

George Elliott Clarke. J'Accuse . . . ! (Poem versus Silence)

Gary Geddes

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BOOK REVIEW

George Elliott Clarke. *J'Accuse . . . ! (Poem versus Silence)*. Toronto: Exile Editions, 2021. ISBN 978-1-550-96953-5

My aim here is to offer some insights into George Elliott Clarke's robust attack on those critics and media representatives who maligned and incriminated him for his innocent and unwitting association with a convicted murderer on early release who now presents himself as a poet. To do this, I'd like to begin with some thoughts about Clarke's forthcoming essay for Memorial's annual Pratt Lecture, which I've been shown in advance: "The Quest for a 'National' Nationalism: E.J. Pratt's Epic Ambition, 'Race' Consciousness, and the Contradictions of Canadian Identity." I believe this interesting lecture throws some light on Clarke's motivations for writing *J'Accuse*.

In this essay, Clarke begins his explorations into the nature and possibility of epic poetry in our times by discussing Ezra Pound, whose *Cantos* constitute a good modern example of the length and depth often attributed to epic poetry, though Pound neglects, or dismisses, the importance of narrative. Then, Clarke shifts his attention to Northrop Frye, who disparages both region and empire — the first too parochial or small, the second too big — as unfit subjects for "major literature." Instead, Frye prescribes the nation as the principle focus of the contemporary epic. As Frye's choice for the label of epic poet focuses on the work of E.J. Pratt, Clarke takes on the task of countering, or questioning, the appropriateness of those laurels. He finds both *Brébeuf and His Brethren* and *Towards the Last Spike* to be ethnocentric and to "fall victim to racial blindness." Instead of being a national epic, Clarke insists that Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike* is a celebration of Muscular

Protestantism, tacit White British Supremacy, and Capitalist Derring-Do, with all the laurels granted Europeans and the chief heroism allotted Scots.” According to Clarke, the question of how to write the great Canadian epic poem comes down, finally, to this:

How can one craft a poem that is truly representative of the variegated whole that is Canada, with provinces and territories and First Nations and multicultures, all as jealously distinct as any ecosystem? To his credit, Ned Pratt tried, but by siding with empowered elites (whatever the reason), Pratt served up fairy tales of progress as opposed to weighing histories of repression.

What seems to be missing here is an acknowledgement that Pratt is mocking the so-called Scottish factor by attributing its successes to oatmeal and whisky; so, too, his ironic observation that the elites’ hammering of the last spike, and perhaps by implication the project itself, has somehow missed the mark.

Clarke offers some valuable insights into Pratt’s poems along the way, but what interest me most in the essay are the frequent rhetorical assumptions that Pratt is trying to keep ahead of the pack by writing truly national epics, even if these epics were elitist and ethnocentric in their postures and assumptions. If the definition of a great epic poet is that he or she is oracular and encyclopedic, or even “festively heteroglossic,” as Clarke calls Pound’s *Cantos*, there is the unavoidable question of intention at work in these assumptions. A serious iconoclast, Clarke takes copious shots at what he calls Pratt’s “attempt at national epic,” his efforts to out-write Longfellow and Whitman, to “cement his front-rank status among Anglo-Canadian poets,” and to ensure “his own cultural ascent into the headship of Canadian letters.” These frequent references to becoming the best or principal epic practitioner in Canada say as much about Clarke’s own ambitions as they do about Pratt’s. Like most poets, Clarke shares what Harold Bloom aptly calls the “anxiety of influence,” which has to do with the struggle to over-

come the influence of one's poetic predecessors, a literary equivalent of the Oedipus complex. Most poets have to deal, more or less, with this anxiety; but those who have been racially or socially marginalized will find the task even more arduous and maddening, if not impossible, given the odds against them.

When the vicious attacks were launched against him, Clarke had already earned most of Canada's available laurels: numerous honorary doctorates, the Governor General's Award for Poetry, appointments as the City of Toronto's fourth Poet Laureate, Canada's seventh Parliamentary Poet Laureate, and, most interestingly, the position of E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto. While he wears his laurels with modesty and grace, you can imagine what a shock he must have gotten when the false accusations began to appear in the media, when lectures he'd been invited to deliver were cancelled, and when even his character was being assassinated by what can only be described as mindless yellow journalism. The possibility that much of this jaundiced and undeserved criticism was racially motivated must have driven him to near distraction. How to respond? Take the high road and ignore it? Settle for silence? Or mount a spirited response?

