

A RESPONSE TO JEAN MALLINSON'S "POETRY AND IDEOLOGY"¹

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Please allow me a brief response to Jean Mallinson's article "Ideology and Poetry: An Examination of Some Recent Trends in Canadian Criticism." As a critic known to attend more to form than to declared content, I of course noted immediately the frequency in Ms. Mallinson's writing of loaded images ("magic circle," "coterie of fellow travellers," "weeds and flowers"), of sophomoric asides ("slap!"), and of pejorative name-calling. John Bentley Mays and his articles are variously termed "extravagant," "malevolent," "self-indulgent," "venomous," "desperate," "irrational," "savage," "ill-tempered," "tendentious"; I and my work are termed "repetitive," "mischievous," "normative," "prescriptive," "exclusive," "bewildering," "heavy-minded," "naive," "hopelessly diagrammatic," "dogmatic," "doctrinaire," as well as "tendentious." Quite a list. Overall, the rhetoric suggests someone more eager for argument than possessed of a case to argue. Most of Ms. Mallinson's adjectives are intended, I would assume, as themselves 'magic' words which will blacken their target on utterance — the adjective being by nature presumptuous. But many of Ms. Mallinson's presumptions are most questionable. Should I mind being called "mischievous" or "normative"? Is it blameworthy to be "prescriptive" and "exclusive"? — probably only to those I have proscribed or excluded.

In the case of John May's alleged malevolence, ill-temper, venom, irrationality, savagery, etc., the presumed portrait astonishes reality. The quotations which Ms. Mallinson offers to document the portrayal turn out to be not vituperative at all but rather ordinary and somewhat admiring descriptions of Phyllis Webb's writings. What Ms. Mallinson reveals here, in fact, is not a savage Mays but her own surprisingly provincial and bourgeois view of Webb. In the quoted passages Mays praises Webb for the same elements which attract him to Leonard Cohen and Genet — her courageous declaration of self-destruction, vanity, and desperation, her "commitment to sexual, intellectual, literary failure." Mallinson's wide-eyed amazement at these comments (a frequent rhetorical device in her essay) suggests she has never heard of black romanticism. Or perhaps black romanticism is acceptable to her in Montreal or Paris but not in Vancouver? She seems to want a highly edited, anaesthetized Phyllis Webb whose despairs and

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melodramas, given clear form in *Naked Poems*, are somehow safely concealed and forgotten. One wonders why.

More self-revelation follows. May's wish that Webb transcend such a limited and painful view of life is a benevolent wish for her personal growth; but to Mallinson it is only a reflection of "culturally determined expectations about the nourishing and comforting attitudes that it is thought appropriate for women to express." Mallinson's real anger at this point seems directed more at the cultural stereotype than at Mays. The message I get here is that a woman is better off in "cul de sac nihilism" than involved in nourishment or comfort — a rather polarized view.

Such a polarization makes it exceedingly difficult for a man to say much about a woman's writing. Ms. Mallinson's article is both not at all "nourishing" and not at all accurate, but in objecting to its inaccuracies I may also be perceived as objecting to its lack of 'nourishment,' and of thereby holding Ms. Mallinson to the maternal stereotype. It seems to me that this is a crucial issue in contemporary Canadian criticism, and one which must be resolved if the credibility of male critics is not to be limited to their work on male writers and of female critics to work on female writers. In the present article, Mays's perception of Webb as having given literary form to "the worthlessness of the body" becomes distorted into disappointment that Webb "will not be earth-mother Solveig, Penelope, waiter and shelterer"; my reservations about Atwood's *Power Politics* become a personal grievance against the "unaccommodating woman"; and George Amabile's suggestion that Atwood's *Circe* ("Circe/Mud Poems") is a "cliched evasion of reality" becomes a view of the woman "in a predominantly sexual relation." Using this logic, Mays, Amabile, and I could account for Ms. Mallinson's attacks on us as mere displaced disappointment in men, or as perhaps implicit demands that we give her and other women fatherly support and confirmation. Possibly so.

Most of Ms. Mallinson's 'disappointment' with me takes the form of objection to something she calls "ideology." As with Mays, she is determined to make appear blameworthy something which I have openly acknowledged — here a specific formal and philosophical approach to literature. Particularly since I have repeatedly ("repetitively," Ms. Mallinson would say) argued that all views of literature are subjective, I find her claims that I state "as fact what is only . . . [my] opinion," that I have forced a "private" view on a "public" audience, sadly amusing. I don't find much of myself present in such remarks. It is not me but Ms. Mallinson who finds the *subjective* to be *prescriptive*, *point of view* to be *ideology*. When through semantic alteration *roast beef* becomes a *charred hunk of dead cow*, it is the perceiver, not the perceived, that is revealed.