

George Bowering and the Extended Forms of Poetics

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The original title for this set of essays, “Unacknowledged Legislators: Poet-Scholars and the Poetics Essay,” with its allusion to Shelley’s famous assertion, immediately brought to mind George Bowering, whose admiration for the great Romantic poet is well known. In *Errata*, for example, he mentions Shelley while demonstrating his usual way with words, the particular ‘voice’ he has chosen for the ‘George Bowering’ who speaks in his criticism and poetics:¹

One loves only form, said Olson, and form comes into being when the thing is born. I think there can be no doubt about that, no getting around it. Beauty creates love, and beauty makes one want art. But some dolts, while extolling an emotional outburst about love, will denigrate the intellect as if it were a tight collar. What a pity. Great beauty reveals itself the more fully as it moves the mind. And mind is shared; the experience of the mind is shared experience. John Keats, whose writing can be found to influence Olson, and earlier Williams, wrote some great earthly beauty, and did not want to know too much about it. But ragged Shelley is, to my mind, the greater poet, because the heaven he was trying to glimpse could be approached only in thought, the achieved shaping of thought, only in the forms granted to and by the human mind in imagination. (85)

The rhetoric of this passage nicely and accurately demonstrates Bowering’s essaying style. There is the playful wit of allusion to both Olson and Keats, but at a well-judged distance, the weight of much reading, even research, carried lightly with a casual insouciance. There is the sly use of occasional slang to drive a point home. Although pleasure is important, there is, nevertheless, a definite reverence for what counts in the making of art, and for those artists who choose to spend a lifetime doing so. It is not a consistent style, and it is continually reminding us that consistency is the enemy of

poetry, and, perhaps, of poetics. As Russell Brown has pointed out, the style is not academic but literary, if peculiarly so: it's "a friendly style," one which "entwines speech and writing, is . . . written to be read out loud – to be heard, at least by the inner ear." And he adds, "although the prose in Bowering's essays resembles speech, it has more impact than ordinary conversation – partly because it is so frequently aphoristic" (32). For all these reasons of style, and because it reiterates various threads of thought from earlier sections, number Eighty-Five is a representative section of the serial work that is *Errata*.

In a roundabout way, this paper is arguing that *Errata* and the earlier *Craft Slices* are examples of serial form, in which the poetics essay extends itself into a version of the long poem, often following the same rules Bowering applies to the writing of such works as *Genève*, *Autobiology*, *George*, *Vancouver*, *At War with the US*, *Curious*, *Allophanes*, *Kerrisdale Elegies*, *Delayed Mercy*, *Irritable Reaching*, *Blonds on Bikes*, and *His Life*. Bowering has long practiced and defended the poetry of extended form in his writing. Quite early in his career, he turned from traditional lyric to larger schemes – the serial poem, the book length poem. I would argue that his essays at poetics have also followed something like a serial form. In a conversation with Ken Norris, he says, "I tend to write a longer poem the way Victor Coleman or Roy Kiyooka do; that is I have what I call a 'baffle,' some rule I impose upon myself, like writing a poem alphabetically, or using tarot cards; that way I can prevent the individually desirous will from its ambition" (12). While such baffles inform many of his individual critical essays, they most clearly generate the shapes of *Craft Slices* and *Errata*. In the former, it is once again the alphabet that structures the whole volume.² *Errata* works a bit differently, in

that it appears Bowering always had 100 sections in mind, that he wrote them in the order they appear, that each one had to fit into a single page or less, and that connections among them would arise in the act of writing. Here I am going to deal mostly with *Errata* as an example of the poetics of extended form presented in an extended form of poetics, that is, in the organic yet arbitrary form of the serial poem as prose argument(s).

If these pieces practice any politics, it is a politics of the writing life, of a life dedicated to the kind of writing Bowering's desire goes out to, writing that goes beyond the older ways he feels have outlived their original, energetic, value. Nevertheless, I would argue that what is not there is legislation, unacknowledged or not, for Bowering's poetic, with all its comedic power, stands against the legislations of others, stands for a lack of legislation in writing. This does not mean that one cannot learn craft, but it does insist that such learning come from inner desire and not outer coercion.

