

NOVELIST AS RADICAL PEDAGOGUE:
 GEORGE BOWERING AND
 POSTMODERN READING STRATEGIES

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In “Extra Basis: An Interview with George Bowering,” Laurie Ricou asks Bowering to talk about pedagogy, “about teaching in your books, if you do” (Quartermain and Ricou 52). It is a question to which Bowering never responds directly. Instead, he reveals that he sees himself as a “good, but not devoted” teacher, and he recalls how *Caprice* “probably began with a graduate course [he] gave on the Western ten years ago” (52). The response is not so much an evasion as it is a characteristic omission—and probably a reaction against what he sees as the pronounced moral didacticism of other contemporary Canadian writers, such as Margaret Atwood. Nonetheless, Bowering remains intellectually and emotionally concerned about “teaching” the reader how to respond. Perhaps more than any other Canadian writer, he has attempted to theorize away the boundaries between critical and creative discourse; and, in the process, he has explored the area of overlap between the postcolonial and the postmodern. As Eva-Marie Kröller says on the back cover of *Imaginary Hand*, Bowering’s own critical and creative idiom, though typically iconoclastic and flippant, “only serves to disguise the committed, even stern, voice he assumes in his role as teacher and critic.”

Not all critical readers are as convinced as Kröller that Bowering’s work contains evidence of serious commitment. Some see Bowering’s writing, and the Canadian postmodern generally, as both frivolous and a threat to Canadian culture; and, significantly, such critics as T. D. MacLulich identify postmodernism and the reading practices associated with postmodernism as pedagogical problems. Fearing a decline of interest in the Canadian canon, in such realist

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COLLEGE ENGLISH, VOLUME 54, NUMBER 5, SEPTEMBER 1992

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authors as Frederick Philip Grove, Morley Callaghan, Hugh MacLennan, Sinclair Ross, Margaret Laurence, and Robertson Davies, MacLulich argues:

Our universities should be encouraging such writing, rather than calling for experimental or language-centred fiction. After all, what will we get if Canadian fiction wholeheartedly adopts the international style? At best, we will see more incarnations of *The Studhorse Man* (1969). At worst—and this is a more likely result—we will get more works like Chris Scott's *Bartleby* (1971) or George Bowering's *A Short Sad Book* (1977) and *Burning Water* (1980). The games that these works play with Canadian themes may not announce the health of a national tradition, but may predict its death, crushed by the weight of excessive self-consciousness. (252–253)

For MacLulich, the realist paradigm inherited from the dominant founding cultures remains an unquestioned (and seemingly unquestionable) presupposition: “When there is an emphasis on technical innovation in fiction—and a concurrent denigration of the straightforward mimetic possibilities of fiction—then our fiction may lose its capacity to mirror the particularities of culture and personality” (250). The indictment is a serious one. MacLulich implies that, by reading the Canadian postmodern, we are forsaking issues of social import. Moreover, he argues that since “Formal instruction in Canadian literature is now the single most important factor in shaping the future readership for Canadian writing” (248), what we teach has serious social consequences. MacLulich is surely right to draw attention to questions of curriculum and the role of instruction in the development of a readership, but he goes too far when he suggests that enthusiasm for teaching and reading the postmodern is simply a matter of satisfying “the latest dictates of literary fashion” (249). If, contrary to MacLulich, we start with the assumption that there may be a serious social purpose to Canadian postmodernism, then we are obliged to reconsider the ethics of reading Bowering and what his work teaches.

TAKING BOWERING SERIOUSLY

In this essay I shall attempt to highlight the serious side to Bowering's view of reading by focusing on *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, two-thirds of an as yet unfinished trilogy very much concerned with the subject of reading, interpretation, and postcolonial discourse. “I believe that reading comes before writing and speech,” says Bowering, reflecting on the composition of the two novels.

Reading involves, say, reading the sky to see what the weather is going to be like tomorrow. And then eventually people say, hey, I could actually put up something for somebody to read, like a little pile of stones, or blaze a tree. (Quartermain and Ricou 65)

Burning Water, a novel tracing Captain George Vancouver's colonial explorations in western British Columbia, treats the theme of reading as inner vision—“the

difference between fact and fancy and imagination”; *Caprice*, a western tale of frontier development, is much more interested in reading as perception—“*Caprice* is all about seeing things, and it keeps talking about various kinds of eyes and language” (Quartermain and Ricou 65). But in both novels, the author depicts writing and reading as communal and consensual processes; he seems very aware that, in practice, readers use what writers say to construct and consolidate their own meanings. Writer, text, and reader collaborate, through the text and the space it brings into focus, to make meanings—meanings that take shape “beyond” the text. The question of how we read our world marks a significant area of overlap between postcolonialism and postmodernism, for both discourses challenge the dominant order and both engage in what Linda Hutcheon calls “debates and dialogues with the past.” She sees this overlap as a “conjunction of concerns” and asserts that “it is not just the relation to history that brings the two ‘posts’ together; there is also a strong shared concern with the notion of marginalization, with [the] state of ex-centricity” (72). Postmodernism offers a critique of the conventions of realism; postcolonialism seeks to counter the imported narratives of an imperial culture, for, as Kröller points out, postmodernists and postcolonialists alike consider realism “an instrument placed at the service of the conqueror to perpetuate the reflection of his world image as the only one possible” (“Postmodernism” 53). Both discourses show an almost irresistible tendency to converge on topics of perception and interpretation, on reading, especially for a postmodern author dealing with postcolonial themes.

