

## George Bowering / RANDOM ACCESS COACH HOUSE

Recently I offered my skull to Anne Hungerford. She is a playwright and language teacher who has been experimenting on writers' brains. She theorizes that writers initiate their work variously – some hear language, some see language, and some work out of a kind of abstraction the more logical among us would call logical. I am reminded of Ezra Pound's maintaining in his *ABC of Reading* that superior writers coordinate "phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia."

Late one Friday afternoon Anne led me to a laboratory full of electro-imagic equipment. There she and others attached three dozen electrodes to my cranium. These were attached to a box hanging from my neck, which in turn led to a computer in another room, on which was an electroencephalographic screen. I, on the other hand, was placed before an IBM computer. I have been using Apples and Macintoshes longer than most writers have been wired, but I had never touched an IBM before. The writing program was Microsoft Word™, which I use all the time. But I saw that I was going to have to relearn the business of making things happen without windows and a mouse.

Here is what I was supposed to do: sit and write on the IBM computer for several hours, while Anne in the other room scans my brainwaves. I did. I wrote the first portion of an experimental (it seemed appropriate) poem. I wrote some other stuff. Then typing as fast as I could, but still not gleaning my teeming brain, I wrote out some unordered memories of Coach House Press.

For those who don't know, Coach House Press has been since the mid-sixties the principal publisher of avant-garde writing in English Canada. For those who know that but who have not been keeping track, there is a new regime at Coach House Press made of people who were not around during the revolution and who want the press to be respectable.

So. A few months later Anne brought me a print-out of the stuff I wrote. The verse will find its way into print some time. Some of the stuff will just disappear like most brainwaves. Here will follow a few of my unordered memories of Coach House Press, which received a

manuscript from me via bp Nichol in 1965, and published in 1967. I have published a career's worth of books with CHP.

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When Coach House Press published *Geneve* (1971), my tarot poem, they used my wife Angela's tarot pack for a photograph that was printed on the inside of the dust jacket on the clothbound version. In the photograph the cards (the major arcana) are laid out in a spiral, in the order in which they appear in the book, upon an oriental rug with spiralling patterns. Quite a number of people reading the book did not have the Curiosity (heh) to unwrap the book and look at the picture inside. Others, once they found the picture, removed the dust jacket from the pumpkin-coloured cloth, unfolded it and put it on their walls as a non-poetry poster.

After the publication of the book, CHP didn't bother to get the tarot pack back to me, but stored it, wrapped in its silk square, as is the proper custom, on a shelf in the main lounge or whatever that upstairs room is called at the Coach House, along with the archive of books and magazines constructed at the press. Hundreds of workers, writers, vagrants and friends of the family would hang around in that room over the years. What odds.

I guess it must have been something like seven years after *Geneve* came out, after we had moved to Vancouver, that I found the cards, still there, at the press. Actually, I think that it was more like ten years, but seven years always works quite well in narratives such as this. I picked them up, along with a bunch of recent Coach House books. One could, if one were a CHP author, still do that in those days. Postcards and poesy, try to figure out where to pack them, as always, for the flight back across the Rockies. Reading new poetry on a new jet west across the new world. L'étoile.

The cards are now in Angela's study, but I don't remember whether they are still wrapped in silk. They are several rooms from the nearest copy of *Geneve*.

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I was there in the old narrow brick building on the lane behind Huron Street shortly after Coach House Press got its own perfect binder. A

perfect binder makes those books whose pages are trimmed neatly on the right and glued to the spine on the left or vice versa. The CHPers treated it in what used to be the time-honoured Coach House manner.

Everything that was not nailed down was being perfect-bound. Blank-paged books appeared with exotic covers, often covers of Coach House books. Nurse novels sported covers from Northrop Frye texts. A book by Michael Ondaatje had a Canadian Cigarette box as its wrapping.

They mixed and matched, the eclectic crew. It was beautiful. It was also learning. It had a trace of 1967, of Rochdale and the origins of the Coach House Press. Young people were finding out, their hands on the machine, how to do something, while persuading themselves that they were having the kind of fun that people who were not tokers and longhairs and wives and husbands who were not taken in by the slick city magazines later decades would never see or understand. And if that is a funny sentence, so what?

I mean no one even bothered to think like numismatics. No one made a Margaret Atwood book with a perfect bill bissett cover just so they could sell it to a collector in 1999. I don't think anyone did. I hope not. No, I am nearly sure no one did.

But I am typing this with a bunch of EEG wires in my head and some heavy plate they are plugged into on my chest, and on an IBM machine for the first time, and listen, there is more — it has red letters on the white buzz of a screen, and no mouse. EEK. I have to relearn how to be a second generation computer freak.



The Coach House people were first generation computer freaks as far as the Canadian publishing scene was concerned. I mean that head freak Stan Bevington used to get LIP grants and OFY grants, and a lot of money would go into the purchase of amazing new machines in the offices upstairs, up above the old iron hand press and the huge typesetting machine, that monster metal spider that threw hot lead through the air, past the humming head of Victor Coleman, bent before it, his spatulate fingers making beautiful lines of 1968 verse. How I miss those times.

I reflect now. What kind of writing do I want this to be, I with these wires in my scalp, cult cybo-horror movie anti-hero. Do I want



to see sections of a piece of Coach House Press, fit them together, make a possible paper of them, read them to the Curious (there he goes again) in the side room of the National Library in hot humid Ottawa? Or does this person, android skull face, want to reflect on CHPress, offer you poetry of the metrical age, the meter a cable under the sea of this old gink's islanded brain?

If that was truly a question I will stand with that question mark. After all, I am typing more than I generally do on a Friday afternoon.

Trying to imPress whom? No, trying to make a piece, to escape from the evasion of writing I have been doing at home these afternoons this whole week.

