

IDEOLOGY AND POETRY: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME RECENT TRENDS IN CANADIAN CRITICISM

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I would like to examine three separate instances of what can be called ideological criticism of Canadian poetry: examples from a body of criticism which not only interprets but also ignores, rejects, and misreads poems and judges poets on philosophical or quasi-philosophical grounds. This kind of criticism, in spite of the professed good intentions of those who practise it, undermines the possibility of a sympathetic understanding of the variety of contemporary Canadian poetry.

Aside from the presumptuousness of such criticism, it has unfortunate consequences: it invites either defensiveness, a search for ways of including the outcasts within the magic circle of the ideologically acceptable, or the setting up of a counter-ideological structure, which may be as much a distortion as was the misreading which aroused it. And, as I shall show from a specific instance, an ideologically biased view of a poet can enter the criticism of others either who have not made up their own minds or who share the ideological bias of the original writer, and so be passed on to the student or reader as received opinion. All three of the critics whom I shall consider are male, and the objects of the criticism which concerns me, female. It would simplify matters if the ideological bias could be perceived as sexist; but the subject is more complex, although, as I shall show, culturally enforced expectations about attitudes appropriate to females have, I think, something to do with the judgements which these particular critics make of these particular writers.

The most extravagant, malevolent, and self-indulgent piece of ideological criticism in recent Canadian letters is John Bentley Mays's venomous attack on Phyllis Webb in *Open Letter*, II, 6 (Fall 1973). Mays's essay is a malign combination of rhetorical self-advertisement and desperate, irrational ill will; I call it ideological because it is directed primarily not at how Phyllis Webb writes poems — though this, too, enters in because these critics believe either dogmatically or implicitly that certain attitudes generate certain styles — but at her putative beliefs or "values." Mays perceives Webb through her poems as nihilistic in her steadfast refusal to hope, as perverse in her alienation from the "real world," and as a noxious embodiment of negation in her failure, in his terms, to accept her body and sensuous experience. He sees in her poems a "testimony, as a woman and as a writer, of decisive, unmitigated failure" (p. 12). She has fallen short of his large expectations of her: ". . . if only she had given us one monumental poem, or had she loved or

hated heroically, or shown evidence of courage toward one besetting sin, charity, let alone intelligence, would compel a reversal of verdict" (p. 12). He calls her

... a poet whose whole desire goes out, finally, to the barbarian silence and lithic insensibility of things: whose poetry does not "mature", but merely changes as her tactics of self-destruction vary; whose work is as vain, sectarian, as without acme or distinction, as distorted by her lusts, and as inconclusive as any in the recent career of literary modernism. (p. 11)

It is crucial to see ... [her questions] for what they are: cries of pain camping as ideas, gasps for air too desperate for metaphor, yet set out in pleasing language *anyhow*, wilfully, against all reasonable expectation of what poetry can be expected to do. This unreasonableness ... is radical to Miss Webb's poetic decisions and is that mental characteristic to which we can ascribe the melodramatic hollowness and overwrought stageyness of her poems.

Such writing is a symptom of unhealth ... (pp. 14-15)

She is one of those, he declares, who have "demonstrated publically a commitment to sexual, intellectual, literary failure" (p. 15). Her "historical and literary project is predicated upon a sense of radical existential destitution in a kosmos of silent, threatening things, a sense of the worthlessness of the body and all history" (pp. 25-26).

What can account for this spate of hysterical outrage? I think that it has two sources, one of which Mays makes explicit. Like Flaubert apropos of Madame Bovary, Mays clearly feels "Phyllis Webb, c'est moi". His essay on her work is not criticism or interpretation; it is a rite of exorcism: he wishes to cast out of himself those attitudes which he perceives in or projects on to her work. Her sense of what he aptly calls her "passionate forsakenness" (p. 31), her inability to "accept the happiness of ordinary things" (p. 33), is or was his sense. But to rest in this destitution is, in his view, to be damned. He wants to hear another story and she refuses to tell it. The irrational malice aroused in him by her lucid, *cul de sac* nihilism, as he perceives it, has probable roots in culturally determined expectations about the nourishing and comforting attitudes that it is thought appropriate for women to express. He is grievously disappointed because she fails to sweeten his imagination with messages of hope, sensations of *participation mystique* with the "real world," and benign acceptance of the body and sensuous experience. I shall return to this point later, but I want first to look briefly at Mays's expressed sense of our general cultural and poetic predicament.

