

Essays on Canadian Writing



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NUMBER 38

SUMMER 1989

- KEN NORRIS 1 Introduction
- MARGARET ATWOOD 3 Bowering Pie . . .
Some Recollections
- KEN NORRIS 7 The Efficacy of the Sentence
as the Basis of Reality: An Interview
with George Bowering
- RUSSELL BROWN 30 Words, Places, Craft:
Bowering's Critical Voice
- GEORGE BOWERING 53 Work Poets
- FRANK STEWART 56 Wonderfully Conscious Poetry:
George Bowering's *Selected Poems*:
Particular Accidents
- SUSAN LYNNE KNUTSON 67 Bowering and Melville on
Benjamin's Wharf: A Look at
Indigenous-English
Communication Strategies
- WILL TRUMP 81 Cryhat Valley
- JOHN MOSS 85 Life / Story: The Fictions
of George Bowering

GEORGE BOWERING 99 Death

FRED WAH 101 Bowering's Lines

GEORGE BOWERING 107 Relentless Referents

JOHN HARRIS 109 Big Benzedrine

Bowering's Lines

FRED WAH

I WOULD LIKE to extend the notion of the line, that basic unit so predominant in the minds of twentieth-century poets, to its effect on the larger unit of the poem. What I hope to make evident is how George Bowering's awareness of units called "lines" extends throughout his poetry. Sometimes this sense of line and its scope can be seen simply as a particular kind of rhythmic line unit, sometimes as a pun, and also as a growth in the writer's consciousness that informs his art and his life.

It doesn't take much reading of Bowering's poetry to discover the "me's" and "I's" that operate as a centrifugal motion in the writing. Though some readers might feel offended at the egocentricity this prevalence of personal pronouns conveys, it appears as a necessary flux in the interaction between the writer's life and his writing. The "I" is there to be measured, according to the measures of the poem. In the early "Radio Jazz" the focus is upon the lonely "me alone in the big house" (*Selected* 29), sucking in the distant jazz connecting up over the Okanagan plateau from the States into Canada. Such singularity of attention gathers insistently through Bowering's poems and comes to inform their actual making and reading.

When Bowering reads his poetry out loud he uses one hand, and usually one finger from that hand, in a paralanguage that underlines and points at the stress and juncture in the poem, as well as at the stress and juncture in the mind's choices in making that poem. Such particularization arises, I believe, from Bowering's awareness of an intense singularity of focus. One of his root poems is "Wattle)" [sic], and in that poem he transfers the "I" to second person for the power of the address. But the "you" in the poem indicates his awareness of the connections between the words on the page and the "sticks and stones" (*Selected* 29) of one's self or, at least, one's work. The "you," in fact, is reflexive here; the mask of the "I" is used as a precise

measure, both mentally and rhythmically. Or, in another early poem, "Matins," in a play on morning sex, Bowering rises "undefended / pointing myself" (*Selected* 32). He points to himself so frequently in his poetry because it is the pointing, the delineating, the measuring in order to see clearly, that forms the basis of his poetics.

This concern with the self, with indicating the self, is not just an epistemological one. Bowering writes his poetry in the tradition of Blake, who casts up language as image; of Stein, who tries the possibility of the sentence against an expected or assumed world; of Williams, say, who demands a measure of his own speech in his world; or of Ginsberg, whose language becomes true consciousness. In other words, Bowering uses his poetry as a way of informing his life. An early poem, "Thru My Eyes," talks about being

Eager and wary
for the energy
thru my eyes
lit every moment
lighting my way to the world (*Selected* 33)

He ends the poem in a self-apprehending vision:

I stare at all this energy
there
eager and wary
for the light (34)

In seeking vision, Bowering, like all the others, knows he must beware of the knowledges his words can summon. Back to his hands:

And my hands
to know the touch of things
have no sight to them
but the suggestion (34)

In the blindness of the unpredictable poem, the unknown next word or line, the poet must be careful, must be precise, must emphasize the choices, must make the connections.

One of the prime connections Bowering makes, and this goes along with the mainstream of modern Canadian poetry, is that between poetry and the biographical. Line is also lineage. "The

Descent," a long poem in which Bowering uses the triadic stanza espoused by Williams, is the first of a series of poems that investigate family ties. This 1963 poem is about how the poet sees himself reflected in his father: "When I think of him / it is me — (*Selected* 35). The phenomenal placement of the persona in someone other (particularly someone older) alerts the poet, at the end of the poem, to the possibility of another double — "wisdom & despair —" (*Selected* 40). In "Grandmother," the poet's projection is to the woman's "palsied elbow" (41). Such drawing out of images and self-consciousness of the literal through words is an intentional actualizing of a line that will give shape to the author's life.

Such biographical writing is serious and can be dangerous, however. Bowering finds, or, rather, we can find in reading him, the blind casting of the word-images turning up an architecture of the self that is physically potent, metaphysically real. This is simply to say that the line of the "I" in his poetry turns up certain images as traces of who he is. In June 1971, Bowering hit the nail on the head in "That Way, In Words":

I once thought I was Christ
come back, so later became a man who writes
because I came on him that way,
in words. (*Selected* 104)

At the roots of such personification is the obligatory gathering of one's life's images, some simple enough, others impinging on death and dying. In his thirties, Bowering said: "To think that for thirteen years I was completely convinced that I'd die at twenty-nine" (*Selected* 13).

