

A Poet on Poetry and Its Discontents

Robyn Sarah, *Little Eureka's: A Decade's Thoughts about Poetry*. Emeryville, ON: Biblioasis, 2007. 270pp.

Little Eureka's may well be the most informative and useful book that has yet been produced in Canada covering every aspect of the writing, reading, and appreciation of poetry. If it were made compulsory reading for all students of poetry, both the art itself and literary commentary about it would improve immeasurably. But it is addressed to many besides students: to poets, teachers, publishers, editors, grant-giving agencies, general readers - to all, perhaps, except literary theorists, who would be unlikely to understand. Yet Robyn Sarah writes in her introduction: "I have never thought of myself as a literary critic." This is not, I think, as paradoxical as it may seem at first sight. As I read, I was reminded of a late poem by Robert Graves, quoted (appropriately, given Sarah's sensibly non-academic attitudes) from memory:

Experts ranged in serried rows
Fill the enormous plaza full;
But only one is there who knows,
And he's the man who fights the bull.

Sarah has been fighting the bull for the best part of thirty years now, and has earned the privilege to speak out.

For the record, she was born in 1949, and has eight volumes of poetry to her credit. Her education included early training in music, and as a result she brings a fine ear for subtle rhythms and unusual sound-combinations to all her work. Her poetry arises mainly from the challenges of everyday living; the poems are generally simple in language, though distinguished by a regular but strictly controlled command of striking yet never flamboyant metaphor. Although many of her poems are in "free verse" (of which more later), we are always aware of conscious shaping. And they generally contain "little Eureka's," effects that surprise and delight, and linger memorably within the mind. Hers is an unostentatious but decidedly individual voice.

This is so rich a book that it is difficult for a reviewer to know where to begin. The best procedure may be to present a formal description of its varied contents, and then to offer a personal account (since this is a very personal book) of aspects that I consider most valuable. First, however,

two representative samples of what is said and how it is said. Here is part of a review of “four new poetry books, all of them ‘firsts’ for their authors”:

I found in all four books some of the elements of poetry; I found glimpses and flashes of poetry; I found phrases and images and stanzas that I admired. But I did not find many *whole poems* that stuck in my head, even on second and third reading—and I did not find a single whole poem that I wanted to run out and photocopy, tape to my fridge or tack to my wall, and *live with* for a while. (143-4)

An admirable blend of honesty, discrimination, and firmness. Here is a critic with standards, not afraid of revealing subjective responses.

And here, from an interview, is her impassioned statement about the reluctance of modern poets to learn the tools of their trade:

It amazes me that there are so many poets writing today who feel no pull to learn the formal vocabulary of their literary forebears (I mean, to learn the exercise of it—to achieve what fluency they can in it)—simply as part of mastering their craft, their facility with the language, their control of it—whether or not they choose to write poems of their own in traditional forms. (Who not only feel no pull to learn it, but who make a virtue of *not* learning it!) I see no reason why any modern poet should feel *obliged* to write in metre and rhyme, or to write sonnets or villanelles or whatever. But I think we should all be *able* to do so, if we want to call ourselves poets. And we do not become *able* without practice. We should remember that the modern poets who broke with formalism to pioneer a free-verse idiom were breaking with something they were fluent in. (262-3)

One can hear Sarah’s unique combination of enthusiasm and frustration through the rhythms of her prose. Clearly a genuinely committed poet.

The book consists of five parts: “Essays,” “Approaches,” “Essay-Reviews,” “Short Reviews,” and “Collaborations.” The essays range widely over general matters. She begins with an autobiographical memoir, “How I Fell for Poetry.” This is followed by a highly readable discussion of Poetics that presents a series of attempts on her part to define poetry, none of them comprehensive but all of them thought-provoking and full of stimulating insights. She then tackles the teaching of poetry - and does not mince her words. She soundly condemns “wrong-headed teaching of poetry, by teachers who neither like nor understand it themselves, out of text-books designed with exactly such teachers in mind” (31), and chal-

lenges the choice of poems taught (those with “topic appeal“ and “social-studies potential” (32), etc. “Good poetry teaching,” she insists, “gives strong place to the aural and the oral: hearing poems and saying them, reading them aloud to experience their rhythms and sounds, reciting them in performance” (34).

The next, “On Publishing Poetry,” criticizes the whole process in Canada by which the grant-system forces poets to publish too much too regularly and too soon, while the last substantial essay, “On Editing Poetry,” questions “workshop” situations which can “cultivate an entrenched insecurity about one’s own intentions as a poet - an inability to judge one’s own unfinished work, to decide when a poem is finished” (47). Editors, she argues, should advise but not command, and should concentrate on displaying a poem to the best advantage, querying details perhaps, but not encouraging substantial alterations which are the poet’s responsibility. It’s sad that suggestions that ought to be obvious to the point of “needless to say” come across as controversial and even radical.

The central sections are more specific and practical in nature. “Talking about these things in the abstract is meaningless: they only make sense when we have an actual poem in front of us” (26). Sarah is open to many kinds of poem, tolerant of idiosyncrasy, welcoming to an original approach, but she knows that some poems—many poems—are inferior to others. The “bottom line” is always evaluation; she has no patience with the pseudo-democratic everyone-should-have-a-prize mentality. Moreover, though most of her examples are Canadian, they are not exclusively so; she often comments on poets from elsewhere, even including some who write in other languages.

