

## The Author As Teacher

*Hugh MacLennan*

Up to the outbreak of the Hitler War, creative writing and university teaching were considered almost incompatible. The university was still a protected environment, and that is bad for novelists and poets who usually thrive on turmoils, passions and recklessness, which "are things," wrote a Georgian poet, "that come not to the view of slippered dons who read a codex through." Nor did scholars have any desire to have writers around; they correctly assumed that the work of all living writers is still on trial and were apt to dismiss contemporary novelists as superficial romantics, as indeed many of them were.

I myself never studied English literature formally, and when I was working in Roman history in the Princeton Graduate College, I remember being appalled by the attitude of some scholars in the English Department. One of them, finding me reading Shakespeare, delivered himself of what for me was a lapidary sentence: "He's full of interesting problems, of course, but you're the first person I ever saw around here reading Shakespeare for pleasure!" When Macmillans, in 1931, wanted to use some extracts from Bernard Shaw in a text-book designed for use in India, they got this reply: "I have the strongest objection to the association of my name in

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*His novels — published between 1941 and 1967 — are BAROMETER RISING, TWO SOLITUDES, THE PRECIPICE, EACH MAN'S SON, THE WATCH THAT ENDS THE NIGHT, RETURN OF THE SPHINX. They are all still in print and have been translated into eight languages. THE WATCH alone has sold over 100,000 copies in Germany.*

*His other books are CROSS COUNTRY, THIRTY AND THREE, SCOTCHMAN'S RETURN AND OTHER ESSAYS, SEVEN RIVERS OF CANADA.*

*Hugh MacLennan and his work have been accorded many honours. He received the Lorne Pierce Medal for Canadian literature in 1952, was elected to the Royal Society of Canada the following year, has won the Governor-General's Award three times for fiction, twice for non-fiction. In 1966 he was awarded the Molson Prize of the Canada Council and in 1967 he was made a Companion of the Order of Canada.*

the infant mind with school lessons. I have always refused to sanction the insertion of samples in school books. Why should I make my name loathed in India as Shakespeare's is loathed in secondarily-educated England?" Would-be writers who turned to teaching as an easier way out he dismissed with a famous sentence: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

Of course there used to be plenty of would-be writers who taught in elementary schools in order to eat. Evelyn Waugh was one for a time, but his employment terminated with the publication of *Decline and Fall*, which owed its inspiration to the school in which he worked. During the depression I taught school myself, but as I liked boys better than Waugh did, this turned out to be a priceless experience, at least from my own point of view.

I soon learned that school is a much better place for an embryo writer than the lower echelons of a university English department, providing that English is not the subject you teach. Children are the raw material of society; they are barely if at all removed from savagery; they are very incompetent hypocrites, with the result that they often tell the truth without knowing it. I found them unparalleled instructors in the repetitive patterns of human motives. My school teaching years were exhausting and financially barely above the subsistence level, but at least they saved me from *la mystique de la gauche*, which in those days was the passport to intellectual respectability among young university instructors, and the doom of many a generous-hearted novelist during the 1930s. The schoolboys stripped bare the rock on which political idealism has always foundered: that simple law which asserts that men tend always to satisfy their desires with the minimum of exertion. (N.B. I didn't say "needs," because hardly any of us, myself included, can be relied upon to understand what our real needs are.)

But in those days the literary schoolmaster was wise if he concealed his extra-curricular activity. He was hired to teach, not subsidized to write literature, and the teaching load was assigned on the ancient principle of putting as much on the donkey's back as the donkey's back can carry without cracking. Your time was supposed to be the school's, not your own, and schools were most ingenious in finding extra little things for the staff to do. I was very careful to write in secret while at school, and considering how many hours I worked at my job, in retrospect I am amazed that I wrote as much as I did. I wrote two novels (which were never published) in vacations, on weekends and on evenings after a school day which began

at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m. (not counting the duty when I slept in the school), began work at 7:30 and terminated it at 9:30 at night. Under these conditions I also wrote the whole of one novel and the half of another which found publishers. But I was not surprised, shortly after the appearance of the first of these, to be told by the parent of a pupil, "Well, I enjoyed your novel quite well, but I hope you realize you'll have to resign now." Though my employers never objected to me about the kind of book I had written, there were many others who did. I received dozens of letters from strangers expressing their horror that the author of a novel as immoral as *Barometer Rising* should be allowed in a place where he could contaminate the minds of the young.

