

*Georges-Henri Lévesque*

## YOUTH AND CULTURE TODAY

IN 1949, AS MEMBER OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, it was my privilege to come to Charlottetown with my colleagues, for the purposes of our survey, and thus to hear Principal Frank MacKinnon tell us the wonderful story of Prince of Wales College, and voice very wise and helpful considerations about the importance of the arts and of the humanities in the life of a nation. Ten years later I again visited Charlottetown when in 1959, owing to the illness of our Chairman, the late Honourable Brooke Claxton, I presided over meetings of the Canada Council. I felt honoured to sit in the very same chair once occupied by Sir John A. MacDonald, in the Confederation Chamber.

Today, through more kindness from Dr. MacKinnon, I am requested to take part in the famous series of the Samuel Robertson Memorial Lectures. I consider it a great honour to have my name placed after those of Sir Ernest MacMillan, Dr. Penfield, Dr. Wallace, and other renowned Canadians and to see it associated with that of the great man, Samuel Robertson, whose educational achievements in Charlottetown have earned him such fame throughout Canada.

As a subject for my address, the topic of "Youth and Culture Today" stands out among those which appeal to me most, not merely because for the time being I happen to be Vice-Chairman of the Canada Council or because some years ago I took an active part in the work undertaken by the Massey Commission. It appeals to me because throughout my career as a teacher and as an educator, the cultural development of our Canadian youth has been the very nucleus of my activities.

When, twenty years ago, I founded the Faculty of Social Science at Laval University, it was my dream that it would become for young Canadians not only a school for specialized learning, but also a source of cultural guidance and inspiration. Thus, it has been most interesting and comforting as well to ascertain that the intellectual curiosity of our pupils extended far beyond the programmes set by the curriculum. The manuals being just a point of departure and, so to speak, a kind

of crossroad opened on innumerable scientific paths, we tried to make our pupils conscious of the intellectual wealth which was so close at hand and which they could attain through only a slight effort on their part, if they would acquaint themselves with the works of renowned masters, especially in the realms of art and philosophy.

Does not education consist in a discreet suggestion? A suggestion that stems, of course, from strong convictions, but that would be of little practical effect if it were not developed in that mild climate which renders so attractive the radiant fruits of the spirit. The organizations that have kindly requested my co-operation in the past and that request it now are much concerned about cultural problems, and we have often debated them with special regard to youth. I must confess that the situation is at present far from being comforting in both milieus, French and English.

I do not by nature indulge in pessimism—nothing indeed is more alien to my way of thinking—and it is not my intention to brush a dark picture of the present state of things. I trust that it will be agreed, since the experience of others has led you to conclusions similar to mine, that my statement is realistic.

Young people today live under the sign of *easiness*. The material comfort in which they are born and brought up is so general that it can be truly asserted that it is one of the characteristics of our time. In the schools that are erected for them by society, everything is handy and functional. Visual teaching methods draw the attention of the child without requiring much effort from him. Besides, the teachers, imbued with the recent discoveries of psychology and psychiatry, do their utmost not to hurt the feelings of boys and girls whose personality is still frail, inconsistent, and unstable.

So much care should result in the full blooming of the young people's psychism in an atmosphere of complete freedom. These methods are obviously in opposition to the old stiff educational rules and principles. From this standpoint it can be said that they definitely mark a real progress.

But is it not to be feared that such a slackening of discipline and restraint, otherwise useful, together with a very strong pressure exerted at home by mass media such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and records, will create among the young a state of *passivity* and also a tendency towards *narcissism*?

Those attitudes — the contradiction of which is only apparent — are the main characteristics of youth today. They are the cause and the explanation of its strange and bewildering behaviour.

It is in a very friendly spirit that I shall try to find out how pressure from the

exterior, together with psychological tendencies, does influence the orientation of youth towards cultural experiments, and to describe, as I see it, a situation where the peculiar dispositions of youth and of mighty strength are confronted with each other. First, I should say that I have great admiration for young people but that, at the same time, I regret that since their early years they are swayed to and fro by tremendously powerful trends. Through radio and television, which occupy a place of honour in nearly every home, they penetrate after childhood into a universe of fiction, of sheer imagination or, rather, of fantasy. They live in a kind of fairy land which fascinates them and influences them profoundly.

