THE CANADIAN CRITIC: IS HE NECESSARY?

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ABOUT ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, England's leading literary critic, Matthew Arnold, declared that good criticism was more important than second-rate literature. He was speaking with particular relevance to his own time. The great Romantic movement which Arnold described as "abortive" had petered out with the early deaths of Byron, Shelley and Keats. Coleridge had faded away and Wordsworth, for many years before his death in 1850, had become a conservative institution. Arnold, profoundly convinced that he was living in a creative vacuum, was gloomily contemptuous of the pallid, pessimistic literature of his own day — including his own. Consequently, he looked to criticism to re-establish standards, to distinguish the excellent from the second-rate, and to act generally as a stimulus to a fresh period of creativity.

Time, of course, has proved him obtuse in his failure to recognize the genius of, say, Dickens or the Brontës or Browning. But let us not condemn him too harshly, since he was a man with a real passion for literature in contrast to some critics, past and present, who make one wonder if they nourish a pathological distaste for writing or art or music or the theatre. For the moment, then, let us put aside the fact that many of Arnold's judgments have not accorded with those of posterity and turn to the reasons for his particular attitude at a particular moment in history. In the middle of the nineteenth century English readers could feel proudly confident that they possessed a long tradition of literary masterpieces. (However, it is possibly significant that the Victorians were still uneasily hesitant about their immediate predecessors, the Romantics, particularly in view of the poets' embarrassingly unconventional lives. When Keats' love letters to Fanny Brawne were published posthumously in 1848, Arnold dismissed them superciliously as "the love letters of a surgeon's apothecary").

But the point to be grasped is that a nineteenth-century English critic felt secure in measuring contemporary works against the achievement of the past.

Arnold's particular method of evaluation was the application of what he called "touchstones". When confronted with a new and uncategorized work, he would compare it, for example, with the tone of Hamlet's dying speech to Horatio:

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

The fallacy inherent in this rather simplistic approach is that one can be highly selective in the quality of the lines one chooses to use as "touchstones". It ignores the fact that two authors might be aiming for entirely different effects. This particular passage happens to be deeply moving but there are others whose authors might cringe to hear them repeated. Wordsworth was also one of Arnold's favourite poets but he had absent-minded lapses and Arnold would never have used these immortal lines as "touchstones":

> This is a work of waste and ruin;
> Consider, Charles, what you are doing.

Nevertheless, there was a great storehouse of literature which was as familiar to Arnold as his own name and which had incescapably moulded his attitudes, and this security gave him an assurance, a sense of confidence even when he was blandly wrong. Sometimes it even helped him to make judicious evaluations.

One often hears the story about the president of Harvard University who, when asked how long it takes to make a great university, replied, "Three hundred years". This same observation might be applied to the creation of a great literary tradition. And that is precisely what we lack in this country. As a result it seems to me that the outstanding quality of the average Canadian reviewer might be described as failure of nerve. When confronted with the spanking new literature of his own country, he tends to be timorous, hesitant, or evasive; or, at the opposite extreme, he becomes truculent, contemptuous, or vitriolic. If we can count on him for any consistency, it is an almost undeviating lack of enthusiasm for anything Canadian. Why, heavens, it might stamp him as being chauvinistic or provincial! This is just a single instance of our genius — for this is what it almost amounts to — for demeaning ourselves, a manifestation of our infinitely boring inferiority complex. The contemptible attitude of a great many Canadians to one of our most distinguished original thinkers, Marshall McLuhan, is a case in point. Morley Callaghan is particularly bitter about his treatment by

Canadian critics. I do not exempt myself from this syndrome. I do not know how many books I have reviewed — certainly in the hundreds — but only a small percentage of them have been written by Canadian authors. One obvious reason for this omission is that a great many more books are written by Americans and by Europeans. And let's face it, a great many more important books that seem to interest the rest of the world. But I cannot evade my responsibility as easily as all that. On the whole — mea culpa — but I do not enjoy reviewing Canadian books as a general rule. I, too, suffer from the syndrome common to the average Canadian reviewer — I honestly do not believe many good Canadian books are written, and when reviewing them, I find myself gripped by some inhibiting force. I rather suspect that many of the writers themselves feel somewhat inhibited creatively here. Certainly some of them have told me that they seem to gain creative confidence when they are working thousands of miles from Canada.