This struck me as curious, for during all my time at Princeton I also had feared contamination, though of a subtler kind: the ruin of such literary style as I thought I might acquire, through association with the academic jargon I had to master in order to qualify for the Ph.D. degree. My professors made me dismantle the original text of my thesis because its style was "too popular" and re-write it in a prose "that met the dignity of scholarship." I dutifully made it as dull as I could and qualified for the degree, but it took me more than seven years to weed the last remnants of jargon out of my prose and to cease feeling guilty if I wrote something in three words which my Princeton master had insisted should be said in ten. Had my schoolwork involved the teaching of English, and not Latin and Greek, I know I would have finished myself as a writer. No beginner can help being affected by what he reads, and to have to read a hundred or more schoolboy compositions a week, to say nothing of trying to correct and improve them, would have been lethal even to Shakespeare.

This, I think, is not an unfair picture of the author-teacher relationship until very recently. But after the Hitler War a remarkable change occurred, for a new phenomenon appeared in a number of the better-heeled American universities — the writer in residence. Toward the end of the 1940s I was offered two such jobs, but I feared the Greeks, and still do, when they bear me gifts. I guessed, possibly without foundation, that being a writer in residence meant giving a course in creative writing and I wanted no part of that. I found it so hard to teach myself how to write that I did not expect to have any success in teaching somebody else to do the same. I remember that one prospective employer was so liberal that he told me that I would have no regular duties at all; I would

simply have to "talk about literature in an informal way with interested students." This didn't seem to me a job, but a place. The placeman was fine in the eighteenth century because usually he had nothing to do at all. But teaching is one of the most important jobs in the world, and if anyone attempts it, both he and his students will suffer if he doesn't do the best he can.

Why, then, did I join the McGill English staff in 1951 and stay there until now? Certainly not for financial reasons; it would be indelicate even to mention what I was paid in the 1950s while handling two courses on a part-time salary. No, I was driven to McGill by nothing more noble than the instinct of self-preservation, and if I have been allowed to stay there, it must be because I have done a full working job with students. But I went there originally, as I just said, in the hope of saving my life as a writer.

Toward the end of the 1940s most novelists suffered from the eerie sensation that prickles a man when he hears unseen footsteps crunching around a graveyard after dark. For a full century the established novelist had been the most secure man in the literary world; once he got going, he could generally keep on going until he was gathered. If he was lucky he could earn a good living, for even a moderate best-seller in the 1940s was worth 75,000 copies in cloth and had a one-to-three chance of being accepted by the movies. It is true that large sales came to very few Canadian writers in those years — they didn't come to Brazilians or Mexicans either — but I am not talking of Canadian literature here, I am talking of the relationship between authors and teachers in the whole English-speaking world.

Overnight, toward the end of the forties, both the prestige and sales of fiction tumbled, and there were several reasons for this. The most obvious (though not the most important) being the law of diminishing returns. The volume of junk sold as "great" literature had turned many a stomach in the palmy days of publishing when Nelson Doubleday spoke happily of selling books by the carload and not by such and such a number of copies. Suddenly a disgusted public demanded far higher standards from serious novelists than they had asked for in the past. If they read for the sake of the story (and a story is a human necessity), they no longer had to depend upon novelists. The new school of non-fiction writers had by this time learned all the story-telling tricks of the novelist's trade and applied them to the biographies of famous men and women, to inside tales of epic events like the sinking of the *Titanic* or the rise

and fall of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, and later still to common crimes where every fact had been recorded in court and police records.

All of these factors began working against the novelist at the end of the 1940s, and all were formidable, but the most frightening of them was a sudden lack of confidence felt by novelists themselves. Most of the established reputations at the end of the 1940s had been founded in the atmosphere of the twenties and thirties. Now their possessors looked out on a new world in which most of their familiar landmarks and touchstones had become blurred or had faded out. Human perceptions and social values were changing and many a novelist felt lost and unable to believe in his own work any more.

If I speak for a moment exclusively of the novelist's predicament it is not to forget the other half of my subject. It is because what I am now going to say is sensed, but has seldom if ever been specifically described.

There is a mystery in the author-reader relationship hard to explain. The author who writes books which are read and which last must, while writing them, be in a state of extra-sensory perception with the life around him. When his work is published it is often derided by contemporary critics and rejected by most readers, but if it is good, it will ultimately be recognized because it was a true product of the time and place in which it was written. There is no better example of this than Conrad. Though he had a fairly good reputation in his lifetime, and his books sold to a certain extent, his true greatness was not apprehended until the 1960s. This year, for example, I discovered from an informal poll of my students that he was the most admired novelist on the modern novel course at McGill. This belated recognition has come about because the whole Western world is now living with the aftermaths of Conrad's main theme — the frightful results produced on the characters of Europeans and Americans when they blindly involve themselves in the lives of Africans and Asiatics. Though Conrad during his lifetime complained about being misunderstood, he never once suspected that he was out of touch with the real hidden *leitmotif* of his age.