Bowering writes historical narratives about colonial conquest and postcolonial resistance to imported tradition; thus he initiates a double vision that enables an ongoing dialectical struggle between conventions of realism and postmodernism (or what Bowering calls “post-realism”). In his fiction, narratives of imperial history are subverted by a metanarrative that continually foregrounds the processes through which histories are constructed and reconstructed. The focus shifts from the historical record, as documented and sanctioned by colonial culture and its discursive practices, to a fascination with how history gets written and read. As Kröller says of *Burning Water*, “postmodernist scepticism toward the ability of language to capture truth [is] placed at the service of defining the role of fiction in a post-colonial context” (“Postmodernism” 60). Bowering in particular is committed to teaching his audience a rhetoric of reading that will make sense of this postmodern/postcolonial overlap.

In his remarkable prologue to *Burning Water*, Bowering offers a preface to reading in which he frames a rhetorical space for the composition and reception of narrative. “When I was a boy,” he begins in what first appears to be a conventional enough opening, “I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. That made me feel as if

current history and self were bound together, from the beginning" (9). The apparently innocent coincidence of names provokes a sudden recognition that the narratives of history have consequence for Bowering's developing sense of identity. Living in Vancouver prompts yet another series of highly personal associations: Vancouver, George Vancouver, George the Third, and Bowering's own geographical and historical "involvement." "What could I do," he asks rhetorically, "but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place?" (9). Both Georges, Bowering and Vancouver, depend on narrative, are constructed in narrative; and any attempt to pretend objectivity by hiding behind the conventions of realism would only compromise Bowering's sense of narrative's potential authenticity.

Storyteller, subject, and, as Bowering makes clear in the conclusion of his prologue, audience are all implicated in a complex narrative interrelationship that collapses conventional distinctions between oral and written discourse, history and fiction, writing and reading:

We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you. But in order to include you, I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying *I* to a second person. Therefore let us say *he*, and stand together looking at them. We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction. (10)

By conflating the historical record of colonization and the metafictional reflections of a contemporary narrator, Bowering constructs his "real historical fiction," a simulacrum foregrounding postcolonial concerns. We are, in effect, asked to view the traditional, realist narrative of discovery and colonial exploration through a postmodern lens.

The new rhetorical situation for reading depends, in part, upon what we perceive to be the status of the prologue and its relation to the text that follows—an issue and a relationship problematized by Derrida. In *Dissemination*, Derrida reminds us that "Prefaces, along with forewords, introductions, preludes, preliminaries, preambles, prologues, and prolegomena, have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement" (9). The prologue introduces the text but traditionally "remains anterior and exterior to the development of the content it announces" (9). Derrida asks, "Couldn't it be read otherwise than as the excrement of philosophical [or narrative] essentiality—not in order to sublimate it back into the latter, of course, but in order to learn to take it differently into account?" (11). Bowering's prologue, I suggest, needs to be read "otherwise."

If *Burning Water* centres on the author's presence, it simultaneously involves the presence of the reader, the other maker of meaning without whom the narrative would cease to exist as a process of communication. Vancouver and Bowering both rely on the reader, for

as the voyage grew longer and the book got thicker he felt himself resting more and more on his faith in the readers: would they carry him, keep him afloat? (173)

Without the reader, the process of narration congeals into the product of narrative; but the rhetoric of the prologue, if accepted as an enabling circumstance for reading, creates a shared space that privileges communication and collaboration between writer and reader as both a controlling metaphor and a guide for reading postmodernist narrative. There is, as MacLulich and others repeatedly insist, a postmodern playfulness about Bowering's work: his wordplay, his *roman à clef* references, his provocative public statements on reading. But if we are going to read *Burning Water* (or any novel by Bowering) in the spirit in which it is offered, we need to take the notion of "collaboration" seriously, for it is only through collaborative reading and writing that a postcolonial discourse can emerge.

This is no easy task for readers who operate with romantic (and Eurocentric) notions of "belief" and "suspended disbelief." Many readers have responded with irritation to what they see as a dual narrative: Carla Visser sees Bowering's story about the process of literary production and reception as intruding on the narrative of Vancouver's voyage, and Edward Lobb finds that the author's presence "spoils the reader's fun—the traditional fun, that is, of absorption in narrative" (123). Another reader, Janet Giltrow, in an early review of *Burning Water*, complains about what she calls "the interpolated narrative":

conveying some very ordinary details of the writer's life, the interpolated narrative embarrasses the text, lingering like an unnecessary excuse. . . . Chapters beginning "He . . ." are no doubt deliberately ambiguous in reference; but when the antecedent George turns out to be Bowering rather than Vancouver, the reader is disappointed, for this version of the life of Vancouver is interesting, and the delays in advancing the story are exasperating. (118)

