

Imagining 'Us': Power, Justice and Community in Canadian Literature

Jonathan Kertzer, *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998. 243 pp.

Jonathan Kertzer's *Worrying the Nation: Imagining a National Literature in English Canada* is an engaging critical work concerned with national literary histories, particularly English Canada's. As a political scientist invited—perhaps improbably—to review this work, I was initially absorbed by the discussion of nations and nationalism Kertzer provides at the beginning of his book, familiar terrain that I thought he negotiated very adeptly to present a concise overview of the philosophical, sociological and political literature on the subject. Shortly thereafter, however, I was baffled by the emphasis Kertzer placed on justice as one of the key topics governing his analysis of the three works he singled out for attention—Oliver Goldsmith's "The Rising Village," E.J. Pratt's *Towards The Last Spike* and Dennis Lee's "Civil Elegies."

Because I found this emphasis on justice so surprising, if not a little suspect, I thought that if I worried it sufficiently I might come up with a review both beneficial to the reader and worthy of Kertzer's efforts. It has not been easy, mostly because political scientists (apart from my colleagues in political theory) typically spend little time thinking about justice at all, let alone in relation to national literatures. What follows therefore is a severely gnawed bone (of contention, slightly) which I can only hope will be recognizable to the readership of *Canadian Poetry* as a discussion of Canadian literary history.

Whenever my thoughts do turn to justice, one work comes to mind almost automatically. It is Thucydides's account of the debate between the Athenians and Melians about whether or not the former should proceed to obliterate the latter (which, of course, they summarily did, after they let the Melians have their say). "Might *versus* right" has rarely

been rendered more starkly than this:

Melians: You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust...

Athenians: ...Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do. (354)

Apart from revealing that Athenian democracy was not of the liberal variety, this exchange points to a central problem with the role that justice is assigned in Kertzer's discussion of Canadian literature, namely that in the real world conflicting interests and unequal power inescapably affect the ways in which and the extent to which justice is realized. Even more importantly, one's interests and power almost inevitably affect one's notion of what justice is, and where it does or does not lie. At times, Kertzer would seem to be aware of these possibilities, stating as he does that, "[j]ustice, too, must be rethought, from an interstitial perspective, but, in a sense, it is located right at the interstice, at the liminal point where rival views confront each other" (190). He even goes on to say that, "[j]udgments must be made and enforced. No ideology can avoid imposing its values at the expense of others, even when its values are generous."

These considerations are linked to the fact that *Worrying the Nation* is largely about the ways in which national literatures generally can help to define and sustain national communities, and about how explorations of the notion of justice can assist this task by examining the higher principles around which communities are formed and according to which they reconcile conflicting interests in peaceable ways. For example, justice is wedded to "sociability" in an early section of the book (26-35). Kertzer thus seems to want from justice what most political scientists are content to get from good laws, based on the fact that most nations' politics seem to be (at best) much more unmistakably about laws than about justice. (I am reminded here of another of my occasional thoughts about justice: the superb film of Melville's *Billy Budd* ends with the narrator instructing the audience that, "[l]aws shall live as long as the mind of man; justice as long as his soul.") Kertzer's reply to this would likely be that creative works can be about much

more than "peace, order and good government," and that the realm in which they do this "more" may be one in which justice resides. He tries to persuade us that, while dwelling in this realm (or by invoking it in some manner) literary works can inspire a judgment about the quality of the laws—beyond the fact that they simply do or do not "work"—that communities create to govern their mutual affairs.

One way to see more clearly how Kertzer establishes the connections between justice, community and nationality might be to point to a case where justice is missing. "Risking a gross generalization," he writes, "I would say that current cultural theories are extremely skillful at disclosing the injustices committed on behalf of the nation, but less successful in portraying what used to be called the commonweal—the public good" (176). In his next paragraph, he complains that the discourses he lumps together as "current cultural theory" have difficulty "envisioning a genuine commonweal." Such discourses may sound a wake-up call to the cultural amnesia that is necessary to nationhood, he tells us, but they fail to specify a compensating sociability that will not, in its turn, be exposed as equally unjust.

It is not for me to argue whether Kertzer's claims about justice, community and nationality are sound, but I do believe they largely beg the question. I say this because his solution to the problems he has identified presupposes the existence of community, of a harmony of interests and widely-shared values (the most crucial of which appears to be civility) (198-200). He clearly recognizes, and frequently explicitly states, that the prevailing notion of what is just is contested ground, but his answer to this seems to be a transcendent notion of justice that regards that very contest (so long as it is confined to non-violent modes of expression) as the highest good.