Why this sense of inhibition? Canada may be a large country geographically but her literary community is very small indeed. We all tend to know each other intimately or at least to be friends of friends. And news travels fast among this incestuous group. For example, a few years ago I reviewed Margaret Lawrence's *A Jest of God* for the *Globe and Mail.* Even though I usually adhere to a policy of not reviewing books by personal friends, I agreed to take this one on because I had been so enthusiastic about her previous novel, *The Stone Angel.* I found myself greatly disappointed in *A Jest of God* and as a result I suffered misery writing that review. I even toyed with the idea of sending the book back to the literary editor and asking him to find a more "objective" reviewer, but that alternative was rejected by my Puritan conscience. The review itself was not a vitriolic piece. I simply stated that after the great excitement I had experienced while reading *The Stone Angel,* I felt sadly let down by *A Jest of God.* Mrs. Lawrence is a very generous-spirited person, and she has never conveyed to me that she felt any resentment towards what I believe she realised was an honest opinion. However, with her publisher it was a different matter. A few days after the review appeared I ran into him at a party where he proceeded to attack me in highly emotional terms. Is it understandable that I have shied away from reviewing Canadian books ever since then? *A Jest of God* went on to become the very successful film, *Rachel, Rachel,* but I have not changed my opinion.

I am not going so far as to claim that all my criticism has been, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, sweetness and light. I do recall the great pleasure I felt in the praise I lavished on Gabrielle Roy's *The Road Past Altamont.* But I also remember with a certain grim satisfaction the hatchet jobs I did on Graeme Gib-

son's *Five Legs* or Scott Symons' *Place d'Armes*, two novels which happen to have been written by Canadians but, in my opinion, would have been deplorable in any language. I may be completely wrong about this — as I may have been about *A Jest of God* (a book infinitely superior to the two I have just mentioned) for one cannot evade the fact that ultimately criticism is based on subjective reaction.

At the risk of being tarred and feathered, then, I do not believe that Canadian writing at this point is either extensive or impressive. Perhaps it never will be. There are countries, old countries, which have not developed a literature which has gained an international reputation. And, as American influence gains a strangulating hold on so-called Canadian culture, my pessimism, I admit, increases. This does not mean that I have lost faith in all Canadian writers. There are some whom I consider very fine indeed. But — and here I seem to be contradicting my earlier point — at this rather sensitive moment in our history I detect a tendency to bestow on some writers the most absurd attention where in more prolific countries they would simply be lost in the shuffle.

Well, what is one to do in this situation? Throw up one's hands in utter despair? My answer is a qualified optimism. I have made it clear that I am opposed to a myopic chauvinism; and I am equally hostile to a petty provincialism whose instinctive reaction is to deplore anything Canadian. A Canadian reviewer should be aware of what is being written in Canada and he should bring it to the attention of the Canadian public. He can also do what he may to offer help to promising young writers by reading their manuscripts, or by recommending their work to publishers. (Incidentally, most of us still hold the romantic notion that the novel is the most creative form of writing. I couldn't begin to tell you the number of starry-eyed students who have told me that they were writing "a novel". One of my own favourite Canadian books is Peter Newman's *The Distemper of Our Times*. Perhaps our literary future lies in non-fictional writing).

But the outlook for responsible, informed reviewing in Canada is very discouraging. *Tamarack Review*, *The Canadian Forum* and *Saturday Night* are in perpetual financial difficulties. They have been held together by a noble band of few active members and they deserve the highest commendation. But what I find absolutely deplorable in this country is the book review pages in our newspapers. When I arrived back in Canada five years ago after living for some years in England, I felt an indescribable sense of loss when our dreary Sundays could not even be cheered by spreading the weekly papers on the floor and spending hours

reading through the arts sections. In England, literature, like the other arts, is considered news.

As far as Toronto is concerned, the situation has not improved in the slightest in those five years. On Saturday the *Globe and Mail* continues to run a fine section on books in its magazine supplement, an arrangement which has aroused a certain amount of criticism from some quarters. It is organized by a highly competent, full-time literary editor, William French, who knows what is going on in the literary world and has the imagination and judgment to compile a balanced group of reviews. In 1965 I was very pleased when he asked me to contribute a review every three or four weeks, which is the *Globe and Mail*'s policy with reviewers. This pleasant arrangement continued for two years; we parted amicably when I moved over to the Toronto *Daily Star* to write a weekly review for two years; and I am happy to return to his fold once more.

