133

Fighting Words, a New Vision, and a Call to Arms

Carmine Starnino. *A Lover's Quarrel: Essays and Reviews*. Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 2004. 269pp.

Make no mistake about it, this is an important book. It will, however, enrage many. A gauntlet has been thrown down, which cannot be ignored; nor should it be.

First, some adjectives that could be applied to the book. Outspoken? Certainly. Devastating? Yes, but gratifyingly constructive also (more of that in a moment). Offensive? Well, yes, if you happen to be a bad poet or a bad critic; Starnino admits to being, on occasion, "fantastically rude" and "intemperately dismissive" (13). Persuasive? So far as I'm concerned, absolutely.

Starnino's basic premise can be paraphrased as follows: if you consider (say) Susan Musgrave or Christopher Dewdney talented and important poets, then you won't be able to recognize truly accomplished poetry when you encounter it. In his own words: "we've frittered away the last thirty years valorizing negligible poets who possess feeble imaginations, meagre technical skills, and scant knowledge of the tradition in which they work" (14-15). Once again, I agree entirely–though I must confess with due shame that I half fell for Dewdney's work when it first appeared.

So much for the polemical, destructive part. But the corollary is still more important. Starnino argues that, despite suspicions to the contrary, Canada has produced some excellent poets who have written poems equal to anything produced in English during the same time-span: "I would say that there exists a Canadian poetry that is better–more musically focused, more imaginatively surprising, more seriously motivated and more verbally memorable–than the version the world is familiar with" (45).Unfortunately, he continues, academics have failed to recognize most of them. Again, agreed.

Whether we like it or not (and I, for one, like it), Starnino creates a strong case for both parts of his argument. It won't, of course, be a popular case because, if he is right, new textbooks and anthologies will have to be compiled, and a lot of professors will have to scrap their lecture-notes and start afresh. And this will entail a lot of laborious rethinking. So be it!

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Despite the fact that Starnino has established himself prominently on the Montreal poetry scene in the last few years, it may be necessary to explain here that he first came to attention in 1997 with the publication of *The New World*, notable for a series of accomplished and moving poems based on his Canadian-Italian background. There he projected a strong sense of family ties, but also included a number of poems exploring his cultural and religious heritage, especially several striking verse-explorations of the art of Caravaggio. This was followed by *Credo* (2000), which returned to the same material with increased technical and stylistic confidence, and *With English Subtitles* (2004), where a linguistic exuberance (reflected in his criticism, as we shall see) comes to the fore. Since the mid-1990s he has been contributing reviews to the Montreal *Gazette* and other newspapers and magazines such as the *National Post* and *Books in Canada*. In 2001 he edited a collection of essays on the work of David Solway in the handy Guernica series, and for some years now has been in charge of the Signal Editions at Véhicule Press. It is, I think, significant that he has no academic affiliations.

A Lover's Quarrel divides into three parts: an Introduction, a long essay–60 pages–appearing for the first time, which raises general critical issues, and a selection of articles and reviews, the products of his literary journalism, that comment on individual poets and/or specific volumes. Each section deserves separate consideration.

The Introduction, though highly readable and full of shrewd observations, is oddly (I think, unnecessarily) defensive. Thus he begins by modestly questioning the wisdom of reprinting reviews in volume form. Yet, for my part, I have always enjoyed such compilations by critically talented men of letters (and am grateful to Starnino for drawing my attention to some that I had missed). Indeed, I far prefer reading a judicious selection of reviews by a trustworthy critic than most of the one-eye-on-a-c.v. articles churned out for the learned journals (even some of those in *Canadian Poetry*!).

Starnino then goes so far as to apologize for the fact that "much of the writing in *A Lover's Quarrel* had its origin in anger" (11). Although he rightly goes on to insist that this anger is often directed "at the unmerited neglect of a poet," he is clearly preparing readers for his more curmudgeonly critical judgments: "anger at the overblown fanfare attending a book, and anger at the circumstances conspiring to ensure that poems in this country continue to be crudely read." But in certain circumstances, such anger is surely necessary as a moral and aesthetic duty, and I firmly believe

that such is the case here. I can think of no more justifiable reasons for anger, so far as literary matters are concerned, than those that Starnino cites. Moreover, as one who has published his share of angry reviews and articles, I applaud Starnino's courage in risking protest and censure to say what desperately needs to be said.

More important, however, is the fact that the later sections of this Introduction contain one of the very few serious discussions of the art of reviewing that I have ever encountered. Its cogency and good sense are all the more welcome for that reason. Scholarly reviewers–especially young scholarly reviewers–would be well advised to read and ponder it.