The bulk of impressions they absorb is disproportionate to the general capacities of a human brain, and more so with those of a brain in process of development. What, intellectually speaking, they eat, drink, and breathe, activates in their mind only a very elementary mechanism. Without any intellectual effort on their part, they sit in front of the radio or television sets. They simply look and listen. The small boys and girls are impressed only by sound and movement, but the older children look eagerly at the plays, the different phases of which pass so swiftly on the screen that no participation of their own and no kind of personal discrimination are required from them. Besides there is no reason why they should bother to exert their judgment, since the play-writer has foreseen a conclusion they are blindly ready to accept.

With mind and heart widely opened to life, the teen-agers care above all for fun and enjoyment, even for sensation and thrill. Their eroticism is stirred and moreover brought to exasperation by rock 'n' roll, — "That music for legs!" as someone has called it. They are exalted, impassioned, haunted by the performances of boxers, wrestlers and sportsmen. The recorded or broadcasted romantic songs and plays make them languid. In all these cases, they submit to emotions and sensations which, without their noticing it, create in them, in the long run, a strange soul, a soul which, if I may put it this way, is much like a caravansery. For they are open to everyone and to everything. They welcome indiscriminately everything, any kind of food, whether gamy or tasteless.

Of course, such a regime results in the overexcitement of their nervous system. And, what is perhaps even more serious, their taste and their judgment are misled. Bewitched by the stories they hear and see, they care very little for the way these stories are composed or written. The sloppy language and the vulgar manners evinced in certain "comics" or by certain radio and television characters do not shock

them in the least. On the contrary, they themselves talk slang and applaud at the performance of frantic dancers.

And so, gently, quietly, they slip, they slip towards facility. Without any participation of their own they simply look at the picture-books or stand motionless in front of the movies. Little by little, pictures enslave them. Nearly every day they lie open to their magic spell, without any resisting power of their own opposing them.

Now, here is the point! Image inflames imagination and, nowadays, the young simply worship imagination! Accustomed since their early childhood to the endless tales of the "comics" and the feuilletons, the plots of which have for background the boundless interplanetary universe and for themes the most extraordinary hypotheses, the young people are swept off their feet. They become over excited. They claim they have a right to give in to any kind of extravagance.

Imagination is undoubtedly that intellectual power which is essential to creative work. But it is also a fanciful lady! It obviously needs to be tamed, and it is left to good judgment and to an innate sense of taste and measure to assign it its boundaries. Numerous, however, are the young people who, nowadays, disregard that rule of wisdom. They cultivate, even to the point of morbidity, their hypertrophied imaginations, without ever doubting their suggestions. That is why when they reach an age which should be that of fertility, they prove abortive or produce those weak invalid works deprived of any viability other than the artificial and momentary excitement which is the result of a mercantile publicity.

Here are, to my mind, some offsprings of the *passivity* and of the *narcissism* which characterize the young generation of today. It unfortunately lacks the salutary fear, self-criticism, and discipline which are a natural bridle for a too prolific imagination and the sign of a certain maturity. Many boys and girls eagerly try to have their works published, even though those works are only blundering and confused drafts. They do not wait for maturity in their minds, so that awkwardness, elementary mistakes, lack of realism, and boldness of style can be noticed at first glance. Such mistakes are, in fact, prejudicial to the people who launch out in the perilous adventure of artistic production. In short, there are too many young people who are dominated by the unhealthy desire to talk ceaselessly about themselves, to show off their wit, to indulge in a kind of exhibitionism.

Wise men and women use up their strength to convince these talented boys and girls that unbalanced works cannot be accepted save by those who themselves lack equilibrium. Learned men are at a loss to make them understand that the

works of innovators of genius have always rested on solid structures all the more skilled that they are not very apparent. That is why ignorance fails to notice them.

It is not my intention to put on trial the modern media of culture, which are besides marvellous instruments, nor do I wish to crush the young who obey the suggestions of these media with too great a docility. My sole purpose is to point out that in our time popular works of imagination exert too strong a fascination over the minds of our fellowmen and that the young people have not yet the right training to make a wise choice. The whole problem is thus a matter of measure. Since tremendously strong cultural media have invaded air and space, since in a fairy-like manner they appear suddenly at any moment in the life of our youngsters, we must necessarily oppose power to power. In this respect, the influence of the family is particularly efficacious for, like good genii and fairies, fathers and mothers possess the power of transforming their homes into places where only those who distinguish themselves by their true worth are admitted.

No one would think for a moment to prohibit or put away those amiable companions of our life, those marvellous cultural media that have been mentioned. The essential point is that their performances should bear the mark of intelligence to reduce them to silence when they are too prolix, to disprove their peremptory statements, and to select among their presents those that are really genuine, beautiful, and harmless.

