

STONES FOR GLASS HOUSES
SOME REFLEXIONS ON THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION

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T.V. addicts following news reels are familiar with this scene: the camera focuses on the smooth glass edifice, travels over its thousand anonymous windows, sweeps down to the main entrance. Gleaming limousines disgorge important persons in dark suits and imposing briefcases; a perfunctory nod to the press and in they sail escorted by a flotilla of aides, along the corridor and into great spherical or hemispherical halls; hands of friendly nations are shaken, well-caloried posteriors meet comforting upholstery, aides offer papers and settle discreetly behind their chief's ear. Here the camera leaves them as the Earthly Powers meet once again to arbitrate in a quarrelsome world and hand out its surplus wealth to the deserving poor. This is what we see and this is largely what we know about the activities of the Glass House.

It is not easy to know what, in fact, goes on behind those thousand anonymous windows, for who is there to tell it? Upon retirement Secretary-Generals of the United Nations do tend to write memoirs, and even when untimely cut off in Office, as was the case with the late Dag Hammarskjöld, leave us posthumous writings about their days with the Organization.¹ From them we may learn curious anecdotes about the Great, including themselves, but little about the anonymous inhabitants of the Glass House, most of whom will be quite unknown to their Chief. A charismatic figure such as Hammarskjöld was commended for *twice* having found time to visit all the departments of his Organization, a real achievement for a man with a divine sense of mission, travelling busily around the world. In the words of one comentator: «Hammarskjöld did not say that God appointed him to be Secretary-General but he nevertheless received the charge entrusted to him, including all its responsibilities, as a divine vocation.»² As regards a more recent and controversial Secretary-General, Kurt Waldheim, Connor Cruise has written of his Memoirs and their «discreet and emollient approach and pedestrian style». «As an international diplomatist he was a highly

competent, cautious professional: exactly the combination of qualities that the super powers agree in regarding as desirable in a Secretary-General.» Such qualities, he adds somewhat wryly, will inevitably lead to «cultivating such habits of discretion that in the end you can no longer be revealing even when you decide to write your memoirs.»³

Are we doomed then never to know what goes on in the Glass Houses? Or are they considered unsuitable material for literary expression? The difficulty lies, of course, in the fact that such persons as might write revealingly, acutely, amusingly about the great international organizations are extremely unlikely to be inhabiting such realms in the first place. They would certainly be doubtful candidates for admission, and once in, would scarcely prosper in such a bureaucratic setting. It was then a rare chance or oversight that brought a keen-eyed, thoughtful young Australian into the United Nations Organization, and what is more, kept her there for ten years while she took note. With a fine sense of humour and a sharp style reminiscent of the early Evelyn Waugh, Shirley Hazzard survived to tell her tale not once but twice, first in light-hearted vein in the slim volume entitled *People in Glass Houses* (1967) and again in darker, more condemnatory tones in *Defeat of an Ideal* (1973), drawing attention to the main defects of that Organization, particularly during the inglorious era of Senator Joseph Mc Carthy and the Secretary-Generalship of Trygve Lie. A time, as she says, «of monumental personal, national and international cowardice.»⁴ Although a rather specific denunciation of the state of affairs in the early 1950s, general and perpetual ills afflicting large corporate bodies are also displayed in lucid, straightforward prose.

*People in Glass Houses*⁵ is an altogether lighter work, one of those deceptively slight books which nevertheless offer glimpses of a budding major talent, which in this case was to be confirmed in *The Bay of Noon* (1970) and more particularly the remarkable *Transit of Venus* (1980)⁶, justly the winner of the U.S.A. National Book Critics Award of that year. *People in Glass Houses*, adapted from a series published first in *The New Yorker*, contains eight brief sketches which place a neat finger on some of the more typical human failings that hamper man's noblest ideals when he sets out to establish some altruistic international organization.

'People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones'. So says the old adage, but in this case the author had already left her particular glass house before she started throwing hers. The target is, of course, that familiar glass block rising imposingly from the banks of the East river in New York. Founded at the end of World War II at a moment when, as she says «the spirit of international cooperation was naturally at its height», the elements of discord seem already to have been cemented into the very foundations of the building itself.

