

## 5. Criticism

*Peter Stevens*

THE FACT THAT *Canadian Literature* has flourished during the last ten years suggests that criticism in Canada has also flourished. One of the main thrusts in Canadian criticism during the last decade (and I think this has been both one of the reasons why *Canadian Literature* has survived and also one of the influences it has exerted on criticism) has been towards a description of a Canadian literary tradition, and this interest has stimulated a gathering together of writing about the main figures and their work as it is seen as shaping Canadian literature. This is evident in the appearance of the checklists of Waters and Bell and of the indexes to various small magazines of the past. The survey of our literary heritage and tradition had been made earlier, most notably by Desmond Pacey, and he found it convenient to revise and enlarge his *Creative Writing in Canada* in 1961. The same author's *Ten Canadian Poets* was reissued as a paperback in 1966. Various collections of essays have also contributed to this trend, the two edited by A. J. M. Smith, *Masks of Poetry* (1962) and *Masks of Fiction* (1961) being significant examples. The literary tradition has also been seen in a wider context in the series of lectures delivered each year at Carle-

ton University and published under the title of *Our Living Tradition*.

I suppose the biggest attempt to map and measure the growth and development of Canadian literature is the *Literary History of Canada* (1965), edited by Carl F. Klinck, including contributions from some of the best scholars and critics in Canada. However much I sympathize with the effort behind this book (and certainly it contains a great deal of valuable information), finally I find it a rather dull book. There is not much sense of excitement behind the writing and no real idea of achievements in Canadian literature permeates much of the book. It is a solid and generally well-researched collection of factual information about the development of Canadian literature, but I could have wished for more incisive critical writing in it. Perhaps the aim was to be merely descriptive but the over-all impression the reader gains, particularly in the section devoted to the twentieth century, is of a somewhat bland plateau of descriptive statement with little enthusiasm for individual authors showing through the scholarly surface, no downright zest for a living literature being communicated to the reader. There are some interesting revaluations of travel writing in Canada and of some minor

poets, and some sound critical judgments on Confederation poetry, but the greatest failure in the book is its lack of perception about modern writing and, in particular, its absence of any expression of the quality of poetry since the 1920's. The book explores many areas of our whole span of tradition and growth but the map it draws is only a faint tracing of the real topography.

In the past ten years we have also seen a broadening of the context of the study of Canadian literature in the newer magazines such as *Mosaic*, *Malahat Review* and *West Coast Review* all of which place Canadian writing and criticism in the setting of world literature. Articles by such critics as R. E. Watters, John Povey and John Matthews see certain aspects of Canadian writing in relation to the literature of other countries in the Commonwealth and there have been contributions by Canadian scholars and poets to the recently-established *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*.

A certain amount of interest in Canadian literature has been evinced outside Canada. Edmund Wilson has given us some of his thoughts in *O Canada* (1965). The Twayne University series on Canadian authors is another example of such interest, and as we come to the end of this decade, we can see our attempts to describe our literary heritage are moving into a more critical (as opposed to the *Literary History's* descriptive) phase, as three Canadian publishers have announced series on individual authors and movements. Ryerson's *Critical Views* are collections of critical reviews and articles in a more permanent format, Copp Clark are well under way with their series of critical surveys of Canadian authors, and McClelland & Stewart have just pub-

lished the first four books in their series entitled *Canadian Writers*. All in all, then, the last ten years have been very much a period of reassessment of the whole sweep of our tradition.

The other main thrust in criticism over the last ten years has been in the field of synthesis, a widening of critical response to include material from other areas of modern culture. A principal practitioner of this criticism of synthesis is Marshall McLuhan who has received world-wide recognition in the last few years and whose criticism, like Northrop Frye's, has been the subject of a collection of critical essays, *McLuhan, Hot and Cool* (1967).