Giltrow compares the novel to a "projected," ideal text—one that is comfortably coherent, plain-spoken, and referential. "The structural commotion of flashbacks and fast-forward leaps," she says,

pesters this plain-speaking [that she finds in the travel sections] with stops and starts and recursiveness, making the narrative spasmodic just where the logic of travel demands that the story be advanced. (120)

Giltrow is by no means unaware of Bowering's probable intent in writing *Burning Water*; on the contrary, she acknowledges that "Bowering may see this as a contest between traditional and modern fiction" (120). She simply feels, however, that authorial intention is irrelevant here. The important issue is one of genre and the schema it demands: "Voyage narrative is neither realistic nor novelistic: it is documentary and compellingly linear" (120). For this reader, taxonomy takes on an imperialist role, which in turn takes us some distance from the initial reading process. Ironically, the description of the narrative "with stops and starts and recursiveness" sounds very much like a psycholinguist's version of how we do "in

fact" read. Giltrow, though, has little interest in reflecting on process; she wants to get on with the story.

However, there are signs that the kind of rhetorical situation invoked in the prologue to *Burning Water* may yet find a more sympathetic, more collaborative, response; published readings are beginning to address the problems and responsibilities of reading itself. In a brief essay in the second edition of his *Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, John Moss articulates what might be a common experience for those seeking to respond to the novel "on its own terms":

In the first edition of this book, I wrote a fair acknowledgement of what happens within the text of *Burning Water*, without showing much awareness of its significance. That was five years ago. My essay was analytic and descriptive. My attention was directed somewhat myopically toward the fictional reality, as if it existed apart from the surrounding world and took precedence over it. This, in spite of Bowering's insistence, within the novel, that I as a reader do otherwise! The whole thrust of his work, at this stage, is against barriers between life and art. *Burning Water* insists that there is a world beyond the text. It does so, perhaps paradoxically, by repeatedly collapsing the illusion of reality within the text, so that we are thrown, again and again, back upon ourselves, reading. In attending to the collapse, I seem to have ignored myself—although my presence is crucial to Bowering's achievement. *Mea Culpa*. (32)

Moss's confessional tone and highly personal admission of guilt over earlier, less aware readings suggest the enthusiasm of a convert to a revolutionary world view. Instead of shifting the responsibility for determining meaning from the text to genre, as Giltrow does, Moss speaks of the reality of the text "collapsing," and of the need to confront the reader's role as a co-creator of meaning. The difference in these two responses suggests that we need a better understanding of Bowering's view of readers, reading, and the interrelationship between life and art. We need to ask, then, "How serious is Bowering?" Does he "lack . . . genuine concern for his readers" (Whalen 34)? And to what extent does his conception of reading influence the rhetorical direction of his art?

PARTICULAR ACCIDENTS

The question of Bowering's seriousness is complicated by his abiding love of (and faith in) the aleatory aspects of life and language. There is certainly an element of whimsy to Bowering's rhetorical stance, but there is also a serious epistemological point at stake, and we need not become so distracted by what we perceive as a frivolous tone that we miss a serious message. Bowering, after all, has "always favoured tapinosis," which he defines as "a sneaky kind of rhetoric—it means the saying of very serious things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang" (*Errata* 61). Take Bowering's frequent references to things accidental. On a superficial level, an accident refers to a mishap often caused by inadequate

planning or perception. For Bowering, however, the accidental illustrates the very nature of how we read and write narrative. He is fascinated by those moments when the discovery of meaning occurs “accidentally,” for the accidental tends to prompt both a sudden recognition of interpretive processes and an invitation to integrate accidental meaning into a narrative of origins and causes. In *Errata*, for example, Bowering links the accidental to the concept of “intertextuality,” the concept that every text quotes, alludes to, revises, parodies, and otherwise echoes other texts. Intertextuality, he says, works best “as a series that looks accidental, that makes an order by apparent coincidence, synchronicity, let us say” (6). In the same collection of brief essays, he tells an anecdote that illustrates his sense of writing and reading as intertextual, social, collaborative, and accidental:

One morning I walked along Inglis Street in Halifax with Ted Blodgett, the poet. We saw a sign in a shop window: “Words.” Then next door we saw a pizza oven with this word on it: “Blodgett.” In moments such as that, literate people start looking for meaning. Or they pretend to, and often that pretense is made in fiction or poetry or conversation. Actually Blodgett and I knew that there was no meaning in the coincidence on Inglis Street. In fact, the lack of meaning is what made the event delightful. There is a lesson for the reader of contemporary poetry in this. A poem such as Robert Kroetsch’s “Sketches of a Lemon” is delightful because the connections between parts of the poem are accidental, and devoid of systematic meaning trails. The walk along Inglis Street is metonymic. It is also highly readerly. Its meaningless conjunction of words has stayed with me, as Kroetsch’s poem has, while other walks in Halifax, and other poems about fruit have faded. (65)