Scarcely had the Founding Constitution been signed by the participating nations when a commission of the world's foremost architects was formed to draw up plans for a building that would house this noble expression of human solidarity. The commission, in turn, had hardly sat to its task before certain fissures began to appear in the fabric. Dutchman contended with Swede and Swede with Turk; Burmese fended off Brazilian, and Spaniard (through an interpreter) disparaged Swiss... The eventual design, endorsed by a group of three, was remarkable for its extensive use of conflicting primary forms, and was fittingly hailed throughout the world as a true example of international cooperation. (p. 122)

Such then the origins of the glass structure pointed out to tourists boat-tripping round Manhattan island or led in groups around its imposing halls. The inner vistas may be discovered in Shirley Hazzard's more intimate review. Up and down lifts and escalators she leads us from the spacious three-windowed offices of the Important on some 30th. floor (the 38th. being reserved for the Secretary-General himself) to the windowless gloom of inner areas where the more numerous but Less Important toil. Grey walls, grey rubber floors, offices with their accumulations of dust-covered papers yellowing on radiator covers, here and there small personal effects struggling to give some sort of identity to the uniform scene. All this is conveyed in tiny, swift strokes as she sketches her scene; pausing now and then to point out some architectural quirk, as, for example a ladies room which through some oversight has been supplied with an inordinate share of windows, this dangerous encouragement to linger on the part of typists being subtly subdued by the instalation of a fluorescent tube over the mirror, dispensing «a light so ghastly that it was rumoured to have been systematically chosen as a result of a time-and-motion study.» Elsewhere our attention is drawn to the adjustable heating arrangements «so that in all the rooms of the Organization its international character was manifest in temperatures that ranged from nostalgic approximations of the North Sea to torrid renderings of conditions along the Zambesi.»

While such details are not without importance in the smooth running of international affairs, the more significant is the human element, which to the outsider would seem to comprise a fascinating, colourful medley of interesting people from all over the world. We are soon disillusioned on this count.

The Organization had bred, out of a staff recruited from its hundred member nations, a peculiarly anonymous variety of public officials, of recognizable aspect and manner. It is a type to be seen to this very day, anxiously carrying a full briefcase or

fumbling for a *laisser-passer* in airports throughout the world. In tribute to the levelling powers of Organization life, it may be said that a staff member wearing a sari or *kente* was as recognizable as one in a dark suit, and that the face below the fez was as nervously, as conscientiously Organization as that beneath the Borsalino. (pp. 15-16)

In such a unifying ambience there is obviously little room for the individualist, the man or woman of originality, imagination or humour. As the perfect example of a misfit we are asked to consider the case of Algie Wyatt, an intelligent, eccentric and humorous polyglott, employed as a translator and consequently bound to the dreary task of rendering records, recommendations and reports «not all noted for economy or felicity of phrase» into intelligible and readable prose. His keen awareness of the jargon and double-talk circulating round the building is obviously misguided. «To Algie it seemed that he was constantly being asked to take leave of those senses of humour, proportion and the ridiculous that he had carefully nurtured and refined throughout his lifetime.» All this, together with untidy and unpunctual habits mark him out as a mistake in that context.

It was known how Algie came to apply to the Organization; still less how the Organization came to admit him. (It was said that his dossier had become confused with that of an eligible Malayan named Wai-lat, whose application had been unaccountably rejected.) (p. 15)

Among other anti-organizational habits, Algie is a great collector of what he describes as *Contradictions in terms*, those neat phrases that roll so easily off administrative tongues and typewriters and sedate the public into thinking that all's well with the world. Soul of efficiency, competent authorities, military intelligence or Bankers Trust are some of Algie's collected gems which are hardly out of place in an institution that includes a Department for the Less Technically Oriented or for the Forceful Implantation of Peace Treaties. When Algie's Permanent Contract comes up for review, it is not renewed. Permanence, at the Organization, is reviewed in blocks of five years. Another Contradiction in terms? Urged by a friend to appeal against his expulsion, he replies: «No thanks old boy, really. Fact is I'm not suited to it here, and from that point view these chaps are right. You tell me to get inside their minds —but if I did I might never find my way out again». Thus Algie escapes to end his days in the south of Spain, mourned only by one of his fellow translators who remains in the cage.

