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The Battle of the Generations

A few years before his death in 1924 Franz Kafka wrote, but did not send, a long passionate work known as "Letter to My Father," explaining why he had always lived in fear of him.

More recently Georges Simenon, in his *Mémoires intimes* (1981), has told how hard he sometimes found it to get on with his Belgian mother. Visiting him and his wife in Connecticut, for example, she refused to get rid of a threadbare old corset even when they bought her a better one, and when her daughter-in-law threw the disgusting object into the garbage on the sly, the obstinate old lady had an answer even to that: 'At midnight my mother goes downstairs silently, opens the garbage-can and takes out her old corset.' The drama was repeated nightly, as Simenon reports, and with nothing said, until his wife put the offending garment into the incinerator and his mother, quietly resentful, cut short her visit and returned to Liège.

Such are the familiar trials of the generation-gap – of being a parent and being a child; and neatly inserted between Kafka and Simenon came John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the play that started the London theatrical revival in 1956, where Osborne's hero, Jimmy Porter, loved the memory of his father but loathed his mother-in-law. Kafka had plainly wanted to love his father; Simenon felt a real if troubled affection for his mother; and Jimmy's hatred is not for his own parents but for his wife's: so the lines of battle, as usual, are unevenly drawn. There are lonely fictional precursors such as *King Lear*, too, in which a father begins by misunderstanding his daughters and learns to know them only at the terrible cost of his sanity and his life. No one needs footnotes, at all events, to the chronicles of the war of the generations. One has lived such stories or watched them.

The theme, for all that, remains impressively undiscussed. That is not necessarily a reproach or a disadvantage, and it may signify nothing more than the simple truth that nobody needs a theory when something is already understood. There are theories of class because

we are not sure if we understand class, and the same goes for sex. But there is an odd silence about dogmatic differences between youth and age, child and parent. That is a gap. Though there are strikingly few theories of the age-war, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that differences of age affect convictions, and even voting habits, more powerfully than the difference between wealth and poverty, man and woman. To put it bluntly, there are not many old radicals. Madame Simenon's corset is the perfect symbol of that. She preferred it not because it was better than a new one or because she thought it was but because she was used to it, and she did not have to discuss the matter with her son or daughter-in-law or anyone else for her reasons to be understood. That is what the old are like. They want things to go on as they are, if only to complain about the way they are.

So there are few grand theories of the war of generations, just scattered reports like Kafka's and Simenon's from the fighting front. There may be a further reason for that – namely that the war itself in one significant aspect is new. Parents and children may have been disliking each other, or at least failing to understand each other, for a long time; but to dignify all that into an ideological difference like conservative and radical is surely pretty recent and, in broad terms, confined to the twentieth century. Kafka's father and Simenon's mother are mirror-images of a new age of mankind because personal differences amount now to an ideological distance: in Kafka's case because his father's impatience with an over-sensitive son, as an opinionated old Prague tradesman, was a symbol of his dogmatic impatience with the whole world and his habitual intolerance of fine distinctions; in Simenon's because of his mother's refusal to accept that, since technical advances occur even in underwear, it is sensible if you are rich to throw things away even if they are still in working order. Planned obsolescence is a very recent discovery of modern industrial societies, and she obstinately refused to accept it.

The literature of earlier ages fails to report cases of this sort, presumably because they seldom existed: perhaps the most eminent exception being *The Clouds* of Aristophanes in which Socrates, who had been condemned to death by an Athenian court for misleading the young, is accused of inciting a new generation to rebel philosophically against its elders. The instance casts a long forward shadow. When Ezra Pound lived in London between 1908 and 1920 he was accused of running a youth racket called Modernism, so Aristophanes may have an interesting pioneering point to make here; but it is not a point

