

Lighting the Ritual Fire

Carmine Starnino. *Lazy Bastardism: Essays & Reviews on Contemporary Canadian Poetry*. Kentville, NS: Gaspereau Press, 2012. 272 pp.

Carmine Starnino's *Lazy Bastardism* is somewhat off-putting in the first instance. The title is uninviting. "Lazy" reads as accusatory and self-righteous, and "Bastardism" is an ugly neologism that is hard to imagine emanating from the mouth of a poet-critic with a self-declared love of language (though he is careful to attribute the phrase to his father, to whose memory the book is dedicated). The word "Contemporary" rankles too, since a number of the poets considered are not especially contemporary, and some are in fact long dead.

The book is also irritating in its lack of attribution. Individual essays are undated in the body of the text, with their original publication dates and sites buried in a closely-packed page of acknowledgements at the end of the book. Looking for each essay's provenance is arduous and irritating. As well, there are many interesting quotations from the works of other poets and critics sprinkled throughout the text, but no assistance is offered in terms of pursuing them. Starnino is obviously thoughtful and well-read, but those wanting to follow his leads and links to other writers and books are seriously undermined by what feels like a deliberately anti-academic approach in failing to acknowledge sources. In this he risks losing serious readers, the very kind that he claims to wish to engage.

Such *caveats* aside, however, perseverance on the part of the reader ultimately pays off. The brickbats are fewer than expected—given Starnino's reputation as a pugnacious critic hell-bent on decimating those inimical to his own ways of thinking—and in the end the reader is left with plenty to think about.

Picking up where his first essay collection, *Lover's Quarrel* (2004), left off, *Lazy Bastardism* is a veritable smorgasbord. It includes a Prologue, an introductory essay, twenty essays on individual poets or poet-critics, a review of a recent Canadian poetry anthology, another of two books on "why poetry matters," and an essay called "Steampunk Zone," which explores a new genre that Starnino characterizes as "creolized," "lavishly anachronistic," "retro-futuristic" and rather troublingly determined to "exceed interpretation" (252-53). The book concludes with a final section in which he presents one of his own poems, "Next Door Café," followed by a commentary on its origins and status as a poem that bears "witness to predicaments for which it can offer no consolation" (263). The essays and

reviews were published between 2004 and 2010 and are directed (to extrapolate from what Starnino indicates that he is looking for in readers of his poetry) towards readers who are “both listeners and interrogators,” and who will participate in a “sincere, half-skeptical conversation” with him (25).

Certainly there is much to contend with in the twenty essays on individual poets and collections. Some deal with established poets to whom he puts the boot (notably Margaret Atwood, Don McKay and A.F. Moritz), who are over-rated as he sees it and apparently—as he says of Atwood—no longer able to “strike a nerve” (37). Others concern established Canadian poets who have regrettably slipped from view, and invite re-reading and re-thinking (as in the cases of Margaret Avison, Earle Birney and John Glassco). There is one simple elegy, a homage paid to Irving Layton who is celebrated here, for, among other things, not having a “Canadian bone in his body” (121). And there are a number of reviews of new or underexposed poets he finds worthy of attention (such as Robyn Sarah, Karen Solie and Michael Harris), along with a few little-knowns who have been seriously neglected and whom he wishes to redeem (as with the hardly-contemporary James Denoon and the understandably-overlooked Peter Trower).

Not all of the essays are convincing. Starnino’s rather limp endorsements of poets like J.D. Black, James Langer and Anne Szumigalski fall flat—though, to be fair, all are short reviews and Starnino needs considerably more space to construct his precise arguments than such venues offer.

But some of the longer pieces rankle too. The attacks on Atwood and McKay are over the top in their levels of vituperation. While it is generally agreed that Atwood’s *The Door* is one of her weaker collections and bears marks of haste and/or exhaustion, Starnino’s attack has an *ad feminam* quality that goes well beyond consideration of the poems at hand. As if there is no *persona*, successful or not, whose oracular voice delivers so many of the poems, Atwood herself is castigated for “icy virtuousness” and a pervasive sense of her own “invincible goodness” (39). She is assumed to be suffering from “insufferable high-mindedness” and “tortured vanity” and to have become dilatory owing to her self-investment in her own eminence as being “beyond-all-argument” (36-37). Starnino’s attempt at even-handedness—in reminding us of Atwood’s biting “revisionist conjectures” of the past (32) or the “feral self that comes alive again” in “Year of the Hen” (35), for example—is too little to mediate the sense of scalding personal assault that characterizes so much of the review.