The *Telegram*'s book page is run by Barry Callaghan largely as a forum for Barry Callaghan who generally writes one long review, eked out by a series of mini-reviews, something like a quick shopping guide. But the situation at the Toronto *Star* was the one that I found even more depressing. Here was a newspaper with the largest circulation in Canada, yet on Saturday it ran what purported to be a page devoted to reviewing books, utterly dull in format, duller still to read. The only bright spot was Robert Fulford whose daily column was often devoted to an urbane, witty, well-informed discussion of a current book.

Mr. Fulford was depressed about this situation too. Two years ago he persuaded the *Star*'s management to do something about it. The *Star*'s policy was against appointing a full-time literary editor, so Fulford's job was virtually to act in this capacity in addition to writing his daily column. It was a courageous thing for him to do but it was exhausting, and it is little wonder that he left a short time later to become editor of *Saturday Night*. For various reasons the others dropped away, and towards the end of my two-year stint I often felt like the weary knight of Browning's poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came".

But I still remember with mingled enthusiasm, regret, and nostalgia, the conversation we had that day with Bob Fulford when he outlined his plan for not only giving vitality to the *Star*'s book page, but for making it the best book page in Canada. His model was the *Observer* in which regular reviewers give a unique impress to a literary section. I remember Bob saying, "Why, I find Cyril Connolly interesting even when he's writing about gardening!" Bob didn't give us any sermons about objectivity of treatment or the importance of sensing what would be best sellers or beating other papers with the first review of a book. He knew

that we had developed individual styles of writing and individual prejudices. He had enough faith in us to expect us to be as impartial and perceptive as humanly possible; but he expected us to have very human reactions too. He knew we all shared a passion for books. He paid us the tacit compliment of assuming that what we wrote would be lively and interesting. And I sincerely believe it was, even for a surprisingly long period after Bob left. But it was bound to fall apart without an experienced guiding hand.

The Canadian public's attitude towards books has something of the awkward embarrassment with which it regards all the arts. I think we are still enough of a frontier nation to consider them somewhat effeminate, and our hard-headed Puritanism whispers that they are frivolous and therefore dispensable. Nor do potential readers receive from publishers, book sellers, or newspapers, much stimulation to read books. In this country it would be inconceivable to imagine anyone making a full-time living from reviewing books. Most of the reviewing is done by journalists or by academics.

Have the reviewers themselves done enough to create an enthusiasm for books? There is little opportunity for them to find a forum. Even when they do, the publicity departments of most of Toronto's publishing firms are surprisingly un-co-operative or unenterprising in supplying them with advance copies of books. But what about the reviewers themselves once they have found themselves in the happy situation of talking about a subject in which presumably they are enormously concerned? I have already suggested that some of them tend to display a lack of confidence in Canadian books. Yet this is not adequate cause for the extraordinary attitude of the Canadian public towards the critics. I cannot think of another country where such an uneasy relationship exists between critic and public. I maintain that book reviewers suffer from guilt by association with TV, drama, and music reviewers, many of whom seem to view their function as that of demolition squads. The public is not wrong in regarding many of these as venomous, self-important, and envious of those who are truly creative. They lack confidence in their responsibility as constructive forces in the community. Clearly some of them use their columns as outlets for personal aggressiveness.

This is not what Matthew Arnold had in mind when he talked about criticism as an educative function. It should, as Arnold comprehended, above all stress the importance of art in our lives. As far as Canada is concerned, Canadian literary critics can stimulate people to read books; they can make people concerned or angry enough to write letters to the paper when a favourite author is attacked; they can make us aware of what is being written in this country and how we

differ from what is being done elsewhere and in what way we may be part of an international movement. In other words, criticism can create the sort of dialogue which is so necessary to a cultural climate.

True enough, we have not a native literary tradition such as Matthew Arnold had to support him. But we have infinitely more literate readers whom we can reach. For that matter, we are not hindered by Arnold's comparative insularity. The most popular writer among college students for the past few years has been Hermann Hesse. Only by assuming that we are part of the international cultural scene can we ever hope to gain this sense of nationality—by which we mean feeling grown up and being taken seriously by the rest of the world, which we hear so much about these days.