

Trudeau Through the Looking Glass

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Books

B. W. Powe *Mystic Trudeau: The Fire and the Rose*.
Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007, 256 pages

George Elliott Clarke *Trudeau: Long March and
Shining Path*. Gaspereau Press, 2007, 123 pages

“If you want to talk about symbols, I’m not even
going to bother talking to you!”
– Pierre Trudeau to René Lévesque, 1963

I ONCE HEARD an impishly provocative philosophy professor suggest to his undergraduate students that Friedrich Nietzsche’s writing is like a mirror: it reflects readers back to themselves, in all their unique, unspeakable horror. The point of this sly provocation, of course, was to short-circuit all the complaints that Nietzsche is really a fascist, a misogynist, a postmodernist – anything, really, other than someone who wrote. All the stabbing attempts on a writer’s identity are really just excuses not to read them, after all. If you want to know what a writer wrote, the lesson is, you must stick to the page, and not try to read through the page to the person beyond. The writer you find behind – or think you find – will in fact be a mirror.

Pierre Trudeau is not Friedrich Nietzsche, and reading Trudeau – a writer certainly, but much more importantly a political man, a man who ruled – is not as easily herded back onto the page. But there is something of that reflectiveness to Trudeau, some of that mercuriality that makes intelligent people want to go chasing around after his identity and meaning. This is strange given that Trudeau really only cared about one thing, and that he spoke more directly about his political aims than any politician in Canadian history: a bilingual federation, with a charter of rights to protect linguistic and other minority rights, was on his mind and his lips as early as a decade before becoming Prime Minister in 1968; a bilingual federation, with a charter of rights to protect linguistic and other minorities, was his legacy upon retiring from politics in 1984. And yet, despite this unflinching clarity of purpose, people seem to want Trudeau, the man behind this perfectly legible history, to be mysterious, to be in some way the answer to their private political prayers.

This tendency to read meanings into Trudeau rather than to take him at face value has followed the man since he entered politics, and at least partly

explains his success as a politician. A thinker with such an explicit and uncompromising agenda is a less-than-likely object of a cult of personality, but Trudeau, as everyone knows, was swept to power in 1968 on a tide of hysterical popular support. Clearly, as Ramsay Cook has noted recently, misrecognition played a large part in the frenzy. “Among his 1968 supporters,” Cook says in his 2006 memoir, *The Teeth of Time: Remembering Pierre Elliott Trudeau*, “I had met young Quebec nationalists, far-left NDPers, and, most frequently, journalists and even Liberal politicians whose understanding of Trudeau’s antinationalist federalist philosophy and commitment to bilingualism was founded on little more than a few hastily read newspaper articles. ... It was only a matter of time before disillusionment set in among those whose image of Trudeau was constructed from personal imagination and yearning.” Yes, there certainly was disillusionment as Trudeau’s actions failed to jibe with the characteristics his admirers projected onto him; but more often than not, the admiration and the yearning survived the actions. Trudeau was (and is) admired as much for what he was imagined to be as what he in fact was.

Trudeau’s death in 2000 inspired a renewed investment in the mythology of Trudeau, coming as it did at the end of a decade of uninspired ruling by his old team the Liberal party and aggressive new maneuverings by neo-conservatives set on undoing what was left of pre-NAFTA Canadian political culture. It also inspired a number of books, like Cook’s memoir-eulogy to his old political and intellectual ally; John English’s authoritative biography, the first volume of which takes us to his entry into politics; and Max and Monique Nemmi’s *Young Trudeau*, another first-of-two-volumes biographies, this one tracing Trudeau’s intellectual development up to his departure for Harvard in the middle of the Second World War. (For a more detailed discussion of these books, see Donald Wright’s review in *The Underhill Review*, issue #1.) The Nemmis’s account is particularly controversial and sensational, paying particular attention to Trudeau’s early ultra-nationalism and flirtations with right-wing extremism. English does his best to soften these facts with both context and other semi-salient facts (young Trudeau also liked the Marx Brothers, and they were Jewish!), but dwells more on Trudeau’s humour, vitality, and formless ambition. All in all, though, the three books, published in the immediate shadow of Trudeau’s death, scrupulously present the

reader with an accurate picture of Trudeau, using his words and his actions, and as such serve as a kind of high water mark of an emerging Trudeau scholarship, one actively opposed to mythologizing its subject.