By reading such “texts,” says Bowering, the reader becomes aware of his or her role as a maker of meaning. These aleatory moments constitute the brief epiphanies of Bowering’s art: they point toward the necessity of a shaping consciousness to borrow and intertwine texts in new, meaningful arrangements and contexts. The “truly” accidental occurrence, like all texts, remains literally “meaningless” until the reader activates its significance. Meaning resides in reading, not in texts. For Bowering, the accidental thus becomes a postmodern aesthetic principle asserting the ascendancy of process over product. It also becomes a postcolonial topic insofar as a commitment to the accidental subverts the supposedly seamless authority we grant the historical narratives within which cultural imperialism flourishes and gains definition. Accordingly, Bowering’s *Selected Poems* are subtitled “Particular Accidents,” collisions between words and world, where both author and reader collaborate as accessories before, during, and after the fact. One may distinguish, of course, between the truly capricious and that which merely “looks” unplanned. But Bowering seems to be saying that, since all language acts are socially constructed and therefore essentially collaborative, and since we do not have absolute control over the dynamics of that collaboration, some element of chance influences how we construct meaning at

any given moment. We never perceive the text the same way twice—not because the text changes, but because we are not the same people we were a moment ago.

If the accidental informs interpretation, it also informs composition; more particularly, it informs the writing of a work such as *Burning Water*. Bowering, indeed, sees the whole inspiration for his novel as accidental:

With *Burning Water* it started by *accident* when I was in London, Ontario and I couldn't write about that place. I don't know how it happened, or why it happened, but I was in the library and I found Menzies' journal [the journal of a botanist assigned to Vancouver's ship], which had been published by the B.C. Government in 1933, or something like that. I don't know why I picked it up, but I took it home and I read it. (Quartermain and Ricou 59–60; italics added)

Aleatory moments insinuate themselves into all of Bowering's recent narratives, and they constitute a primary motivation for his writing and reading. "What I really like in a story," says Bowering,

is that sometimes you have an experience when you are writing fiction, that something just happens nicely and you didn't think it was going to happen and it works and you say, "Whoopee!" As if you were an outsider reading it and saying, "Whoopee!" I love it when I find in somebody, or even in myself, a passage in a story that makes references to twenty other things that have happened in that book. Not necessarily logical ones, like repetitive colour, or an object, or something like that. (Quartermain and Ricou 61)

Bowering likens such moments of perception to "reading a system that you don't know, but are beginning to know" (61).

In *Burning Water* such moments are dramatized. While composing Vancouver's search for the Straits of Anian, the narrator notes that he took a break from his writing, walked around "the Tuscan capital" as a sightseer, and discovered by accident a painting depicting a sea called the "Strette di Annian" (36). In a similar vein, the narrator notes that Vancouver fixed his sailing date for All Fools' Day and that "he [Bowering] had landed in Trieste and begun writing on All Saints' Day" (81). The narrator remarks, "It was all coming together in the way he loved—this had happened other times, and when it did he flew before the wind"(80).

This metaphor of flying before the wind, frequently reiterated in the novel, becomes a motif that links together a romantic faith in the importance of fancy and imagination and a postmodernist fascination with the accidental. Later, in Chapter 33, for example, we learn that the author

had, this is true, dipped into Vancouver's journal for Johnstone's Straits, and come up with the word "fancy." It was like finding the Strait of Anian in Florence, and it was also like several other things, found. When he found these things he knew a book was going well, that is without oars, before a good wind. (145)

The aleatory alerts us to a system that we don't know, but are beginning to know. Accidents suggest small tears in the ostensibly seamless fabric of patterns that make interpretation predictable, comfortable, and seemingly objective. To understand the accidental in narrative we need to take note of perception—of how we perceive, of how we read. "I'm more interested in perception than structure," says Bowering in *Craft Slices* (29); and elsewhere he muses,

I would like to write a book, let us say a novel, an historical novel, in which once in a while a page is an actual mirror. If the reader has been deluded into thinking that the book "mirrors reality" or "holds the mirror up to history," the appearance of her own reading face might serve to shock her out of that error. (*Errata* 62)

The small shocks that Bowering sends his unwary readers argue for a renewed focus on epistemology; he has suggested that "modernism was ontological in purpose, & post-modernism is epistemological" (*Mask* 82). He repeatedly reminds us that we are at least partly responsible for what we know and see: "Reality is in the I of the beholder" (*Craft Slices* 28). As participants in, and co-creators of, the discourse, we need to recognize that simple inside/outside divisions will not hold:

The place, the "out there," is not prior to human perception or activity; it is a result of someone's being in the world. "Environment" is not possible, because one cannot be surrounded by something he is a part of. (*Errata* 38)

Thus we do not so much "enter" the discourse; we become aware that we are already inscribed in (and by) discourse.

Only by refocusing his reader's attention on discourse as process rather than as product can Bowering establish a rhetorically aware audience. He is profoundly concerned with the ethics of reading and writing, with teaching appropriate modes of response. "Here is what one wants his reader to learn and know," he states explicitly in *Errata*: "that writing and imagining can be done, can still be done. One wants them to notice thinking, not buy thought. That's thinking, not thinking about" (18). He wants his readers to accept the proposition that perception is a political act, that "we change the world by the manners in which we perceive" (*Craft Slices* 91). Bowering's rhetorical purpose, then, is not simply a self-serving search for a postmodernist audience; his sense of the political significance of language informs the shape of his postcolonial vision.