In the long central essay that gives its name to the book as a whole, Starnino pins his colours to the mast, and it is immediately made clear that he is radically challenging the Canadian literary-critical status quo. He is, above all, unabashedly evaluative, insistent on reading literature as literature and not as something else. "To read a poem," he asserts, "is to read aesthetically" (42). (That he feels bound to state the obvious confirms the seriousness of the problem.) Similarly, he has no patience with the ideological establishment that persists in assessing all contemporary work in terms of "post-colonialism." Starnino is healthily contemptuous of this attitude, properly identifying "the most fatal flaw in the doctrine of colonialism" as "the idea that influence will always provoke impersonation rather than a self-defining difference" (71). The English language, he reminds us, "is a medium, not an 'oppression' and it can as well affirm one's Canadian experience as deny it" (56). All this is, to say the least, refreshing, as is his related, wonderfully blunt pronouncement: "There's no reason why one shouldn't be able to write great poetry, except that great poetry is hard to write" (62).

Starnino's critical attitudes become even clearer, of course, when we turn to the specific articles and reviews. The variety of his responses is exhilarating. He properly applauds some well-established poets whose reputations are virtually unassailable (A. M. Klein, P. K. Page), draws attention to the weaknesses that accompany the virtues of those he respects with reservations (Louis Dudek, Irving Layton), discriminates shrewdly within the work of others (Richard Outram, Tim Lilburn, John Reibetanz), severely challenges some inflated reputations (Musgrave and Dewdney), and firmly questions the importance of certain writers whom he obviously hopes will turn out no more than nine-days-wonders (Christian Bök, Anne Carson).

As for lesser-known writers–or, to be more circumspect, poets seldom formally taught in university "CanLit" courses–who, it may be asked, does

he single out for special praise? From the past, in an admirable act of rehabilitation, Charles Bruce; in the present, Eric Ormsby, David Solway, and Ricardo Sternberg, all of whom are discussed in some detail. Others, mentioned with approval in the course of the book, though often only in passing, include (among others) Mary Dalton, Michael Harris, Robyn Sarah, Peter Van Toorn, and Christopher Wiseman. I suspect that many of these names will be unfamiliar to all but the most omnivorous of regular *Canadian Poetry* readers. If so, here is yet another reason why this book needs to be taken into account.

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It is time now to define Starnino's critical position a little more precisely. Throughout the book we find complaints about "the joylessness and phrasal drabness of current poetry criticism" and, more generally, "the blandness of our present literary scene" (12). Not unexpectedly, these strictures are similar to those levelled at Canadian poetry itself so far as the currently accepted canon is concerned. He repeats, to be sure, a number of recurrent complaints that have been heard (though not generally heeded) before: the unwarranted and self-limiting emphasis on "Canadianness," the reluctance to have Canadian writing judged by rigorous world standards, uncritical acceptance of an avant-garde that usually indulges in no more than "ersatz experimentation" (110). However legitimate such charges may be, they are hardly unprecedented. A clue to Starnino's special brand of dissatisfaction , however, may be found in his objection to "unassuming, artifice-avoiding poems" (45).

"Artifice-avoiding." When Starnino writes about his likes rather than his dislikes, the same point is made again and again. Thus he quotes a passage from E. J. Pratt's "The Witches' Brew," describing it with obvious approval as "impulsive, sparkling, madcap and mischievous," and this is followed immediately by pleas for "linguistic ardour" and "lyric licence" (91). He confesses to being "tired of all the propaganda" about the virtues of "ordinary language" (92), and although he claims to have "no gripe … against spare workmanship" the quality isn't much in evidence here. The whole passage works up to an impassioned call for "accomplished, *verbally charged*, memorable poetry" (93; my emphasis).

And it is precisely here that Starnino's critical position–his ruling aesthetic passion, if you will–is revealed. Not only do we recognize his preference among the older poets for those who have evolved their own individual and powerful rhetoric–Pratt, Klein, Page, and (with qualifica-

tions) Layton–but the newer poets who attract him are similarly noted for what he later calls "linguistic brio" (229), especially Eric Ormsby, with whom Starnino shared an insightful "conversation" in Tim Bowling's *Where the Words Come From* (2002), which is well worth looking up. Indeed, Ormsby has obviously been an important mentor for Starnino, his name occurring not only on the acknowledgments page of *A Lover's Quarrel* but in all three volumes of poetry.

And not Ormsby alone. A high percentage of the writers discovered and praised here live and work in Montreal, and can now be recognized as a loosely knit and mutually congenial–as well as highly gifted–poetic group: Harris (Starnino's predecessor at Signal Editions), Van Toorn, Solway, Sarah, and a number of others including Ormsby himself. Solway, incidentally, has written an important account of this group, entitled "Double Exile and Montreal English-Language Poetry" in *Director's Cut* (2003), a book that complements Starnino's in its call for radical reconsideration of who and what are truly important in current Canadian poetry.