"Desert Elm" is, so far, Bowering's major statement concerning this connection to his lineage. The ten-part poem is a moving and sombre probe into the images surrounding his father. Bowering structures the poem around images of a "rock," "earth," and "A tree, growing downward," among other things. The last stanza of the poem comes to a sense of what it means to measure.

In the ocean light of the ward window his
eyes are barely blue & deep in his head
like my daughter's. He woke again to see
me smiling at him, his head straight in
the pillow, a rock nearly round. In the

desert the rocks simply lie upon each other
on the ground, a tree is overturned out
of the ground, its shallow widespread roots
coiled around small rocks. By these fruits
we measure our weight & days. (*Catch* 112)

In *The Catch*, the page facing the opening of "Desert Elm" is the last section of the eleven-part "Summer Solstice." Here, as in the last measure of "Desert Elm," Bowering mentions his daughter. The double use of measure and lineage in his awareness of the line suggests a curious desire for closure:

Thea, never read my lines, love your mother,
love your father, distrust circles, reach
this way & that. (*Catch* 102)

Another significant measuring that takes place in Bowering's poetry is seen in his use of the map. I don't want to go into it here but I have a notion that geography has become less important for Bowering as he has become more of a city dweller. However, there is the base for a geographical imagination in such early poems as "Radio Jazz," where the Okanagan boy constructs a world out there.

Sucked into the horn of the jazz
on lonely midnight Salt Lake City radio
over to me alone in a big house
hundreds of miles in the mountains (*Selected* 29)

This Okanagan dweller becomes the interior boy moving down to the coast, and implanting a similar imagination on the coastline in *George, Vancouver*. Here the map becomes the explorer's mind, the line of Menzie's mind, the king's mind. The coast is only a line, to reiterate the title of a conference on West Coast writing at Simon Fraser University several years ago. Bowering says of the discoverers:

If we could invite the fog
of the Japanese current
& sail the map in their minds. (*Selected* 84)

But it is, finally, a measuring of the self that is at work in the poem.

Bowering ends the poem by countering the finality of any such measuring process, however:

Let us say
this is as far as I, George,
have travelled.

the line
obscured still, the coast
I mean, toucht, sighted,
mapt to some extent,
the islands
noted. (*Selected* 84–85)

The geographical for Bowering has taken a peculiar shift in his writing. It has come to occupy less concern in his poetry, and more in his fiction. *Burning Water* (1980) and his latest novel, *Caprice* (1987), both take up the imagination of place. His poetry, around 1972, shifted to a more spiritual and metaphysical address. In his preface to *In The Flesh*, Bowering explains some of the change:

So what of that period just before the long poems. At about the same time I turned thirty I moved from the West to southern Ontario. I found it difficult to keep on writing lyrics. I found it difficult but I did it, I kept on writing lyrics. But the poems were different from those that had come before. In my twenties in the West I'd been learning to write lyrics by finding my voice as it sounded according to my sense of place, in Vancouver, by the sea, the mountain valleys of B.C., the snows of Alberta's crumpled plains. But in southern Ontario there is no place. At least not the kind you can get lost in & find your way in. So I didnt quite know what I was doing, but I began to look elsewhere, inward, as they say, & into my personal time, around me in dreams, over my shoulder at the approach of the dentist & his friend the man in alligator shoes. (8)

Shortly after this 1972 statement, Bowering was at work on his brilliant long poem, *Allophanes*. Notice how he opens the third section still showing a concern to measure the "I":

Fold the page before the ink dries
& read before you pass on.

Literature must be thought now.

There is no perspective
when the eye is transparent.
When the author dies
I disappear.

Companionship is true growing up,
I reach for the companionship of art. (*Selected* 117)

With the line in mind, Bowering moves from the punning of "lion" and "line" in his poem "Mars," to an interest in the narrative and literary line. He says, in *Allophanes*,

Thus. Logos is true narrative,
wild logos, mad skier, Al Rose intent on suicide,
his meaning left in lines on the melting snow. (*Selected* 123)

This skiing image is, in terms of the imagination, similar to the "baseball" image that crops up in his poetry so often. There's a little bit of a hockey thing in there too, first mentioned, I think, in chapter 7 of his novel *A Short Sad Book*.

I've used this notion of the line as a fusion between poet and subject, inside and outside, to explore a relationship I believe significant in Bowering's writings. The idea of line, however it might actualize itself, extends throughout his writing. The line is used by Bowering to connect his life to his activity as a writer, to examine his own consciousness as it reflects off such planes of the synchronicity language sometimes offers.

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I can imagine that when Margaret Atwood was editing her Oxford anthology she had to talk to herself quite a bit when she was filling the pages in the first half of the book. I don't know how the writers in 1920 regarded their literary world, for instance, and its chances for immortality. But it has always puzzled me that the English departments of our universities are filled with Canadianists who are busy as hell trying to make a canon out of pretty punk stuff. I believe, natch, that there has been more good writing in Canada since 1960 than there was till that time.

— George Bowering

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