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Literary Criticism

You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada
James Pollock
Porcupine's Quill
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Essays argue for good Canadian poetry, rather than poetry written for ideological or nationalist purposes.

"The virtues of good critical reading," writes James Pollock, are "openness, attentiveness, patience, critical intelligence—and love." *You Are Here*, a collection of essays on the contemporary Canadian landscape, aptly embodies these virtues and displays Pollock as an honest and heartfelt contributor to the national poetry's topographical record.

Appearing in three parts, *You Are Here* draws together several of Pollock's previously published critical essays and new writing designed to consider "poetic value" in resistance against the "claustrophobic … provincial isolation" of his experiences with Canadian literary poetics. He attacks and deconstructs poetry he deems to be written more for ideological or expressivist/experimental purposes (the work of Fred Wah and bpNichol, for example) and illustrates the merits of lesser-known Canadian poets who might more satisfactorily represent the nation's literature on the global canonical map. Jeffery Donaldson, to whose poem the book's title refers, is a favorite.

Working from a tradition firmly established by institutional education in English, and writing from an authority granted by the hierarchies of canonical poetics founded in the aesthetics deemed worthy by generations of students and writers of poetry in the Western tradition (and thus, performing a very Canadian feat of charting territory that is both nationalist and in a constant colonial process), the author earnestly adopts the position of the "honest judge" he desires both for writers and readers of poetry.

Arguing repeatedly and with a great deal of passion for such honesty and the production of evidence for all claims made about the quality of other poets' work, Pollock has also evaluated several of the most recently published collections of poetry meant to establish a

national canon. In so doing, Pollock occasionally falls into the trap set by his critical predecessors in spending a significant amount of ink on the decisions made by editors of these anthologies. Those critics, he argues, are not in the business of artful writing but are, as W.J. Keith calls them, “middlemen.”

Still, the author remains true to his values, lovingly approaching the efforts of fellow critics to produce useful guides to good poetry produced by writers who are Canadians, and not necessarily writing that was good for Canadians or Canada as a national construct. Pollock carefully and thoughtfully provides evidence to support each evaluation.

The most interesting and artful section of this work is the third, in which Pollock engages with himself directly—publishing a “self-interview” designed to answer any future criticism of his work. Regarding the relationship between poetry as art, the critical environs of its creation, and the terrain its readership must traverse, the author “wants a healthy number of strong, highly persuasive interpretations and judgments,” with which the aesthete may symbiotically exist.

You Are Here embodies the modern-day tour book, combining updated maps and personal insight, to provide those interested in the art of poetry new reason to visit Canada.

Patty Comeau