In his letter to bp nichol in *Open Letter II*, 9 (Fall 1974), a commentary on Jerome Rothenberg's anthology *America: A Prophecy*, he talks of "that longing for home which is ... the gravest problem of our culture" (p. 53) and of writing as building a "dwelling in the wilderness" (p. 61). This is a theme which he takes up again in his illuminating essay in *Open Letter III*, 3 (Fall

1975), "Ariadne: Prologomenon to the Poetry of Daphne Marlatt." He anticipates a "mode of intellectual action" (p. 16) which he calls, after Heidegger, "to think for the sake of dwelling" (p. 17). Daphne Marlatt he celebrates as one who practises this poetry in the apparent desolation of a modern city, Vancouver. She "locates her vision within the zone of her immediate habitation" (p. 21). She transfigures without abandoning the "essential historicity" of her city and its places (p. 21). He declares that "a vision which does not return us to ethics is hallucination; an ecstasy which makes us hate our bodies and our histories and instills in us a thirst to be rid forever of mortality and limitation, is delusion" (p. 23). But

... a true poetics of dwelling is . . . a pacing-off of the bounds of our habitation, and an embodiment of the rhythms of this walking in structures of language. Thus measured and given voice in poetry, the ground speaks to us, invites us to authentic living, a *poesis*, poise among all things that are, to the eschatological possibility which yet lies on the horizon of the present; the voice we hear is that of the woman who, grounded in the acceptance of materiality and finitude, now sings the song of dwelling. (p. 33)

The reference to the grounded, rooted woman singing songs of dwelling is from Kwakiutl legend, but I suggest that it has some implications about the kind of song which, in Mays's view, it is desirable for women to sing. (We shall come across this bias again when I discuss George Amabile's response to the Circe and Penelope figures in Margaret Atwood's poems.) Mays in his attack on Phyllis Webb accuses her of self-admitted failure "as a writer and as a woman." She declines to embody the woman who, "grounded in the acceptance of mortality and finitude, sings the song of dwelling." She, in the lucid honesty of her own vision, will not affirm, will not be earth-mother Solveig, Penelope, waiter and shelterer; and out of his homelessness and his power Mays will vilify her for her refusal to be what he needs her to be. He is not, in Northrop Frye's sense, a "well tempered" critic; he is an ill tempered one, and the mixture of savage and tendentious vituperation with confession and self-advertisement which he displays in his essay on Phyllis Webb cannot in any acceptable sense be called criticism.

In the essays on Jerome Rothenberg and Daphne Marlatt, Mays gives some thoughtful attention to the ideological and historical circumstances which underlie the creation of a canon of sacred books or secular literature. Mays himself has been thrice exiled: first by his confessed existential participation in the crisis of our culture, second by his disillusionment with the old agrarian culture of America's deep south, and third by his emigration to Canada. It is natural enough for him to experience a longing for dwelling. But it seems to me that out of this longing he is himself conniving in the setting up of a canon of Canadian poetry on ideological grounds, a practice which he deplors in others whose grounds are not his. And his criticism is not only ideological in its foundations, in the reasons for its condemnations or

approvals; it is also prescriptive in its definition of the authentic. In his desperate need to invalidate the genuineness of such a vision as Phyllis Webb's, he wishes to set up criteria of wholesomeness and to cast into outer darkness poetry which does not meet his criteria.

Mays is an émigré, with his talismanic library, his touchstone tomes, weeping by the waters of the Don, condemning, prophesying, wearing his angst on his sleeve. As he modestly says, not many people are going to read heavy philosophical articles in esoteric literary magazines. But he is responsible for his opinions, and he is operating as a taste-maker: in Frank Davey's *From There to Here* (Press Porcepic, 1974), called "A Guide to English-Canadian Literature since 1960" and designed for use in high schools and universities, Mays's view of Phyllis Webb is taken over without question as received opinion:

As John Mays has argued, Phyllis Webb's work is vain, private, and inconclusive. It aspires not to greatness but to the simple recording of its own small melodramas and failures. It rejects certainty and "longs to slam the door on matter" — to free itself of historicity, morality, law, and words themselves. Its voice seeks to become amoral and amaterial, to transcend all extra-subjective considerations. (p. 262)

There is a falling off in the level of discourse throughout Davey's tendentious and misleading book; he writes a more demotic but less carefully considered prose than Mays. But both he and Mays share a predilection for vulgar Americanisms like "historicity," and his writing is prescriptive in the vein of Mays. Where, one wonders, would Thomas Hardy stand in this castigation of a poetry of melodrama and failure? Where would Shelley, darling of the self-styled phenomenological poets, stand in this condemnation of the desire to transcend matter? Where Keats in this rejection of the poet who is poised in uncertainty?