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) McLuhan starts from a discussion of *King Lear* which leads him into the exposition of his general thesis about the detribalization of man as a result of the abstraction of meaning from sound in the development of the alphabet and its use in the printing press. This in turn led to specialization, bringing with it schizophrenia in man, a split between thought and action, arising from the breaking apart of the magical world of the ear and the neutral world of the eye. The extension of our senses fostered the disturbance of our senses. (It seems to me that McLuhan's view of schizophrenic man and the imbalance of sensory perception is related to some of the ideas of R. D. Laing whose views, together with those of Norman O. Brown, are beginning to loom large in this criticism of synthesis.)

This explanation of what has happened and is happening in our whole culture is expressed in a very crabby and convoluted style but McLuhan has since that time tried to popularize his ideas. *Understanding Media* (1964) is a very good description of modernism, and his concepts of

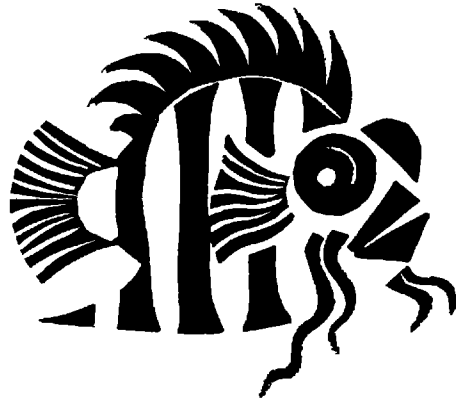
total field and our "revulsion against imposed patterns" are interesting insights into recent developments in literature. McLuhan is, in fact, a thorough-going modernist and even though he tends to avoid value judgments, he does on occasion let a kind of evaluation drop:

Our unified sensibility cavorts amidst a wide range of awareness of materials and colors which makes ours one of the greatest ages of music, poetry, painting and architecture alike.

*The Medium Is The Massage* (1967), "a collide-oscope of interfaced situations", is McLuhan's presentation of his content as a form in itself, his message as its medium. It is probably the most amenable of his books, well-suited to his penchant for categorical statements, many of which are presented with an air of invincible rightness without so much as a nod in the direction of detail to prove them. Such statements are often stimulating but just as often leave the reader baffled: for instance, to prove his assertion that TV commercials have influenced contemporary literature, he cites *In Cold Blood* as an example without any kind of an explanation.

For such a committed modernist McLuhan shows a singular blindness to certain elements in modern culture that seem to be specifically made to prove his thesis. He has never mentioned, to my knowledge, concrete poetry (surely a splendid example of form as content) and the movies of Jean-Luc Godard.

For some readers McLuhan's style is a barrier and I must confess I find something undergraduateish about his twisting of certain literary quotations to suit his purpose. His use of lines from *Romeo And Juliet* as a prediction of the effect of TV is an example of this kind of writ-



ing. His books abound in puns but in fairness to McLuhan it must be said that he appears to be trying to emulate his own concepts in this matter, for he tells us that a pun derails us from the uniform progress of typographic order and, like Arthur Koestler to a certain extent, he regards humour as a probe of our environment.

McLuhan has undertaken an analysis of the total field of modern awareness and in spite of his exasperating habits of style and argument he is a key figure in this area I have labelled the "criticism of synthesis". Perhaps the best way to come to grips with his ideas is to reverse the linear progression of his books by reading *The Medium Is The Massage* first and then moving back through *Understanding Media* to *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

Despite Irving Layton's assertion that we have no real critics (like George Steiner and Michael Hamburger) in this country, most students of literature regard Northrop Frye ("a sterile ideologue" according to Layton) as a real critic, indeed as a critic in the largest sense of the term. Perhaps "aesthetic philosopher" might be a better term. Over the last ten years Frye seems to have been attempting

to collect the variety of his comments centring around his *Anatomy of Criticism*. He published a collection of his earlier essays in his volume *Fables of Identity* (1963) and over the last six or seven years he has been applying the general thesis of his *Anatomy* to individual authors and areas. He has published books on Shakespearian tragedy and comedy, Milton and Eliot as well as on the function of criticism, the nature of the imagination, and modernism. All these books with the exception of his study of Eliot were originally oral presentations and it is for this reason that these books seem more approachable than the *Anatomy*. They are lectures in book form, lectures as vehicles to popularize his ideas about myth and the nature of literature.

