

You Are Here

James Pollock, *You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada*. Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill, 2012. 222 pp.

2012 was a year of accomplishment for James Pollock, a young creative writing professor originally from southern Ontario and now teaching at a Catholic liberal arts college in Iowa. Pollock's first collection of poems, *Sailing to Babylon*, published by a small California-based press called Able Muse, was nominated for both the Governor-General's Award and the Griffin Prize. At the same time, at the behest of influential Montreal-based editor, poet, and critic Carmine Starnino, Pollock's first collection of critical prose, *You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada*, was published by The Porcupine's Quill.

The title of Pollock's collection will resonate with students of Canadian literary criticism as a response to Northrop Frye's well-known remark characterizing the search for identity in Canada as a quest to discover "where is here?" rather than "who am I?" Pollock's three-word statement "you are here," borrowed from a Jeffery Donaldson poem, suggests an indicator on a map, and reflects what the book purports to do: locate Canadian poetry on a map of world literature. Frye provides another reference point for a promotional assessment of the book made by T.F. Rigelhof on its back cover. Rigelhof calls Pollock's collection "the most compelling enquiry into the current state of poetry in this country since Northrop Frye's omnibus surveys in the 1950s." Thirteen years ago The Porcupine's Quill published Rigelhof's *This is Our Writing*, a book devoted to critically reevaluating twentieth-century Canadian fiction with what a *National Post* reviewer called a "cantankerous" attitude. Focusing instead on contemporary poets, *You Are Here* does not go as far back as *This is Our Writing*, but the attitude lingers, as does the drive to literary evaluation.

To be sure, Rigelhof's hyperbolic comment does not exceed the norms of back cover copy, but in a critical context it is a claim of no little significance. Did Pollock agree to have the remark printed, or did the editors drop it in on their own, hoping to inspire interest with a deliberately provocative comparison? A national poetry prize nominee may rightly be flushed with self-confidence, but to set one's criticism against Frye's is necessarily to create expectations beyond almost anyone's ability to meet. Pollock's essays are insightful, his poetic ear well-developed, and he has made some efforts to turn previously-published reviews into a coherent critical statement. Nevertheless, readers led to expect commentary on a

broad spectrum of Canadian poetry in a scholarly mode will likely be disappointed. Pollock follows the example of his editor Starnino, unafraid to sharply critique work he does not like or put the blame on lax critical standards in Canada for elevating mediocre art to places of prominence. Despite its detailed analysis, valid criticisms, and frank tone, however, *You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada* suggests rather that the greater threat to the quality of both poetry and criticism in Canada may well be lax editorial standards.

Almost all the essays in *You Are Here* were originally written for popular literary review publications, such as *Arc Poetry Magazine* and *Canadian Notes and Queries*. The first part of the book features essays dedicated to the critique of specific volumes by Daryl Hine, Dennis Lee, Anne Carson, Jeffery Donaldson, Marlene Cookshaw, Karen Solie and Eric Ormsby, a somewhat arbitrary roster comprised of poets whose work Pollock has reviewed since 2005. Of these, the essays on Donaldson and Carson are the most substantial and insightful; Pollock examines the evolution of Donaldson's voice from volume to volume, and places in the tradition of the literary sublime the work of Carson, whom he calls "a classical scholar with the soul of a Romantic" (46). Pollock rips apart two of Lee's books (*Un* and *Yesno*), heaps praise on Donaldson (who wrote the foreword to *Sailing to Babylon*), and throughout the essays veers between pinning blue ribbons on winning poems and slashing unsatisfactory passages like a copy editor on deadline. Pollock also reviews recent anthologies of Canadian poetry, including Starnino's *The New Canon*, Jones and Swift's *Modern Canadian Poets*, Sina Queyras's *Open Field: 30 Canadian Poets* and *The Best Canadian Poetry* series, and directs some justifiably pointed criticism at W.J. Keith's critical survey *Canadian Literature in English*. To these reviews Pollock has added a brief preface outlining his perspective on Canadian poetry as an expatriate living and working in America, and a "Self-Interview" summarizing his critical rationale. The book concludes with a previously-published essay titled "The Art of Poetry," in which Pollock as creative writing professor offers a mini-course in poetic technique.

Why review a book of popular reviews in a scholarly journal? For one, the attention Pollock gives to poetic detail in these essays is frequently of a scholarly standard, lifting them above most reviews of their kind. At the same time, the book exemplifies two issues which continue to plague literary discourse in North America: a strangely simplistic kind of rhetoric around "good" and "bad" poetry, and an aura of missed opportunity typical of work rushed into print by zealous editors with too much on their plates.