Davey is a repetitive writer, but through this fault we are permitted to become dreadfully familiar with the sacred terms in the mythology which supports his dubious judgements, as when he says that Webb retreats from "the world of matter, morality, and process" (p. 261). He is potentially a more mischievous writer than Mays because he will be read by more — and more naive — readers. He is also more misleading. Mays declares his bias to be philosophical, whereas Davey in his Preface and Introduction says that he is explicitly interested in technique as his contribution towards redressing the "tendency in recent Canadian criticism toward exclusively thematic interpretation" (p. 10). "Ultimately," he says, "only the form of a writer's work speaks to us" (p. 10). And yet throughout his Guide he excludes and castigates writers on the basis of attitudes, not technique. He makes it clear that the good buys believe in process, materiality, historicity, biology, morality, and participation — which, we are told, is the "normal and desirable human condition" (p. 21). This is normative and prescriptive writing, exclusive in its

intention and designed to establish a canon of approved writers on the basis not of style but of the "values" or attitudes which Davey condones.

Even as a judge of style Davey arouses our misgivings in his Introduction. How anyone, after looking at the not so recent facsimile of the manuscript of *The Wasteland* with Pound's excisions (or perhaps Davey has not seen it?), could call Eliot's poems "rigidly sculptural in structure" (p. 19) is bewildering. His describing the style of Hemingway, surely one of the most mannered writers of prose in the early twentieth century, as "detached and matter of fact" (p. 19) makes one suspect his judgement of prose as well as poetry. Davey is not always wrong, but often he is right for the wrong reasons. Dorothy Livesay is given the Davey stamp of approval because she "believed in the worth of the individual, the joy of sexuality, and the sufficiency of the physical universe" (p. 168). Good girl, Dorothy, but I think that a careful reading of her poems will reveal some ambivalence about sexuality and some reservations about the sufficiency — not the abundance, beauty, and fascination, but the *sufficiency* — of the physical universe.

Often I sympathize with what Davey is looking for in poetry, as when he rightly praises Gwen MacEwen for the fact that her poems "succeed in giving substance to myth by showing the poet living these myths in the mundane and domestic particulars of her life" (p. 178). I suppose because Clara Thomas' volume of "Our Nature-Our Voices," of which *From There to Here* is the second, treats Sheila Watson and James Reaney, two writers who theoretically fulfill Davey's criteria for the successful use of myth, they are excluded from consideration. But then why does Davey exclude from his canon Pat Lane, who creates a mythology of vegetation, broken winged birds, and larger than life figures out of the harsh interior that he knows, and Pat Lowther, who always attempted and often brilliantly succeeded in integrating, not without risk, the mythical and the domestic? Perhaps because they have not to his satisfaction demonstrated, as he says MacEwen has, that mythology "need not be merely a system by which ones escapes worldly events, but in fact can be found emanating from those events and providing understanding of our very real sensual and Heraclitean world" (pp. 178-79). Of course, I agree that the mythological, in *illo tempore* and now, has its source in an encounter between the human and the numinous felt as presence and power out there, but to go from this discovery to making pronouncements about the nature of reality as "very real sensual and Heraclitean" seems to me heavy-minded and philosophically naive.

Davey cannot very well ignore, though he does his best to undermine our sense of the accomplishment of, the poems of P. K. Page. He finds that she resembles Webb, Cohen, Smith, and Finch in her "severe distrust of the physical universe" (p. 232), and he combs her poetry for evidence, often in his determined search simplifying and misreading it. She prefers (slap!) "pure geometry, colour, and pattern" to "the rough passions of actuality" (p. 232). "Many of her poems actively transform a living scene to the lifeless

permanence of glass, ice, snow, lace, metal, or pattern" (p. 232). I shall not linger over the dubiousness of calling "rough passions" more actual than the geometrical patterning of a rose or a snowflake, or point at length to the stylistic ineptitude of including the noun "pattern" in a series of specifics; but how can anyone who has experienced a northern spring call ice and snow permanent? Or lace in the wind or on a moving arm lifeless? He grudgingly admits that Page is "unmistakenly [sic] one of the most readable of the various 'anti-life' poets of twentieth-century Canadian poetry" (p. 234). Her vision of the world is incorrect, but she embodies it in a style for which Davey expresses qualified approval:

Her vision of a corrupt world is based on fairly detailed and realistic portraits. Her images are precisely and economically presented; her syntax, while not colloquial, is free of rhetoric and pretentious complication. Her symbolic patterns are straightforward almost to the point of being formulaic: white, snow, glass, and ice for childhood; foliage, fire, and birds for the physical and sensual; the sea for the subconscious; metal, gems, lace, geometry and pattern for the welcome permanence and simplicity of art; sunlight and gold for that celestial world "more real than flowers."
(p. 234)

He approves her work in his own terms and with reservations: "fairly," "while not colloquial," "almost to the point of being formulaic." He lists the qualities he admires: detail, realism, precision, economy, freedom from rhetoric and pretentious complication. "Complexity" would be too positive a word for Davey's purposes; what he is essentially singing here is, in Elizabethan terms, a "contempt," not a "praise." In calling Page's image clusters "formulaic" he, characteristically, oversimplifies. He will have it that the innocence of childhood is one of her varieties of escape from "oppressive mortality" and that "white, snow, glass, and ice" "stand for" childhood. But it seems to me that these images, in many of the poems, signify something quite different from a state of childhood innocence. In "The Snowman," for example, white, snow, and ice stand for — to use Davey's unsubtle verb — negation, the ultimate poverty of lack of love. And in the extraordinary "Stories of Snow," snow bears some of the meaning of a sinister zero of being that it has in Conrad Aiken's story, "Silent Snow, Secret Snow."