I feel as if I have a hat on.

Or a hat inside my cranium bone, whew.

Anyway, the computers at CHP. They kept provoking articles with pictures and personalities in the big daily press, including the *Globe & Mail*, probably even the business pages. Bearded gink in this dot-dot picture looks like a Doukhobor tractor-fixer, got a screen in front of his face, a gleam behind his eyeglasses, what used to be expertise regarding burning herbs now converted to this PAL program, whew again. I mean I remember Stan on the subway, sitting there on the sideways seat, eyes straight ahead, two big paper sacks beside his feet in boots, a Doukhobor hat on his head, round crown.

Eventually all your books will be on the screen, inside the chips only. If there is such a thing as print, it will just be collectors' beautiful artifacts. Who better to do that than Coach House Press?

I mean, do you remember those 1968 posters they used to make for rock & roll concerts outdoors at Varsity Stadium? Remember you could not read them unless you were stoned, and then you probably only thought you could read them, because if anyone asked you what they were about, you would just mumble words or parts of words. Like Chet Baker thinking he can really play really gone when he is high up through his own bony brain.



Varsity Stadium, oh yes. Once there was a three-day rock festival there, lots of the hot groups, their names filled two columns of print, from what was it, 1969? Vanilla Fudge? The Who? Procol Harem. The

Kinks. I went free, but not much. And if the statute of limitations permits, here is how I went free.

Some narcorevolutionary love heads at CHP had got hold of a pair of tickets for the three-day festival of decibels, and applied guerrilla hipster logic to the situation, that musicapitalism right across the street nearly, in the DMZ. They found similar paper and ink and type and so on, and printed a fair number of tickets for the festival. The listeners would be in the stands and on the grass of the football field, after all, and there was room for everyone.

It was amazing to hand the ticket to a tough guy at the gate and walk right in.

The music was loud and sort of like San Francisco. There is no way to tell younger people, people the age of the new crowd at Coach House, what feeling passed between the air and the human interior in those days. The summer was hot and humid. The folks were wearing clothes like buccaneers in fifties movies. Some may even have had sabres between their teeth. Some of the rock singers sounded as if they did. I think Donovan was there. You could understand his words, if you wanted to.

So in the crowd were a lot of people with tickets with the same serial numbers on them, but no guard noticed. Of course not. This was one of the japes the "movement" could be proud of during that period when entrepreneurs were trying to make a bundle off the populace's appetite for the counter-culture. I was not a great rock fan, though I once drank the Ottawa night away on roadsides with the Youngbloods, and so on. I was into ESP jazz records, Albert Ayler and his brother Don, as taught to me by Greg Curnoe of London and John Sinclair of Detroit.

Oh, this IBM screen is doing idiosyncratic things. Now I have a black rectangle whose length keeps changing, right after my last red words, and often letters just don't make it onto the screen anyways. Anne says that something like that is happening to the brainwave monitor.

A few weeks later there was a rock "concert," as they were starting to call them, because this music after "Sergeant Pepper" was getting pretentious, at Maple Leaf Gardens. Coach House spies got a couple of tickets and reproduced a certain number of them again. This time, though, the tickets were larger in number than the available seats in

the hockey arena, and after a while the guards were eager to read the figures on the ducats. There was not a lot of elbow room in Maple Leaf Gardens. I am glad that I wasn't there. I think The Doors were on the program anyway.

The only time I have been inside Maple Leaf Gardens was the occasion on which two other Coach House authors and I bought some tickets off a scalper and saw the Leafs beat Detroit 6-0. They were at the time very unsuccessful teams. After the game was over, David McFadden, whose ticket I had bought, announced that he would like to read his poems aloud to whomever stayed in their seats. The other author, David Young, disappeared from sight.



One time I was being old familiar George, you never know when he's going to appear all at once, loud at the press, come first thing in Toronto to the lane behind Huron Street, stomp loudly up the stairs, give them the familiar twice a year, say, surprise. Loud guy from the west coast but an old pal of the press, first book in Centennial Year, remember?

This time I slammed the bottom door or maybe I did, and stomped really loud up those narrow worn-down wooden steps, headed for the scarred familiar table and good coffee. They were going to be as always glad to see me.

Really loud, making some loud remark, as if in the middle of a cross-the-street conversation, here I am from the cool Pacific, noisy.

But it is a little embarrassing, or a middle amount embarrassing. Because there's Stan Bevington at the table with papers and photos all over its surface, and two or was it three guys in suits no matter the weather in consultation. These were, I think, ginks from the National Gallery, who were talking with Stan about publishing a lucrative picture book through the press.

Whew, I suddenly became a quieter guy, said I will just look around, see what's new, talk with Nelson and the boys.



That's all the Coach House memoiring I have from this occasion. I had intended to tell the story of Stan Bevington and the acid and the



book in the fish bowl. As a matter of fact, I thought that I had typed this one out. Maybe it got lost among the chips. Maybe it strayed between the brain waves. Maybe I mixed intention with typing.

Anyway, it was really late Friday afternoon, or more properly evening. We were both tired, and Anne knew that it was going to take more than an hour to get the electrodes off my head and the conducting gel out of my hair. We were both brain-tired, so we quit for the night.

The stuff I got could have been better, but I am not overly displeased by the words the experience called up at ski-jump speed. Maybe if I get used to the IBM and the electrodes and the necessity to keep kind of still, I can make a better second installment of memoirs. As Ezra Pound put it in *ABC of Reading*: "The best work probably does pour forth, but it does so AFTER the use of the medium has become 'second nature,' the writer need no more think about EVERY DETAIL, than Tilden needs to think about the position of every muscle in every stroke of his tennis."

Anne, meanwhile hasn't told me whether she saw anything while she was looking at the brain monitor.