Pollock has developed a prose style suited to online reviews and short essays, one that carries a strong sense of the spoken word. Indeed, at many points the reviews sound like lectures, with verbal interjections (for example, “as I have said”) left in the printed text. This works well enough in the journalistic context, but fails to charm in book format. Indeed, the emphasis on the first-person perspective and voice eventually suggests self-absorption, as the reader encounters many more references to Pollock himself throughout the book than to any of the writers whose work is being reviewed. This impression is compounded by the “Self-Interview,” a device reminiscent of Glenn Gould’s experiment in this mode in *High Fidelity* magazine in the 1970s. Pollock expounds his philosophy of criticism in less ironic terms than Gould, however, and by the midway point the piece has become a question-and-answer session from an undergraduate lecture on how to read and critique poetry. Prominent here is the attachment to the simplistic categories of “good” and “bad” also evident in the essays. “Bad criticism can be confusing,” Pollock warns us, “bad prose is inexcusable,” and “bad style...betrays a critic utterly.” By contrast, a “good critic” has a “dog-eared OED” and “good poets are master artists” waiting to be helped by “good criticism” to “see what the gods are doing in their work” (193-94).

Pollock’s obsession with rating poems and poets, criticism and critics, as either “good” or “bad” taints the accurate observations made throughout. The opening piece on Daryl Hine takes this bent to rhetorical extremes. Pollock begins by calling the critical vacuum around Hine’s work “one of the most forlorn and gaping holes in our literary history” (17). Yet after praising Hine’s wit and technique in overflowing terms for six pages, Pollock acknowledges that Hine’s *Recollected Poems*, a career-long anthology of his work, “offers up rather too many bad poems” (26). Pollock the creative writing teacher “wants to cut the good lines out and leave them alone on the page,” and recognizes that not only the early work but “some of Hine’s later poems are bad, too.” So maybe Hine is not the forlorn great master we thought at first blush? The essay on Lee begins with the resolution that “even bad books may be instructive if we read them carefully enough to see why they are bad” (29). Pollock proceeds to give Lee the editorial advice he thinks he should have received before publishing *Un* and *Yesno*, down to the smallest detail. If only Lee had come to me, his books could have been so much better, is the implication. “I find it difficult to sympathize” with Lee’s attitudes, Pollock admits; “I find it disingenuous that [Lee] claims to be praising and salvaging when he’s mostly just cursing,” he states; “I’m afraid the sequence as a whole has little dis-

cernible structure,” he confesses (36-37). Why is Pollock afraid? Yet there is hope for Lee, as “fortunately, not all the poems in the sequence are bad” (38). The lambasting of Lee is followed by an essay praising Donaldson, who “never writes—or at least, never publishes—bad poems” (59) and demonstrates facility with Pollock’s favourite poetic technique, the etymological pun.

The clear-cut division of poems into “good” and “bad” piles, bizarre as it is, might have been partially salvaged if only for its suggestion of a sense of objectivity in evaluation. But Pollock’s emphasis on his personal perspective undermines even this justification. The last line in the book, “I want our poets to try,” which both author and editor presumably hoped would pack a rhetorical punch, has become a parody of itself by the time the reader arrives at it. Pollock is here urging “our” poetic team to give 110% effort in hopes of an artist as great as Shakespeare or Whitman emerging from the Canadian cultural landscape. Could it be Pollock’s proximity to Iowa’s Field of Dreams that leads to his concern with performance statistics? *The Best Canadian Poems* from 2007, for instance, in Pollock’s estimation includes sixteen first rate poems and five near-misses, while the remaining twenty-nine range from “talented” to “truly bad” (173). That’s a .320 batting average—enough for an invitation to the All-Star Game? By contrast, only six of the poems in *Open Field* are “very good.” Even worse performances are given by Marlene Cookshaw’s first two books, which are “almost uniformly bad.” Her third, shows a much improved average—seventeen of forty are “very good indeed” (79), a ratio even better than *The Best Canadian Poems*. Disappointingly, her next book does not have the same “rate of success,” as only nine of thirty-five meet the standards set by its predecessor. Back to the minor leagues for Cookshaw?