This position may be defensible, but it seems a long way away from what the Melians and the Athenians were debating. The differences between the Athenians and the Melians were not "interstitial" and the outcome of their conflict was not the result of a failure to communicate. At issue was neither's notion of justice, but how the fate of the Melians could affect the balance of power between Sparta, Athens and their respective alliances. That wider contest was not a dialogue about the meaning of community, either; it was (or turned out to be) a total war between communities. In short, if the gap between contending views of justice is "liminal," it is probably also true that the tangible issues dividing the two sides of the debate are already minor—the conflict is taking place within a more fundamental community of interests or commonality of values. My colleagues in political theory have a similar tendency to assume a global harmony of interests, if not a universal definition of humanity, when they try to devise a compelling

notion of international justice. The problem with these assumptions, of course, is that they are persistently contradicted by so many human acts (*vis* today's Balkans, yesterday's Iranian revolution and the American response, and forty-five years of Cold War).

Admittedly, the conflicts which Kertzer explores in his book are not on this order of magnitude, but they may be not altogether different in kind. Ironically—given the prominence *Worrying the Nation* affords the eloquent words of reconciliation spoken at the foundation of the Five Nations Confederacy—this point can be illustrated by taking a closer look at one of the ways in which Kertzer applies justice to a critique of E.J. Pratt's *Toward the Last Spike*:

Pratt acknowledges that hardship and death are the price of daring to build the railroad, but the price is worth paying since the reward—a new nation—far exceeds the cost. Mourning bells acknowledge the sacrifice of Blackfoot, Chinese coolies, and Metis, but their specific, historical suffering is immediately subsumed within an abstract morality...and then drowned out by the engine bells of progress...(80)

We even learn that Pratt was aware of the "contrariety of interests" in the Riel Rebellion but could not afford to let them "contaminate the poem with a different notion of nationhood." Indeed.

It seems fair to argue, then, that Kertzer fails to justify giving justice so important a place in the assessment of national literatures, first because he examines justice in isolation from power and second because he takes the existence of community for granted. This seems regrettable, since there is in fact a plausible case to be made that nationalism and justice are related. Nationalism (or at least the only version of it that sane people would consider subscribing to) is counter-hegemonic. Its only legitimate expression is anti-imperialism. This may explain why justice crops up in a book about Canadian literary history and might not do so—I have no knowledge in this area—in American, British or French literary history. Nationalism is an answer to power and, as the Melians all too briefly demonstrated, so is a call to justice. However, that being said, there is a nagging concern that even when it takes this form, nationalism itself is not immune from justice-centred investigations. Not all nations may be sufficiently just to vindicate their being created and to deserve being defended. In the light of what Kertzer tells us about Pratt's poem and his self-rationalization for it, one might even feel prompted to ask if Canada was ever such a nation.

In this light, it is interesting to note that, during much of his discussion, Kertzer seems to be on the defensive. English Canada, its

literature and the critics and historians who study that literature seem, if not close to extinction, then suffering from a severe malady rather like the resignation that characterizes Dennis Lee's "Civil Elegies." Thus, *Worrying the Nation* is in part a catalogue of decline, a lament. It seems that the Canada that was once built by, for, and of Canadians has been eclipsed by a Canada contending against forces that were once called continental and are now called global. Kertzer shows us that the literature about how Canadians are doing against these forces is increasingly being written (to speak of national origins or backgrounds) by Italians, Japanese, East Indians, Trinidadians, Sri Lankans, and countless other "imported" nationalities. Moreover, the literary criticism of these works is more and more provided by postmodernists, who would rather criticise the very existence of standards than apply them to creative works. Lastly, he tells us, the historians who record the output of both the country's creative writers and their critics seem to have given up on a shared concern with the past.

Kertzer seems to consider many of these developments (or at least, some of their consequences) not only regrettable, but unjust. Reading between the lines of his closing chapter, in particular, I began to detect a different kind of worry, perhaps over the possible turning of some intellectual or methodological tables. (Could it be that these are rifts in the "community" of Canadian literary scholars?) It then struck me that, all those centuries ago, Thucydides may have rendered a truth beyond the circumstances and events that he was recounting: an appeal to justice is often the last recourse of a losing cause.

Work Cited

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