cannot tolerate many of them. In the West (what happened among the Greeks between Homer and the invention of the alphabet is unrecorded) I would estimate that there have been only three. The first was begun by Ikhnaton of Egypt and perpetuated by Moses. The second, of course, was the work of Christ and St. Paul and destroyed the Roman Empire by giving a rationale to its death-wish. The third is somewhat more blurred, but it centred on the replacement of "faith" with "reason" and over the past few centuries has triumphed in the technological society which in our time has replaced the wings of the dove with the thrust of the rocket and sent men around the moon and back with the soul-stirring news that the Sahara would be as desolate as the moon if it had no atmosphere.

Compared to these psychic and moral revolutions, the French and Russian affairs were mere political spectacles accelerating the triumph of a life of materialism founded on reason and know-how. The recent revolution in China is exactly comparable to this last recorded one in the West, with the difference that with western help it has managed to produce in a century the psychic change that took the West some three hundred years. Today the Chinese are as convinced as we were in the Thirties that the combination of politics and technology is just what the Doctor of History ordered. "When you grant priority to politics, actions and people become good. When you do not, people and their acts become bad." Who said this — a French or American intellectual of the late eighteenth century? An activist professor of Political Science in a modern multi-university? Of course they all said it, one way or another, but this actual quotation comes from Marshall Lin Piao.

I don't want to stray too obviously from my subject, which is supposed to be my own state of mind as a writer and my own feelings about my profession at the present time. But before crossing the Great Divide into what the students are calling "the modern age", let me not leave my generation entirely desolate. We were fake revolutionaries sure enough, yet nevertheless the directions we encouraged politics and science to take have produced some notable improvements in the world we inherited.

I am old enough to have known men who had witnessed floggings in the armed

services. In World War I, thousands of shell-shocked British soldiers were shot under the authority of Field Marshal Haig for "cowardice" *pour encourager les autres*. It must be nearly twenty years since the press has reported the lynching of an American negro and twenty-five since one was burned alive. It may sound corny, but it remains true that in advanced western countries poverty no longer excludes a man from good medical care and very seldom excludes him from education. Science has virtually obliterated the terror of venereal disease which haunted the West for centuries. The employer who dismisses an employee without cause does so at his peril. In Canada an artist no longer has to apologize for wasting his time, and EXPO '67 was certainly not created by the activist students who sneer at the men who had the courage and ability to make it possible. Chief of all — though whether or not this is an improvement in human happiness remains to be seen — we have witnessed the average human life-span so enlarged and the average sexual potency so prolonged that men in their fifties now look younger than men in their late thirties did forty years ago and a good many of them can act like men in their late twenties and get away with it.

These are colossal improvements by matrist standards for which, of course, our well-meaning generation has received no thanks and should expect none from children who have been raised to expect much more than this. But our matrist triumph has been purchased at a price which has only recently become apparent. The price has been something mankind has never been able to endure for even a short length of time without becoming hysterical if not destructively insane. That something is the validity of the father, the idea accepted throughout human history that the word "father" implies trust, reliability, a certain valiancy, a deserved authority and continued respect when he is old. And this, of course, brings me over the Divide into the 1960's.

THIS PRESENT DECADE is too immediate for me to trust my inferior brain with many generalizations. Trying to write novels while swimming in the broth of several hundred students, I have become so closely involved that detachment is impossible. But one thing at least must now be clear to everyone. The most important feature of the 1960's is the phenomenon that John Grierson, that perennially youthful observer of what is and not of what somebody says ought to be, calls *The Children's Crusade*.

From China to Peru, from Montreal to Buenos Aires, Youth is on the march,

but in so many different external directions that not even a sociologist would venture to claim that he has found a single common denominator for their behaviour. Our obsession with the Youth has made the moon-race as corny as Batman. At any rate, I claim no authority beyond my own personal observation for anything I am going to say about this — which is something that obsesses me especially because I am not only a teacher but am still a writer.

Of all the cities to live in, Montreal has probably been the most mentally confusing during these years. Here the revolt of Youth has not only been against their own parents; it has also been against one of the toughest Catholicisms in the modern world. This double-barrelled revolt has been an agony to French Canadians. To put it simply, where can an angry young French Canadian find a rock to stand on? He wishes to realize his own potential above all else. He is against his traditional Church, which has traditionally instructed him that close association with the Protestant *Anglais* will not only destroy his soul, but annihilate his identity as a French Canadian. He loves Quebec passionately. He wants the good things of the Affluent Society, but at the same time he is told that if he separates from *Les Anglais* he will not obtain them. The history books he has read have fed his paranoia, just as the student press all over English-speaking America feeds the paranoia of those who read it.

At any rate it was not in Berkeley that the first post-war student riot occurred. It was in l'Université de Montréal, and it happened well before the Viet Nam War or the Cuban crisis. The revolting students expressed the usual separatist sentiments, yet their particular target was not *Les Anglais*, but the clergyman who was their Rector, and this at a time when many Catholic priests were preaching separatism, one even going so far as to write a letter to the press claiming that *Les Anglais* were treating the French Canadians as Kikuyu and that the suitable response would be Mau-Mau. In retrospect, therefore, it would seem that in Quebec as elsewhere hatred of the paternal role was the dominant force, but that here it was unconsciously projected onto what had been a really tough parental authority, the Church. For the fathers of nearly all these boys belonged to the new Affluent Society of Quebec, and had been just as permissive with their sons as their English-speaking counterparts.