Besides, if need be, other kinds of entertainment should be provided for the young people in place of them. When the walls of living-rooms are covered with books, these books selected one by one by a cultivated mind; when the record library of the family is steadily enriched with the most refined works of man's sensitiveness; when art books, full of wonders, are purposely forgotten in one or another room in the home, it is not likely that the young people will ever take pleasure in reading insipid novels, in listening to frivolous talkers, or in contemplating valueless paintings. A masterpiece hung on a wall is, for beauty, a witness whose authority can hardly be challenged. The true importance of beauty can also be evinced thanks to all those articles of current use — ash-trays, flower vases, cigarette cases and so on — if one cares to select them for their artistry.

If the young are given a chance to compare real artistic works with the gimcrack furniture and the shoddy goods of which they have, alas! sometimes daily examples, they will develop that discriminative spirit essential to self-defence. From then on, they will not indulge in *passivity* any more. From that moment also, it will definitely be forbidden for them to satisfy themselves too easily with

the rough drafts they formerly took for valuable realizations. Anyone who has looked at, even in facsimile, the manuscripts, untiringly corrected, of Shakespeare, Flaubert, and Valéry, anyone who has seen the drawings and etchings worked over again and again by Michelangelo and also the numerous "brouillons" of Beethoven's symphonies, cannot possibly exhibit the awkward drafts of his doubtful inspiration. There is nothing like culture to make one conscious of one's own value. Besides, the study of masterpieces cannot discourage the true artist. Throughout the centuries, culture has always been a stimulus. Is it not in the great schools of Italy that were educated and trained the painters, the writers, and the sculptors of the Renaissance? And never have the disciples taken umbrage at their masters. Never have they thrown away the hammer, the brush, or the pen because men of genius had preceded them and shown them the way.

Cultural education, in conclusion — in the family, in the schools and colleges and, above all, in the universities — is of primary importance for the straightening of the two tendencies evinced by so many youngsters: *passivity* and *narcissism*. Sports and outdoor games are no doubt excellent means of stirring one's taste for the physical culture that is essential to a healthy mind. But sports and romping games can in themselves be of only secondary importance. They cannot be mainly responsible, of course, for a young man's intellectual development and activity. The impulse given to the mind should obviously be the main concern of teachers and educators, whose task is to turn its original inertia into a clear knowledge of one's own possibilities, to teach it how to perceive the essence of things and to exercise a wise judgment. In a word, the mind must be taught how to be personal, for education has for its goal the full development of the individual as a human being.

It may be retorted that the wish to avoid *passivity* by stressing the improvement of one's personality may have as a consequence the worsening of the other tendency, *narcissism*. I would not say so. For if the well-educated youngster scrutinizes his own personality, it should not be through self-admiration and self-complacency but in order to make a fairer estimate of his gifts and talents; it is not with the purpose of being satisfied with what he is at present but to realize that he can achieve more and be even more exacting for himself; it should not be to rest in a standstill contemplation of himself but to launch himself out into the pursuit of his ideal.

Education will also make him conscious of the huge universe that surrounds him and, at the same time, of mankind, in comparison of which he himself is just

a molecule. Education will unfold before him a panoramic view of that universe with its endless line of geniuses, of heroes, of thinkers, of saints, and also with its crowds of needy craving for assistance.

Thus, to educate one's self does not mean to brood over one's problems but rather to open one's mind ever more widely to the realities of the world and one's heart to altruism. That is the reason why colleges and universities would be guilty if they were simply to enlighten the minds of their students while neglecting to broaden their hearts and souls. Canadian educational institutions must not aim solely at the education of specialists but also at the education of men who, like Terence, "are concerned with everything that concerns man".

Universities are indeed worthy of praise for training top-rank physicians, engineers, economists and so on, but we should not forget that those specialists are above all "men" whose ability as professionals is greater, as for example in a Pasteur or an Einstein, as their humanism is more widely developed.

In spite of their specialization our colleges and universities must therefore at all costs create within and without their walls an atmosphere of culture and humanism. It is well indeed to teach students how to earn their living. But it is not enough. Students must also be aware of the importance and value of beauty and culture in a man's life.

Having ascertained that two tendencies characterize Canadian youth today, and knowing, on the other hand, that parents and educators are ideally situated to counterbalance the insidious suggestions of free-and-easiness, of mediocrity, and of carelessness, how can we refrain from urging them to inculcate in the minds of young people a sense of beauty and a desire for learning, so that thereafter they may long for the most refined culture? That supreme goal once achieved, why should Canada envy those cultural groups that enlighten the world? Let us dream that such a day is coming near.