Algie's last letter to Lidia was written only a few days before he died, but reached her some weeks later, as he had neglected to mark it 'Correo Aéreo'. In this letter he reported the discovery of several new contradictions in terms and mentioned, among other things, that Piero della Francesca died on the same day that Columbus discovered America, and that there is in Mexico a rat poison called The Last Supper. Such information is hard to come by these days; now that Algie was gone, Lidia could not readily think of another source. (p. 32)

In *Defeat of an Ideal*, Shirley Hazzard writes: «Courage is required not so much to be 'different' within the recognized spectrum of disorder, as to be singular and to set oneself intelligently apart'. And in *People in Glass Houses* we read: «There was no room for personalities, and... its hope for survival lay, like that of all organizations, in the subordination of individual gifts to general procedures.»

Who then are the survivors? With quick, sure touches, Shirley Hazzard sketches little portraits of a variety of grey people, grey to match the office decoration, people who have been swallowed up by the machine and hang on in the vague hope of promotion or at least a pension. Some are befuddled in the orgy of officialese, such as the complaisant Mr. Bekkus of the Appointments and Terminations Board who «made a point of saying locate instead of find, utilize instead of use, and never lost an opportunity to indicate or communicate; and would slip in a basically when he felt unsure of his ground.» Or again the unfortunate Swoboda, a D.P. washed up from the European catastrophe of World War II, «not a brilliant man. He was a man of what used to be known as average and is now known as above-average intelligence.» In spite of years of faithful service to the organization Swoboda is the victim of a system denounced by Shirley Hazzard in *Defeat of an Ideal* where the lower orders of the Organization are 'frozen at their posts, like Pompeian relics'.

A form in the file had accordingly notified Mr. Rodriguez that Swoboda was punctual and in good health, that he upheld the aims of the Organization, and that his output was high. The form was composed as a questionnaire, and against each question a series of boxes invited the appropriate tick —such methods as these having been painstakingly devised in order to avoid anything resembling a personal opinion. Since, in this modern world of incomparables, a tick in anything less than the topmost box for each item would have been highly damaging to a staff member, Rodriguez-O'Hearn also learnt —and expected to learn— from the file that Swoboda was of ineffable good humour, that his initiative was unremitting, his imagination inexhaustible and his judgement invariably sound. Had the file contained a more reasonable estimate of Swoboda's capabilities or suggested the slightest singularity, the implication would have been such that neither Rodriguez-O'Hearn nor any other Organization official would have felt justified in accepting him. (p. 78)

The United Nations Organization is said to print over half a billion pages of documents annually and according to a UN press release «laid end to end, these would stretch nearly 100,000 miles, or four times around the Earth at the Equator.» As we learn in *Defeat of an Ideal*, the U.N. holds about seven thousand major meetings, annually, all replete with working papers, proposals, counter proposals, records and reports. In 1970, Canada's Lester Pearson spoke of the Organization as «drowning in its own words and suffocating in its own documents»⁷ and we cannot suppose that this avalanche has in any way lessened since then. Survival, of course, requires a judicious use of the waste-paper basket, but for the conscientious hoarder, things will get out of hand and nightmarish as is the case of the Japanese Nagashima, snowed under with 'innumerable unmemorable documents'.

The false docket —such a strange name, like some treacherous Dutchman— that Ismet wanted was there, he knew, must be there, but he would never find it. He would lift them all, examine each title, his fingers would become frantic, his palms moist, but he would not find it. This had happened so often now that he sometimes did not look at all. The papers had ceased to be —had perhaps never been— quite real to him. If he actually believed in the existence of the file, then he might find it. (p. 117)

Some do indeed manage to keep on top of things, such as the smooth and elegant Olaf Jaspersen whose out-tray is always more loaded than the in. «From the first he had been given important responsibilities which he handled with efficiency and charm». But over the years something grave happens to Jaspersen. He falls in love with the Organization.