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I am not sure any act of writing for and in itself can be defined as 'political,' beyond the basic claim that everything one does is political in one way or another. To ask if George Bowering is a 'political poet' – in the way that, say, Pablo Neruda³ was – is to ask a question whose use value is minimal, I think.⁴ In the poems, Bowering is after something else; as, I think he would argue, was Shelley. But there are poetics, and there are politics, and always and sometimes inchoately, they do inflect one another. Certainly, within the specific culture of art and writing in this country, Bowering has been

something of a political gadfly, championing his particular poetics and the writers who follow it, arguing their necessity if not superiority, sometimes arguing their particular place in a Canadian and international poetic forum. In his practice as both poet and criti, he has long argued, in formal terms most importantly, his position; and while I would wager that one could derive a social politics of sorts⁵ from his writing, such is not the point they seek to make. As he tells us:

. . . for years I have learned to live in the middle of a seeming contradiction. Socially and politically I believe that I am a romantic leftist; but when it comes to the composition of literature I am an elitist. I am not reluctant to say that I'm interested in the art of writing. I like trade unions and hate chambers of commerce, but I am still not going to support an unlearned instinct poet in her delusion that she deserves the attention I will give happily to *The Dumbfounding*. (Errata 22)

He would argue, I believe, that this “seeming contradiction” depends on how we read him, and how we understand the power of formal innovation to alter the way we see the world. While his “romantic leftist” sympathies (and the adjective is deliberately chosen) affect his life outside of art – how he votes, why he won't cross a strikers' picket line, what causes he might support -- they do not have the same effect on his artistic choices as do writing and reading. There the power of genius and studied craft, which are not in the ordinary sense 'democratic,' are most important.

Nevertheless, Bowering will make occasional asides that help to construct a politics of place – not region exactly, but what the local has kept becoming for him, sometimes the province of British Columbia, or rather specific parts of it like his birthplace, the Okanagan; sometimes the city of Vancouver; sometimes a single community of that city, like the Kerrisdale of *Kerrisdale Elegies* – set against an Ontario-

centric vision of Canada that he has never felt fully represented his world.⁶ One of the funnier, but still serious, threads of *Errata* has to do with Bowering's continuing sardonic commentary on the failures of what can only be called central Canada's political vision. By seeing its values as pan-Canadian, Ontario completely fails to get the measure of the country as a whole, especially its western sections. Bowering's West is mainly B.C., but it also includes the Prairies, if only because such admired writers as Robert Kroetsch come from there, and Sheila Watson, Fred Wah, and others have spent much of their writing life there. Bowering reiterates this basic point throughout *Errata* in a variety of contexts. One way he does so is by pointing out how little Eastern Canadian critics know of Western Canadian writing and what and how it means. In number Eighty-two he makes an additional important point:

In some intercontinental travelling . . . I have come to understand why I do not rest easy in "the Canadian tradition" espoused by some university literature teachers in Ontario and English-speaking Quebec. Of course I have always understood that. But now I have another angle on it. I think that cross-cultural similarities – sex, class, profession, whether one is a sports fan, etc. – outpace in-cultural groupings. The implications for writing, and especially for criticism and theory, are many and enspiriting. You will notice that our critics are quicker to lick up the European critics than they are the new Canadian poetry. I find it easier to make my notions known to my confreres and sisters in New Zealand and Italy than to Canadian literary journalists. I know an Australian who knows more about *Alibi* than any reviewer in my own country. I will remind myself to write local histories for foreigners. (82)

If some of Bowering's serial poems can be read as political – certainly a title like *At War with the US* invites such a reading – we should also remember his oft repeated, warning: "the poet's job is not to tell you what it is like, but to make a poem" (CS 6). So, although one can read political meanings into parts of, say, *At War with the US* –

& who are we

The sheer
intensity
& numbers of their bombs –

they are trying to obliterate
measure, the inevitable measure

& making count of themselves

We help them count
one two three

They see their fear
walking out of the bush
four five six

– .that is only a small part of what the poem is doing. Likewise, the author makes it almost too easy to read that curious trans-generic volume, *A Short Sad Book*, politically, especially with its references to *Evangeline*, or the Last Spike. But to read these works only in terms of an inferred politics is to miss too much of their actual making; it is to limit them in precisely the fashion that the “Sparrow”⁷ of *A Short Sad Book* has consistently done with the works of Bowering and his fellow West Coast writers. That Bowering has seen fit to construct books of criticism, reportage, poetics, and even history in much the same ways he has constructed volumes like *Autobiology* suggests that he sees them all working in similar fashion to create memorable “dis-
understanding” (*Errata* 17) in their audience. His art has been to find an entertaining manner in which to practice *ostranenie*. Though highly political in its way, especially in terms of cultural politics, such a poetics is first and foremost committed to the craft and its possibilities.

