

THE CRITIC CRITICIZED: A REPLY TO BRUCE MacDONALD

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I am sure it is healthy to face up to criticism, yet I would be less than honest if I did not say that I enjoyed Alan R. Young's "Note" in *SCL*, 1 (Summer 1976) more than Bruce F. MacDonald's essay in the same issue. Last summer, I picked up Mr. Young's monograph, *Ernest Buckler*, and happily discovered that he, too, had seen the ironies I discussed in my essay in *SCL*, 1 (Winter 1976). His note is a useful example of bibliographical scholarship, not least because of the self-critical awareness of the dangers of the "international fallacy," and all I have to add is that I like my title too much to change it, despite Buckler's comments.

About Mr. MacDonald's essay I want to say first that it adds to the small list of necessary critical analyses of Buckler's most important novel. One thing it makes me feel is somewhat apologetic to Claude Bissell, though I think I was fairer to him than Mr. MacDonald is to me. Yet it is often easier to begin one's own critical analysis of a work by arguing against a previous one; and since almost the only analyses available when I conceived my article were Bissell's and Atwood's, their work provided me with a jumping-off place. My feeling about Mr. MacDonald's essay, however, is that, rather than disagreeing with mine, it extends the analysis I began. His conclusions tend to match mine; and, in fact, as I read him, he, too, discovers in the novel a deep philosophical pessimism underlying a profound love of the world and all who inhabit it. I find most of what he says valuable, then — except what he says of my essay.

Mr. MacDonald quotes me early in his essay, but where (even in his quotation) I say, "On one level Martha and Anna are surrogates for David . . .," he says that I "dismiss the other characters as surrogates."¹ My point is that I had only so much space and that was for an argument about the book which had not previously been made, but I tried nevertheless to indicate throughout that there were many other aspects of the novel (the aspects covered so well by Mr. MacDonald, for example) which I necessarily had to leave out of consideration (see, again, my final paragraph). I do not think I implied "that there is some *evil* lurking under the surface of the family" or "that the unity of the family is *mere* hypocrisy."² And I certainly did *not* "assume a uniform cruelty in all the characters."³ Indeed, I consider that statement the most blatant misreading of my essay. Finally, where Mr. MacDonald says I see Martha's silences "as *mere* weapons of jealousy,"⁴ I would argue that they are weapons of jealousy as well as much else. In other words, when Mr. MacDonald refrains from attacking my admittedly and

¹Bruce F. MacDonald, "Word-Shapes, Time and the Theme of Isolation in *The Mountain and the Valley*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 1 (Summer 1976), 195 (my italics).

²MacDonald, p. 196 (my italics).

³MacDonald, p. 196.

⁴MacDonald, p. 201 (my italics).

deliberately limited analysis⁵ and gets on with his own, he contributes to the needed critical discussion (which must arise from various analyses of the work itself) that will move us all closer to critical consensus concerning this fine novel. In that endeavour, I am pleased to participate with him. And, I think, we must both remember that no single analysis will ever be enough. A work as rich and complex as *The Mountain and the Valley* will always somehow transcend any final statement about it.

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⁵Though I will say, in my own defence, that when I teach *The Mountain and the Valley*, I can find many more incidents than I quoted or referred to which support my "reading" of the novel.