Of his work devoted to individual authors I find his book on Shakespearian comedy, *A Natural Perspective* (1965), most helpful. He is very explicit on the structure of the comic world and its autonomous nature expressed through conventions, but in the later lectures in this series his argument becomes too abstruse and complicated in its paradoxes and at no time does he suggest that some things happen in comedies on the grounds of sheer dramatic expedience. He repeats the general thesis that myth in its primitive sense is an "Imaginative experience for the untrained"; that word "untrained" is uncomfortably connected in my mind with a whole world of cultural snobbery, a snobbery I suspect runs through much of *The Educated Imagination* (1963), especially in the last lecture in which he seems to present to us some rarefied ideal of "highbrowism". Popular culture for Frye means the kind of art that appeals to the primitive myths that

reside in the unconscious of all men, and he seems to have no conception of popular culture as a natural growth out of the whole life of a society, including the lower levels of the "untrained".

Although Frye makes some good generalizations about modern movements in his series of lectures published in 1967, *The Modern Century*—the self-consciousness of the modern and the way in which it "is concerned to give the impression of process rather than product", for instance—there is no real appreciation of new modes of thinking which have developed within recent years. However provocative and stimulating his generalizations are, I think that some of them are dropped into his lectures as deliberate statements to show how his ideas have kept abreast of modern developments but they only serve to emphasize, to me at least, a lack of comprehension about certain elements in modern culture. For someone who has shown a remarkable grasp of Canadian poetry earlier in his career, it is strange to find him saying in *The Educated Imagination* that Canadian writers "produce imitations of D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden". And I find meaningless his statement that certain poems are "dreamlike and witty at once, a kind of verbal blues or pensive jazz".

Perhaps it is churlish to criticize Frye on these grounds, particularly as one can sense a real urge behind his work to establish the primacy of the value of literature in our society in his application of his critical theory to such a wide range of writing. It is when he turns to the critical task itself that he shows his real insight. For me, his best work during the past ten years is the first lecture in *The Well-Tempered Critic* (1963), an attack

on sloppy expression rising to an almost Orwellian fervour. He maintains that all language exists on an oral basis and that poetry is a prime expression of that basis, a very significant statement of an important idea in modern poetics. He closes by making a plea against specialization and for real criticism, that is, for literary criticism as opposed to scholarship. It is here that I recognize Frye's genuine humility about the role of the critic, a humility that tempers the hints of snobbery in some of his other works.

Over the past decade Frye's criticism has been, in general terms, a popularization of his ideas. Recently his theory of myths and archetypes has been attacked but he has come to be seen as one of the most important modern critics, the subject himself of a collection of critical essays, *Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism* (1966), edited by Murray Krieger. Not only that. His ideas have stimulated some Canadian poetry which has developed beyond the barren academicism he is so often accused of: witness the recent work of James Reaney. And in the poetry and criticism of one of his followers, Eli Mandel, his ideas, among others, have helped to produce what I consider to be the most original aesthetic criticism during this decade in Canada.

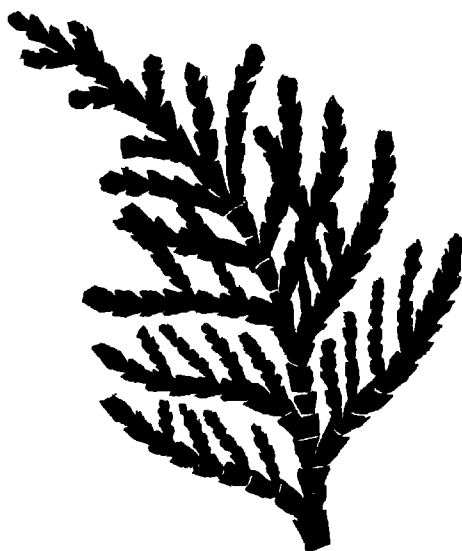
Eli Mandel's criticism can be found in one or two articles published in journals in the 1960's and in talks given for the CBC, principally in a series called *Novelty and Nostalgia* (1967) and in another series later published in 1966, *Criticism: The Silent-Speaking Words*. Like Frye, Mandel sees modern literature as being essentially about process and, like McLuhan, he makes much of the idea of instant awareness and instant obsolescence. He even connects his discussion of