Well, then, what is Bowering's attitude toward 'audience'? "People often ask," he says, "What audience are you writing for?" But how can one write *for* an audience? One can read poems or stories *to* an audience' (*Errata 2*; emphasis added). The point is of central importance:

But when one is writing there is no audience there; at the best of times one is alone. Or nearly alone. There is no audience, but there is the text; one is alone except for the text. So one writes for the text. This is for you, one says, and one really hopes the text likes what one is doing. It is not, perhaps, the judge; but it is the significant and growing discernment one has to be aware of as company. When one happens to be the reader, producing the text that way too, one is also alone with the text. (*Errata 2*)

As usual, Bowering's words say it best. Here, too, what he is saying he wants to do, he does. Yet who out there becomes the reader of this text, or others like it? Russell Brown wonders about that too, noting that a title like *A Way with Words* points to "the desire to speak without speaking that lies beneath Bowering's words [and] provides us with a better understanding of why his style makes the reader uncomfortable: this is language uncomfortable with its own existence" (37). I would say, in response, that this reader, among others, feels that lack of comfort as an exciting challenge, and enjoys it, but then, as a poet more than as an academic, I have always tended towards a similar poetics. Writing in the 1980s, Brown thought Bowering still was not reaching the academics, and pointed to one of the few responses to Bowering's criticism, Alan R. Knight's "The Dilemma of the Public Critic; or Does George Bowering Have *A Way with Words*," as an example "of just how uncomfortable Bowering's criticism *can* make readers" (50). But then Knight's misreadings of Bowering's sentences,⁸ more misleading

than the misreadings of poems he accuses Bowering of, demonstrate just how poorly some academics do read such a style of poetics (here rendered, admittedly, as criticism).

In the end, we have to take Bowering at his word: he is writing, as he says in the lovely little note on his name:

What I do is not write or written. It is writing. It is writing and so am I. I am Bowering and I am writing. If you are reading, you are reading writing and Bowering, I hope. I am not a bower of bliss and I am not bowered with any muse; I am too busy bowering, I mean writing. You do see what I mean. It is writing and I am reading and so are you. What is your name? Whatever it is, I hope you keep on doing it. (*Errata 7*)

△

What I have not said yet: how the various entries in *Errata* return, again and again, to the central problem of writing, whether it be poetry or prose, or the border-blurring encounters between them, of which it is a prime example. Bowering has spent much of his life promoting a poetics of openness – to the language, to the ongoing process, to a collaboration with the text of the world that eschews the aggrandizements of ego. He returns, for example, to the concept of “dictated poetry” a number of times, often invoking Paul Valéry’s dictum: “The gods in their graciousness give us an occasional first line *for nothing*; but it is for us to fashion the second, which must chime with the first and not be unworthy of its supernatural elder” (*Errata 33, 55, 66*). Juxtaposing that with a phrase from John Ashbery (*Errata 55, 66*),⁹ he will add his own take on what both poets are arguing. “In this way, failing or not, we turn our ears to the poem – it is its turn to take our attention. We will insult that first line the second we turn our hungry regard

upon some 'subject.' We are priests, not monarchs. We have no subjects. A gift from the gods is not a licence to rule" (33). This is a politics of poetics, and it is a stance toward both art and the world that Bowering cannot state often enough. His audience will be those with his kind of ears and eyes, I suppose. But there is more to it than that. Bowering has managed, over the years, in his fiction, his poetry, and, clearly, in his essays at poetics, to state such hard truths with a wry and comic wit that some, at least, will find particularly winning. It shines through, for me, in *Errata Seventy-One*:

In the early sixties I found this statement somewhere, and assigned it to the Stupid statements Department: "Poetry is a manoeuvring of ideas, a spectacular pleasure, achievement and mastery of intractable material, not less than an attempt to move the world, to order the chaos of man insofar as one is able. Love, harmony, order, poise, precision, new worlds." Richard Eberhart. In the late eighties, or whenever it is now [the reading, and the writing, continuing], there are probably still people, even poets, who think in such terms. I cannot shake the notion that there are essentially two views of poetry. Theirs wants to manoeuvre ideas, to show mastery over material, to order chaos. Ours looks after music to shape ideas, offers ourselves as servants rather than masters, and sees no chaos but a multiplicity in order. Eberhart's statement, not an unusual one, sounds in its exhuberance, very "male," like a businessman's, a developer's excitement about his potential world. We others? We sound like girlish priests, I suppose, like insect collectors, roadside talkers. (71)

I happily accept that 'we' as the gesture of welcoming I feel it to be. This is writing I, as part of that implied 'we,' desire, at this moment, reading.

Notes

¹ Russell Brown argues that the “creation of an ongoing critical persona is one of the chief tasks that Bowering assigns to language in his essays, and one of the distinctive features of Bowering’s use of language” (31).

² Noting that the various pieces, many of which were written at various times over the years preceding its publication, are arranged “in alphabetical order by heading,” Russell Brown points out “that, although this alphabetical arrangement promises its own kind of arbitrariness and prepares the reader for the sudden jumps and surprising juxtapositions that once led the American critic R.P. Blackmur to describe the dictionary as ‘a palace of salutary heuristics,’ it has been tampered with. We do get some unusual *sequiturs*, but we find that Bowering is again fooling us (or fooling with us) – that he controls this not-really-arbitrary sequence by exercising his power to name these ‘slices’” (42). Similarly, in the recent *A Magpie Life*, the long first section, “Alphabiography,” follows an alphabetical order, but demonstrates in its choices of words and phrases for each entry that the writer has done a great deal of highly focused tampering.