Now in the wake of this great wave of Trudeau books comes a second wave that sets out to re-imagine and even re-mythologize Trudeau. B. W. Powe's *Mystic Trudeau: The Fire and the Rose* and George Elliott Clarke's *Trudeau: Long March and Shining Path* give us a kind of topsy-turvy Trudeau, one in express revolt against the more directly representational and historical pictures English, Cook, and the Nemmis have produced. Both books are excursions through the looking glass, but in different ways and with different results. Powe's Trudeau is less invented but also less honest about (and perhaps less aware of) its fictional elements, while Clarke's is purely fictional and fantastical and loving every dissonant note it rings. Clarke's book is less of a true con than Powe's, but both illustrate well the pathology and the price of turning Pierre Elliot Trudeau into a purely mythical figure roughly on par with the Easter Bunny or the Mad Hatter.

II

"We may say that the charismatic being is instantly recognizable (because an archetype; a face could carry the look of people we've seen in representations of the past) and original (no one quite looks like that). McLuhan probably meant that charisma is the talent to project a mirror to viewers. We gaze at the fire, and see a portion of ourselves, or how we might like to be."

– B. W. Powe, *Mystic Trudeau*, p.85

Mystic Trudeau is Powe's second time taking on Trudeau. In 1987's *The Solitary Outlaw*, Powe presented Trudeau alongside Marshall McLuhan, Glenn Gould and others as representatives of a kind of last-stand of literacy against the dumbification of intellectual life by electronic media. That book led to a relationship of sorts between Powe and Trudeau, punctuated by a series of telephone and in-person discussions through the 1980s and 90s. The book intersperses Powe's accounts of these conversations with McLuhanesque observations and ruminations on the enigma of the private Trudeau, and with direct appeals to Trudeau himself ("Pierre, ...") that are printed in a different, sans-serif font that suggests something less guarded, like email. The book feels almost like a séance, an attempt to communicate with the spirit of a departed stranger.

This effect is underlined by the curious mixture of privacy and distance Powe's Trudeau evinces. Powe was clearly left unsatisfied by what he gleaned of Trudeau in those many private moments they shared, and seems to have been on guard with his idol when he actually had him to himself. Having

probably spent more time one-on-one with Trudeau than any other English Canadian intellectual of his generation (Ramsay Cook and F. R. Scott taking the prize respectively for the two generations above), Powe has remarkably little insight into the things he's interested in knowing about the man. Partly this is just a reflection of Powe's style as a thinker and writer: though a McLuhanite, he leavens his teacher's propensity for pithy pronouncements (for example, "The e-cosmos is the crux of the mundane with electricity, and thus a meshing of the visible with the invisible source") with some Jacques Derrida-lite, with his long lists of rhetorical questions.

More than this, though, Powe's I-knew-him-personally-but-never-truly-knew-him authorial stance is also the substance of the book. Deeply narcissistic, Powe's agonized search after the lost meaning of Trudeau the man ("Pierre ...") is primarily a performance, and only marginally, if at all, a serious attempt to shovel a glimpse into the ditch of what the anecdotal fruits of his time with Trudeau mean. So while Powe's direct access to Trudeau provides the ostensible cover for the enterprise, it never becomes anything approaching useful in solving any of the riddles the book poses. Asking the right questions is the goal; the mere answering of them would be an unnecessarily violent closing off of interlocution between Powe and Pierre.

This is, without a doubt, a remarkably personal and subjective book, especially considering its subject. Powe makes a lot, in fact, out of the opposition between the political and the personal, the scholarly and the subjective, taking the side of the second (and, he implies, suppressed) term in each pair. Rather than writing as "a political historian" "informed" enough to "assign the right ranking to his position among Canadian Prime Ministers" (a reference to J. L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer's *Prime Ministers: Ranking Canada's Leaders*), Powe says he can "only speak of what he stood for in my life." He sides explicitly with those who have a very vague conception of what Trudeau symbolized, as opposed to what he actually did, "government policy," which "political scientists and historians" think is important. (Did he try that one out on Trudeau, I wonder?) What is remarkable is that, though Powe's having been in personal communication with Trudeau is the entire premise of the book, Powe still wants to see Trudeau as a symbol for something he isn't. He wants, that is, to get at the private man, in order paradoxically to turn him further into a symbol. "From the beginning, we projected impressions onto Trudeau," Powe notes, echoing Cook's comment (above) about the perils of Trudeaumania; the difference is, Powe thinks that's a

good thing. And he wants to keep doing it. Why on earth did he bother meeting him?