Much the same can be said of his battering of Don McKay, who is portrayed as a somewhat enervated “pastoral *flâneur*” making “his daily rounds of pond, cliff, river and pine seeking first-hand revelations” (131). Starnino characterizes McKay’s poetry as full of “sententious overstatement,” “intellectual filler” and “fussy intensifiers” (133). In reviewing *Strike/Slip*, he does read a number of McKay’s poems closely and succeeds at times in demonstrating the difficulty of identifying the real substance that lies beneath their often-glittering surfaces. But the dismissal of McKay’s *oeuvre* more generally as “vapid, repetitive and muddle-headed” (134) is belied by Starnino’s own praise for a poem like “Stress, Shear, and Strain Theories of Failure”—which plays with the geological terms embedded in its title, and, as Starnino notes, successfully takes the form of a “defrocked sonnet” that seriously “addresses the “provisional order of things” in the natural world that we all, for good or ill, inhabit (135).

As with Atwood, Starnino’s quarrel appears to be largely with the fame of poets like McKay, who, along with colleagues like Tim Lilburn and Robert Bringhurst, has been advantaged in Starnino’s opinion by a favourable *zeitgeist*. In McKay’s case Starnino argues that the pervasive “quasi-reverential” platitudes of environmentalism (138) that permeate our culture at this time have made it easy for publishers to jump on hot-topic bandwagons and publish collections that amount to “re-gifting” what has already been better said in the past (132). However Starnino’s aggrieved air tends to dilute the pointed and useful parts of the critique he offers. This is regrettable, since it is easy to agree with him that a “balanced assessment” of much-feted established poets is “desperately needed”—though perhaps not at the cost of egregious severity, despite Starnino’s spirited defense of such “harshness” (134).

Starnino is better when dealing with poets he likes and admires. His essay on Margaret Avison is brilliant, focusing on her poetry as intrinsically religious, which is to say on her Christianity, and especially her evangelism—rooted as it was in a powerful personal born-again experience that he feels critics have chosen to suppress in their determination to portray her as a secular “saint” exemplifying “the imagination as a force for self-invention and transcendence” (42). Starnino is convincing in demonstrating Avison’s success in portraying her personal “dumbfounding” (43). He celebrates the ways in which she compresses “language into fierce oddities” (43) and engineers triumphs of “encryption” (49) as she restlessly strives—through “unremitting inventiveness” (45)—to “create a space where God’s presence is mediated through [a] poem’s exemplary language,” a dizzying “daredevil adventure” (49).

What Starnino is particularly good at, it seems to me, is identifying a core element, an “essence” (to use a word that has fallen out of literary favour), that characterizes the work of individual poets, whether in particular collections or when taking a longer view. His distillations are interesting and productive, based as they are on solid close readings of judiciously selected poems. John Glassco, for example, is beautifully depicted as “the saddest of all Canadian poets”—as having written out of a sense of pain and the pervasiveness of entropy and death that generated a poetry rich in images of decay, entrapment, and despair at the futility of human life (81). To follow Starnino’s argument is to read Glassco with fresh eyes.

Indeed one of the great pleasures of Starnino’s books is observing his dab hand at such encapsulations and the vigour of his language in doing so. He characterizes the work of bp Nichol as “literary gunpowder” intended to “free poetry by killing it and resurrecting it as junk art” (161). He sees Nichol as that “rare bird: an avant-gardist without an axe to grind” (165)—and celebrates Nichol’s celebration of ephemeral “pictorial rhetoric” (162) as something alive and immensely appealing. He argues that Karen Solie’s freshness emerges from her “grit and diesel” voice (207), her use of an armoured “argot” that captures “our cultural mood with seismographic accuracy” (208) and her insistence that “idiom—not gender—is fate” (212). He nails Solie’s aggressiveness, her toughness, her determination to replace the “archetype of the powerless, fey poetess” with a figure who is “cardio’d into something buff and ready” (211) to take on the world. In reading Robyn Sarah, who is easy to dismiss, he makes a good case for her as embodying “a smallness that takes itself seriously, a smallness that dreams big” (196). He argues, successfully in my view, that her best work is “a whisker past minimal” (197), marked as it is by compression and a plainness that together produce a poetry of “air-cleaning sanity” (199). Larger claims are not made, but in characterizing Sarah as “crisp,” “pure,” and pithy— “a one-woman-and-acoustic-guitar kind of poet” (204)—he shows how she can be read productively, and how rewarding it is to take this approach to her work.