During his early years on the staff, he had maintained his outside interests, his social pleasures —the books he read for nothing but enjoyment, the conversations he had that bore no apparent relation to his Organization duties. This state of affairs had flagged, diminished, then altogether ceased to be the case. He was still an able man, but his concept of ability had been coloured by Organization requirements; he found it harder to believe in the existence of abilities that did not directly contribute to the aim of the Organization. (p. 22)

So far the members of the Organization we have considered have belonged to the relatively Lower Orders, but what of those near the top? These will be appointed for considerations that have nothing to do with questionnaires, slots and boxes but rather as a matter of international expediency. In *Defeat of an Ideal* we learn of «some who might have been recruited as minor officials arrived in time to fill a geographical need... and

were whizzed to the top —where, it need hardly be said, they clung on for dear life.» We also learn how the nations «appealed to for recruits to this new legion,... seldom sent their best (and sometimes their worst —just as the United Nations itself was later, on occasion to send its own incompetents out on field missions to be rid of them.» «The accidents of politics and geography» also provide the Organization with some of its higher officials. Such is the case, amusingly presented to us in *People in Glass Houses*, of Mr. Achilles Pylos, a former civil servant employed in a ministry in Athens, with no Organizational connexions and the merest smattering in economics.

The matter was in fact a simple one. When the Organization's Governing Body created a department to aid retarded nations, the question of a chief for that department arose. He must be a national of a country not too contrastingly prosperous, nor conspicuously delinquent, with an acceptable past, a decent, uncomfortable present, and a reasonably predictable future. (p. 88)

A man of middle years and middle brow is sought and after rejecting 'one or two over-qualified who would have caused trouble', the field is narrowed. «At last the word went round. 'They're trying to dig up a Greek.' Some weeks of archaeological jokes and official indecisions were followed by the announcement of Pylos' appointment. Thus Achilles Pylos finds himself in a spacious three-windowed office with conference room attached, on the 30th. floor of the Glass House still a little dazed and wondering «what particular quality of his had struck the Organizational hierarchy.»

Gradually Mr. Pylos' new department takes shape as DALTO —the Department of Aid to the Less Technically Oriented, and he settles in to form a circle of acquaintances. «Although exalted in Organizational rank, they were not remarkable men. First-class minds being interested in the truth, tend to select other first-class minds as companions. Second-class minds, on the other hand, being interested in themselves, will select third-class comrades in order to maintain an illusion of superiority.» After some time in his new exalted position, Mr. Pylos develops «a posture that had always been latent with him —an excessively upright posture verging on a strut. He walked as if he were bending backwards.»

The work of DALTO «to induce backward nations to come forward» meets with some success. «Since its inception a number of hitherto reticent countries had become very forward indeed.» But Pylos is not altogether happy about its activities. Looking at the fully oriented, more particularly from a vantage point in the USA, he wonders if «this was a state of mind one sought to purvey to the less privileged». «About this development process there appeared to be no half-measures: once a

country had admitted its backwardness, it could hope for no quarter in the matter of improvement. It could not accept a box of pills without accepting, in principle, an atomic reactor. Progress was a draught that must be drained to the last bitter drop.» Such scruples no doubt do attack those in power from time to time, but, as in the case of Pylos, they tend to get turned aside. «Pylos was intent on staying on the top of things, not getting to the bottom of them.» Finally he ends up with the same sort of hope that generally disperses misgivings which is to trust «that the backward nations, once technically oriented, would make some happier use of this condition than their mentors.»

Regarding the V.I.P.s who tour the world to investigate its ills, one is often led to wonder how much they do, in fact, see and how much they can, indeed, understand of what they see. In the case of Pylos we find him «obliged to participate in what were called far-reaching decisions concerning countries of whose language he was ignorant, whose customs he had never studied, whose religion was a puzzle to him, whose politics a labyrinth, whose history a mystery.» Travelling about in limousines, staying in important hotels he remains always at one remove from the situation. «Sometimes he consoled himself with the simple fact that he... was aware of such inconsistencies. This seemed to help somewhat.»

DALTO, at a lower level, does, of course, include experts who get down to the realities of the Third World in specific field work. In one chapter Shirley Hazzard offers us the picture of two such experts coming to the Glass House to report on their missions. Flinders, the agricultural conservationist who has for two years been toiling to plant trees in North Africa, is ill at ease in the presence of an Organizational Board of fifteen. He has dutifully been sending in his Quarterly Reports on Performance in the Field, an expression which allows him «to fancy himself capering in a meadow», but now faced with a stern request for a final report, in six copies, on the banks of the East river in New York, he finds his effort strangely diminished, his young trees struggling to take root on an arid hillside, somehow insignificant and even irrelevant.