³ “A writer who writes in accord with centrist dictates in form, etc., is, as the great revolutionary poets, Blake and Shelley, said, a mental slave. And I think that an art that serves the reference will be in peril of serving authority. That’s why international modernism, despite Pound’s madhouse infatuation with Mussolini, is the voice that speaks to the free. In Canada, there are a lot of reference poets speaking of their adoration for Neruda. A lot of Latino poets I have listened to wonder about that, because Neruda was a faithful Stalinist” (Norris 26-27).

⁴ Although, as Susan Knutson has argued, Bowering’s novel, *Burning Water* (and, in a different mode, aspects of *Bowering’s B.C.: A Swashbuckling History*), “employs a variety of strategies intended . . . to undercut racist stereotypes” (68); and she suggests, in the larger context of sexual and racial politics, “Bowering shows a greater awareness of political reality than Melville [in *Moby Dick*]” (73). Even in his novels and non-fiction, however, as Knutson’s explications of Bowering’s use of language and parodic forms demonstrates, the poetics of writing is central to Bowering’s artistic purpose.

⁵ But it would be an anarchistic one, if for no other reason than the grand ideal of self-contradiction inherited from Whitman. I mean, Bowering does not write his various poetics fragments to make any single political point.

⁶ In the entry on “Tradition” in *Craft Slices*, while pointing out that *Allophanes* is a dictated poem, and so he “could not choose a ventriloquy of Archibald Lampman, for example” (131), Bowering also captures, in an aside, the feeling of so many Westerners about how Eastern Canadians perceive the country as a whole: “I am not here trying to rile the scholastic tradesmen of that important nation bounded by Toronto, Montreal and

Ottawa. I am just explaining the reason behind the structure of my organized writing, including the essays I have written on Canadian poets. If I had been schooled within the snowy triangle, it is possible that I would have drafted articles on the Confederation Poets, [etc] But my writing on poetry . . . reflects my education in that subject of Canadian verse. It is therefore a track of a kind of Canadian tradition. It is the evidence of what I, a Canadian poet, have found interesting in the reading I have been led to pursue. Most of my essays are stories about my companions in poetry. Others tell of predecessors whose books have come my way and made it clear to me. Some perhaps illuminate the difficulty I faced in finding for myself a Canadian tradition in a nearly trackless frontier. We have all been, since Pound and Eliot, in a position from which we must find, not simply inherit, a tradition" (131-32). As usual with Bowering, what might appear to be politics turns quickly into poetics. Bowering carries on this argument in various sections of *A Magpie Life*; it is clearly an aspect of central Canadian criticism that continues to bother him.

⁷ "Sparrow" is the name Bowering gives to the Canadian critic, Robin Mathews, in *A Short Sad Book*. Mathews is famous for his defense of Canadian culture (read, however, 'central Canadian') and his attacks on Bowering and the other *TISH* poets for being taken over and in by US poetics, and therefore US politics. Mathews's simplistic reading of the *TISH* poets' poetics and tradition misses all the nuances of the local, as well as the international, that play through their writings (as well as the vital differences among them); Mathews sees only an example of US cultural colonialism at work. Many of the comments scattered throughout Bowering's various volumes of essays and poetics undermine such a black and white interpretation. See, for example, the comments in "Hello, Down There: Do You Know Who the Canadian Poets Are?" in *A Magpie Life*: "It made some Canadians in the literature community edgy to hear that the move from fustian to modernity in Canadian poetry was among other things a move from British orientation to American. I was vilified by the nationalistic conservatives and remnant anglophiles back east for aiding the incursion of U.S. poet-thought into our sovereign nation. The attack has been simplistic but unamusing. My U.S. 'masters,' Olson and Williams, counselled digging deep into your own local conditions for your imaginative material. The nationalists in Ontario saw that as a threat to their hegemony over what they perceived as the 'regions,' a term that denotes something outside Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal" (200).

⁸ See Knight's misinterpretation of Bowering's use of complex metaphor (18-19). As Brown points out: "the arguments that Knight advances . . . are very often vitiated by the tone and rhetorical strategies of his own tendentious arguments (Bowering's critical style has quite evidently gotten under Knight's skin)"; "More distressing, however, in an essay that accuses its subject of misreading, are Knight's own misconstruings of text": he then points to Knight's trouble with what he sees as a "baffling metaphor" but which is a very clear one, if the reader understands Bowering's poetics, "that the poet himself is a conductor of poetry." As Brown puts it: "Bowering is using the word in the sense that it has often been used by writers who are schooled in the Black Mountain tradition – as if it were describing electricity of magnetism – for that which *conveys*, or *mediates*, or *moves from one place to another*" (50).

⁹ "We must first trick the idea / Into being, then dismantle it" (55).

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