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Fred Alsberg

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AN INTERVIEW WITH WENDELL MAYO

by Fred Alsberg

Alsberg: When you lectured in Lithuania about American Literature, what types of writing were they most interested in?

Mayo: Nature writers, for one. For example, I read ten poems by Robert Frost concerning nature, translated into Lithuanian. At the conclusion of "Birches" one of my colleagues from the former-Soviet republic said, "Frost's birches are like our birches here in Lithuania; they are like Lithuanians—we bend but we do not break." Lithuanians are strongly drawn to American writers who have a healthy respect for nature. Lithuanians were one of the last peoples to be Christianized in Europe—sometime around the 14th century, so their pagan traditions, ties to nature, and fears of nature, have survived a little longer. Lithuanians are also fascinated by American writers who deal in various ways with the relationship of the individual to society. With the exception of the period 1920-1940, over the last two centuries, Lithuanians have suffered foreign rule: the Germans and Poles in the 19th Century; the French and Germans in the early 20th Century; and until recently, the Soviets. Because Lithuanians have been deprived of the opportunity to develop a national literature and identity, they are interested in work such as Whitman's "Song of Myself," the poet who saw America itself as a poem. Lithuanians are also attracted to American writers who deal in various ways with "displaced persons"— they were particularly moved when, for example, I read an excerpt from "The Diary of Peter Pitchlynn, 1828-37," published in 1993 in *The Missouri Review*. Pitchlynn was a Choctaw chief who recorded events on the infamous "Trail of Tears"—the displacement of Native Americans from their lands in the southeastern United States. Lithuanians reacted strongly to this passage since in the 1940's and 1950's over 300,000 Lithuanians were executed or deported by the Soviets to Siberia....I suppose I'm going on and on about this. But I'm very interested in the culture. Lithuanians are extremely sophisticated and modern people. But I suspect that because they lived so long under a modern totalitarian regime, they prefer literatures which reflect their desire for closer ties to nature and to their cultural identities. By the way, some of my favorite Lithuanian writers are the 19th century novelists, Žemaite (for her depiction of rural life); and the 20th century poets Janina Degutytė (for her nature poems) and Justinas Marcinkevičius (for modern tensions, for example, his poem, "Evening: Atom Bomb Fright").

Alsberg: What makes character so important in stories?

Mayo: Character is so important because a writer cannot avoid it. Even in a piece of writing supposedly devoid of character (I'm thinking of the "Time Passes" episode in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*), at least one character is always present—the narrator. Even given the most objective point of view, there exists an implied voice saying, "I'd like to tell you this story." One cannot avoid characters in fiction, ever, so one must make the best of them! And that means to communicate, dramatically, what it means to be human. I think of the narrator as a kind of benchmark character. Other characters or elements of the story come into relationship with themselves and with this benchmark character, and it is these relationships —antagonistic, sympathetic, quirky, quixotic—that give a story a life-like complexity, a pointedness, a humanness. What else can be more important than making fiction appeal to humans? Who or what else will read them?

Alsberg: Why did you decide to write short stories as opposed to other forms?

Mayo: Edith Wharton suggested that writing finds its own dimension. I know that seems a bit mysterious, but I think this goes for writers, too. I began writing poems, published a few in literary magazines, but quickly became frustrated with the prospect of turning a single couplet around in my head for weeks at a time, thinking that all poems had to be very short (before I discovered that this was a peculiarly 20th century predilection). So while I slaved for the elusive modern lyric, I began to lose my sense of what I wanted to say. I needed more elbow room. Narrative gives me that. I look to poets for my deepest inspirations and for reminding me that at some level every narrative demands attention to sound and sense of language. And that other form, the novel? Henry James' "baggy monster?" I'm working on a novel-in-stories now. We'll see about that.

Alsberg: Does a great story always change the reader in some way?

Mayo: Yes. I believe the greatest stories have a pointedness to them (not a point) that says to a reader, "This story begins long before the beginning and ends long after the ending, long after you've finished reading." These kinds of stories project themselves into the deep past (perhaps in a mythic sense) and into an uncertain future of hope and dilemma. I believe that readers who think and feel deeply about their present circumstances are changed when they read these sorts of stories. I'm thinking, for example, of Joyce's "The Dead," Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Alsberg: You mentioned myth in conjunction with stories. Are mythic elements important to you?

