editorial

THE FRONTIERS OF LITERATURE

THE FRONTIERS of literature have always been fluid. In a time of self-conscious intermedial miscegenation we are inclined to think our age unique. In fact, the only difference lies in the expansiveness of our techniques. Essentially, writers have always been interested in the activities of painters and musicians, and have always wished to have some part of them, and vice-versa. Similarly there has always been that borderland in which, in every generation, the art of literature had blended into those varieties of craftsmanship by which writers have earned their subsistence through serving the channels of information and propaganda which only in very recent years have earned the right to call themselves mass media.

The links between the writer and the visual artist have always been much closer than the advocates of "pure" or abstract painting have been willing to admit. Until the late nineteenth century nobody seriously doubted that the aim of painting was to illuminate themes that were identical with those of poetry or fiction. William Blake and William Hazlitt were only the precursors in the early nineteenth century of a movement which reached its height among pre-Raphaelites like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, who regarded painting and poetry as almost interchangeable ways of expressing right sentiment, and which achieved a second peak among the Surrealists, whose paintings always had literary implications and whose poems rarely lacked visual suggestiveness. In our day of the early 1970s the conceptual artists on the visual side of the frontier and the concrete poets on the literary side have come very near to a hybridization of their complementary tendencies.

In music the links are subtler, but not less complex. There is a natural musical element in all poetry — developed to a pathological extreme in writers like Swinburne and Victor Hugo — and even in certain rhythmic kinds of prose. From

Yeats chanting his poems like mantras, to the musician setting them as songs, lies no great distance. From the earliest days of oral literature, the composition of verses to be sung has always been a function of the poet; music was a part of early drama, and for many centuries the masque has been a form mingling poetry, music, dance and dramatic action. With Monteverdi the masque developed into opera. For generations thereafter the provision of verses for operas was the work of mere literary hacks, but in the eighteenth century Lorenzo da Ponte, with his inimitable scripts for *Le Nozze de Figaro* and *Così fan Tutte*, raised the writing of libretti to an art, and in recent years many writers of standing have turned to writing for opera, including, in Canada, James Reaney, Mavor Moore and George Woodcock.

The newspaper apprenticeship of novelists is in no way new: indeed, if our age differs substantially from past generations, it is in providing *less* of a position in journalism for the serious writer. Perhaps our dailies are staffed by mute, inglorious Hemingways, but there is little evidence to support the assumption in the novels that are occasionally produced by reporters or columnists. In general, radio, television, and, to a lesser degree, film, have taken the place of newspapers and magazines as sources of income for writers and as means by which they can expand their artistic capabilities. Radio drama, now a literary form doubly vanished because of the decline of the medium and also because of the failure to publish the best of the scripts that yearly gather dust in the unresearched archives of the CBC, extended significantly in its day the non-visual potentialities of drama and produced a new kind of theatre for voices, while, if television has been disappointing in its encouragement of literary or quasi-literary experimentation, the same is not true of the cinema.

The scope of the collection of writings on the frontiers of literature which forms the present issue of *Canadian Literature* is necessarily limited by space, and there are aspects of the field which have hardly been touched — such as opera writing (though in past issues of *Canadian Literature* — Nos. 12 and 41 — James Reaney has written fascinatingly on the links between writer, musician and audience). Other aspects of the drama and its changing relation to writing are documented by Mavor Moore, while five members and former members of the Film Board staff chart the present fragile relationship between literature and the cinematic arts. As for the daily press, it is only in the review columns that any pretensions to literary excellence survives, and Phyllis Grosskurth, writing as a professional critic, throws doubt on the prospect of even that relationship retaining much significance. In general summary of the whole question of "Lit-

erature and the Mass Media", Patrick Lyndon establishes an important criterion when he defines literature as "what is written to last, with a serious purpose, and involving an imaginative re-ordering."

It is because, by and large, we accept this definition, that we have ignored some of the more ephemeral forms of intermedial relationships. A mere happening, amusing though it may be, is not by any definition literature or even related to literature. On the other hand, the work of concrete poets, on the borderland between the literary and the visual, has to be taken seriously, as Mike Doyle and Peter Stevens have done. Peter Stevens advances more widely, to survey writing from the point of view of the painter who seeks by literary means to expand the understanding of his art, and Audrey Thomas comes towards the same point from the other side, considering the writer as critic and appreciator of the visual arts; their essays overlap a little, but that is both inevitable and fruitful. We are brought nearer to the sources of creation by the feature prepared by P. K. Page; at once a fine poet and a fine painter, she demonstrates in prose, verse and graphic art how her various forms of expression have so admirably mingled.

There is a further aspect of the expanding frontiers of literature which involves a technological development that has been going on for many years. Print — as was pointed out long before McLuhan — modified literature and created new genres. So, in their ways, did radio, television and film, but we should not exaggerate their effects, since the ultimate aims of literature and the mass media are different, and new techniques are often means to old ends. One can see this by assessing the effect of the new tools which the writer has acquired over the past fifty years — typewriters, tape-recorders, photo-copying devices. They have all eased his task, and made quantitative changes in literary production theoretically possible, but the limitations of the brain's power to create indefinitely has meant that writers in the electronic age have done little better in terms of output than such mass-producers by pen and ink as Balzac and Ballantyne. But in terms of literary studies — of providing the *material* for more exact scholarship and more insightful criticism — it does seem, from the evidence presented in Sandra Djwa's convincing article — that the computer can, if it does nothing else, unseat some of the glibber and more superficial of literary judgments and prompt critics to work with greater care.

The frontiers of literature: by the geography of the human mind they touch on every province of consciousness, and there is always infiltration across the borders. Pure literature — that sterile ideal — can never in fact be achieved.