

NOTES ON CRITICAL PRACTICE: A REPLY TO JEAN MALLINSON¹

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The encounter of the critic with a literary text is as susceptible to ambiguity as any other transaction between the self and other, and as open to variety. It may be casual or passionate or lustful; confident or vulnerable; generous or anxious. It can be an act fraught with disturbance, or empty of meaning, or alive with busy contradictions. This is true because the critic is a person before he is a critic, a respondent to the total environment of surfaces and structures of experience in which the literary artifact is only one object.

But the current fashion in academic literary criticism posits a critic who has definitively left his human wholeness behind him as he thinks and writes; who has become an amnesiac, out of touch with his own urgencies and those of his era; a disembodied intellect able only to look, but not to touch; to think descriptively, but not to open himself to the dangerous possibilities of engagement. It is impossible, of course, for real men and women to assimilate themselves completely to this sterile paradigm, but the preoccupation is there; and its impact is everywhere apparent in the decadent intellectualism of academic critical writing, its timidity and narrowness, its utter *sameness*.

But fastidiousness has no place in the perennial loss of virginity and purity that is the essence of the critical act: for poetry touches not only our public and respectable personae, but also the dark, extravagant, abhorrent sectors of our selves. If the poems our writers have given us summon our confusions as well as our certainties into their structures, are we then to deny (in our writing of that summoning and engagement) that such has taken place? All that we have learned and thought, and all we are, is present in the critical encounter; and all is illumined by poetry, challenged and unmasked. We cannot demand that poetry confirm our beliefs or fit neatly into our frames of literary and historical reference, though when it does we must say so, and how. When it bursts these expectations asunder, when it leaves us with nothing but questions, in open disarray, disarmed: this too must be said, and an account given.

The poets of this century have broken forward from the strictures of the past, liberating the making of poems as they have gone, creating new forms

¹See Jean Mallinson, "Ideology and Poetry: An Examination of Some Recent Trends in Canadian Criticism," *SCL*, 3 (Winter 1978), 93-109.

for new thoughts and sensibilities. And these tasks have been accomplished in the course of a great project of inclusion, of gathering and probing beyond the limits set by the older poetics. They have renewed language by renewing the adventure and discovery, the struggle for heroic reclamation of what has been suppressed, in the practice of language. Criticism, however, lags far behind, because it is yet enmired in a formalistic ideology unworthy of its immense promise, stagnated in that intellectual and experiential poverty against which we who write criticism must continually move and work.

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