these ideas to tradition by saying that contemporary literature works towards "a renewal, not a denial, of old forms". Literature in our time, according to Mandel, has gone beyond practical value; it has ventured into a world of pure experience, so that "aesthetic form confers the only value that endures". Modern literature is full of regressive images, becoming a literature that constantly calls attention to itself. Because of the growth of inter-media forms, Mandel seems to suggest that we try to synthesize all our aesthetic knowledge and the function of the critic is to help us make that synthesis.

Everything in art is now much more open in form, and criticism must make an attempt to become more open. The "New Criticism" is now no longer valid, for it cannot cope with the contemporary, being able to deal only with closed structures. Mandel also tackles the problem of social criticism. In his view art creates a completely autonomous world divorced from society and external reality so that the social critic is really incapable of coming to an aesthetic judgment. Mandel finally sees the critic as a savage, appreciating and passing on his knowledge of art by means of "direct perception rather than intellectual analysis". He sees the dangers in such a theory; that it may be impossible to judge art on anarchic and irrational grounds, that this kind of response is too dependent on subjectivity, that it is too open and impressionistic. But he insists on the notion of total sympathetic participation in art, an idea that surely links him with McLuhan, as his idea of the autonomous world of art connects him to Frye. Mandel goes much further into a concept of a much more open synthesis of these ideas by drawing

also on the ideas of Norman O. Brown. In fact, he suggests that McLuhan's idea of the extension of our senses is really an expression of a Brown idea in that "art is the language of the human body". Finally, Mandel summarizes art as "the human form of desire, . . . it is the vision of our complete humanity and an affirmation of love."

I may have done Eli Mandel an injustice by summarizing his ideas in such bald terms but in the series of talks I have outlined as well as in some single radio talks he seems to me to have formulated a new, open and almost visionary concept of criticism, synthesizing, as I have already suggested, much of what Frye and McLuhan state, and adding much of the thought of some of the new culture heroes, most notably R. D. Laing, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. Mandel's plea for a criticism of total participation leads him to involvement in a concept stated by Brown: "The proper response to poetry is not criticism but poetry."



Of course, in Canada at the present time many poets write criticism. One can read poetry reviews in many of our literary reviews by practicing poets. This has always been the case but I think this practice has been encouraged over the last ten years. In the pages of small magazines poets preach polemically about their own poetic theories. One such publication is *The Open Letter* which is specifically designed to be a forum of critical ideas about poetry. Since its foundation *Tish* also has included defences of its special mentors, and *Quarry* gives a good deal of space to long reviews of poetry by poets. *Tamarack Review* generally puts its "Poetry Chronicle" in the hands of a poet and it occasionally includes an article of a literary-critical nature, such as Frank Davey's view of the Black Mountain phenomenon and Miriam Waddington's study of the radical poems of A. M. Klein. At one time it seemed as if *Tamarack* had set itself the critical mission of saving Canadian theatre. It ran two issues devoted to the problem but more recently, apart from an occasional review, it has not revived that particular missionary quest. And I should not omit from this discussion the highly valuable practical criticism of Milton Wilson as editor of *Canadian Forum*. His choice of poetry for that periodical has been consistently astonishing in its catholicity, its recognition of new talent and experimentation and its personal concern. He has in this way contributed a great deal to the continued growth of poetry in this country.