We get some sense of this commitment to the political in an essay called "A Great Northward Darkness," where Bowering takes the position that, by flouting the conventions of realist fiction, writers such as Leonard Cohen (and George Bowering) offer an ethical and thus responsible aesthetic position. Of Cohen he says:

Despite the argument by naturalist writers that non-realists preach individualist escapism, it is easy to see that Cohen's concern is for a revolution of health in terms

literary, physical, moral and political. Unlike the social realists, he knows that it is at best hypocritical to espouse social revolution through conventional and authoritarian aesthetic means. (*Imaginary Hand* 6)

Surely this kind of political commitment informs *Burning Water's* discourse on fact, fancy, imagination, and the shape of belief.

POLITICS, LANGUAGE, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

On one level, as Edward Lobb has discussed in some detail, *Burning Water* serves as a dramatic exploration of Coleridge's concept of imagination. In these terms, the various references to competing ideologies and cultures might be seen as little more than an amusing if elaborate treatise exploiting such contemporary theoretical concerns as historiography, intertextuality, and imaginative perception. Much of the "theory" in the novel comes in the form of a series of amusing dialogues between two natives identified, like characters in a Hollywood film script, as "the first Indian" and "the second Indian." Lobb suggests that this is enough, that the novel "succeeds because it is interesting and funny," and because it "avoids easy answers" (127). But the references to the collision of two worlds—European and native—provoke more than an opportunity for "several funny dialogues between two Indians" (Lobb 113). When, for example, the two Nootka first catch sight of Vancouver's ships, their dialogue sets in motion a complex chorus of multiple discourses that range far beyond the kind of language available to them on June 10, 1792. But then historical time is not in command here: as the narrator of *Burning Water* notes ironically, "It could have been June 20 for all the two men who watched from the shore could care" (13). The "first Indian" describes the ships as "two immense and frighteningly beautiful birds upon the water" (14), whereas the "second Indian" explains that they are boats, "dugouts" with wings "made of thick cloth" (16). The first interpretation is coloured by the native's perception of himself as an artist (and by his desire to establish a place for himself among his tribe). A latter-day Caedmon, he says,

"I will open my mind to the Great Spirit, and create a song, and the song will reveal the meaning of the vision, and I will take it back with me to the tribe, where I will be accepted and welcomed as . . ."

"A full man of the tribe." (15)

Such an objective, however understandable, breaches an indigenous ethics of interpretation, for by allowing himself to become carried away by fancy, the artist has prevented his imagination from guiding his senses. The "second Indian" explains all this to his friend by treating the art of capturing meaning in terms of a fishing analogy:

I am discrediting only your fancy. Your fancy would have the fish leap from the water into your bag. But the imagination, now that is another matter. Your imagination tells you where to drop your hooks. (16)

And a little later he advises that “You must allow your senses to play for your imagination”(16). In terms of a rhetoric of reading, the “first Indian’s” interpretation offers little more than an unbridled and self-interested subjective response. His friend argues for critical reflection tied to an appreciation of both the context and the process of interpretation. Significantly, what is at stake here is more than the credibility of a witness: the fanciful belief that the sailors must be gods, however innocent (even amusing) it may seem, constitutes an open invitation to political oppression. Only by remaining watchful and by reading the white signifier responsibly can the Nootka assert their power to understand their world and tell their own story. Historically, of course, the indigenous peoples did not always read carefully enough.

The wise native reader reappears in *Caprice*, looks back in time, and offers the following assessment:

The people of my grandfather’s grandfather’s time paid the price for not watching everything the newcomers were doing. In our time the wise man will know everything that goes on in this valley. If we do not watch them carefully, some day they will make us drink poison and lock us up inside big stone houses. That is what my father’s father told me when I was younger than you are now. (129)

Explorers such as George Vancouver offer ample reason for watchfulness. For Vancouver, the world is an experimental text to be read according to the objectivist terms of his empirically-based discourse. To colonize, after all, means to control, categorize, and conquer. His vessel is a “fact factory” (186) measuring the serrated coastline, surveying the land, calculating the rainfall, documenting the vegetation, and assessing the native population—and life on board ship is little more than an “ineluctable daily sequence of facts”: “The charts were covered with numbers and then rolled up and stacked in holes, waiting to be published at home. Vancouver even wanted to transform the Northwest Passage into a fact” (186). Language too is a mere fact to be mastered, and Vancouver’s “trick of assuming the natives’ tongue” (120) remains tied to an unshakable sense of mission: to chart, record, and claim both geography and inhabitants as wards of the Empire. “Learning a naked foreigner’s tongue is the first step in creating some form of government,” boasts Vancouver. He wants language, like everything else in his world, to be rolled up and stacked in neat, objective holes. There is no room here for an appreciation of “accidental” meaning or whimsy, and, as Menzies, the scientist, instructs his captain, the illusion of objectivity costs Vancouver dearly: “You learn [the natives’] language,” lectures Menzies, “in order to practice your control over them, while you never get close enough to them to listen to that language for a while and find out what they want” (150). Vancouver, however,

remains an unwilling pupil. Questions about historical and ideological contingency—questions that might trouble his adulation of facts and his abiding faith in a knowable universe—never shake his realist commitment that the new world can be objectively charted, understood, and explained. As a result, he reads life the way he reads maps, expecting in both an exact and unmediated correspondence between signifier and signified. As he sees things, “the coast is there, under California sun or behind New Norfolk mist. So his charts would be there as well, fact now by perseverance, equal to the real” (242).