Metal, gems, lace, geometry, and pattern, Davey tells us, "stand for" the "welcome permanence and simplicity of art." I should say on the contrary that generally in Page's poems art is far from simple, certainly not permanent, and often viewed with an ambivalence which is incongruent with "welcome." In "After Rain," having first perceived the garden, as is her habit, in terms of "a woman's wardrobe of the mind," Page says:

I suffer shame in all these images.
The garden is primeval, Giovanni
in soggy denims squelches by my hub
over his ruin,

shakes a doleful head.

.....
I find his ache exists beyond my rim
.....

O choir him, birds, and let him come to rest
within this beauty as one rests in love,
.....

And choir me too to keep my heart a size
larger than seeing, unsexed by each
bright glimpse of beauty striking like a bell,
so that the whole may toll,
its meaning shine
clear of the myriad images that still—
do what I will—encumber its pure line.

(*Cry Ararat*, pp. 18-19)

In "This Freize of Birds" she says that her "friend," who could make of a scene of birds in a garden "an intricate poem" "fashioned of glass and tin," "most exquisitely brittle," "would find no words"; her wire would melt in their fluid blur of light and life. It is surely perverse to read in this poem a preference for art over reality. As for the "welcome permanence of art" that Davey deduces from her poems, the sinister poem "Arras" surely suggests with shrewd insight that just as shelters can turn into prisons, so the patterned world of art can become a soul and body trap, that stasis is a temptation and a possible negation of quick life. In the poem "Another Space," which Page said in an interview in *Canadian Forum* (September, 1975) came to her in a dream, the poet is in dream pulled into a ritual circle of dark skinned beautiful people, spinning, cosmic, and the headman shoots a feather into her absolute centre "with such skill / and staggering lightness / that the blow is love":

And something in me melts
It is as if a glass partition melts—
or something I had always thought was glass—
some pane that halved my heart
is proved, in its melting, ice.

and to-fro all the atoms pass
in bright osmosis
hitherto
in stasis locked
where now a new
direction opens like an eye.

(*C.F.*, Sept. 1975, p. 35)

So you see, Frank, ice is a part of process; it melts.

Margaret Avison is another poet whom it would not do for a would-be serious critic to dispraise, let alone ignore. But in trying to demonstrate that the recent Avison of whom Davey approves is different from the early Avison

about whom he has misgivings, Davey is forced into an inaccurate description of the earlier collection, *Winter Sun*. "The vocabulary," he charges, is "intensely formal" (p. 37). "The syntax of these poems," we are told, "is complex and extended." But surely diction, in a poet as accomplished as Margaret Avison, is always a matter of decorum and poetic intent. It seems to me that in *Winter Sun* the vocabulary ranges appropriately from the colloquial through the scientific to the esoteric, and is always precise and apt. One fears in Davey's strictures a desire to reduce all syntax to the simple declarative, all vocabulary to jejune stock phrases which will serve in any context. "The affinities of this poetry," he says of *Winter Sun*, "are with the patterned, modernist work of A.J.M. Smith and Jay Macpherson" (p. 37). A sensitive reading of the poems will show this to be untrue. Avison seldom uses formal traditional structures, and when she does, as in the sonnets "Snow" and "Butterfly Bones," the formal pattern is always overridden by rhythms which I would call colloquial, the movement of speech or the process of thought, what Donald Davie would call subjective syntax.

Even in *The Dumbfounding*, Avison's second book, she does not make it in Davey's terms of Heraclitean process, but belief in an immanent rather than a transcendent deity will have to serve in the case of a poet whom Davey can hardly afford to dismiss. What Davey is obsessively concerned with establishing is a correspondence between belief and style, and so he is driven into thinking he perceives a greater shift in style in Avison's poems than I think in fact exists:

Man is no longer alienated, but clumsily participating. Avison's style has undergone a corresponding change. It is no longer synthetic and deliberate, but now moves in natural rhythms, colloquial syntax, and less formal diction. This relaxation in style gives to the poems a sense of emotional spontaneity which was entirely lacking in the calculated measures of the first book. . . .

In recent poems Miss Avison has continued this kind of work in which the naturalness or authenticity of expression is a major ingredient — a naturalness which is antithetical to the sculptural, intellectual style in which she began but in keeping with a belief in an immanent divinity.