I was no quicker than anyone else to adjust to the 1960's, for the usual reason that my brain was so much slower than my intuitions. My last novel, *Return Of The Sphinx*, took four years from my initial notes in 1962 to its completion in the fall of 1966. My mental hang-ups ceased only when I realized that the separatist movement, its external theme, had no more to do with the real theme than a

revolver with the mind of a man who uses it to shoot somebody. The real story was the destruction of a well-meaning father by an unhappy, ambitious, confused, guilt-ridden, idealistic son. It was not until well after the novel was published that I learned that even while I was writing it this had been the fate of a prominent French-Canadian statesman, or that a little later the son of Willi Brandt was arrested as one of the ringleaders in the student riot which selected him as its prime target. This novel was so savagely attacked by Canadian reviewers that it occurred to me that I had quite unwittingly written something that had enraged them in the secret places where the most important parts of them live. But as this is a frank essay, I would be hypocritical if I pretended that the reception of this book in Canada did not stun me for a time and make me want to find a mental tent that would serve me as the actual one did when I used to sleep in it during my 'teens in Halifax.

A year and a half has passed since *Return Of The Sphinx* was published and during that time I have been reading some of the new novelists of the 1960's. I must admit, not caring how old-fashioned it may make me appear, that the work of some of them is alien to any literary tradition I have known or respected, and that it seems to me a symptom of something terribly serious. I can't believe that this present tide of pornography, self-hatred, self-contempt and boring drug-fed egoism can last indefinitely, or even much longer, and this I infer from the tastes of my students, with whom, incidentally, I have managed to get along very well. As they are the readers of the future, their tastes and values interest me more than those of the neobourgeois of the age-group between mine and them.

We are told by many observers, and by some spokesmen for the young, that they detest the technological system. Some certainly do detest it, but not many detest it for aesthetic reasons. They fear it, and with good reason, because it is part of the knowledge explosion which threatens to outmode within a decade not only the little they have learned, but even the techniques they have acquired, including the technique of student leadership. But no simple over-all judgment can be made here. College administrations are making fools of themselves because they judge the student-bodies by the activists who corral student societies and the student press. These young men may or may not be on a wave of the future, but their avowed aims are certainly archaic. These latest converts to Marxianity are all disguised puritans, and as such are symptoms of what may well be a patrist reaction. But because they speak in the language of Political Science and Sociology, this means they are speaking in the language of the past, and of course this is the great bond they share with their dear enemies, the college administrators.

To anyone with eyes in his head, the most anger-making aspect of the present Generation Gap is sexual.

When we look back on the past forty years, what else are we viewing but the most colossal explosion of the libido in history? In an age so permissive and luxurious, its intellectual leaders permissive even with the truth, the father is beginning to appear as the sexual rival of his son on a scale seldom seen since the Stone Age, while the mother, rejuvenated by the cosmetician, the pharmacist and a college education, has in the cities become a most potent rival of her inexperienced daughter.

When I use the word "sexual" I am not thinking entirely as a Freudian; I am thinking also in the context of the new biology with its emphasis on the inviolability of "territory" among all living creatures, including man. I am thinking in terms of rivalry for admiration and the kind of power that accompanies it. Not for nothing was *South Pacific* the most successful and popular musical of the 1950's, for it gave a veiled public endorsement to a code of social behaviour which is inimical to man's survival. When I was young the good old Oedipus Complex was just as valid as it is now, but the naked Oedipal conflict was seldom prolonged in the form of open war when the son was in college. The only area of an earlier society sufficiently affluent to afford this kind of thing was the high aristocracy, as Shakespeare carefully noted when he made Hamlet both a prince and a student, and put into the mouth of the unimaginative Marcellus the familiar sentence that something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

I am not suggesting, for it would not be true, that this crossing of territorial boundaries between generations is in practice large on a percentage basis. I am, however, stating the obvious when I say that many members of today's parent generation *appear* to the young as potential rivals on a scale wider than ever before. Madison Avenue lost no time in following up the success of *South Pacific*. For years it has flooded the advertising market with pictures of lovely young things dining out, yachting and conspicuously consuming with well set-up, confident, rich, exciting men with steel gray hair. It takes no genius to understand that these men are either divorced or two-timing their wives, which means something far more important in the sense that they are also two-timing their own children. What can you say to the student activist who shouts, "There's no decency here!"

Here, surely, is the explanation of the outlandish hair-dos of young males in the late 1960's and of clothing styles among students which so affront their elders. These say, with perfect unconscious symbolism, "Older people — keep off! Daddy, go home!" I may be guessing in many things these days, but it's not much

of a guess that at the close of the 1960's we are in the last stage of a dramatic *fin de siècle*, and that the cycle that is ending is the matrist-permissive one, together with its archaic faith in politics based not upon biological science, but upon the naive rationalism we inherited from the eighteenth century.

How to close this without completely tailing off?

All I have known about myself as a writer is the live feeling that comes when I know I must and can continue writing. For two years, the first time since 1932, this feeling left me and left me pretty desolate. I did little but work with students and listen more to what they didn't say than to what they did say. But two months ago the old feeling returned and I began a new novel. Whether this one will be stalled as others have been I don't know, but the feeling is there that I can write it. I can still say, "I believe in God and that is what scares me", for it does scare me when I look at the mayhem the commands of evolution are making and are going to make of the dearest illusions of intellectuals and the costliest plans of politicians and organizers. But it also fills me with awe and wonder to know that once again the species to which I belong is stubbornly, blindly determined to remain human and not be converted into an abstraction in the super-mind of a computer.

¹The Esthonian edition was published in Canada by Esthonians who had lost their country.