The most substantial piece here is “In Star-Warm Dusk: The Poems of George Johnston,” a welcome specimen of close reading that tries to place Johnston where he belongs, in the forefront of Canadian poetic achievement. Once again, Sarah’s crusading zeal is evident. Here, she insists, is a scandalously neglected poet who has much to give us:

In a country that has nurtured, almost to the exclusion of anything else, a free-verse flat-toned vernacular in its poetry—accustoming readers to expect some novelty of content, shocking or exotic or wittily anecdotal, to carry the poem—it is the rare reader who recognizes what a highly disciplined, exacting poetic sensibility is at work here, what a nuanced ear, or what a masterful hand. Most Canadian critics have become deaf to such virtues. (97-8)

She provides sensitive readings of seventeen poems, all of which are as exemplary as the poems themselves. Her emphasis, as it should be, is on

how the meaning of each poem is determined not by a bald statement of theme, but by tone, verbal nuance, and the exaltation of colloquial rhythms to dignity and eloquence without ever losing touch with the modest, the human, and often the humorous.

The final section, "Collaborations," involves subjects discussed with other poets, generally in some form of interview. All are valuable, but I would like to focus on one involving the vexed question of free verse. Sarah had reviewed Governor-General's award winner Robert Hilles's *Higher Ground* (a review reproduced in the fourth section) and complained that it was prose arbitrarily sliced into verse-lines. As a result, John Unrau, a poetry-writing academic, wrote to her suggesting that the same might be said of the work of other poets and citing examples from Michael Ondaatje, Don Coles, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, and Al Purdy. The resultant exchange of letters is duly reproduced here. Sarah agrees in the cases of Ondaatje and Purdy, but explains how, in her view, the extracts from Coles, Hughes, and Heaney are justified as free verse. One does not need to accept every argument (though personally I find them convincing), but it is a brilliant exercise in subtle discrimination, essential reading even for those who inhabit one or other of the extreme ends of the "free" or "traditional" verse-spectrum. More is communicated in twelve pages than in as many volumes of learned scholarly commentary.

Little Eureka's is a compelling record of what Sarah has learned, not through accepting standard theoretical formulations, but through personal experience, a disciplined apprenticeship, and sustained thought about her chosen craft. It is refreshing because it never tries to disguise the personal response under a cloak of supposedly objective detachment. When she says that she "fell for poetry," she is bearing witness to an equivalent of falling in love. Endearingly, she can ask: "What do I love about this poem? ..." (70) or begin a paragraph of shrewd literary analysis with "I love the way the word 'stars' ..." (78). How many contemporary poets, one wonders, love words in quite the same way?

For myself, I "love" many of the insights presented here because they touch off echoes in my own experience that I have lacked the courage to acknowledge. For example, she acknowledges exposure to "A. A. Milne's two volumes of children's verse, *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*," as vital to her early development (17). I share that good fortune, and am fully convinced of its importance as a factor in my own response to language and its possibilities. They introduced both of us to rhythmic subtlety, the artistic value of repetition, and the sheer joy of verbal dexter-

ity. (I would, indeed, go further, and add their prose equivalents, *Winnie the Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*, as performing a similar function in encouraging an ear for clear, flowing, and witty prose.) There are many, I suppose, who will dismiss these books as hopelessly dated and outmoded, yet it is worth pointing out that they are contemporary with Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon* series, are far more varied in tone and decidedly superior in style.

Sarah also argues that, contrary to present-day beliefs, memorizing poems "is actually a deeply enriching activity that should be brought back...a great poem saved in memory will repay, many times over, the effort involved in putting it there" (34). How right she is! Once again, I was fortunate in growing up before ill-informed educational psychologists took control. The less fortunate are, I suspect, incapable of appreciating the extent of their cultural deprivation. (Interestingly, P. K. Page has made the same point recently in *The Filled Pen*.)

There are many reasons why I "love" this book, not least the honesty and forthrightness of the opening statement in her introduction: "First off: I'd rather write poems." After so much high-flown theoretical pontificating from our "professional" scholar critics in recent decades, it is both a relief and a pleasure to find someone stating that her motivation is "to challenge aspects of cultural policy, practice, and pedagogical thinking that (to my mind) serve poetry badly and diminish its audience" (11). Here is someone rightly concerned about the waste of effort and talent (not to mention expense) involved in the annual publication of scores of books of poetry (and non-poetry) when the vast majority even of the worthy ones will never reach the small group that might appreciate them. But Sarah's book is not weighed down by verbal hand-wringing. Her exercises in "practical criticism" point towards what can be done. After one of her guest appearances in an elementary-school classroom, the teacher remarked: "You've made me realize it isn't the kids who are afraid of poetry - it's teachers" (36). Such an example is immeasurably more valuable than run-of-the-mill academic criticism.

Here, then, is a poet who can both write and think about poetry in all its aspects. *Little Eureka's* is sensible, practical, clearly and even beautifully written. Though the longer pieces are the most rewarding, even the brief reviews can present food for thought and offer salutary challenges to our preconceptions. Read it.

W. J. Keith