(pp. 39-40)

I would say, on the contrary that, as with all major poets, her authentic voice in its individual syntax, which is the outward and visible garb of the movement of her mind, speaks clearly, though sometimes idiosyncratically, from the beginning. Once again, Davey has "found" what he needs to find to suit his rigid theory that a certain way of writing is good and that this approved manner has a one-to-one correspondence with certain "beliefs" or "values." In Davey's view, poets are either for life or against it, kinetic or static, and he is determined to set up his canon and to divide the flowers from the weeds. If this were a private exercise or a shared amusement with a coterie of fellow travellers, we could dismiss it; but it is mischievous because he has made his

doctrinaire views public and available to those who are just coming wide-eyed and eager to Canadian poetry, and he has disguised his tendentious and dogmatic, high and heavy-handed, set of little treatises as a 'guide' to contemporary Canadian poetry. Save us from such guides. Better to stumble in the wilderness on our own preferences and surprises.

One can only view with ironic amusement Davey's statement in his review of Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and *Surfacing* in *Open Letter*, II, 5 (Summer 1973), that these books represent or "reflect a possibility which the poet has always confessed herself to be tempted by — writer as power politician" (p. 75). It seems to me, bewildered as I am by the obtuseness of Davey's comments on *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, that perhaps he is himself essentially an abstract, schematic thinker, a system builder, and that it is this tendency in his own mind that he is fighting, projecting it onto other writers, in this instance Margaret Atwood. Who but a hopelessly diagrammatic thinker could say of Atwood's two novels: "The only important differences between the novels are in the ages, background, and activities of the characters; the issues and plot structures remain the same" (p. 76). Thus, in his view, the two novels are "essentially" the same; he calls *Surfacing* a "reworking" of the earlier novel. His mania for finding parallels, for categorizing, the very sin for which he castigates Atwood in his comments on *Survival*, leads him to parallel Anna in *Surfacing* and Ainsley in *The Edible Woman* and thus to miss the comic and satirical point about Ainsley: that she so thoroughly acts out the earth-mother role beloved of men in fantasy that she alarms the men who actually encounter her and can only be accepted by a man who is hooked on archetypes. Davey, intent on diagramming the novels, gets Anna wrong too. She does not "possess" her husband, as Davey says. They are devouring one another. To possess implies an agent, and she has sold her soul and is hollow at the centre. Her compact, make-up kit, emblem of her attempt to become the stapled and folded *Playboy* woman, is her soul-keeper. She possesses nothing. It always amazes me how critics manage to write so solemnly about a novel as funny as *The Edible Woman*. In his schematic desire to see the two novels as the same novel, Davey even says that there is "no sense of irony or detachment" in *The Edible Woman*.

Davey has a way of defining things in a disappointed manner, as though he has been cheated of his expectations, the effect being to downgrade or diminish the work under review, as when he says of Atwood's novels, "In this way both works become *romans à thèse* instead of the novels of character they superficially appear to be (p. 78). He implies that the poor reader has been wilfully misled. On the contrary, it seemed to me fairly early on in my reading that *The Edible Woman* is a satirical comedy of manners and *Surfacing* a quest romance, and I personally never felt that I had been cheated out of a novel of character. But if Davey is out to get you, you can't, on his premises, win. First, he diminishes Atwood by suggesting that she has betrayed her readers' expectations in writing *romans à thèse*; then he

downgrades her further by declaring that she has failed to articulate and solve her thesis plausibly and hopefully. He posits as an ideal subject for novel writers and Atwood in particular the achieving of "an authentic self in a world of inter-personal imperialisms" (p. 78) and comments that *Surfacing* "does not mark much of an advance" in insight into this struggle (p. 78). Finally, by stating as fact what is only his opinion — that *Surfacing* is a reworking of *The Edible Woman* — he achieves the *tour de force* of condemning Atwood for imitating in *Surfacing* the kind of work which she takes pains to denigrate in the novel. The fact that his conclusion is based on dubious, and in my view false, premises does not bother a critic like Davey to whom doctrine is everything, but it should give his readers pause:

She writes a new novel from recipes for old work, becoming in this respect as mechanical a worker as characters like Peter, David, or Ainsley whom she satirizes. . . . As *romans à thèse* they reveal Atwood to be manipulating her materials every bit as rationalistically and exploitively as *Surfacing's* David does in shooting his film "Random Samples."
(pp. 78-79)

