

A REPLY TO JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

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I am at a loss to understand why John Bentley Mays has addressed his "Notes on Critical Practice" to me since he does not turn his attention to any of the issues I raised in my article: the danger to literature of canon-building on exclusive, ideological grounds, the destructiveness of personal attack thinly disguised as criticism, and the presumption of prescriptive declarations about the nature of literature and reality. But I blush to reflect that my remarks seem to have been the occasion for his present graceless, but mercifully brief, polemic. And I confess I feel a twinge of pity for anyone who describes himself, by inference, as a "respondent to the total environment of surfaces and structures of experience." It must be hard work, and it certainly isn't my idea of being alive.

What, then, am I to make of this little piece by Mays? In terms of genre, it is an apologia, defensive and sometimes belligerent in tone, at times vainly fluttering its wings in an attempt to rise to the publicly moral heights of homily, in a style which I should describe as vapid hieratic. The difficulty in replying to Mays when he is on his philosophical high-horse, talking his derivative high-talk, is that he isn't really building a house, so there aren't any doors to knock on — though even if there were, I doubt if one would find him at home.

Indeed, his present *feuilleton* confirms my view that he is a master of the dubious art of writing inflated prose in a corrupt vocabulary. He strikes at air, or at phantoms of his own devising; he conjures up a category, calls it an academic critic and hurls abstractions at it. Even when, on rare occasions, he manages to talk like the person he exhorts us to become, the one who lugs his "human wholeness" with him rather than "leaving it behind," his metaphors seldom come off:

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.

The royal "we" seems out of place here. Speak for yourself, John, but please count me out. To be deflowered over and over again seems curiously repetitive and would require a little reconstruction between poems. Are you

¹See *SCL*, 3 (Winter 1978), 93-109.

always so respectable in public? Really so dark and abhorrent in private? The critic as Dorian Gray, perhaps? It does seem sad that a man so hooked on wholeness should, looking inwards, find himself divided into "sectors." I should personally be very disconcerted to discover my psyche so methodically partitioned. Give me something respectably romantic, like fragments, any day.

Surely — and I risk being extravagant, and in public too — a self-styled *enfant terrible* as critic can do better than the disembodied, debased pulpit oratory of the following:

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?

Note the "then," the "that," the "such": marks of a rhetoric which, having little or nothing to say, vainly props itself up with the shop-worn expletives of an out-moded style. Oh, the tedium of these empty cadences; the milk-sop, watered-down ex-existentialism of "summoning and engagement"; this inflated, pretentious "giving of account"; these projects, essences, gatherings, probings; these immensities, reclamations: the language of the conquistador as frontiersman. Take care, he usually carries a knife or a gun in his belt. And all this rhetoric in praise of the great task of poetry is spoken by a man who is capable of writing "broken forward" and speaking of the "practice of language."

Myself, I don't practice language; I speak, I write and re-write. But — since the first duty of the critic is to language — perhaps John Mays had better go back to his typewriter and "practice" a little language. I have, in fact, a few closing suggestions which might help him change his style from the banal, abstract, sham existential into something with the quick, bright quality of strong English. He should forget the ground of being and get back to the roots of words. Being out to lunch may have its attractions, but these summonings, encounters, transactions, these urgencies, engagements, must get to be pretty thin eating or pretty meagre company. I suggest, to start with, that he banish for a long time the present participle of all but the most concrete English verbs; that every time he is moved to use an abstraction he try a concrete word instead; that he try to stop being a "respondent to the total environment of surfaces and structures" for a bit and try living and reading and writing.

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