What Vancouver fears is that other kind of reading: the kind practiced by Menzies, the Scotchman who “could read [Vancouver’s] skin and the colour of his eyeballs . . . [who] could look at the outside of his soul’s vessel and make an estimation of the events transpiring inside” (73). When he sees himself through Menzies’s eyes, Vancouver feels exposed to both others and himself, for Menzies “had read his soul . . . had read it before it had been fairly perceived by [Vancouver] himself” (73). Vancouver defines himself in terms of the social and emotional distance between what he perceives as his self and others. Thus, appropriately enough, he casts himself adrift from the company of others: “He had been at sea all his life, and all his life at sea he had been creating the distance between himself and others” (99). He lives “inside his head,” keeping a distance from those others “out there” (99). The hard-won distance makes Vancouver “a young *ne plus ultra*” (21), but one condemned never to see beneath the surface of things. In contrast, the natives seek to understand their world through an exercise of the imagination that contextualizes people, places, and events in terms of stories based on community experience. Thus, for the natives, imagination (which yields insight) is more important than sight (which yields only fact). Indeed, according to the “second Indian,” the tradition of cannibalism in his culture relates to his people’s reverence for imagination:

I cannot be dead certain, but I believe I remember hearing that one person would eat a second person in order to consume that second person’s imagination. . . . To transfer it from the person eaten to the person eating. (113)

The notion of identification of self and other through physical consumption offers a radical, even visceral, alternative to Vancouver’s spiritual, emotional, and physical isolation. Where the natives eat words whole, Vancouver never develops a taste for more than their surface-level meaning. Vancouver prefers the company of boiled cabbage and vinegar: “This is the Communion I celebrate,” he tells his young lieutenants, “in the true expectation that I will be safe in the companionship of the facts” (56).

Jeanette Lynes calls readers such as Vancouver “reader vandals,” those who seek to “leave the text, having commodified or conquered its meaning” (73–74). Although the natives remain watchful, they nonetheless incorporate aspects of the

invader's language into a sophisticated form of cultural conversation. Watchfulness does not mean withdrawal into social or linguistic isolation, for the range of discourse (especially the puns) that the two natives manage suggests a kind of polysemic defence against the white man's fixation with linear order, literal understanding, and historical accuracy. As I have already discussed, the first sighting of Vancouver's ships offers an initially dislocating heteroglossia; and the story about the consumption of another's imagination illustrates the natives' rather literal-minded commitment to a heteroglossia of community imagination.

But it is in the second part of Bowering's unfinished trilogy that the role of language becomes most pronounced. When in *Caprice*, for example, one of the natives talks of his people's time—of his “grandfather's grandfather's time” (128)—he characterizes history in terms of kinship relations, a temporal concept central to oral cultures. Cutting off the traditional catalogue of family references, his friend interrupts with the words “Et cetera,” and the “first Indian” pointedly invokes a new discourse: “Very well, etcet-era”(128), he says. This is, as we are told, “not an Indian pun” (128); but, as Bowering argues, one cannot speak outside the dominant discourse—and “if one is thinking at all, one is perforce bilingual” (*Errata* 96). Puns and other language-play allow the natives a kind of linguistic high ground from which they can practice their bilingualism without suffering a loss of cultural identity through total assimilation. Thus this brief interlude of “Indian” and “non-Indian” puns offers a dramatic illustration of Bowering's concern for the definition of self and other through discourse; it points toward the political power of language, and perhaps more subtly, it argues that the notion of collaboration need not entail the loss of identity. As the native teacher advises, the trick is to “not assume all the invader's ways, but [to] make use of the particulars that will bring strength to the people” (*Caprice* 128).

READING A CAPRICIOUS WORLD

Caprice offers the second installment of a three-part exploration of imagination, language, and the politics of interpretation. As Bowering explains,

The first [novel] takes place in 1709, and the second one in 1890, so the third one should take place in 1990—about the time I'm writing it. The first one is on the sea . . . and the second one is on the land—so the third one will have to be in the air, right? (Quartermain and Ricou 56)

Caprice, set in British Columbia's Interior, in and around the town of Kamloops, plays with the narrative conventions of the traditional male-centred western: in place of the male gunslinger, Bowering introduces Caprice, a whip-cracking woman who reads *Faust* while tracking down her brother's murderer. Indeed, just about everybody in the novel reads, and even more than *Burning Water*, *Caprice* explores the rhetoric of reading: it teems with poets, readers, and teachers and

offers us a world where poems are tied to tumbleweeds and outlaws feign interest in Goethe; where “read[ing] sign” (129), whether in the form of books, laundry lists, people, or landscapes, becomes a principal preoccupation; and where virtually every character plays out the role of either teacher or student. The older native, for example, referred to as the “old teacher” (56), instructs his student in reading the ways of the world; Caprice, when young, announces “that she [is] going to become a schoolteacher” (21); Caprice’s lover, Roy Smith, works as a teacher at the Kamloops Indian School; and even Loop Groulx is said to feel like Smith’s “student or apprentice” (126).