Starnino's context, and the logic of his whole intellectual and critical attitudes, should now be seen in clearer focus. All these poets stress mastery of language, with accompanying emphasis on craftsmanship and discipline, shunning self-conscious "Canadianness," Purdyesque vernacular, politically correct ideology, and all the numerous other non-poetic characteristics that have an apparent stranglehold on Canadian writing at the present time. "Canadian Poets, Learn Your Trade," the title of one of Starnino's reviews, is an adaptation from Solway's poem "Lampman among the Moderns," both of them alluding back, of course (but dare I, given the suspicion of "foreign influence" that both lament, say "of course"?), to Yeats. Memorability as a feature of lasting poetry has also been one of Solway's preoccupations for some time, while the same poet, as Starnino acknowledges here (93), encouraged him to "begin with sounds." Ormsby, as I have already indicated, has also been a major influence on Starnino's *poetic* practice; this can be seen by the ever-increasing stress on verbal richness and dexterity from *The New World* to *With English Subtitles*.

A comparable verbal dexterity is to be found in Starnino's critical prose. Indeed, I have quoted prodigally from his own words in the course of this review because it seemed desirable to give a clear impression not only of his arguments but of the style in which they are couched. As should now be evident, he is formidably articulate, with an amazing ability to find the clinching but succinct phrase to drive home his point. Moreover, whether as the result of a prodigious memory or a highly efficient filing system, he

is able to quote revealing pertinent remarks from a whole host of earlier poets and critics, sometimes Canadian but more often international. (In fact, he tends to over-use this device, which can give the impression of name-dropping, but when used sparingly it is decidedly impressive.) “I like prose with a bit of pep in it,” he confides early in his Introduction (12), and this is precisely what he provides. Though I’m half reluctant–yet, to be honest, half delighted–to say so in a learned journal, Starnino’s writing makes that of most academics sound like the work of insensitive duffers. In short, he is one of the very few Canadian literary critics (Ormsby is certainly another) who can give pleasure by the elegant precision of their prose; since his stylistic gift is accompanied by equally rare intellectual perceptions and astute evaluations, he is remarkable indeed.

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Unqualified eulogies always sound implausible. I therefore pass now to some minor reservations, to be regarded not so much as criticisms but as examples of the kind of respectful disagreement that stimulating commentary ought to provoke. The first is little more than a quibble. Noting that Canadian poetry has continually failed to gain recognition abroad, and confident that some of it is worthy of international praise, Starnino lays the blame at the feet of Canadian critics for “ranking poets by the wrong process–as important not because of the sophistication of their style but because of the cultural themes carried by their content” (68). So far, so good. But Starnino’s first witness for the defence, as it were, offered as a pioneer in the crusade “to do justice to the unique music of our poetry,” is Pratt. Fair enough–yet Pratt’s poetry was hardly neglected by Canadian poets in his lifetime, being recognized (as Starnino notes) by three Governor Generals’s awards and also (as he doesn’t note) edited by Northrop Frye, Canada’s foremost, and internationally recognized, literary scholar. All this suggests that other factors were at work besides those that Starnino stresses. Prominent among these is the historical fact that the two contemporary poets whose “music” sounded most like Pratt’s were John Masefield, who had already cornered the fast-declining market for jaunty lyrics and long narrative poems about the sea, and Roy Campbell, who was both pugnaciously independent and, after the Spanish Civil War, politically incorrect. One doesn’t need to be a fervent Canadian nationalist to suggest that, in this instance, foreign critics were just as culpable as their Canadian counterparts.

Another minor quibble. At the opening of his brilliantly perceptive discussion of Richard Outram, Starnino writes: "Of course, that Outram is not better known says a great deal about Canadian poetry. We like our poetry trouble-free and Outram, metrically sophisticated and intertextually intricate, is as troublesome a poet as you can currently hope to find" (115-6). Yet this statement follows immediately upon Starnino's attack on Dewdney, where the complaint seems to be that the poet has turned intellectual and linguistic trouble into a major preoccupation.

Yes, the cases *are* different ("metrically sophisticated" is irrelevant in Dewdney's case), but, with the example of Dewdney in our minds, we may surely question whether "we like our poetry trouble-free" is a justifiable generalization.