As the title and subtitle of his rebuttal immediately inform us, silence was never an option. What transpires is a lively and vigorous public display of his determination not only to damn his persecutors and detractors, but also to direct a few deft blows at the dangers and excesses of so-called political correctness and "Woke" consciousness. His title, *J'Accuse*, immediately references the famous article of the same title by Emile Zola, written in defence of French army officer Alfred Dreyfus, who had been falsely convicted of treason during a secret court-martial and sent to Devil's Island penal colony. Thanks to Zola's courageous article, accusing the authorities of anti-Semitism and tampering with evidence, Dreyfus was eventually acquitted and his conviction annulled. The second literary and historical allusion central to Clarke's rebuttal is to Cinna the Poet, who was lynched after being mistakenly identified as a supporter of those who ordered the

assassination of Julius Caesar. His repeated plea — “I am Cinna the poet” — fell on deaf ears.

Clarke is so determined to ensure that his persecution and incrimination are not ignored or forgotten that he has written not an article, but a book — perhaps it should be described as the script for an opera — of almost 200 pages, linguistically rich and referentially vigorous, ranging widely to include countless examples of political injustice, including the Salem witch trials, KKK lynchings, the genocide of Canada’s First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and the recent police murder of George Floyd. At one point, the narrator spells it out: “So I was ID’d, not as Literati, / but as Niggerati, a “tribal wanna-be,” / a pettifoggin, Hogtown noggin — / agog, saying he prefers // over and above silence, // Poesy.”

Clarke mocks his torturers, who have presented him as “*la bête noire de la Tour d’ivoire*,” the black beast of the Ivory Tower. Early on in the text, he examines, in painful detail, the brutal murder of Pamela Jean George by Stephen Kummerfield and his partner and the subsequent mistrial, where too much attention was paid to slandering the victim and too little spent on the terrible butchery involved in the act, resulting in a short sentence hardly commensurate with the facts of the crime.

The ranking of poets is a sad practice, as we are all working for the common wealth of the English language, in all of its regional, national, and international linguistic assets and accents, to create a poetic patchwork quilt of our turbulent times on this earth. Judged by international standards, Clarke has joined the ranks of wonderful satirical poets, such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope. I have in mind Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe* and *Absalom and Achitophel* and Pope’s *The Dunciad*, where the objects of their satire are in for some serious drubbing. Ben Jonson once identified the two kinds of satirist: one who bludgeons his antagonist to death with a broadsword; the other choosing instead a fine rapier, that leaves the head severed at the neck but still in place, even the smile intact. In *J’accuse*, Clarke employs both weapons as well as an admirable range of high and low diction, scatological imagery, verbal punning, lam-

pooning his critics and defamers, writing what begs to be described as a mock-epic. Clarke's verbal dexterity and playfulness and his immense vocabulary make for some impressive and humorous moments, employing the kind of self-mockery that allows him to present himself as sick and not-quite-dead in Venice, popping the gout medication Indomethacin and Cefalexin, an antibiotic prescribed to counter bacterial infections, and casting himself as a hobbling, comical Byronic figure down on his lustre and luck, while the world back home conspires to reduce his reputation to tatters.

As Kummerfield's victim was Indigenous, all the white guilt associated with colonialism, residential schools, ongoing, slow-motion genocide and systemic racism, and the unsolved cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls are partially responsible for the irrational attacks on Clarke for his unwitting involvement with the killer, then living in Mexico under the assumed surname Brown. Clarke was forced to pay the price for this unresolved national guilt, much as Dreyfus and Cinna the Poet had been forced to pay the unfair price, respectively, for racism and mistaken identity, the former with his reputation, the latter with his life. While the energy and inventiveness of the satire have been described on the back cover of *J'Accuse* as "dynamic" and even "joyous," the too-frequent details of the murder certainly do not lend themselves to satire. So, although there is both vigour and exuberance at work here, when attacking his critics, the underlying currents of anger and sadness are not always easy to reconcile with the dominant satiric mode.

For those who know George Elliott Clarke and his work, the solidity of his reputation as a man and as a poet was never in doubt. While I greatly admire and respect this amazing *apologia pro vita sua*, a defence of his life and reputation, I am not allowed throughout this book to forget for a moment the monstrosities perpetrated on Pamela George, which cry out first and foremost for justice and, then, what — silence? I presume Clarke had to ask himself often during the writing of this text, how do you write a poem about a horrendous murder, perhaps the greatest injustice that can be done to an individual, and

balance that with the terrible, but arguably lesser, injustice of attempts to assassinate your own honour and reputation? The unease I feel may reflect the inadequacy of calling *J'Accuse* a mock-epic, where there is no place for something as serious as murder. Perhaps, then, *J'Accuse* is best described as a high-octane epic discourse and lamentation on injustice, in all of its manifestations, some tragic, some comic, some tragi-comic. In which case, George Elliott Clarke can congratulate and fairly judge himself as he judged Pratt: to have tried and almost succeeded in doing the impossible. And in this very mortal sphere, that constitutes a resounding success.

Gary Geddes