

"CRITICALLY SPEAKING" CRITICIZED

Tony Emery

MOST CANADIANS of my acquaintance are loyal to their national institutions, some to the point of chauvinism, but there is one institution which seems to rouse mild and gentle stevedores, taxidivers, journalists and garagemen to unreasonable fury: I mean the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. For many ordinary Canadians the CBC stands for all that is tedious and pretentious and stuffy; they cannot bear to think that they are forced to contribute to its upkeep.

Perhaps this animosity is confined to Western Canada. I personally hope that this is the case, since it seems to me that the CBC is defensible on several grounds; it is the only cultural link between the provinces; the only regular patron of music and drama; the only national institution which encourages people to criticize it. It not only encourages criticism; it provides a regular weekly opportunity for critics to plunge their harpoons into the monopolistic leviathan, and it pays them a fee for doing so.

For eleven years a programme called *Critically Speaking*, organized nationally by Robert Weaver, has been a regular Sunday feature on CBC radio. The half-

hour programme usually incorporates three separate critical contributions, on films, books and radio - tv respectively; and one of these items — Clyde Gilmour on the movies — is constant. The programme originates from one of half a dozen different centres each week, (Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, occasionally Ottawa or Halifax) partly to provide variety for the listener, and partly to ease the burden on any one production centre.

Weaver has recently handed over the programme to Robert McCormack, but the format is unlikely to change, since it appears to be ideally suited to the task it was created to perform. Like any regular weekly programme, it has good days and bad, but the one rarely varying element is the consistent and reasonable tone of Clyde Gilmour's movie criticism.

Gilmour, doubtless, is not the most sensitive and intelligent man alive, but he seems to me to answer the needs of this programme in a manner that is almost beyond criticism. He approaches the movie under review in an adult and sophisticated way, but his judgments have a blunt and sensible downrightness that makes short work of the chi-chi on the

one hand, and the trashy, on the other. He makes his points, which are usually based on a sound knowledge of the possibilities of the medium, with a simple lucidity that is an object lesson to all who use the microphone for the expression of ideas. For me Gilmour stands as a symbol of that intelligent and educated middle-class audience that is our chief lack in Canada today. We could do with two million like him.

Turning to the book reviews, I note that in the last six months of 1959 some 70 books were reviewed, of which 30 were Canadian and 40 or so American and British. The reviews, to judge by the scripts I have in front of me are extremely uneven. With certain exceptions those of Canadian works seem to be motherly and protective and dull, and those of British and American works tend to be neutral, grey, obtuse and dull. A partial excuse can be found in the fact that frequently the reviewer has been asked to deal with more books than can conveniently be discussed inside eight and a half or nine minutes. On one occasion, I see, a gallant lady set what must surely be an all-time record: 12 books in eight minutes and forty seconds. Small wonder, then, if nothing very memorable emerges.

But there were, as I mentioned earlier, exceptions that relieved the monotony. On occasion there were reviews that rose above the level of mere "noticing" to achieve the status of criticism: Blair Fraser's perceptive treatment of Miriam Chapin's *Contemporary Canada*, for instance; Hugo McPherson's sharp and acute criticism of Edmund Carpenter's *Eskimo*; John Peter's comparison of two books on Africa; George Woodcock's penetrating analysis of the weaknesses

and strengths of Koestler's *The Sleepwalkers*.

On the whole, the liveliest moments on *Critically Speaking* come from the weekly reviews of programmes on television and radio. I think this is because none of the reviewers takes the media or himself ("herself" in several bright instances) too seriously. For most listeners, too, there is more relevance in the radio/TV reviews since they are dealing with matters on which they have views of their own, however inchoate or unformulated.

Since *Critically Speaking* is a national programme, the reviews tend to deal only with the shows that go out to the whole nation, and this is a limitation to the critic, who may spend much of his time listening and watching shows that originate from his home production centre. Of the national shows several are hardy perennials, and there is a limit to the number of times one can discuss *Close-Up* and *Fighting Words*, *Rawhide* and *Front Page Challenge*. There appears to be a disproportionate amount of time devoted to dramatic features compared to the infrequent comment on the music which is one of the chief glories of the CBC for the excellent reason that, while everybody feels qualified to carve up actors and producers and dramatists, only Chester Duncan knows anything about music.

I drew attention earlier to the protective attitude towards Canadian literature adopted by book reviewers (Is this because writers and reviewers are frequently academics, and so solidarity, affection for old students, and fear-of-hurting-X's-feelings-because-he-may-be-reviewing-your-book-next-month all play their part?) and I must point out now that the radio/TV reviews are entirely

free from this inhibiting emotion. The reviewers lay about them with a will, and do not scruple to draw comparisons between American, British and Canadian programmes. This gives a liveliness to utterances that is all too often missing from the prim, grey, heavily-qualified book reviews.

The need for regular and responsible criticism of music and the plastic arts is one which might well be met by an occasional review on *Critically Speaking*. Chester Duncan, it is true, pays attention to the musical component of radio and tv programmes, but he is the only one who does out of a dozen or so fairly regular critics. All who heard Alan Rich's broadcasts on the musical offerings of the Vancouver Festival would surely agree that they were rewarding, even if one had not attended the concert under review.

Similarly, a notice, from time to time,

of art exhibitions across Canada would provide an opportunity for those interested in painting and sculpture, whether domestic or foreign, to compare opinions. At the moment, the only vehicle for this sort of evaluation on a national scale is provided by *Canadian Art*, which reaches only 7,000 subscribers. I don't know how large the audience for *Critically Speaking* is — Robert Weaver describes it as "small but loyal" — but I would guess that it must be many times as large as the circulation of *Canadian Art*.

Yet, in summing up, I would affirm that *Critically Speaking*, even as it now functions, helps to fill a void in our national life. Outspoken criticism is all too rare on this continent, and to find it sponsored by the institution which is itself under attack is a shining example to all who are concerned with freedom of the intellect.

TRADITIONS REJOINED: RECENT FRENCH CANADIAN POETRY

G. V. Downes

ALAIN GRANDBOIS, *L'Etoile Pourpre*. ALAIN MARCEAU, *A la Pointe des Yeux*. OLIVIER MARCHAND, *Crier que Je Vis*. FERNAND OUELLETTE, *Séquences de l'Aile*. JEAN-GUY PILON, *L'Homme et le Jour*. PIERRE TROTTIER, *Poèmes de Russie*. MICHEL VAN SCHENDEL, *Poèmes de l'Amérique Étrangère. La Poésie et Nous* (collection). All published by Les Editions de l'Hexagone, Montréal, at \$1.00 each.

ONE OF the strangest phenomena in the history of the arts is the time-lag. I do not mean the time which so often elapses between the creation of a work of art and its public acceptance (which can be tragic enough for the

artist as everyone knows) but something just as unfortunate. I mean the gap which, through geography or ignorance or a barrier in language, may separate individual artists, or whole generations of writers, from the very works in which