much echoed over the next two thousand years. Sophocles's *Antigone*, for example, strikingly fails to make it. If it had been written by a twentieth-century playwright like Arthur Miller, it would have shown the idealistic young clashing with their stuffy law-abiding elders, but that is not the play Sophocles wrote: in fact his Antigone is fired by family loyalty, nothing less – a highly backward-looking and traditionalist view – in her quarrel with her uncle Creon over the burial rights of her brother; and Lear's failure to understand his daughter Cordelia is matched by his failure to understand a lot of other people as well, not all of them young. Even in *Henry IV*, in the so-called crown-stealing scene in the second part (IV.5), Shakespeare portrays a simple misunderstanding rather than a dogmatic divide. Prince Hal does not in fact steal the crown from his dying father, as the old man thinks, but merely wanders away with it absent-mindedly; and when he returns he convincingly proclaims an unfailing filial loyalty. In the end he never defied parental authority, even when he consorted with Falstaff in taverns. He was merely learning about life.

All these instances now look alien or at least omissive, since few authors in the twentieth century would handle such themes in that way. A modern Antigone would be a student militant, in all probability, full of doctrinal points; and she would link her defiance of Creon with a determined view about how states are to be ruled and ancient laws repealed or flouted. Prince Hal, similarly, would probably think his father guilty of misgovernment and would look forward to an England under a new order that represented, or claimed to represent, a dogmatic break with the past. That almost no author before the present age has conceived of the war of the generations in that way is remarkable. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) Charles Dickens critically portrays his own mother as Mrs Nickleby, and he mentions the matter in a letter or two. But the difference between them in no way appears to be a dogmatic one, and Dickens seems merely to have thought her feckless and absurd. Some thirty years later Samuel Butler wrote an autobiographical novel, *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), a fictional diatribe against his parents; but he took good care not to publish it in his lifetime, partly (it is thought) because he hoped his clergyman father would leave him money; and Edmund Gosse's memoir *Father and Son* (1907), which really is about the dogmatic divide of the generations, belongs to the twentieth century. So we are separated from all previous centuries of mankind by the assumption that each generation has its own characteristic way of looking at the world, that the generation-gap is about dogma as well as personal differences. No wonder our ancestors seem strange.

Part of the difference may be a matter of discretion, and no more than that. Christina Crawford's withering Hollywood portrait of her adoptive mother Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (1978) would be hard to parallel in earlier times if only because such public revelations about a parent would once have been thought indecent. (Perhaps they are still thought that, but it is a thought that sells copies.) Another large difference concerns the steep decline, in terms of status, of inheritance. Shakespeare's Prince Hal, to translate the matter into deflating modern terms, is waiting for the keys to his father's car. That is no longer considered admirable or even amiable, but Shakespeare's contemporaries would not have seen it that way. They would have thought it honourable and more than honourable – a bounden duty – to maintain a legacy of forefathers. Ancient literature is full of talk about the duty of the patrician to pass on the family inheritance of land and slaves, unimpaired and unencumbered, to descendants who, in turn, are in duty bound to do the same. The idea sounds strangely feudalistic by now, though it lies at the root of some of the novels of Evelyn Waugh, last of the feudalists, such as *A Handful of Dust* and *Brideshead Revisited*. At all events Shakespeare counted on the full sympathy of his first audience when he made Hal protest that the crown his father had won should be preserved to his line of blood, and a modern audience has to forget the mafia as it listens to talk like that and should not recall any time it may have misspent watching such films as *The Godfather* or *Godfather II*. Hal has a duty under God to preserve the kingdom, and the question of governing it by a new set of principles like the New Deal or the New Order does not even arise. Power is what it is and will always be – an act of self-aggrandizement to be perpetuated by one's line – and Macbeth is right to be horrified, one is meant to feel, when the three witches show Banquo's heirs, and not his, succeeding to the British throne.

It is surprising how recent the association of youth and radicalism is.