Mayo: Yes, though my sense of what constitutes myth is changing. While archetypal mythic patterns—contest, metamorphosis, taboo, ect— are useful in stories, the kinds of experiences people share, whether in the deep past or not, are changing. For instance, folklorists are now studying “urban myth,” shared experiences of urban dwellers. And television has become instantaneous shared experience, folklore or myth, “in a box.” I tend to avoid looking to electronic mass media for patterns for my stories and look instead to others, to try to make something new out of them, to make my stories continue to offer an alternative to television.

Alsberg: How has your writing changed or evolved over the years?

Mayo: The opening lines of Yeats’ “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” reads “I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,/ I sought it daily for six weeks or so.” I’ve always thought Yeats wrote those lines a bit tongue-in-cheek—after all, he sought his “theme” all his life, not just six weeks. I know the modern predilection was and still seems to be a search for form, not subject, but more and more I look for themes or subjects, ones that seem to me important: why people suffer; the old ache of faith and faithlessness; a loss of centeredness, etc. I used to be so concerned about form. But now I’m beginning to feel that subjects tend to demand forms, not the other way around. As I write, then, form clarifies and transforms “subject” into something fresh, original, meaningful. So I continue to look for subjects...as Yeats writes in another poem, “I walk through the long shadows questioning.”

Alsberg: Should the reader always consider the character narrating a story to be presenting a slanted perspective?

Mayo: Speakers of stories offer slanted perspectives because they must be selective in what they speak about and how they speak about it. Form dictates this. Art dictates this. Even an omniscient objective narrator is slanted in the sense that it must select and arrange elements in a narrative to tell a story; these narrators become “arrangers” of a kind, for example, those implied in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. A good story writer can create the illusion of objectivity; or a uniquely compelling speaker who is trustworthy; or one who, considering other elements in the story, is untrustworthy—and everything in between. I think this is one reason story writing is so interesting—it’s a bit like acting: think of the infinite variety of personalities and perspectives (*dramatis personae*) the imagination can conjure up.

Alsberg: Do you ever research your stories before you write them?

Mayo: I don't often research stories *before* I write them, but I do research them *as* I write them. For me, research is part of the writing process, not separate: as I'm writing a story I may reach a point where the story begins to demand that I find out a little more about a character, place, idea, etc. I've learned not to fight it. I'm off to the library—or somewhere. One story may demand that I know precisely how the Boris Karloff monster was made-up for the original 1931 *Frankenstein* film; another, Pancho Villa's supposed whereabouts in 1916. Now I'm working on stories set in Lithuania. I'm keeping a list of research questions, so I can work on them when I get to Lithuania.

Alsberg: How does pacing in a story relate to memory?

Mayo: As a reader, I expect a sense of how a story moves forward in "clock-time." It's a basic instinct I have: how time is passed. And, for better or worse, I like to think that "progress" is being made dramatically as clock-time is passed. Memory is a kind of time, too, but quite unlike clock-time; it is more like dream-time. If you've ever had a dream you swore lasted several hours and woke to see that only five minutes have passed on the clock on your nightstand, then you know the difference. When I'm writing, I'm trying to manage both these sorts of time so that my story uses elements of memory to give it psychological richness, but not so much that the progression of the plot in clock-time bogs down.

Alsberg: Are any of your stories autobiographical?

Mayo: Sure. Some more than others. None are purely or mostly autobiographical. I'm afraid that the pure facts about my life would make little sense to anyone. "The Hermitage, 2:10 P.M.," which appeared previously in *Westview*, has very few autobiographical elements, perhaps none; it began with a single image: the broken clock on the mantle in the Tsar's palace. On the other hand, another story of mine, "El Centauro del Norte," is predicated on a story my uncle told me about my grandfather, but it goes far beyond that story when I decided to bring Pancho Villa into the narrative. Is that autobiographical? Perhaps. Both these stories do intersect my life at one point: I began to write them because I needed to answer questions for myself about myself.