Quite other is the reception of the other expert Edrich, back from a Civic Coordination Programme whose object is «to tap the dynamics of social change in terms of local aspirations for progress». Edrich speaks the language of «ends and trends, of agenda and addenda». His report is submitted, in six copies, and the final one «will shortly be available under the document symbol E dash DALTO 604 slash two». Edrich is at ease in that public institution «so liberally studded with the many-faceted gems of the sociological lexicon.» And thus we come to the root of the evil, the abysmal gulf dividing all Organizations, however altruistic their ideals, from the true end and purpose of their existence.

In the brief space of 159 pages, Shirley Hazzard summed up the essence of the Glass House, this Glass House in New York, or any other of

the Glass Houses now proliferating around the world. Here it is with its petty human frailties struggling with noble aims. The drab monotony of the daily routine shaken momentarily out of its apathy with documents marked RUSH or HASTE —like a Bloody Battle of Hastings, as an Australian inmate remarks— that «nothing makes a more fanatical official than a Latin. Organization is alien to them, but once they get the taste for it they take to it like drink. They claim to be impulsive, but they're the most bureaucratic of all, whatever they may say.» Well, yes, it gives us food for thought...

People in Glass Houses is, as we said at the outwards, a slight book, but throughout its pages we are aware of a keen intelligence at work, a writer with an exceptional sense of language, with a good eye for jargon or the absurdities of so many of our commonly used idiomatic expressions, while her images are often apt and unusual as, for example, in this description of the delightful Algje:

He would then let himself down, first bulging outwards like a gutted building, then folding in the middle before collapsing into his grey Organization chair. For a while he would sit there, speechless and crimson-faced and heaving like a gong-tormented sea. (p. 15)

Or we may remember the little Indian lady Miss Shamsee who has remained too long in the unpropitious ambience of Manhattan and the Organization and is like «a resort town in bad weather.» Or again the Englishman Glendenning whose turned up mouth and eyebrows «gave him a look of being between inverted commas.»

Well, in the end, it is only a light-hearted smack at what, after all, is a serious institution, trying to do something in a most unsatisfactory world. Was it fair to throw stones? There is much truth in Shirley Hazzard's criticisms, laid more harshly in *Defeat of an Ideal*. «Lofty intentions have not in every case produced lofty responses.» «Bureaucracy is a circle no one can leave». «The present Organization is a veritable haystack of last straws, without resilience for the unexpected.» «People show panic at being ruled by intelligent persons». These are some of her larger stones together with a final boulder:

«As long as they keep talking» is the habitual public reproof to any expressed wish for a less effectual United Nations. The United Nations has kept talking through wars, civil strife, military aggression, religious persecution, tidal waves, starvation, and millions of violent deaths. It has not evolved a recognized machinery of mediation, or even coordinating services for the prompt and practiced alleviation of natural disasters in the world...

We can scarcely deny it all. But in the end we cannot help thinking that there is something to be said for what Connor Cruise O'Brien described as «a controlled letting off steam». «I believe», he writes, «the world would be a significantly more dangerous place than it is now if the United Nations did not exist.»⁷

Notes

1. *Markings*. The posthumously published journal of Dag Hammarskjöld. N.Y., translated from the Swedish *Väg Märken*. 1964.
2. Professor Gustaf Aulén. Quoted in *Defeat of an Ideal*, p. 148.
3. Kurt Waldheim's *In the Eye of the Storm*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson. 1985. Reviewed in T.L.S. by Connor Cruise O'Brien. 17-1-86.
4. *Defeat of an Ideal*. Shirley Hazzard. Little, Brown and Co. Boston-Toronto. 1973.
5. *People in Glass Houses*. Shirley Hazzard. Macmillan. 1967. Published Penguin Books 1970 and reprinted 1983.
6. *The Bay of Noon*. Shirley Hazzard. Macmillan 1970. Published Penguin Books 1973 and reprinted 1982.
7. *The Transit of Venus*. Shirley Hazzard. Macmillan. 1980. Penguin Books 1983.
7. Lester Pearson in the *New York Times*. 26 May, 1970. Quoted in *Defeat of an Ideal*, p. 190.