Caprice thus presents life as a text to be written, taught, and, above all, read. As Stan Dragland notes, “Reading is a complex figure in *Caprice* . . . for the attempt to work out the way things are” (79). And the way things are is always a matter of interpretation: the older native laments the fact that he cannot read books the way he can read signs, while Roy Smith regards the enigmatic Caprice as one “living in a different alphabet” (76). What differentiates these readers from other less attractive figures is their capacity to reflect upon their interpretive processes, to worry words and attitudes into meaning. As Kröller observes, “The wittier characters in *Caprice* dismantle . . . words by punning, while the dimmer or more recalcitrant ones freely misunderstand them, confusing ‘a patchy’ [country] with ‘Apache,’ or ‘motivation’ with ‘motive nation’” (manuscript of *Bright Circles* 164). The wittier readers in *Caprice* accept the challenge to reflect upon their own habits of interpretation, and thus they differentiate themselves from those who accept colonial discourse without questioning it.

When Caprice misreads a passage from Goethe’s *Faust* as “build words” rather than “build worlds”(21), she is, in effect, reading in meaning; and in the process she alerts her readers to the causal relationship between words and world interpreted. Words shape reality, and thus for good reason men such as Loop Groulx “feel affronted when they see someone else reading a book” (21). And when Frank Spencer smashes a pen under his spurred heel, he reacts, albeit instinctively, in fear of the power of language to shape his life story: “Throw that pen on the floor over here. Easy,” he says to the journalist, Kesselring. “You aint putting me in history, damn you” (97). The point of focusing on this word/world relationship (in both *Caprice* and *Burning Water*) goes beyond mere postmodern high jinks or a literary nod to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for, as I have tried to indicate, both novels speak directly and indirectly to issues of historical, political, epistemological, and ideological import. The point, ultimately, is to teach readers that successful interpretation often demands some level of self-consciousness about our terms of reference (our interpretive schemata). In particular, Bowering wants us to jettison the presuppositions of realism and come to terms with a new epistemic view. The shift to a postmodern, postcolonial, and, ultimately, rhetorical perspective is no easy matter, and like the parade of characters who track one

another across the interior landscape near the end of *Caprice*, many of Bowering's readers are, I think, "late in understanding . . . what is happening" (248). The older native offers one explanation of the difficulty some have in "reading":

They have been late in understanding it [the narrative of their lives] because they have been trying to understand it in terms they are accustomed to. They have their peculiar notion that . . . actions can be explained by looking into the individual heart and head. (248)

Such humanist (realist) notions seem inadequate when compared to the everlasting narrative of the landscape and its people: "No single person's story could amount to much in comparison. No human being could walk or ride under that immense blue sky and remain a humanist" (198). Bowering, presumably, would be happy if his humanist readers underwent a similar transformation in the process of reading *his* narratives.

BOWERING'S RHETORIC OF READING

The difficulty lies in learning to leave the colonial mindset, with its conventions of realism and realist response, behind. Bowering himself has struggled with an ongoing interest in the surface level of language, and it is this interest in the ludic potential of words that has led some commentators to dismiss his work as inward looking, self-indulgent, shallow. Smaro Kamboureli, a critic who praises Bowering's playfulness, describes his fiction as "an act of consciousness, an art of surfaces," and it is certainly true that this play of the writer's and reader's consciousness with experience "occurs," at least in part, "on the surface of fiction" (210). That is, due to the novelty of their arrangement or expression, the words on the page seemingly call attention to themselves; conventional reading strategies are frustrated, and readers, if they are to continue reading, must reevaluate (or readjust) their colonized habits of prediction (their anticipatory schemata). Admittedly, some of Bowering's early critical comments, especially those about "the potentialities in the surface" of art and the possibility of "literal prose" (*Mask* 120), do suggest the image of the text as potentially stable and unmediated. But, in terms of Bowering's developing rhetoric of reading, terms worked out in his many creative and critical explorations of reading since "The Painted Window" (1978) and "Modernism Could Not Last Forever" (1980), a colonial conception of text no longer holds. Notions of an objectively knowable text do not shape the rhetoric of Bowering's recent narratives. Bowering's prose fiction may well be a "fiction of unrest," as Kamboureli calls it, but those tensions between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, between colonial and postcolonial discourse, should not be regarded as irreconcilable. The surface of writing does exist, after all; what Bowering now argues is that it is simply not inherently meaningful. A rhetoric of reading postmodern/postcolonial narrative acknowledges the signifi-

cance of the signifier: it does not ignore the words on the page; it merely argues that their meaning must always be subordinate to the rhetorical experience of reading.