My third reservation is, I believe, more substantial. In his search for "something quick and spontaneous" in Canadian writing (78), Starnino quotes James Reaney's "ode to the pig" from *A Suit of Nettles*:

> Pink protrusion, pachyderm pork crystal,
> Crackling with conch sounds casual acorn;
> Mice muzzle and masticate your back
> Unbeknownst by unquick unquiet mind;
> Hear nothing ears except earhasp twitch,
> Smell nothing sound except swine incense,
> Touch nothing trotters save tapioca stye wallow;
> Eyes examine the excellent nose horizon,
> Heedless of huntsmen horning your oak hall,
> Dreaming of the devoured peacock safe down in your belly.

"Beautifully executed," this is Starnino's succinct comment, yet I find much to question, not least at the basic level of meaning, from the first line ("protrusion" from what?) onwards. Why (the needs of alliteration apart) should the pig's "nose horizon"–itself a vague phrase–be "excellent"? And am I being obtuse or guilty of hopeless misreading or literalmindedness in jibbing at the apparent implication that pig has fed on peacock? Consider also "Crackling with conch sounds casual acorn" and "Touch nothing trotters save tapioca stye wallow." I confess that, so far as grammar and syntax are concerned, these lines baffle me as much as Dewdney's writing. In Dewdney's case, however, instead of delightful execution Starnino discovers "interrupted coherence" and "syntactical deferrals" (113), phrases which seemingly fit Reaney's practice here. "His sentences," Starnino writes of Dewdney, "wax and wane to his every deranging and dislocating whim, vexing language's truth-telling tendencies…" (109). Isn't the same

complaint applicable to Reaney? How can Starnino praise the one and trash the other? He is apparently so impressed by Reaney's "inexhaustible affection for words" (78), though this is not a sufficient merit to exonerate Bök, that he is prepared to overlook faults that he pounces on elsewhere.

But the Reaney quotation raises another–to me, significant–problem. Starnino praises "the talky texture of its music" but has nothing to say about Reaney's command of rhythm, which seems to me uncertain. Here I would zero in on the third, fourth, and seventh lines. "Mice muzzle and masticate your back" might be acceptable, rhythmically, in other contexts, but, following the previous two lines, it requires an awkward syntactical adjustment that affects our reading. "Unbeknownst by unquick unquiet mind," to my ear, stumbles oddly. A misprint may be involved, however; I find that in all texts of *A Suit of Nettles* the final adjective reads "unu quiet," which produces a more interesting rhythm while seriously complicating the sense. "Touch nothing trotters save tapioca stye wallow," apart from raising interpretative questions ("tapioca"?), belongs to yet another rhythmical-cum-metrical convention. It might fit within a rugged Old English context, but is hardly appropriate here. My point is that the whole passage fails to flow from line to line; it consists of a succession of verbal units that follow but only imperfectly connect with each other. It makes excessive demands on readers (and even more on speakers), who are expected to cope with tricky, similar, yet slightly changing rhythmical patterns. Lines continually require to be reread to establish rhythm, or syntax, or both.

Starnino, then, is excellent when discussing vocabulary, levels of diction, imagery, form, and even so elusive an element as tone, but he tends to scant metrical and especially rhythmical considerations. It may be significant that, after the Reaney quotation, he writes briefly (and somewhat vaguely) about "a deep-rooted English structure that can be traced to Beowulf") and cites parallel examples in Klein, Page, Birney, and Layton to illustrate "a tendency to incorporate the musicality of the speaking voice into dense structures" (79). But all these examples (where the resemblance resides merely in an accentual beat, often accompanied by alliteration) exhibit decidedly surer rhythms than the Reaney example (where, incidentally I find little or no evidence of a "speaking voice").

All this may seem an inordinately long digression, but it is justified, I think, in identifying an aspect of poetic technique to which Starnino might pay more attention. I realize that adequate discussion (and illustration) of rhythm takes up more space than the constraints of reviewing generally allow, but it is inescapable for a full discussion of poetry as an art form.

Starnino recognizes this–it is at least implicit in the article on Bruce—but he tends to remain content with references to "sound" and "music" and the difference between written and spoken language. Yet as a practising (and skilled) poet, he must know that there is much more to be said. Critically, he is so good that I feel justified (even at the risk of seeming ungrateful) in asking for more. He has already made a highly valuable contribution in stressing the importance of "artifice" to a poetic generation more accustomed to the linguistic forms (if that is the right phrase) of a bill bissett or a Fred Wah; what results might be achieved if he could also introduce rhythmic subtlety to the apparently tin-eared!

In short, *A Lover's Quarrel* is an important and courageous book. It deserves to be welcomed with gratitude, though I fear it will be vilified or, more probably, silently disregarded. But the issues Starnino raises are real. The boat of Canadian poetry needs to be rocked for its own good. More power to his elbow.

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