"It's hard to write about what is private," Powe notes. Clearly, doing so is important to him, because he does a lot of it, however difficult he finds it. Most of what is in the book, in fact, is private, in the sense both that it happened either in Powe's head or in private conversations between Trudeau and Powe, and in the sense that it primarily addresses personal impressions or emotional states, rather than demonstrable facts affecting large numbers of people. This lends the book a kind of voyeuristic quality, where the reader finds themselves looking into Powe's very personal life, or at least his personal life as it is reflected in the Trudeau mirror. The best example of this is the exchange concerning the state of Powe's marriage in 1989. Trudeau asks Powe where his wife is, and Powe responds:

"I'm sorry to say that we've separated," I admitted.

"Ah." He sat back almost wearily. We were quiet for a few moments.

"And it looks like we're headed for a divorce."

I wasn't sure how much I could say to him. He wasn't keen to hear about illnesses or problems.

"This sounds ... final," he said softly.

"I think it is."

"You're sure about that?"

Et cetera. What is alarming is the extent to which, in the context of such a deeply confessional book, reading this exchange feels totally normal. It's only when you pull back from the book that you realize you're reading about a very private conversation between two men who are highly educated and literate but who have no special insight into marriage and love talk about divorce. Because it's Trudeau, this banal banter and well-wishing is worth reading, twenty years later? Is Trudeau an especially important thinker on divorce simply by virtue of having been one of many millions of Canadians to have been divorced? "Anyone can be Prime Minister," Trudeau once told Powe, "but only I could be the father to my children" – to which one response might be: Only his children care that he is their father. Whereas we're only reading (and writing) this because he was Prime Minister.

Trudeau the Prime Minister in fact gets very little direct attention, in part because Powe knew Trudeau after he was retired from politics and also probably because Powe as a young man nursed a platonic crush on the man and never really bothered much with the details of his policies. Powe refers dumbfoundedly to the suggestion that he might be worshipping "an overrated failure" who never lived up to his own rhetoric. A standard criticism of the left (it goes back all the way to Ed Broadbent's *The Liberal Rip-off: Trudeauism Versus the Politics of*

Equality in 1970), this is the view that Trudeau's Just Society phrase (or was it Ramsay Cook, writing as Trudeau?) promised more socialism than he delivered. In fairness to Trudeau, he never really said that, and when pressed for specific policies, always went back to the charter of rights idea. But Powe still believes, in defiance of the historical record, that "Fair distribution, a charter of rights for citizens ... were the touchstones of his dream of a just society."

What happens if we pretend we're historians for just a minute? Well, in fact at the very time the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was being drafted, and Trudeau was beginning his peace tours, the issue of income redistribution emerged on the agenda in the form of a budget by Trudeau's finance minister, Alan MacEachern. This budget was intended to make good on the implied promise of the Just Society, by getting rid of loop-holes that allowed wealthy Canadians to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. To even think of doing such a thing, Linda McQuaig has argued in her essay "Maverick Without a Cause," shows an independence of thought and action that is remarkable and in fact unique among Prime Ministers. The problem was, while MacEachern's heart was in it, Trudeau's wasn't. "If Trudeau had coupled this independent spirit with some political conviction to implement the bold reforms put forward by his administration, we might well have ended up with a fairer distribution of resources and healthy public finances. Sadly, however, this wasn't the case." Trudeau didn't stop MacEachern, but he also didn't support him, and eventually the budget was withdrawn. McQuaig concludes: "In Trudeau we had a prime minister with a refreshing degree of independence from Bay Street, but little inclination to use that independence to champion the economic interests of ordinary Canadians."

