editorial

ARTS IN THE POLITICIAN'S EYE

THESE THOUGHTS were provoked by receiving a copy of an American magazine — *Cultural Affairs* — devoted surprisingly to the arts in Canada. *Cultural Affairs* is the organ of the Associated Councils of the Arts in the United States. The particular issue I am discussing was brought out to celebrate a seminar held in May last year at Ste. Adele in Quebec — a seminar to which, apparently, two hundred and fifty of the most distinguished cultural leaders from both sides of the border were invited. There was no provision in its agenda for the discussion of the creative process; far from it, the aim was specifically stated as to discuss "the political realities of government support of the arts."

The issue of *Cultural Affairs* was conceived as an adjunct to this seminar; its contributors were all Canadians, and all, in one way or another, non-creating members of the cultural establishment. Two were members of the government, Mr. Trudeau himself and the Secretary of State, Mr. Gérard Pelletier. Several were high officials of public bodies devoted to the organization of the arts. Only one was an independent — the journalist and editor Robert Fulford. And not a single one was a practicing artist. In other words, here was a composite official view of the directions public policies for fostering the arts should follow. It was a view some of whose implications I found no less than chilling.

It is true that the Prime Minister opened the issue by remarking that the arts are "an essential grace in the life of civilized people", and that he ended with what was clearly meant as a statement of reassurance.

> I do not think that modern society, or the artist as a member of that society, need fear a generous policy of subsidy to the arts from governments as long as these governments have the courage to permit free expression and experimentation — and, for that matter, to take it in good part if the mirror held up to their nature is not always a flattering one.

Fair enough. Yet Mr. Trudeau admits in an unguarded moment that the government "sets a general course for development" in its aid for the arts, and even so vague a policy can materially accept the situation of the artist. How, we can only estimate by gauging the attitudes of those who shape it.

Here, it seemed to me, two articles in *Cultural Affairs* were of special significance, partly because they were written by men who hold key posts in terms of public programmes for the arts, and partly because they display various aspects of what might be defined as an official approach. They were by Mr. Pelletier, and by Mr. Duncan Cameron, National Director of the Canadian Conference of the Arts. Mr. Pelletier speaks for public and state-supported intervention in the arts. The Canadian Conference of Arts, for which Mr. Cameron speaks, represents what in current jargon is called the private sector. It is a heterogenous federation of many organizations in various ways interested in the arts — some as practitioners, some as organizers, some as spectators. One at least of its main functions is to serve as a liaison between the government and the artists.

However, not all artists are represented in the Canadian Conference of the Arts. To my knowledge, few professional writers belong to any organization that is a member of the Canadian Conference, and the same may apply in other fields. I think it likely, in fact, that the performers are more heavily represented than the creating artists, while those whom Mr. Cameron calls "arts administrators" are also strongly present.

These preponderances doubtless influence the policies of the Conference, and they may well be reflected in Mr. Cameron's essay, whose tone is set by the first sentence, in which he tells us that "national organization of the arts . . . is a relatively new phenomenon in North American society," that it is "an experimental means of achieving the goals essential to the health of the arts and the flourishing of creative expression", and that it is the experiment of the moment. Note the last fashionable touch; the implication is that because it is the experiment of the moment we have to go through with it!

Now it is clear from the rest of his article that Mr. Cameron believes in the organization of the arts, and that he sees himself as a spokesman for the "total arts community, or arts industry, as it is more commonly now being called". Those are Mr. Cameron's words. Personally, I do not believe in the existence of a "total arts community". I find the word *total* itself a particularly ominous one; it suggests something monolithic, something on the edge of totalitarian. But a healthy arts community, if one can call it a community at all, is surely the

most anarchic community that could ever exist, based as it must be on the individuality of each creative artist.

