The Last Post in Retrospect

The Last Post is like Christ; it’s not dead but merely asleep. We can hear the Siren’s Call. Admittedly the people who wrote for it have disappeared into darkest concubinage or have become victims of that lamentable activity described by actors as “doing a modulation into the next act” or “writing for money.”

This will not then be by way of a post-mortem; there’s nobody to be eulogized anyway, even if there is a death. I’m fortified by something I came across the other day, a note of advice in the Times, advising women to bill featuring the backside of animals ridden by the leading police force of the country. The view of authority was not, I hasten to say, the particular preserve of the Post. It was posted in the Hindustan Times, with the awful daring of a moment’s surrender, published on the same day.

As a word to the wise, the editors at the Post now have a new theory. The particular work from which that is drawn, If God Is a Jew, is all the more chilling.

In a way, the sweetening machine is a useful metaphor for the institution of television itself—which has more to do with wish-fulfilment than reality. At a critical juncture in its past, the industry abandoned production values that high-lighted its integrity in all its messy, complex, error-laden but risky and human vitality. In place of this, it has evolved a hybrid of television and filmic conventions, in which traditional telegenic qualities are constructed,譬如 the illusion-making apparatus of Hollywood itself. The result is that TV offers (not only through its chosen content but also through its style of production) a smooth-running, error-free, sweetened world in which every problem is easily solved, every mistake is erased and eliminated, every event is consumed and consumed into being by whatever means necessary, and human complexity is reduced to a formula. To examine the real conditions of our lives, exploring in-depth the problems and challenges, TV has become the rose-coloured glasses for society, or (more alarmingly) for society’s champagne solution in which the status quo hangs suspended. By way of analogy, society is a har, messy and bitter indeed.

No wonder so many North Americans spend so much time in TV’s world rather than work to make the real world sweeter.

The Last Post was not an exception. It was a perfect example of what the title of the WMA was described in bold—even cheeky—headlines as "THE SANTO DOMINGO OF PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU."

I mentioned cheeky deliberately; it’s the only way I have of describing the pop culture of the Post. At the risk of blasphemy, I should venture to say that the Post had an American short-story writer’s narrative of the whole thing from the jaws of victory into a tale from a Renor film by way of an American short-story writer some day. It’s a comment that one day will be called something like “Kennedy saved from drowning.”

I know that these are our own spring publishing lists, parodies and the new nativist efforts, replete with such titles as Old Barns of Ontario, or The Best Toilets on the #7, etc. A work as mediocre as Stephanoff’s Man Called Intrepid would be transformed by Last Post alchemy into A Man Called Insultand. (The paragraph review of the Memoirs of Arnold Hoceny still stands as a perfect alchemist; the insomniac, I, Larry Zolf, do hereby swear that the Memoirs of Arnold Hoceny appeared asleep."

And so on. We even found poems burned in the editorials of the Globe and Mail, which, in their way, were as much as the called found poems.

James Eaves it was who pointed out that there is a significant difference between the Post, a newspaper, and a newspaper, and I do think that in part the Post was a product not only of a newspaper that couldn’t find the time to be a newspaper but of a policy of public life also but of a time when the economy was such that magazine-type publication and a measure of the quality of life was a priority item. We were wrong.

Of course, it should be said that magazines are about writing, and we were all writers and the magazine was readable; while attitudes are important, attitudeizing is the un instructional style of the magazine world. Politically, we had a shared view that we would not fight the Cold War and so political scientists were not allowed to write—except for Mel Lastman and Larry Pratt, who was a writer because he was a bad economist but a good writer, the best kind of economist and a great writer. Pratt tried the same task at the CBC, only then the darts begin to fly.

The Last Post moved from Montreal to Toronto and soon began to die. As I knew it would. My perfectly cogent observation that Goethe had remained in Weimar and did not relocate to Berlin fell on deaf ears.

Still, I find nothing unhealthy about the condition of newspapers disappearing. They should be like catherine wheels, cracking and bursting, the surrounding dark for a while, leaving behind them a good, acrid stench to remind newswriters that that righteous indignation had once been felt here. If I may make an observation: it’s a mistake to try to equate the media as they become of themselves as organizations that should grow in size and circulate, or should they be like the postmen they take over from Peter C. Newman. A small catherine wheel is better than a large one.

Patrick McAdden