

## POETRY

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

A collection of critical essays and a new book of verse testify to the strength of poetry in Canada

**Lazy Bastardism: Essays and Reviews on Contemporary Poetry**

Carmine Starnino; \$27.95 paper 978-1-55447-118-8, 272 pp., 5½ x 8½, Gaspereau Press, Oct. Reviewed from finished book

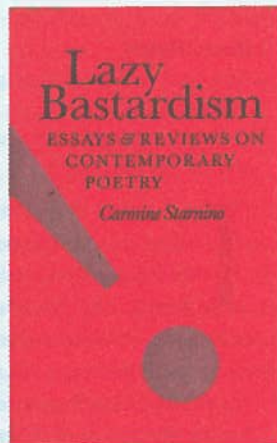
**L**azy Bastardism is an anthology of essays on poetry that date from 2004 to early 2012. The writing is consistently strong in every respect: well-crafted prose glimmering with insight, brimming with rhetoric. *Lazy Bastardism* is also a formidable book by a formidable figure.

Montreal resident Carmine Starnino's opening description of a working class Italian-Catholic upbringing is instantly recognizable: the author contrasts the way his first poetic inclinations emerged from the richness and heaviness of liturgical language with the clear-eyed practicality of a solidly working-class community. Starnino's writing continues to be imbued with these formative cues. As a result, his commentary shifts frequently and suddenly between denunciation and reverence.

It's been said that Starnino is at his finest when his knives are out. For some, there is a certain *schadenfreude* in seeing a seemingly

untouchable icon like Margaret Atwood castigated for her "waning vision and waxing vanity." Al Purdy and A.F. Moritz are also chipped away at. Sometimes, the excessive rhetoric roils into hyperbole, and loses some of its persuasive charm.

However, Starnino's ear is a tuning fork when it comes to studying the notes of the lyric. In these pieces he shows the reader how to hone the skills necessary for poetic appreciation. His work is most rewarding when he is celebratory. Starnino is generous in discussing the Montreal poets in general, and younger poets, such as David O'Meara or Karen Solie, specifically. This makes sense, given that he also edited an anthology of Canadian poetry called *The New Canon*. Starnino is a believer, but also a reformer.



– and enough biographical and historical context to give texture to the men and their times – Cook resolves that Borden and King truly were warlords, though of a particularly Canadian kind. Both were confronted with similar overwhelming issues: raising and fielding a military from a pool of civilian recruits, stick-handling the complexities of war finance and production, managing the divisive issue of conscription, and making “the agonizing appraisal of how far the nation could be pushed in the pursuit of victory.” Both were ultimately successful, variously employing restraint, conciliation, manipulation, and *diktat* to navigate, not steamroll, a very difficult nation through a time of world-wide conflict.

*Warlords* will be especially useful to general readers of Canadian military history, providing an often overlooked political perspective on Canada's experiences in two world wars. Cook points out that the two prime ministers and their times were so utterly different that comparing them is a false construct. Borden, the parochial, politico realist, became an idealist prepared to sacrifice unity for victory; King, the self-absorbed, vacillating idealist, became a

master political pragmatist intent on holding the country together. Neither Borden nor King may have been steely-eyed warlords, but they were our kind of warlords. To paraphrase Mackenzie King's most famous equivocation, “Warlords if necessary, but not necessarily warlords.” – *Michael Clark, a reviewer in Toronto.*

**Truth or Beauty: Science and the Quest for Order**

David Orrell; \$30 cloth 978-0-19900-208-5, 348 pp., 6 x 9, Oxford University Press, Oct. Reviewed from finished book

**D**ue to the nature of science itself, scientific truth is always provisional. And beauty, so the saying goes, is in the eye of the beholder. Given these shifting sands, physicist David Orrell has taken on a tricky subject in his treatise on how aesthetic paradigms have influenced the history and development of science.

In Orrell's conception, aesthetics describe not just the philosophy of beauty, but any mode of perception motivated by a set of values. He illustrates how one particular aesthetic – characterized by “masculine,” “right-handed” properties such as

elegance, harmony, symmetry, integrity, unity, and order – has dominated scientific thinking since the days of Pythagoras, leading to a misconception of the essential nature of the universe. In opposition to this reductionist view, Orrell proposes a “complexity approach,” which involves shifting from a mechanical paradigm to a natural, organic one that values the whole over the parts, context over abstraction, possibility over predictability.

Orrell casts a wide net, both in terms of historical scope and the range of disciplines covered, moving from math and physics to economics and sociology. While such a broad approach may appeal to the general reader, it has the effect of blurring the book's focus somewhat. Orrell provides a general history of major developments in science that aren't always strictly on topic. It is only in the book's final sections that the author addresses his main point, which is that the historically dominant mechanical aesthetic in science is showing itself to be less reliable, and indeed less grounded in the reality of our modern age (his major targets in this respect are string theory and deterministic economic modelling).