Perhaps the other equally jarring phrase — "arts industry" — gives a clue to what Mr. Cameron may actually envisage. To talk of an *arts industry* means that one sees the products of art as primarily commodities; such a view, of course, reverses the true situation. Real works of art are commodities only in a secondary way. In order to continue creating, the artist must sell what he has produced so that he may buy materials and food. Once the work of art has left his hands, it survives as an object of contemplation, an icon, and only becomes a commodity again when it passes from hand to hand. This natural situation has in recent years been disturbed, especially in the visual arts, by the rise of dealers to positions of unprecedented prominence, and the deliberate creation and planned obsolescence (the art museum directors in this process acting as accomplices of the dealers) of fashions in painting and sculpture, some of them as ephemeral as fashions in feminine clothes, to feed what has become largely an investment market. Because of the different physical nature of the product of writing, books have become no more "industrialised" than they ever were, but the building and destruction of reputations on the poetry-reading circuit is analogous to that in painting. This situation — art taking on the outward shape of moderately big business — has actually led some of the organizers of the arts to conceive the possibility of a liaison in depth with the business world, and the author of a minor article in the magazine I am discussing goes a great deal farther than Mr. Cameron in remarking that "more and more business and the arts will come together to build a better society."

One has to grant that, in a country like Canada especially, some degree of organization may be necessary in *some* of the arts. The performing arts in particular depend on it. Urban areas are widely scattered, and where they exist the tradition of support for the theatre or the concert hall is even now not nearly so deeply established as in Continental Europe. While a European city of 100,000 inhabitants may support a theatre or an opera house, an urban complex like Vancouver, with nearly a million residents, finds it impossible to do so without federal patronage. Both the attendance at performances and the private patronage of theatres are growing impressively, but operas and symphony concerts and what we call serious drama can be made available to a large number of Canadians in the cities and smaller towns only by planned public subsidy. Where subsidies are given, the framework of a national organization of the arts obviously exists and, even in selecting the theatrical or musical groups that will be sub-

sidized, the state — or the corporation that represents it — will be establishing the criteria on which its support is to be based. Nothing so crude as an attempt at censorship need ever be tried. The power to influence the choice of what may be performed will be there, even if it is not exercised. "I fear the Greeks," said Virgil, "even when they offer gifts." The help of the state must be accepted only with the greatest vigilance.

The creative artist — with the possible exception of the musical composer and the obvious exception of the choreographer — is much less dependent on this kind of organization. He does not have to face the vast expense involved in putting on the most modest show on a professional level of excellence, and, unlike the performing artist who usually has to work full time in order to sustain a professional standard, the writer or the painter can survive by taking some job that will leave time and energy for artistic production. I can think immediately of two notable examples: the American poet Wallace Stevens and the English poet Roy Fuller, both of whom became major writers in their field while spending their working lives as corporate executives. I have yet to hear of a great actor, or a notable conductor, or even a good first violin, who doubled as a businessman. There is a clear division between the good professional and the good amateur in the performing arts; the boundary is much more nebulous in a field like writing, or even painting. This situation has two consequences. The performing artist is much more inclined to demand organization than the writer or the painter, who is a solitary worker. On a professional level this can be seen by comparing the power and solidity of organizations like the Musicians' Union and Equity, which embrace virtually all the artists in their respective fields, and the weakness of an organization like the Canadian Authors' Association, which professional writers are inclined to regard with lofty disdain. Secondly, the productions in which performing artists take part are much more vulnerable to the perils that come from lack of support, whereas the writer, with his typewriter and his pad of paper, is much better equipped to weather such conditions.

But even the writer is involved when the state decides to organize support for the arts. The actual sum of money devoted to writing in the Canada Council budget for 1968-69 was small in comparative terms; it totalled only one fifteenth of all grants to the arts and was less than a quarter of that devoted to the theatre, but even this relatively small sum of $600,000 meant help to a considerable number of writers in the form of awards to enable them to spend time on writing or subsidies to bring out books which publishers might not otherwise consider commercially practicable.

This means that creative artists, like performing artists, are likely to be affected by the philosophies that motivate those who control whatever programmes exist for what Mr. Cameron calls "the national organization of the arts". This is why Mr. Pelletier's article in *Cultural Affairs* is so crucially important; as Secretary of State he is responsible for all federal support for the arts, and his views may therefore be taken as an indication of the line likely to be followed by those who direct such support. I found his statement ominous, partly because it applied to cultural matters criteria that were essentially political, and partly because it subscribed to a modish and undoubtedly ephemeral inclination to equate with art the more mechanical ways of filling in leisure time.