In a side reference to *Power Politics* Davey says that "the flashily contrived wit of most of the poems parallels the 'castrating bitch' manipulativeness of the persona, and . . . both are qualified by the persona's regret of [sic] this manipulativeness" (pp. 80-81). It is always useful to look at the cover designs of Atwood's poems, and if Frank Davey had looked at the drawing on the cover of *Power Politics*, I think he might have hesitated to talk about the manipulative persona in the poems. It is rather hard to be manipulative when you're hanging upside down, one foot lashed to an extended arm, hands tied behind your back. Of course you could be perverse and say that she manipulated herself into standing on her head, immobile, with all those bandages wrapped around her, and that he isn't actually holding her; she is thonged to his wrist; he didn't do it, honestly; he's a victim too. But to talk about "castrating bitches," that old cliché from machismo writers like Irving Layton, is hardly appropriate to the dilemma of mutual destructiveness in a patriarchal context which is at the heart of the poems in *Power Politics*. I will not linger over Davey's hostile analysis of *Survival*, but I would like to paraphrase his warning to its readers as a caution to readers of *From There to Here*:

Yet its successful popularization of the *Surfacing*/Anansi [*Open Letter*/Mays/ Davey] view of Canadian literature — especially to high schools and universities — could be a disaster for many Canadian writers: those who haven't expressed the "right ideas" to make the Atwood [Davey] canon. Entire regions and movements within Canadian writing could be driven underground much the way the Williams/Zukofsky tradition in the U.S. was stifled from 1920-1950 by the ascendancy of Eliot. I don't like the implications here, and neither should Atwood [Davey].
(p. 84)

I would like to look briefly at George Amabile's review of Margaret Atwood's *You Are Happy* in *CV II*, 1, No. 1 (Spring 1975) about which I felt some of the same misgivings that reading Mays and Davey arouses in me. Amabile is not setting up as a critic: he is a poet who occasionally reviews poetry, and he is not doctrinaire in the manner of Mays and Davey, but I think that he does, like them, find reasons for not admiring poems because he does not like what he thinks they are saying. Indeed, in his distress over Margaret Atwood's attitudes, as he interprets them, he reminds me of Mays on Webb. He talks of "the book's nearly constant rejection of the body" (p. 5), of the persona in the poems being "cautiously aware of the pain which might be inherent in sensual experience" (p. 5). In the last poems in the collection, he says, she "admits to wanting physical experience and sexual love," but "she does not get enough of their reality into her poems" (p. 5). He finds in the fantasy of the mud woman in the Circe/Mud poems a "cheap, clichéd evasion of reality," and he dismisses the figure of Circe in the poems as an "archetypal bitch," filled with "sexual coldness and intellectual savagery" (p. 6). Though he grudgingly admits the movement toward relatedness in the last poems in the book, he finds them "abstract, prosaic, and surprisingly obvious, as though they had been lifted from a self-help paperback" (p. 6). Similarly, you will recall, Mays finds in Phyllis Webb's poetry a "sense of the worthlessness of the body" and a "testimony, as a woman and a writer, of decisive, unmitigated failure." She will allow herself "neither . . . humility before her sensual impulses nor . . . charity towards her body. . . . The sources of the disgruntlement experienced by some male readers when they read female poets who express some ambivalence about the body and sensual experience may, as I suggested earlier, be rooted in social and psychological expectations about attitudes which are thought to be appropriate to women. Such preconceptions may stand in the way of a sympathetic reading of the poems. Some such thing has, I think, happened in Amabile's review of Atwood. I would like to conclude on a positive note by suggesting, briefly, a different reading of *You Are Happy*.

Margaret Atwood has been from the start a subversive and ironic poet, and in this, her latest collection, she is moving coherently and with characteristic wit toward the undermining of mythological structures in favour of, precisely, something more fluid and real. The poem, "Song of the Hen's Head," for example, is both a commentary on Atwood's preoccupation with the severance between the head and the body and an ironic, diminishing gloss on the Orpheus myth in which the head of the decapitated poet still sings as it makes its bloody way downstream. What the song implicitly "says" is that the disengaged head is not a triumphant symbol of the poet's art, but that in fact it won't do: the word it contemplates is zero, negation; the head apart from the body is useless, despite its deluded outcries:

The word is an O,
outcry of the useless head,

pure space, empty and drastic,
the last word I said.
The word is No.

(*You are Happy*, p. 42)

Similarly, "Siren Song," which Amabile finds contrived in conception and context, I find one of the most witty, subversive, and iconoclastic of the poems. It demonstrates how unlike the mythmaker's fantasy any plausible reality of sirens is. To be a siren and to be perceived as a siren are two very different things, and the tenacity of mythological structures is such that even this ironic undercutting of the traditional story becomes in one sense another version of it. The result is a subtle, wildly funny, and slightly sinister poem which creates a new perspective within a very familiar context.