What is remarkable about Trudeau's record on the classic left-right issues of economic inequality is his profound agnosticism. When the chips were down, with a crowded agenda and the chance to beat the provinces into submission and the warheads into ploughshares, income redistribution was taken off the table. It ultimately didn't deeply matter to Trudeau – not the way bilingualism and the charter of rights mattered. This recognition of Trudeau's priorities is not intended to smear his reputation, just to return to the historical record some of its accuracy, and to Trudeau's prime ministerial record some of its well-earned sharpness of focus. Trudeau was a man who cared deeply and acted fiercely in spheres in which he cared to use his influence. To attribute to him other amorphous ideals that he did not care deeply about or act deeply upon is not a tribute. It merely muddies his memory.

III

“So infamously difficult,

To be oneself – and head a cult ...”

– George Elliot Clarke, *Trudeau: Long March and Shining Path*, p. 57

Where Powe spends a lot of time agonizingly searching after the lost voice of Pierre Trudeau the private man, Clarke delights in doing no such thing. A libretto for an opera, Clarke's book is more cavalier, and less tortured, about its refusal to present the ‘real’ Trudeau – the one that is eminently accessible in his words and actions. Clarke's indifference to facts is positively gleeful, as well as being expressly political. In an opening essay directly addressing the question of truth, Clarke says that “as a ‘visible minority person’ (my official identity in white-majority Canada), I seize the right to ‘write what I like’ (to cite Steve Biko), including this libretto about a wealthy, European male; one who has been canonized – and demonized – by hordes of white Canuck lawyers and social scientists, but also by poets, artists, journalists, and historians.” Clarke has no time for the victim position Powe assumes when he addresses his hard-nosed would-be critics. Heir to Trudeau's social contract, he knows his rights and will have them respected, no matter how grudgingly.

What he writes is a kind of Trudeau carnival that re-imagines key personalities of 1960s–70s cultural politics as ethnic in-betweens. In the casting instructions, Pierre Elliot Trudeau is described as (perhaps) Aboriginal or Metis; later he wears a Nehru jacket and a turban. Margaret Trudeau should have an “identity ... as indeterminate as Canadian actress Rae Dawn Chong in Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *Quest for Fire*.” For the supporting characters, Clarke joyfully jumbles Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapper Jacques Rose (pure-laine Québécois) with *Wretched of the Earth* author Franz Fanon (black Caribbean) in Jacques Fanon; French feminist philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous in journalist Simone Cixous; and musicians Robbie Robertson (mixed Aboriginal) and Oscar Peterson (black Anglo-Quebecker) in musician Roscoe Robertson. Again, the point of this is to re-claim Trudeau as a visible minority icon – as an icon, in fact, of ethnic in-between-ness. “I slip my race,” Clarke's Trudeau says, “eclipse my class.”

As far as the narrative goes, Clarke sticks fairly closely to the standard touchstones of Trudeau's life, playfully tipping his hat to the canonical Trudeau as he flips the bird to its authors. It's all rendered a little off, with a very Lewis Carroll-like delight in the nonsense of common sense (Trudeau is described once, in the context of his tough-guy October Crisis persona, as a “snazzy, jazzy, Jabberwocky”), but the

events will be familiar to anybody conversant with Trudeau lore: the trip to China, time at Harvard, Trudeaumania, the October Crisis, the courtship, marriage and divorce, the 1979 defeat and 1980 return, the 1984 retirement, and death in 2000. Into this familiar, though topsy-turvied, mix, Clarke inserts some of the hip touchstones of the 1960s: Chairman Mao, Fidel Castro, John F. Kennedy, and Nelson Mandela. Yet another attempt to wrest Trudeau away from his English Canadian guardians, these cameos provide yet more cheeky commentary on Trudeau's meaning and legacy, and put his cult of personality in a global context.