The great revolutionaries, after all – those inspired by ideological fervour – have not in the remoter past been reliably young. Oliver Cromwell was in his fiftieth year when Charles I was beheaded in 1649; Benjamin Franklin was seventy when he signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and other signatories like George Washington were not exactly youngsters. Not much is certainly known about the age group of the mob that stormed that Bastille in Paris shortly afterwards, in 1789, but it is plain that the leaders of the French Revolution, at least, were not of student age –

Robespierre was already in his mid-thirties – and when Napoleon seized power in 1799, at the impressively early age of thirty, he claimed to be restoring order rather than acting out a radical idea. In fact his contempt for political theory, and especially radical theory, was inordinate, and he may have been among the first to use ideology as a term of contempt. When Lenin ordered the attack on the Winter Palace in St Petersburg in 1917 he was forty-seven and near the end of his life, with little more than four years to go before his first stroke. Revolution has not classically been a youth racket: it is literature that made it so. In 1861, for example, Turgenev wrote a pioneering novel about radical youth called *Fathers and Sons*. The anarchistic hero Bazarov really does seem to be radical because he is young. But in general our ancestors do not appear to have made that association of ideas or to have expected others to do so.

In 1968, by contrast, it was taken for granted. The campus revolts of that year had their literary sources and needed them, since they settled so easily and so comfortably into the common assumption that the young want a revolution and the old do not. That assumption was already there, for instance, in Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, where it is simply taken for granted that the young hero, Jimmy Porter, wants to start the world with a clean slate and wants it because he is young. He is looking for a good, brave cause, as he says, like the Spanish Civil War; and the demand was meant to enrage the elderly, as it did. "I simply don't know what young people want nowadays," I overheard an old lady wail to a friend in the interval; and in the very same month – it was May 1956 – Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* appeared, by a marvellous coincidence, full of heady talk about Nietzsche and Jack the Ripper, while God was officially declared dead by youthful elements in university departments around the western world. Long before 1968, it is clear, the intellectual cocktail of revolutionary youth had been mixed.

Look Back in Anger was revived in London several years ago, to be followed by a sequel *Dejavu* (1991), which proved to be less a play than a sort of interrupted stage monologue for Jimmy Porter, a bitter, ageing cynic by now who, in his turn, does not know (though he certainly minds) what young people think nowadays. Osborne, who began as an Angry Young Man, came full circle and completed his cycle of plays on the generation-gap with *Inadmissible Evidence* (1965), a play replete with bitter anti-youth propaganda, sandwiched between. *Look Back in Anger*, by contrast, had been full of the language of class-war, but somehow one had never believed in it: Jimmy so plainly hated his mother-in-law not principally because she was upper-class, as he pretended or supposed, but because she was middle-aged. He

announced the animosities of the generation-war in the language of the class-war, presumably because there was, and is, a well-established rhetoric of class and none of age. On a critically charitable view of the play, however, it was a mismatch one was supposed to notice. Jimmy was not John Osborne, after all, whatever the reviewers may have thought; and it was perhaps one of the profundities of the work to have noticed that radicals often fail to identify what it is that really annoys them, or fail for interesting reasons to admit it to themselves, so that there can be something emotionally convenient about cloaking your hatred of a mother-in-law in the terminology of a Victorian sage like Karl Marx. We are back now with Kafka's father and Simenon's mother, more or less; and the play survived surprisingly well in revival, a work subtler than it had once looked. In fact the challenging question it famously provoked – "What is he angry about?" – which Osborne quotes derisively in the sequel *Dejavu*, really was silly if it implied that it was a challenge that could not be answered. It can be answered, in an engaging sort of way. Whatever may have been true of his creator, Jimmy was angry about being young and because he was.

The background to that play, and to the student troubles that followed it a dozen years later in 1968, is less likely to be political, in the long run, than artistic.