Although this collection serves as a general overview of Starnino's critical work, it takes a sophisticated approach to its subject. Readers not well versed in the work of the poets discussed (or their influences), could very well find themselves lost. This challenging book will prove rewarding as long as the reader understands that it isn't a primer, but a compendium. – *Stevie Howell, a poet and reviewer in Toronto.*

**Trobairitz**

Catherine Owen; \$18 paper 978-1-89753-597-4, 156 pp., 5½ x 8, Anvil Press, Oct. Reviewed from finished book

**P**oetry and metal collide in the latest offering from prolific Vancouver author and musician Catherine Owen. Here, Owen's voice sounds off like a wolf in a winter forest: it seems lone and foreboding, but its howl is a rallying cry, calling out to a pack whose members may feel just as distant and isolated.

Owen, who has played in the metal bands Inhuman, Helgrind, and Medea, takes the 12th-century troubador tradition and mashes it up with the sensibility of 21st-century metal, a genre not typically associated with poetry, but one that easily crosses over.

The first part of *Trobairitz*, “Cansos and Other Forms of Adoration,” is epic in both style and ambition, as Owen pounds out sombre love, transcendent rhythms, and gender-bending boldness. “Dividing love from desire – nothing new – there is a history to this knife / but each time I grip the blade backwards / in my own endless

narrative of blood,” Owen writes in “Canso 20,” a piece that could easily be adapted into a black metal song or read aloud in bare and hushed tones.

Throughout, Owen's feminism is fearless, constantly pressing up against metal's male-dominated norms. In “The Rival,” Owen writes, “In front of me / she sat down on the toilet ... at the metal show's hiatus / and I saw the innocent / question mark of her tampon string,” a line both jarring and beautifully evocative, an image that summons the feminine unexpectedly but sharply.

The contemporary is teased out in pieces like “Sirventes.” Taking the form of an anonymous Facebook post left by a male metal musician, Owen deftly weaves in a quotation from Gormonda de Montpellier, a *trobairitz* (female troubadour) who is considered to have authored the first French political poem by a woman.

Owen includes a glossary at the back of the book, which provides interesting context. But even reading it blind, *Trobairitz* starts the heart like the thud of a bass line and opens the mind like a scream, poem after poem. – *Liz Worth, author of Amphetamine Heart (Guernica Editions).*



Orrell presents a fascinating and mostly coherent account of recent developments in science, though the paradigm shift he proposes may be less radical than it seems. A complexity aesthetic may just be the next step in the natural evolution in scientific thinking, a course adjustment made in order to deal with new fields of scientific inquiry and new evidence provided by emerging technologies. Furthermore, whether a delight in disorder, impermanence, and imperfection will provide us with concepts as productive and “true” as the mechanical models of the past is a question that has yet to be answered.

If it does, we may look back upon *Truth or Beauty* as an important manifesto for our age. But even if it doesn't, Orrell has provided an intriguing way of thinking about how we got here. – *Alex Good, editor of Canadian Notes & Queries.*

**Leonardo and the Last Supper**

Ross King; \$34.95 cloth 978-0-38566-608-4, 352 pp., 6 x 9, Bond Street Books, Sept. Reviewed from finished book

**A**mong Leonardo da Vinci's writing and journals, one note in particular reveals

his genius: his desire to paint “Man, and the intention of his mind.” Da Vinci's constant search for new ways to reveal the world through art defined the Renaissance and set an artistic standard for centuries to come. Ross King's excellent examination of one of da Vinci's undisputed masterpieces reveals how the artist fulfilled his desire, and gives the reader a fascinating glimpse into the man behind the genius.

*Leonardo and the Last Supper* (which won the 2012 Governor General's Literary Award for Non-fiction) opens in 1494. Ludovico Sforza is the Duke of Milan, and da Vinci is his most celebrated courtier. While very much admired, da Vinci has yet to complete a significant commission to secure his reputation. Eventually, he is charged with painting a scene depicting the Last Supper of Christ – at the time a popular theme – inside the refectory of the monastery Santa Maria delle Grazie.

Da Vinci's painting is notable for many reasons, particularly the choice of medium (oil paint, rather than fresco, so that he could achieve the brilliant colours he desired), perspective (he used harmonic ratios), proportion (divine proportion was not his

template), and realism (he based his figures on members of Sforza's court). King asserts that the result was unlike anything seen before, and suggests the extraordinary possibility that the images of James the Lesser and Thomas are based on da Vinci himself.

King neatly structures the book around the gradually unfolding stories of both the artist and his embattled patron Sforza, who was eventually captured by the Swiss in 1500. By that time, da Vinci had left Italy for good and was working – though no longer painting – in France.

The Oxford-based, best-selling author of *Brunelleschi's Dome* and *Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling*, King is known for weaving compelling histories around iconic works of art and architecture. In doing so with da Vinci's painting, he fashions an elegant portrait of an ambitious, tempestuous, and famously uncompromising man possessed of significant humanity. Readers will appreciate the diligence with which the great painter studied to overcome his lack of literary education, his insatiable curiosity, and his struggles with melancholy and an inability to complete many of his works. – *Andrea Carson Baker, an art writer in Toronto.*