Such has not been the case of many a famous writer of the twenties and thirties. Scott Fitzgerald lost his touch in the depression and died young soon afterwards. Hemingway committed suicide not long ago because he knew in his heart that his style and vision belonged to the past. This does not mean, of course, that his

best work is not as good as it always was; it means merely that at the time of his death, and for quite a few years leading up to it, he had been unable to write any more. I remember hearing Stephen Spender saying in the early 1950s that these days the styles of perception change so rapidly that a writer is lucky if he lasts for even a decade. So far as I was concerned, I got scared around 1950 and said to my wife, "I must get in touch with the young again."

Now I can return to my main theme and try to knit it together.

While I think it would have been enervating to a writer, and useless to a university, if he had worked in the academies before the Hitler War, I don't believe this need be the case any more. These days the university in North America is the focus of the greatest revolution, possibly, in the entire history of the world. It is a revolution almost unthinkable in every aspect of living, in business and communications, morals and sensibilities. There has been nothing like it since the break-up of the Medieval cosmology under the hammer blows of new knowledge, of a rising capitalism, of belief in the value of the individual, of Europe's discovery of America and the Far East.

Gone are the days when the university was an ivy-walled retreat for scholars, a club where an élite body of young people, most of them from the prosperous classes, might pick up a smattering of knowledge in lighthearted tranquillity while, if they were serious, they could also become masters of a difficult profession. If McGill is a good example, the modern university has become a microcosm of the modern world with all its chaos. It seethes with competing ideas and passions, its students come from all strata of society and from many different nations. Student politics show most of the paranoia of a so-called emergent state. Reverence, even respect, for an authority which may be unchallenged in the tough league of international science, has almost disappeared among today's students. The pill competes and combines with marijuana. An old order is gone, permissively-raised young people are frantic with frustration because they lack a solid anvil to beat against. Outside the professional faculties, today's students profess loathing for what they call "the system," and it is still too early to know whether they are harbingers of a new wave of freedom, or the death-rattle of a freedom all but strangled by a vast, impersonal technology. Today's McGill teacher reads the inscription on the library wall about the quiet air of delightful studies with an incredulous smile, and administrators who love their students are dismayed to see themselves

described in student newspapers as finks. The large university today, especially the large urban university, is the *schwerpunckt* of a world revolution, and today's university teacher is on the firing line. To speak personally, my problem is not to obtain new ideas and sensations, but to cope with even a fraction of those that inundate me.

So much for the teacher as a writer — but what of the writer as a teacher? This question seems to me to answer itself.

The writer can be a useful teacher only if he understands his second job and if his second job is worth doing. His position in an English department is generally, though not necessarily, somewhat different from that of his more scholarly colleagues. Usually he is required to deal with contemporary literature, and contemporary literature does not lend itself to the critical process developed in the study of classics. It cannot be "taught" in the sense that Chaucer can be taught, least of all can it be given any precise evaluation because it is still on trial. Personally, I regard contemporary literature as an experience to be shared with students. I don't see how it can be more than that, and for this reason I hesitate to call myself a "teacher" of English, though in the old days I never hesitated to call myself a teacher of Latin.

I believe, however, that if modern literature is to be handled in universities, it is probably better to turn it over to professional writers than to pure scholars, providing that professional writers are able to deal with course requirements. The practising author knows — how well he knows it! — that the conscious, critical mind has never been conspicuously successful in opening the soul to the artistic experience, though it has often proved itself all too competent in closing the soul to it. A contemporary poem or novel, if serious and true, always invites the conscious mind to resist it, and it is the conscious mind which formulates criticism. That may be why I have found the best students much more open to modern work than older people can be, and over the years I have taken the view that their true "teacher" is not myself, but the books on the course. The so-called teacher of modern literature can explain how novels are affected by the authors' technique; he can describe the social and historical backgrounds out of which their work emerged; he can share his own enthusiasm for their books. But in the long run it is the student and Faulkner, the student and Lawrence, the student and whoever the writer may be.

The final question is whether the job is worth doing at all. In



my first years at McGill I had serious doubts about this, and my principal course became contemporary only in the final month of the spring term. But now I know that contemporary literature does have a place on the curriculum of a modern university, if by "contemporary" we mean the literature of the twentieth century. There have been great writers in our time, and master craftsmen. They have been much more than recorders; they have been seismographs of change. But far more important than this, if they have written books which people still care to read, they have created, in Evelyn Waugh's words, "a few small patterns of order in the surrounding chaos" and have made men a little more understanding of themselves and of one another. The chief thing they offer the student is pure undisguised humanity; this the best of them have done, I believe, more honestly than any writers since the age of Shakespeare, and it is humanity that today's students long to embrace in this time of triumphant technology.