editorial

THE LOSS OF ZED

TAKE CANADIAN CHILDREN to a parade these days and watch to see which clowns delight them: the cheers go up when Ronald McDonald and the Great Root Bear pass by. Or Big Bird and Oscar. The children, of course, are showing their customary discernment, however much we might deplore this further evidence of the Americanization of their imaginations. For the simple fact is that Big Bird and Ronald McDonald, through television and corporate industrial expansion, have become part of their daily Canadian lives, culture symbols — and some of the liveliest culture symbols at that — by which they gauge some of the subtler values of their society: what's funny, what's friendly, what's just.

There have been some *adaptations* of American television material to the Canadian scene, of course, and Canadian writers are the verbal wits behind much American television comedy. But there is little point in asserting as a kind of cultural talisman that Walt Disney's father was Canadian-born; and it can only be perceived as ironic that *Superman* and The Hardy Boys books were begun by Canadians. Transformed, particularly by television, they and Disney Enterprises have become voices of United States values. The myth of the perfect society, the cult of the hero, confrontative sports metaphors, and the implicit assumption that crises are resolved by violence are the stuff of American pop culture. *Star Wars* is nothing so much as an interstellar Western in which Good is preserved by a galactic Marine Corps. Hence these images are tangible evidence of American ways of thinking about America. They fascinate Canadians. Mordecai Richler makes the point in *Hunting Tigers Under Glass* that the flamboyance of 1940's American comic books sustained the romantic imaginations of Canadian youths of a quite different generation. But there is a difference between reading for the vicarious thrills that heroic mythologies provide, and accepting another culture's rituals as local truth. A Canadian businessman, trying in a CBC radio inter-

view recently to speak of *one-to-one* relationships, spoke of *one-on-one* relationships instead. The difference between egalitarian and confrontative tactics couldn't be clearer. It is a sign of a particularly virulent cultural malaise, all the more insidious when it alters the way we speak. The moment American pop culture's *zee* replaces several generations' worth of Canadian *zeds*, things have gone too far.

The problem lies not with the children. It lies with the curious way that Canadian children have been either ignored or patronized by Canadian media. The recent surge of interest in children's writing is, therefore, despite the unevenness of the writing itself, welcome. Magazines with the vigour of *Owl* and *Canadian Children's Magazine*, publications with the quality of design that May Cutler's Tundra Books have, lyrics with the sprightliness of *Alligator Pie* and stories with common sense and complex syntax: these are signs of intelligent concern for children. And in order to gauge further the merits and implications of these works, *Canadian Literature* will devote a future issue to more extended commentary on writing for children. For the moment, there are other ramifications of the concern for children's publishing and cultural survival which warrant attention.

We evaluate works designed for a children's market in various ways: seeking the quality of imagination, the quality of mind, the quality of design that appears in the work — but always quality. That works of quality have intrinsic merit ought to be axiomatic. We appreciate *Peter Pan*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Le Petit Prince*, *Pinocchio*, and *Midnite*, whatever their cultural background. But we cannot, while making this assertion, lose sight of the twentieth century. Children's classics are no longer presented solely in book form, and film — the chief optional form — has a singular force. We underestimate its impact at our own cost. We cannot afford, therefore, to ignore the degree to which film exposes children, intentionally or not, to cultural propaganda, or the extent to which the presence of such "propaganda" is actually intensified by the absence of a cultural alternative. Here we come to a key issue: it is by relaxing in the global "alternative" which we represent by the very fact that we exist, that we communicate to another generation the kinetic values which as Canadians we have come to share. We are our own model, and we are still building it. To stop now, and to accept American, French, English or any other systems as our model, is both culturally suicidal and plain downright unimaginative. There is plenty of imagination in Canada, but the curious fact is that it takes a lot of effort to relax.

Television programming is a case in point. Faced with a dearth of money, a dearth of inventiveness, or a combination of the two, both major networks — CBC and CTV — have bought programmes from United States networks rather than exercise the constant effort to develop sprightly programmes themselves. "Popular" programming is somehow equated with bad taste, with offensive results. And Canadian *children's* programming has too often suffered from an absence of personality, an absence of narrative, an absence of movement. It's talky, static,

and — in contrast to documentary programming — seems to strive to be bland; its struggle to avoid offending offends even more. Often when efforts are made to be dynamic, problems still ensue, for in these cases it is an imitation American programme that has been designed. Even many of the Glowing Tributes to Canada to which the CBC annually gives birth are cast in the American mould — ad agency hoopla, which celebrates Canada in the same way as Americans celebrate *their* world — thereby implicitly apologizing for the fact that Canadian society is different, transforming it by media methodology into a second-rate State. Why should we wonder then that the Great Root Bear is becoming a culture symbol for the young? If we don't care enough to represent ourselves *in our own terms* — which are neither provincial nor restrictive, just ours: capable of producing an "international" classic as much as anyone else's terms are — then we will get the colonial mediocrity we invite. Other Canadian generations had radio experiences to share with each other; today's Canadian children, unless there are changes soon in the direction of programming, will as adults be more likely to be sharing a vision of McDonaldland, to have learned their dialect from *Sesame*'s New York *Street*, to have lost at least for a generation the fundamental ability to recognize themselves.

The issue is not one of *defining* identity — that's (in the way Canadians use the term) "American." It's one of resisting definition. It's not therefore a matter of denying children access to *Sesame Street* or any other American programme; it's one of ensuring that the culture represented by American programmes does not replace everything else in order to become Canadian children's sole model of private behaviour and social possibility.

Two recent books provide an indirect commentary on this dichotomy. The first is Dennis Lee's new collection of verses, called *Garbage Delight* (M & S, $6.95); the title poem particularly, and a squib called "The Big Molice Pan and the Bertie Dumb," are delightful, a welcome addition to the inventive maze of literary nonsense. But it is disappointing to find Lee imitating "received" children's verses (whether Dr. Seuss' or A. A. Milne's) so often. The echoes sound hollow. The second book, designed to entertain more adults than children, is Eric Nicol's latest, called *Canada Cancelled Because of Lack of Interest* (Hurtig, $8.95). It is a set of characteristically ironic reflections on Canadian life, sometimes trenchant and sometimes unhappily self-indulgent; but under all its flippancy it is troubled by this same concern for cultural drift. One of Peter Whalley's illustrations, in a chapter on The Arts, suggests one of the reasons why this drift exists. It shows, simply, a figure contemplating its own navel; the navel, however, is creased in the shape of the CBC's current logo. The cartoon epitomizes the self-preoccupation which inhibits relaxed self-expression, whether in television programming or in literature, and which provides a fertile environment for imitation to flourish in.

Self-assurance does not spring full-blown in minds assailed by self-doubt; it grows when people recognize that they don't have to imitate others in order to be good at being themselves. They have instead to develop the strengths that they themselves value. If we ensure that every generation has the chance to appreciate Canadian local truths, to have ready access to books and magazines and television programmes, *both in English and in French* — works that let their Canadian perspectives come naturally and don't artificially force them — then we are setting about actually encouraging the future in which tacitly we have been placing our faith. Apologies inhibit the imagination. We have to turn the imagination on again, in our children and in ourselves, if we want to reinherit our own home.

W.H.N.

AMONG WOMEN ONLY

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

The star stings your memory
and her step caresses
the gravel road again.

The wind decides
where the seeds fall
and if the nests
are to go
before the leaves.

The star might already be dead;
what pollen can give birth
to an alternative past?

Could poetry put a fence
around a Provençal garden
and marry the olive tree
to the unreal woman?