In like manner, it seems to me a misunderstanding of the Circe/Mud Poems to say, as Amabile does, that the "poet is simply using the classical figure [of Circe] as a device for expressing her own concerns" (p. 6). I think that Amabile misinterprets the Circe figure because he is intent on seeing her in a predominantly sexual relation to the persona of Ulysses:

Having used her own body to tease out the hero's desire, Circe begins to appear before us as the archetypal bitch. . . . Filled as she is with sexual coldness and intellectual savagery, it is not surprising that Circe should admit that 'fresh monsters' are breeding in her mind, and that she fears that 'queen of the two dimensions,' Penelope, who, one may suggest, is both body *and* intellect, a maker in her own right. (p. 6)

One might indeed suggest all sorts of nonsense, as, for example, that two dimensions might refer to body and mind, completeness, or that a woman who weaves by day and destroys her weaving by night could be "a maker in her own right." I would have thought rather that two dimensions implied some lack, there usually being three if not four for completeness. Penelope is flat map, tapestry, mirror, all two-dimensional and available for projection, reflection, interpretation, whatever one wants of her. The term "archetypal bitch" is also inappropriate, since it has meaning only in the context of sexual politics described from the point of view of the man: the games of power and submission, reflection, projection, and mutual destruction which Circe will not play. It is also a term, like Davey's "castrating bitch," which men in a patriarchal society use to describe an unaccommodating woman and is therefore hardly suitable on an island on which a female is definitely in control. No, Circe will not accommodate; she is the lady of surprises, reality, which is always rather different from what one anticipated:

Come away with me, he said, we will live on a desert island.
I said, I am a desert island. It was not what he had in mind.

(*You are Happy*, p. 49)

As I read them, the Circe/Mud poems, like the earlier Atwood poem "Backdrop addresses cowboy," are subversions of the heroic stance, rejections of mythological paradigms, because such preconceived structures are not only restrictive, but destructive. The Circe poem addressed to Ulysses makes this clear:

One day you simply appeared in your stupid boat,
your killer's hands, your disjointed body, jagged as a shipwreck,
skinny-ribbed, blue-eyed, scorched, thirsty, the usual,
pretending to be—what? a survivor?

.....
The trees bend in the wind, you eat, you rest,
you think of nothing.
your mind, you say,
is like your hands, vacant:

vacant is not innocent.

There must be more for you to do
than permit yourself to be shoved
by the wind from coast
to coast to coast, boot on the boat prow
to hold the wooden body
under, soul in control

Ask at my temples
where the moon snakes, tongues of the dark
speak like bones unlocking, leaves falling
of a future you won't believe in

Ask who keeps the wind
ask what is sacred

Don't you get tired of killing
those whose deaths have been predicted
and are therefore dead already?

Don't you get tired of wanting
to live forever?

Don't you get tired of saying Onward?

(You Are Happy, pp. 50-51)

Ulysses, trapped into making the gestures dictated by imperatives which no longer make any sense, if they ever did, is both comic and dangerous. For it is dangerous and absurd to act by rote, without questioning the appropriateness of the gestures you make. Penelope, surrounded by empty bowls, breathing in and out, "waxing and waning / like an inner tube or a mother," and dispensing both at the same time tea and sex graciously, is the comic extreme of the Solveig, wife-mother figure, figment of masculine fantasy, endlessly

and impossibly gratifying, and enslaving too, like all such fantasies, because once caught in her warp and weft, her versions of the story are the only ones you will ever hear. I see these poems as ruthless and comic exercises designed to contrive an escape route, to get outside of story, which alienates from reality by imposing rigid imperatives. Amabile sees the fantasy of the mud-woman in the Circe sequence as a beguiling and simple solution to the problems of relationship, to which Circe is drawn, he says, with a "kind of weary longing." I think on the contrary that the temptation to become the passive mud-woman-earth-mother-mistress is the temptation to stay inside the seductive but destructive simplicity of story, of mythical paradigm. It must be resisted.

I agree with Amabile that the last poems in the Circe/Mud sequence move out of stereotypes, crystal patterns, and into presence, reality. This movement is tentative, fraught with uncertainty; temptations to fall back into old patterns re-emerge:

To love is to let go
of those excuses, habits
we once used for our own safety

but the old words reappear
in the shut throat
(*You Are Happy*, p. 78)

But the last poems do not, as Amabile says they do, "proclaim the new woman's independence, and self-sufficiency"; they do not proclaim anything, and what they celebrate is not self-sufficiency and independence, but relatedness, its risks, its wonders, its precariousness. To say, as Amabile does, of such rich, idiomatic, clear, and achieved poems as the last group in *You Are Happy* that they "remain abstract, prosaic, and surprisingly obvious, as though they had been lifted from a self-help paperback" (p. 6) is to fail to read the poems that are there because they are not what he had in mind. It is a contemporary prejudice to think that abstraction is always a vice in poetry; to write any poem is to select, to abstract. But what could be more sensuous than Atwood's poem "Late August":