One of the points Mr. Pelletier is particularly intent on emphasizing is the need to "democratize culture". He has already told us of the vast spread of active as well as spectator participation in cultural activities so that there are now more than 400 amateur theatrical companies performing regularly in Canada. He might have referred also to the proliferation of potters and Sunday painters, to the vast increase in private presses and in mimeographed little magazines publishing the work of a whole swarm of new poets. But this is evidently not enough for Mr. Pelletier. Perhaps with an eye to voter support, and certainly with a politician's literalist view of democracy, he does not merely want to make culture available to as many as may wish to partake of it; he also hopes to sell it to the unwilling.

> Many identify the uses of theatres, concert halls, museums, art galleries and libraries with the middle class and conclude that culture has nothing to do with them. The problem of winning over this non-audience is not merely financial. Above all, it is a question of ideas, of concepts. If we are to democratize culture, without debasing standards of quality, we must not only open the doors to much larger numbers of people, we must also induce them to enter.

One feels an initial reassurance, hearing that phrase, "without debasing standards", but this is dispelled immediately when one turns the page and finds embedded there an extract from a speech which the Secretary of State made last year in Lethbridge, Alberta.

> It may be necessary to transform completely the notion of culture, to replace the notion of a middle class culture with that of a mass culture. Why should the theatre and the opera have a monopoly on culture? Why should not movies, jazz, popular songs and psychedelic happenings also be a means of culture expression? . . . When culture has become a source of alienation — and this is

increasingly the case with middle-class culture — it is high time for us to re-examine it. The democratization of culture will not otherwise be achieved.

This statement, coming from the federal minister responsible for organizing aid to cultural activities, begs a whole series of questions. To begin, there is the use of the term *alienation*, the great crybaby word available to any group that cares to lay a claim to special attention. In this context I fail to see how alienation enters in at all. The arts are there for anyone who knocks at their doors; indeed, they are becoming increasingly available to those who are temperamentally inclined to respond. But there is no spectacular way in which one can — without debasing standards, create a sudden flood of that interest which in any case, at the present time, is growing with unspectacular steadiness. The number of amateurs and participants in all the high arts is several times greater than it was in Canada twenty years ago; it is especially obvious — despite Marshall McLuhan — that the paperback revolution in publishing, coupled with current educational trends, has brought about a phenomenal growth in the buying of the kind of books that half a generation ago only a tiny minority of Canadians would have wished to read, let alone possess.

I have used the term "high arts" because I do not accept Mr. Pelletier's term "middle class arts". There is nothing intrinsically middle class about the opera, which in Italy is an intensely popular art, or about ballet, which in Russia has exchanged an aristocratic for a working class following, or, for that matter, about any art. Such sociological labels have no relevance in cultural matters; Mozart wrote for a long-dead aristocracy, but today his appeal is classless, as is the appeal of all art that survives its immediate time. And political terms such as democracy are equally irrelevant, since democracy means the rule of all the people, and all the people never like the same thing. The high arts — and there is no reason to exclude good movies or good ceramics from among them — are those that display the potentialities of a civilization at its highest and most generous levels. For that reason they have special demands on our consideration, and on our support, and when we equate them with the trivialities of commercialized popular entertainment we are not only belittling our own humanity; we are also robbing the people who will live in a far more leisured and far less class-conscious world a generation ahead of some of the means to develop themselves spiritually, aesthetically and intellectually to the full.

Perhaps the most serious matter of speculation is how far the public bodies which, under the government, are responsible for aiding the arts in Canada have been infected by the philosophy which Mr. Pelletier projects and which his

fellows in the government presumably approve. Certainly there is no sign whatever that the Canada Council has been as yet in any way affected; its choices and its policies have been warped by no political motivations and by no vulgar seeking after popularity. The case of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, once so important as a patron of the literary, dramatic and musical arts in this country, is far different. During the past five years a steady turning away from its duty to foster the high arts has been evident in the programmes presented both on radio and television, and this year has seen a drastic commercialization and popularization of programming which makes one fear that, as a responsible cultural influence, the CBC will soon cease to exist. What the state gives to the arts with one hand, it appears to be taking away with the other.