The Only Poetry That Matters: Reading the Kootenay School of Writing
by Clint Burnham

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

Clint Burnham is well qualified to analyze the Kootenay School of Writing (KSW) because he is a working poet and an experienced academic. Some may remember his nineties poetry volume Be Labour Reading. Others may be familiar with his book The Jamesonian Unconscious, which was published by Duke University Press. Fortunately, The Only Poetry That Matters was written by someone who has the mental agility to apply advanced intellectual concepts to postmodern British Columbian verse. Unfortunately, this work may mean something only to the mentally agile reader.

Readers who believe that they are getting an overview of regional West Coast poetry will be disappointed. The Kootenay School of Writing may have originated in Nelson, when its David Thompson University Centre was shut down in the 1980s, but it was moved to Vancouver. This is not to state that it was merely some transplanted literary phoenix. The KSW is regional in the sense that it reflected that city’s vital and rebellious civic culture. Burnham mentions a “Thank you for not smoking’ sign” (42), pointing out that in “Vancouver . . . one is more likely to be censured for smoking tobacco than marijuana” (42). The poets may be influenced by their environment, but more profound inspiration may be found elsewhere.

This does not mean that the KSW writers were disciples of postmodern European intellectuals, but their milieu was influenced by two psychoanalytic theorists, France’s Jacques Lacan and the Slovenian Slavoj Zizek. Burnham analyzes his subjects through a mainly Lacanian lens, i.e., using advanced scientific theories to explain unconventional poetry. This places the KSW in a paradoxical situation – their brilliant ideas could produce populist verse that is removed from the people they champion.

Applying Lacan’s concepts to the works of KSW writers such as Kathryn MacLeod and Dan Farrell turns this book into a rigorous intellectual exercise. It would be useful to have some familiarity with the master’s philosophy, if only through a Wikipedian briefing. In any case, one should be able to encounter the idea that language assigns “signifiers to signifieds” (70) without groaning. Still, readers should not be blamed if they gape at the graphs and wonder if literary criticism is becoming a new form of physics.

Zizek, the younger thinker, is both an interpreter and a more political theorist. His interests can be discerned through the titles of such books as How to Read Lacan and The Sublime Object of Ideology. Burnham uses Zizek’s theories to provide an intellectual framework to interpret such engaged contemporary poets as Lisa Robertson and Peter Culley.

The fact that the KSW was formed as a reaction to Social Credit premier Bill Bennett’s university closure may lead readers to believe that the school was simply an NDP response. That institution may have represented the Downtown Eastside, but its spirit straddles the traditional left/right divide. Poets like Robertson and Culley are termed “Neo-Pastoral Red Tories” (125). Although this term was invented to describe Progressive Conservatives with socialist leanings and vice-versa, here it is used to describe authors with a social conscience and a profound appreciation of older ways of life. Their advanced literary style mixes postmodern consciousness with an ethos based on an idea of attachment to the land.
Political expression also takes a more linguistic form. Deanna Ferguson, Jeff Derksen, and other poets resent the (mis)use of language in our capitalist society, responding by creating verse that needs to be interpreted by the reader. The result is called “Social Collage,” which Burnham interprets using Lacan’s “four discourses” with various degrees of success. Dorothy Trujillo Lusk’s line “Jar down mine own gritty polish & wonder when saliva segues patina” (101) does not lend itself to conventional interpretation, and none is offered. On the other hand, Jeff Dersken’s observation that “‘Urgent Fury’ wasn’t the movie, but the code name: Grenada 1983” (113) is supposed to be obscure, in its own way. Yet, the politically aware understand this sentence, which may be an inside joke for intellectuals.

Burnham concludes by denouncing the idea of the KSW’s “gentrification,” meaning that its political populism was supplemented by enigmatic postmodernism. The former is symbolized by Tom Wayman’s labour-oriented poems, specifically “The Face of Jack Munro.” The title character is the 1980s BC labour leader who betrayed a popular worker’s movement, in negotiations with the premier. Such politicized literary history is something that ordinary people can relate to. Poetic experimentation will not lure the masses from hockey games. The author begins by calling the KSW “the only poetry that matters,” but ends up prompting critical readers to ask “To whom?”

Ronald Charles Epstein reviewed Clint Burnham’s Be Labour Reading for the Canadian Book Review Annual.

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