This is the plum season, the nights
blue and distended, the moon
hazed, this is the season of peaches
with their lush lobed bulbs
that glow in the dusk, apples
that drop and rot
sweetly, their brown skins veined as glands
no more the shrill voices
that cried *Need Need*
from the cold pond, bladed
and urgent as new grass

Now it is the crickets
that say *Ripe Ripe*
slurred in the darkness, while the plums

dripping on the lawn outside
our window, burst
with a sound like thick syrup
muffled and slow

The air is still
warm, flesh moves over
flesh, there is no

hurry

(*You Are Happy*, p. 93)

The final poem in the book, "Book of Ancestors," together with the first poem of the Circe/Mud sequence seem to me to be the thematic centre of the book. The earlier poem is a rejection of the posturings and disguises indulged in by those who sleep-walk through life in the strait jackets of mythological stereotypes instead of doing that immeasurably more difficult thing, living their own lives:

Men with the heads of eagles
no longer interest me
or pig men, or those who can fly
with the aid of wax and feathers

or those who take off their clothes
to reveal other clothes
or those with skins of blue leather

.....
on hot days you can watch them
as they melt, come apart,
fall into the ocean
like sick gulls, dethronements, plane crashes.

I search instead for the others,
the ones left over,
the ones who have escaped from these
mythologies with barely their lives;
they have real faces and hands,

(*You Are Happy*, p. 47)

The poet can counter the distortion of imposed mythological patterns by subversion, irony, parody, and attention to the real. Given language and its categories, the desire for and pursuit of reality will always be a process, never an arrival. The very beautiful final poem in the book is both a rejection of pre-determined patterns, a realization that it was partly our need for them that called them forth, and an affirmation of life improvised in living presence: a

rejection of death patterns, static demands, imperatives which distort and divide, in favour of improvisation, risk, affirmed life:

Book of Ancestors: these brutal, with curled
beards and bulls' heads . these flattened,
slender with ritual . these contorted
by ecstasy or pain . these bearing
knife, leaf, snake

.....
So much for the gods and their
static demands . our demands, former
demands, death patterns
.....

History
is over, we take place
in a season, an undivided
space, no necessities

hold us closed, distort
us. I lean behind you, mouth touching
your spine, my arms around
you, palm above the heart,
your blood insistent under
my hand, quick and mortal

(*You Are Happy*, pp. 94-95)

I want to reemphasize that I do not regard a reviewer like Amabile as a mischievous presence in Canadian criticism. He does not, like Mays, inflate a personal dilemma into a cultural malaise and then demand that poets provide him with solutions; nor does he, like Davey, select one version of "reality" and human experience and castigate or ignore those writers who dwell in and write out of another reality. But Amabile's misreading of Atwood's book is not unrelated to the activities of Mays and Davey because he too sets out by criticizing the — in his view — deficient style of the poems and then proceeds to argue against them chiefly because of the attitudes which — again, in his view — they express. He accuses Atwood of "mannerism, rhetorical inflation, sloppiness, obscurity. . . , lack of interest in her audience, inept metaphor and analogy, shorthand, verbosity, prosiness, cliché, irrelevant detail, lack of focus, . . . and uncompromising privacy" (p. 5). Yet the body of his review leaves little doubt in my mind that what bothers him about the poems, what makes him want to find fault with them, is the attitudes which he "finds" in them. He is repelled by "the book's nearly constant rejection of the body" (p. 5). Of Circe in the poems he says, "But all is not well. Circe's attitude toward the body is still distant and sarcastic" (p. 6). On the whole sequence he comments, "But the mind-body split which the opening poem insists on and deplores, suggests that the real problem has been an alienation from the pleasures of her own transient physical existence" (p. 6). Rather as Davey posits a theme for *Surfacing* — "the struggle to achieve an authentic self in a

world of inter-personal imperialisms" — and then castigates Atwood for not having, in the novel, advanced much in her insight into this problem, so Amabile states that the "real problem" has been "an alienation from the pleasures of her own transient physical existence" and finds the problem insufficiently resolved by the final poems, in which, he says, the poet admits to wanting physical experience and sexual love but "does not get enough of their reality into her poems." He hopes in her next book for the "rich poems" which her few "admirable discoveries" and "insights" promise (p. 6).

One can only deplore the narrowness of criticism which reads and judges poems in terms of insights, admirable discoveries, approved versions of reality, and optimistic ideological stances toward our possible futures, all expectations based on the critics' various though not unrelated private obsessions. Doctrinaire criticism is baleful because it misinterprets the poetry which exists, thus misleading readers, and because it is prescriptive in its directives about desirable attitudes and poetic modes, thus tending to limit the variety and scope of our literature. One can only hope that poets have the good sense to ignore it and that other critics have the good conscience to speak against it.

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