Pollock makes the argument that poets need critics to give them honest, no-holds-barred feedback so that they will not be tempted to put out half-baked, cliché or uninspired work. Who would question such a claim? Pollock’s blunt dismissal of self-indulgence in much Canadian poetry is refreshingly honest in many cases. But it must be acknowledged that he has a certain set of expectations about what poetry should be, and when a poet takes an approach outside those aesthetics, there’s little likelihood of meeting on common ground. Jan Zwicky has weighed in on the problems of writing pointed literary criticism in an essay for the *Malahat Review* called “The Ethics of the Negative Review.” “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all” is the gist of the perspective she assumes in response to a rising culture of scathing criticism aimed at exposing the

weakness of poetry publications, but even Zwicky seems to take no issue with the principle that some books are “bad,” showing herself strangely in accordance with Pollock’s assumption that there could be a single set of criteria by which to evaluate the almost inconceivably broad spectrum of contemporary poetic practice. In the end, the strength of Pollock’s critiques becomes a weakness as his essays get bogged down in technical advice while he assumes the role of the editor he wishes these poets had had. In most cases it’s easy to agree with his opinions, but his analysis of the failures of the works he discusses begs the question—why does so much self-indulgent, unripened poetry make it into print in the first place? If Pollock’s assessments are accurate, why did no one in the publishing process notice they were putting out material that did not deserve to be published? Should Pollock not be criticizing the editors of these books for letting low-grade poetry through the system? The financial squeezing of the publishing industry in recent decades has meant a streamlining of operations, making it hard to justify paying full-time editors. Has this situation negatively impacted the quality of literature published in Canada? What has the accessibility of online publishing meant for editorial standards? None of these questions, surely germane to any discussion of “quality,” are addressed.

Moreover, Pollock’s own book betrays a distinct lack of editorial attention, despite the crediting of Starnino in the preface with “brilliant editing” (14). That Starnino initiated the book and included an essay praising his own anthology *The New Canon* creates the impression that this was a project about which Starnino himself had little objectivity. How else to explain why the essays were not edited to reduce the overwhelming personal viewpoint, resolve their internal contradictions, and eliminate their chattiness? An embarrassing spectacle of morbidity is created by footnotes at the outset or conclusion of essays explaining that several of the poets discussed therein as if alive had in fact died since their original publication. Why not simply rewrite key passages from a present-day perspective? Indeed, if these essays have been published elsewhere (and are presumably available online), why bother reprinting them without substantial revision? One might surmise that Starnino, eager to push his critical agenda and over-committed with editorial projects, gave the book scant attention, certainly less than he appears to have given the poetry collections he has recently published with Véhicule Press. Did The Porcupine’s Quill want the book out promptly to take advantage of the notoriety of Pollock’s *Sailing to Babylon*?

These issues aside, the question remains whether *You Are Here* meets its stated aim of locating Canadian poetry within a wider cultural sphere. Pollock maintains in the preface that his desire was to “situate some of our poets on the map of world poetry” and suggests that “where we are as a literary culture has a great deal to do with our relationship to elsewhere” (13). He puts Donaldson in the context of Americans James Merrill and Richard Howard, and is not afraid to use the English canon as a backdrop in his essay on Karen Solie. Nevertheless, much of the supposed “cosmopolitan” perspective is indicated by little more than remarks on American poets of whom Pollock is reminded by these Canadians. In the essay on Eric Ormsby, Pollock discusses Ormsby’s observations on the “strong notion of what an American ‘voice’ should be” on the part of American poets, in contrast to a tendency toward self-effacement among Canadians, whose dissolving of personal identity Pollock terms “Keatsian” (136). This idea might have been the springboard to a deeper and broader argument regarding the place of Canadian poetics in the international context. Instead, we must be content with Pollock’s realist perspective on which Canadian poets get read in the U.S. (no one except Carson), which thankfully corrects claims made by some academic publishers as to how widely read and respected Canadian poets are outside the country.

In the end, because these essays were all originally conceived to stand on their own, and because Pollock reviews the work of only seven individual poets, it is difficult to develop a sophisticated argument regarding the place of Canadian poetry in the international sphere, contrary to what is implied by the book’s title and preface. Pollock states that if the book helps readers “begin” to understand the place of these particular poets in the larger literary world, it will have done its job. But this humble aim is for nothing more than the bare minimum, rendering absurd the framing with Frye. Overall, James Pollock’s *You Are Here* indicates a missed opportunity to revisit, rewrite, and plunge deeper into subject matter previously covered, and it inadvertently shows how keen insights can be diminished by the limited vision of an overburdened editor in the realms of both criticism and creativity.

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