Some of the other essays work and some are less successful. “Steampunk Zone” is interesting, and Starnino’s characterization of this phenomenon as the product of a “mashup-mad era” that yearns for “unpigeonholeability,” weirdness and category-killing (249) is intriguing. His treatment of young poets like Lisa Robertson, Shane Rhodes and Adam Dickinson under this rubric seems fair, though somewhat tentative. He raises interesting questions about Steampunk as an adventurous and energetic “entrepreneurial spree” (257) that is fatiguing for those trying to

make sense of it all (253), but worth the try—which again seems fair enough. But the same cannot be said for his treatment of other critics whose work and interests do not correspond to his own. He champions “implacable” “rebooters,” such as Amanda Jernigan, Evan Jones, Zach Wells, and Jason Gurial, who “confront notions of what belongs in our literature heritage” (245), and thus respond to his call for “hard-mouthed, independent, belletristic” young critics who will provide the “peer-directed reckoning” that is overdue at the present time (228). This is probably true. However, to dismiss out of hand at the same time the position of earlier critics such as David Staines, W.H. New and Sam Solecki, who have laboured in the critical vineyards for the past half-century, seems both churlish and historically-negligent. It is worth noting that all three, like Starnino himself, have combined the roles of reviewers, critics and editors, and that they too have worked diligently to revise previously-held assumptions—thereby contributing to the constantly evolving beast that is a national literary canon. Starnino’s extended assumption that the “tenured world is ill-fitted” for the present “era of change” (228) simply does not hold water. As he would surely agree, it is the constant wrestling with the new vis-à-vis the established that matters and not the provenance of the critic *per se*.

I agree with Starnino that “firebrand critics” like himself are important to the conversation—both within and beyond the academy—that is the product of good literary criticism, and find the self-portrait that emerges in *Lazy Bastardism* interesting in this regard. Some may find Starnino’s frequent insertions of himself into his essays wearing. Do we need to be reminded of his boyhood as a “little Fonzie” raised in Montreal’s North End, speaking almost entirely in Italian, but fortunate to have parents who tolerated reading even as they feared it would confuse him (15)? Probably not, but it is interesting to see the way in which his working-class background, linguistic history, and urban allegiance to Montreal as a vibrant cultural milieu explain so much about the way Starnino thinks. He has been shaped by Montreal. His sensibility—with its preference for traditional forms and poems that make sense, poems in which style and substance are disciplined and fruitfully wed—appears to be rooted in the work of the Montreal poets of the 1930s and 1940s, who “introduced a dizzying range of new effects into Canadian poetry, “from the colloquially offhand to the tightly epigrammatic,” but overall chose “euphony over dissonance” and “were after the singing line” (76). In re-drawing the battle lines between the Montreal poets of that time, and those TISH upstarts on the West Coast who had no use for the “precisionists” of the East (79), Starnino makes

clear his poetic ancestry and shows his colours. The point is reinforced by his insistence that to this day Montreal is a hotbed of vital English-language poetry, and that this is because the city is polygot: he argues that “living in a bustling mixed and bilingual city—a hot zone of linguistic impurity—gives one access to ambitions difficult to feel elsewhere” (84).

Poets from other Canadian cities, some even more multilinguistic and multicultural than Montreal, might well take umbrage, but there is no denying that for Starnino Montreal and all that it stands for in his imagination has been a crucible for the development of the poet-critic that he has turned out to be: passionate, in love with language, in love with poetry and utterly demanding about an art form he sees as capacious and judicious—but in danger of dying for want of a literary culture that recognizes that to read poetry well requires years of dedication to acquiring small and “slow-to-learn” skills (24), along with a willingness to engage with astringent critics who interrogate what they read with the goal of cherishing what succeeds.

In some ways, *Lazy Bastardism*, for all of its combativeness, is remarkably elegiac. Starnino even refers to himself, quoting Wallace Shawn, as “the designated mourner” who is “assigned to grieve, to wail, and light the public ritual fire” when the last of the tribe passes away (23). This seems strange, if not disingenuous, in a man not yet forty, who also alludes, rather hopefully, to the way that the production of pearls depends upon the presence of irritants (169). Starnino irritates, it is true, but he also drives us to read and re-think the poetry that he talks about, struggling as he does to keep the tribe alive through a (for the most part) measured bellicosity that is, in a word, energizing. I can live with that.

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