It's a question of taste, perhaps, whether this gesture works. Casting Trudeau as one of many 60s revolutionaries necessarily means removing him essentially completely from his own very determining context. Clarke is clearly alright with this (as demonstrated by his suggestion Trudeau could be Aboriginal, a suggestion at which many Aboriginal people who remember the assimilationist 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy would chafe) but the cost is quite high: by making Trudeau about his image rather than about his policies and actions, and his own words, Clarke can't help judging Trudeau to have failed in doing something he (the real Trudeau) never set out to do. One stanza describes him as “An empty mirror./A naked emp'ror.” A naked emperor is vain, without substance, and encourages his subjects to worship him in defiance of his faults. Trudeau, whatever else we might fault him for, in fact stood exposed repeatedly, and suggested to his subjects that if they didn't like him they were welcome to vote him out. As for the empty mirror, it's not clear that Trudeau ever set out to be anyone else's mirror. That Trudeau failed to be what some of his admirers understood him to be is not his legacy. When, in his closing speech, Clarke's Trudeau offers this autobiographical summary –

... I have done, said, all I meant,

To graft beauty onto government,

Despite my faults, errors, and sins –

Of ignorance, of innocence

– it is as if the character momentarily emerged from under Clarke's authorship to complain of being misinterpreted, and asked to finally and truly be allowed to rest in peace.

IV

Damn each history! Each bio!

There can be but the one “Trudeau.”

But *your* Trudeau? And *my* Trudeau?

On doit chercher l'homme dans ses mots.

– George Elliott Clarke, *Trudeau: Long March and Shining Path*, p. 17

I feel a little like I'm walking into a trap. As a white Canuck historian, I am precisely the reviewer

Powe and Clarke anticipate, each in his own way, both with a sense of satisfaction in predicting my unimaginatively dismissive verdict on their Trudeaus and with a certain dread as to what my lack of sympathy says for the prospects of a multi-vocal, cosmopolitan public culture. I hate to be a bore, but I do believe, to paraphrase Clarke's anticipatory mockery of me, that we should seek Trudeau (if we seek him at all) in his words, and in his actions. And this belief is not merely a symptom of a lack of imagination, or an innate suspicion of the choose-your-own-adventure brand of postmodernism (*my* reality, *your* reality), or a professional prejudice against making things up. Fundamentally I just find the Clarke's carnivalesque revolutionary and Powe's ghostly confessor less interesting than the real Trudeau, the one we find in his words.

Pierre Trudeau is fascinating to me precisely because no riddle at all separates me from his meaning. As a thinker, he is more accessible than Charles Taylor and George Grant, and far more practical, in that his thought takes the form of a policy prescription – a policy prescription he, as Prime Minister of Canada, had the opportunity to put into practice. What makes him fascinating is that he actually did that. The details of his personal life (of the kind John English provided in the first volume of his Trudeau biography) are fascinating only in the sense that they are not at all fascinating – that is, they illustrate that, outside of his thought and actions, Pierre Elliott Trudeau was (surprise, surprise) essentially banal. By making the banal private characteristics of Trudeau (his enjoyment of Chinese food, his tendency to become physically weaker as he aged) the focus of his portrayal, Powe paints a less interesting Trudeau than he would have had he focused on what Trudeau wrote and did. By creating a Trudeau who speaks in riddles and catch-phrases, Clarke has created a Trudeau who could not possibly have done what he in fact did do to merit being portrayed as something he is not. Mirror upon mirror and not a man in sight.

English-Canadian intellectuals need to get over Pierre Trudeau, and in doing so, get over ourselves. We need to stop looking to Trudeau as a reflection of our ideal selves, as a compensation for the marginal role we play in the current political world. To use Trudeau merely as a looking glass, as a space of imaginary projection, is to ignore and nullify his true contribution to Canadian political life: his astounding clarity of purpose. What is most shocking about both Clarke and Powe, in fact, is that neither bothers to say why Trudeau is worth mythologizing. Neither is interested in his actual policies. Both books assume a familiarity with Trudeau's legacy that neither ultimately demonstrates. Their Trudeaus are like

philosopher-king action figures, plastic and small, with a limited range of motion, but with limitless potential for posing and play-acting. Or false idols of the kind Norman Vincent Peale's progeny makes of Christianity (see Laurie Beth Jones's *Jesus CEO*, among umpteen thousand others). They are not about what they claim to be about. And that is a fundamental injustice to a man who, whatever his faults, made a true virtue out of saying what he meant and doing what he said. If we are going to talk about Trudeau, we should stick to what is true, what we know about him. That, far more than gazing through him at our own sad fantasies of power and purpose, would be a fitting tribute to Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

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