To speak then of Bowering's writing as an "art of surfaces," or of Bowering as a writer preoccupied with protecting "the signifier from the *reader*" (Lynes 68), captures only a partial view of his developing rhetoric of reading. Lynes makes the case that, for Bowering, neither the audience nor the author remains constant; and thus she concludes that "only the text holds a stable position" (68). This assumption of "text as centre" leads Lynes to argue that "the signifier is always in danger. The signifier must be protected" (68). As she sees reader-text relations, the author must remain vigilant against bad readers who would "vandalize" his intended meaning. Lynes's metaphor captures something of the postmodern distrust of imposed authority, but, surely, to insist upon Bowering as an author preoccupied with protecting the text as centre is to place him in the company of George Vancouver and Frank Spencer.

Kamboureli and Lynes draw our attention to Bowering's concern for language, to his concern for getting the words right. But I see no evidence that Bowering believes it is possible to freeze the signifier's meaning. The notion of protecting the text may refer to an understandable impulse, but it cannot be considered the premise for a theory of reading.

I do not want to suggest, of course, that any movement from the product-orientation of realism to the process-orientation of postmodernism and postcolonialism is likely to be made without experiencing some sense of confusion and contradiction. I would suggest, though, that Bowering's critical and creative narratives offer a coherent and thoughtful story of reading as a collaborative rhetorical process.

Bowering's notion of process is no simple matter, however, for he remains wary of the term. In conversation with Bowering, fellow postmodern author Robert Kroetsch argues that "we've overused the word 'process' beyond belief," and Bowering responds that he is "quite willing to let it go" (Miki 135). "I'm much more interested in the 'random,' or chance, than I am in the 'processual,' I think," continues Bowering, though he acknowledges that the term "process" helps distinguish certain contemporary views of reading and writing from the view insisted upon by the New Criticism:

I guess you'd have to write an essay about what "process" means to you, as opposed to what it means to somebody else. But when the word "process" came up in discussing poetry it was usually opposed to "product." . . . And product poetry, it seems to me, is what the New Criticism was interested in: a poem in which everything you can possibly find out about the poem is already there. So if there was any failure at understanding the poem, it wasn't that the poem didn't embrace that thing that you didn't find; it was that you didn't find the way into it. And to me, the notion of "process poetry," for the reader, is that it's not necessarily

inherent in the poem. Or needn't be understood as inherent in the poem, unless somebody with a completely different matrix of experiences comes to the poem and finds it in the work. (135)

Once again we see that Bowering's aesthetic position hinges upon his sophisticated understanding of reading as a social interaction—as an interpretive process of “coming to” the work and thus of situating that work within a “matrix of experiences.” And what is true for “process poetry,” as we have seen, is true for *Burning Water* and *Caprice*. His preference for “the random” or “chance” over the “processual” remains of a piece with his commitment to what I have called the accidental; moreover, when he moves from poetry to prose narrative, the corresponding emphasis on plot allows him full range to explore notions of seeing and reading as particular accidents inevitably influenced by personal and cultural matrices of experiences.

As I have tried to show in this essay, Bowering's view of reading as metaphor and process shapes both his fiction and his developing sense of interpretation as a political act. *Burning Water* and *Caprice* do not represent a retreat from the world—from the social and ideological forces that shape our sense of how fact and fiction are constructed; as Bowering says, his writing simply offers readers “another way to make the connection” (personal communication, February 1990). The two conflicting world views (white and native) dramatized in *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, for example, offer readers a clear sense of the political implications of interpretation. Despite the humour in both novels, we are constantly reminded that the white invaders brought disease, alcoholism, and oppressive laws; that they murdered the natives “by the thousands, sacked their cities, defiled their holy places, erased their alphabets, melted down their gold, and brought half-breeds upon their women” (*Burning Water* 166–167). Like Peter Puget, the white explorers and settlers “felt the same way about commas that [they] felt about natives. The fewer the better” (207). Insensitive, wrongheaded, and otherwise obtuse readers such as Puget, Vancouver, and Spencer suggest clear examples of how we should not read Bowering's work. To read the world through a filter of unexamined ideology ensures our participation in the maintenance of the dominant discourse. Only by reducing the distance between self and other, between reader and author, can we read collaboratively and responsibly. The only way in is to enter the conversation—to become perforce bilingual and conversational. With the narrator of *Burning Water*, we need to consider the woman who “had often been accused by herself and others of making novels out of what other people think is conversation” (80); and like the two natives in *Caprice*, whose “conversations [seem] . . . to threaten a kind of dispersal, to wander into byways that did not lead to the advance of education” (129), we are invited to engage with Bowering in the telling of story, in the making of meaning, and in our own education as readers. Bowering's novels too are “conversational,” and Bowering

seems to be saying that the postmodern artist with a postcolonial orientation has no other legitimate way to tell his story: all discourse is inherently dialogic, a matter of seeking to reach oneself and the other through language by creating as many exits and entrances as possible.

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