We are also greatly indebted to the CBC for its encouragement of criticism. It is possible that without radio and the FM program *Ideas* we might not have had Eli Mandel's criticism. More than that. The CBC has given time to poets

and critics alike, allowing them to elaborate critical ideas. In the two series *The Creative Writer* (1965) and *The First Person In Literature* (1966) Earle Birney and Louis Dudek respectively contributed interesting surveys in the field I am calling the criticism of synthesis. They both took a large topic and allowed their imaginations and critical acumen to roam at large in the area of the topic, drawing the specific details for discussion from a wide variety of sources. Other writers who have attempted this kind of synthesis in CBC talks are Michael Yates, John Hulcoop, George Woodcock and Jack Ludwig. One of the most interesting series, which attempted a comparative study of movies and modern novels, was Murray MacQuarrie's *The Allegorical Style* (1967). MacQuarrie sets his talks in a framework of ideas stemming from McLuhan and Frye, suggesting that the decline in realism had re-awakened our interest in the allegorical and the mythical. Within these terms he discussed such writers as Golding, Heller and Grass in relation to the movies of Bergman, Godard and Antonioni. (Incidentally, MacQuarrie's remarks on this director constitute for me one of the best defences of his movies I have read.) MacQuarrie's criticism is sound and straightforward although, like McLuhan, he is prone to the categorical and dogmatic generalization. Nonetheless, this series is a significant contribution to inter-media criticism in Canada.

The CBC also continued other aspects of criticism in series perhaps related to the trend of assessing tradition and establishing order I have mentioned earlier in this article, although these talks were not devoted to specifically Canadian subject-matter. I am thinking of talks by John

Carroll on the contemporary novel and by Roy Daniells on some religious and Puritan poets. There have also been some rather experimental kinds of critical exegesis on the CBC: Louis Dudek on chance in poetry, Eli Mandel talking about Norman O. Brown and also indulging in a kind of prose poem about celebration.

There is no doubt that in recent years the CBC has encouraged not only creative writing but also creative criticism. It has also published a fair sampling of its series of critical talks so that they will reach an even wider audience, but it is unfortunate that these new and often exciting expressions of developments in modern thinking do not reach those of us who are not served by the FM Network of the CBC. Perhaps all of us who are interested in literature and ideas, should make a plea for the availability of these programmes in all parts of Canada.

Sound academic criticism continued in such journals as the *Dalhousie Review* (which seems to have published more literary criticism than any of the other intellectual quarterlies in the last ten years), *Culture* and *Queen's Quarterly*. The *University of Toronto Quarterly* has published each year its very useful survey of "Letters in Canada". Book reviewing has steadily improved and has even caused a few hackles to rise in recent months: witness Irving Layton's diatribe against a reviewer in *Canadian Dimension* and Alden Nowlan's outburst in *Canadian Forum*. There have been collections of some of the better general critical journalistic pieces, such as Robertson Davies' *A Voice From The Attic* (1960) and Robert Fulford's *Crisis At The Victory Burlesk* (1968).

One rather surprising shortage in re-

cent Canadian criticism has been in the field of comparative studies of our own two literatures. There have been tentative attempts and one very good essay, "Twin Solitudes" by Ronald Sutherland, published in this journal, but in view of the centrality of the Quebec question in contemporary Canada it seems strange that very little critical writing on the two literatures has emerged.

In general, criticism has been concerned on the one hand with attempting to establish some order and on the other hand with exploring the possibilities of total involvement in and participation at the frontiers and even beyond the fron-

tiers of modern chaos. There has been a gathering and a broadening during the last ten years, leading towards a loosening of strict academicism away from specialization. In the developments arising from Frye and McLuhan and related to new and emerging ideas in the work of such a critic as Eli Mandel, Canadian criticism promises to stretch into more and more fascinating areas in the future.

NOTE

In preparing my discussion of Eli Mandel's criticism and the contribution of the CBC to Canadian criticism I was helped inestimably by Phyllis Webb who made available to me material and information to which I would otherwise have had no access.