The makers of classic revolutions like Cromwell, Franklin and Robespierre may not have been strikingly young; nor were Lenin and Hitler after them. But the nineteenth century in Europe began to show significant signs of artistic, if not political, revolt among the youth of the age. When Victor Hugo's *Hernani* was first produced at the Comédie Française, in February 1830, Hugo was still in his twenties, and the play was radical in all sorts of artistic ways, including its metrics. Traditionalists booed it from the expensive seats, while Hugo's friends, themselves young writers and musicians, packed the cheap seats and outclapped them, led by Théophile Gautier in a cherry-coloured satin doublet. The avant-garde was born. Breathe the word modern, as W.H. Auden used to say, and the riot is on; and it is a riot that divides the young from the old. In fact that is what it is for. The western world was to live in the shadow of Hernani-style riots for a century and a half, moderns against traditionalists, and to take them for granted; and the recent death of the avant-garde has caused a deafening silence no one can quite explain. It is a silence that has never been there in memory. Jimmy Porter's lament that there are no good brave causes left has proved a pretty good prediction, in the long run, in spite of some feverish activity in the meantime like the New Left and deconstruction

to prove him wrong. Whatever problems people have with their parents, they are not nowadays usually Hernani-style problems or Spanish Civil War-style problems. They are not attached, that is, to differences in politics or artistic taste. The generation-gap is a lot subtler than that.

There were always difficulties, in any case, about the ideological split of the generations. For one thing, political and artistic radicalisms have not always synchronized. Victor Hugo was a legitimist when he wrote his romantic play in 1830 which, in the Paris of the restored Bourbons, was about as right-wing as you could get; he became increasingly radical over a long life while his writing became less and less experimental, dying a republican in 1885. Not easy for the twentieth century to make consistent sense of that. The New Left was young, it is true, apart from some middle-aged leaders; but then so was its successor the New Right, so it is not a reliable principle that the young are radical. Much the same could be said, in their day, of passing fads of cultural theory like deconstruction and feminism, which clearly attracted the young, though the best one can say now about a conference of feminists is that they look as if they were young once. It used to be a standing joke in the Church of England, similarly, that a conference of Modern Churchmen was full of long grey beards. The world moves on. Nothing, as Oscar Wilde once said, is so dangerous as being modern: one is inclined to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly.

The commonest shift is from red to green or orange, and this might be called the traffic-lights version of the kaleidoscope. It is the standard shift of the generation born in the first quarter of the century and the identikit of modern thought. It is commonly accompanied, puzzlingly enough, by a strong sense of uniqueness. I have seldom known a traffic-lighter who did not think he had achieved his present state of enlightenment by efforts that were strenuous, exceptional and unaided; and it is impossible to persuade him how stereotypical he is. But then who wants to be thought stereotypical?

Belief, in any case, is a concept that is not single or simple. “Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Coleridge?” “No, madam, I have seen too much of them.” That anecdote only scratches the surface of complexity. You can proclaim a dogma to feel modern, after all, to win the approval of a peer group, or to feel unguilty about a privileged upbringing. Proclaiming a dogma because you think it true and for no other reason is highly unusual; and to belong to the New Left or the New Right, in their day, was not at all like accepting the two-times table at school. You accept arithmetic because you know it is true and for no other reason, and Wittgenstein’s famous remark that a child in school does

not "believe" that two and two are four has an enormous cogency. When people say they believe in God, by contrast, or the free market, they are plainly implying they know other views are possible. Belief, in short, whether kaleidoscopic or stationary, implies a recognition that there are other views.

The twentieth-century war of the generations was like that. It was conscious that other views are possible; it accepted opposition and thrived on it. So, of course, did kaleidoscopic belief. Where would feminism have been, in its day, or deconstruction, without opponents? You cannot have the Death of the Author without the Life of the Author, feminism without male chauvinism, the Death of God without religion, or a New Right without a New Left. The Reagan-Thatcher mood has recently faded because the Left too has faded, much as Star Wars in its day needed a Soviet nuclear arsenal. Even regimes that do not permit legal oppositions, like the Nazis, have had to hypothesize an imaginary one like the Jews. Convictions can survive unopposed, but no belief can. And that, in the end, is where the creative force of the generation-gap once lay. Kafka would not have been Kafka without his fear of an intolerant father, and Simenon (one feels) understood himself better by contemplating the obstinacy of a mother. Our age has been characterized by the curious fact that it has felt the need to define its nature and its being by estimating its ideological distance from its kin. It thought militancy natural to youth. It is now discovering what other ages have always known: that it is possible to know oneself without any such sense of distance or distinction of style.